

Better Late than Never: Bahrain's Attitude Towards the Red Sea Defense Coalition

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Brief Analysis

The multinational security operation Prosperity Guardian—of which Bahrain is a member—has the potential to protect trade in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, curb piracy and armed robbery on commercial ships, preserve supply and energy chains, and enhance regional security and prosperity.

Bahrain announced that it would be joining the US-led multinational force formed to protect the Red Sea the attacks of Houthi militants, also known as Ansarullah fighters. Houthi militants, who have vowed to stop all shipments and vessels' passage towards Israel through the Red Sea unless the war in Gaza stops, have triggered a firm reaction from the international community—one that is past due given the threat the Houthi presence poses to this vital trading pipeline and the security of the surrounding Gulf Arab states.

Targeting Red Sea Shipping

In the first major attack on Israel-linked ships, Houthi militants hijacked the Galaxy Leader on November 19 and berthed the ship in the Houthi controlled port of Hodeida, then moved to an area further north, with it reportedly turned it into a "tourist attraction." (<https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/12/06/Galaxy-Leader-ship-seized-by-Yemen-s-Houthis-becomes-a-tourist-attraction>) Over the past month, Houthi forces have attacked a number of vessels and cargo ships, forcing Maersk—one of the world's largest shipping companies—and several other global container shipping lines such as MSC Shipping, CMA CGM, and Hapag-Lloyd to suspend passage of its vessels through the Red Sea strait in mid December, though Maersk and CMA CGM recently [announced \(https://maritime-executive.com/article/maersk-and-cma-cgm-restore-some-red-sea-transits-while-industry-is-dividedhttps://maritime-executive.com/article/maersk-and-cma-cgm-restore-some-red-sea-transits-while-industry-is-divided\)](https://maritime-executive.com/article/maersk-and-cma-cgm-restore-some-red-sea-transits-while-industry-is-divided) they would resume shipping on a case by case basis on December 24 and December 26.

As the Houthi attacks on cargo ships in the Red Sea continue, so does the bombing of Gaza, a war that will eventually end with a high cost to both Israelis and Palestinians. A war triggered by Hamas has so far resulted in the deaths of innocent civilians on both sides. Aside from the [recent IRGC claim \(https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rc=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwiB4aaiubWDAxUzIGoFHeKSCUAQFnoECBoQAQ&url=https://www.iranintl.com/en/202312278189&usg=AOvVaw1F3xdkPY\)](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rc=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwiB4aaiubWDAxUzIGoFHeKSCUAQFnoECBoQAQ&url=https://www.iranintl.com/en/202312278189&usg=AOvVaw1F3xdkPY) that the Hamas attack on October 7 was in retaliation for the killing of IRGC Quds force commander Qassem Soleimani, the Houthi involvement clearly underlines the Ayatollah regime's involvement in this war, a development to which the United States is expected to respond.

The Red Sea accounts for [forty percent \(https://www.euronews.com/business/2023/12/20/what-the-red-sea-attacks-cost-for-global-trade\)](https://www.euronews.com/business/2023/12/20/what-the-red-sea-attacks-cost-for-global-trade) of the trade exchange between Asia and Europe, with the passage of a thousand ships daily. The reckless Houthi practices are doing nothing productive in terms of the war, and are instead targeting global economic security, resulting in supply chain disruption, an increase in transportation and insurance costs, and an increase in the prices of imported materials by no less than [thirty percent \(https://www.livemint.com/industry/rise-of-pirates-in-red-sea-to-take-toll-on-india-s-exim-business-here-are-items-that-will-turn-costlier-11703243854151.html\)](https://www.livemint.com/industry/rise-of-pirates-in-red-sea-to-take-toll-on-india-s-exim-business-here-are-items-that-will-turn-costlier-11703243854151.html).

On December 18, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [announced the formation \(https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3621110/statement-from-secretary-of-defense-loyd-j-austin-iii-on-ensuring-freedom-of-n/\)](https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3621110/statement-from-secretary-of-defense-loyd-j-austin-iii-on-ensuring-freedom-of-n/) of the multinational force in response, stating that "this is an international challenge that demands collective action." Austin added that Operation Prosperity Guardian is an initiative under the "Combined Maritime Forces and the leadership of its Task Force 153." [Combined Task Force 153 \(https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/ctf-153-red-sea-maritime-security/\)](https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/ctf-153-red-sea-maritime-security/) was set up in April 2022 to improve maritime security in the Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb, and the Gulf of Aden. There have been 39 member nations in CTF 153, but officials are still working to determine which of them would participate in this latest effort.

Therefore, the multinational security operation Prosperity Guardian will protect trade in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, curb piracy and armed robbery on commercial ships, preserve supply and energy chains, and enhance regional security and prosperity.

Bahrain's presence within the Prosperity Guardian force comes as a result of its commitment to international agreements and, more importantly, to contribute maintaining regional security. Bahrain is all too aware that Houthis seek to trigger a larger war in the region and expand the scope of the conflict, furthering the Iranian regime's agenda to expand and spread its extremist so-called Islamic revolution.

Once again, Bahrain is the headquarters for announcing new steps towards international peace and security, preserving the security and stability of the region and the prosperity of its people, ensuring the sustainability of development, the security of navigation, freedom of trade, the ability to confront challenges, and the elimination of terrorist organizations. Bahrain's participation in the Prosperity Guardian coalition is also self-evident to preserve its national and regional security.

Once again, Bahraini participation comes within the forces of an international coalition to maintain the security of navigation in the Gulf of Aden. This is a continuation of Bahrain's previous efforts in the international duty forces to combat piracy, which yielded impressive results in securing global shipping lanes. It is also a continuation of Bahrain's effective participation in all international coalitions to eliminate terrorist organizations, including, but not limited to, the International Coalition to Eliminate ISIS.

U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's [choice of Bahrain \(https://apnews.com/article/attacks-red-sea-navy-mission-missiles-286d51bfd65e741e839e185f0f4a455b\)](https://apnews.com/article/attacks-red-sea-navy-mission-missiles-286d51bfd65e741e839e185f0f4a455b) as the location to announce this new alliance confirmed the importance of the Kingdom in maintaining international security and stability and Bahrain's position in international strategic alliances addressing these issues.

Within Bahrain, public reactions to the announcement have varied, including both supporters while a minority of movements condemned this alliance. These included statements by Iranian-backed individuals, political societies backed by the Muslim Brotherhood, those with communist and Arab nationalist ideologies, and the Iranian Islamic Republic itself.

Houthi Attacks—An Intransigent Problem

Nevertheless, many Bahrainis are aware that any action against the Houthis does not just aim at protecting the Red Sea Strait but will also bring an end to the military arm of the Ayatollah regime in Yemen, which has been a challenge for Gulf Arab states long before the current targeting of Red Sea vessels. This militant group has killed hundreds of Bahraini, Emirati, and Saudi youth who served on the Yemeni borders with Saudi Arabia to prevent Iranian proxies from infiltrating our region. these soldiers from the Gulf region paid their lives in order to

protect the region's stability and security. In fact, one week before Hamas's barbaric attack on Israeli civilians, Houthis attacked Bahraini forces on the southern border of Saudi Arabia where they were stationed, [killing four Bahraini soldiers \(https://www.newarab.com/news/bahrain-soldier-dies-days-after-attack-yemens-houthis\)](https://www.newarab.com/news/bahrain-soldier-dies-days-after-attack-yemens-houthis) . Another Bahraini soldier died after succumbing from his injuries.

Bahrain and the United States have a history of strategic partnership, as Bahrain [hosts \(https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/3364691/his-majesty-the-king-of-bahrain-visits-us-5th-fleet-headquarters/\)](https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/3364691/his-majesty-the-king-of-bahrain-visits-us-5th-fleet-headquarters/) the US Navy's Central Command, the U.S. Fifth Fleet, and the [Fifth Marine Expeditionary Brigade \(https://www.tf515.marines.mil/\)](https://www.tf515.marines.mil/) . These commitments reflect how the kingdom is dedicated to enhancing its partnership in regional security. But Manama also expects, due to the comprehensive security integration and prosperity agreements between the two countries, that the United States play a major role in achieving regional security through combating extremism and terrorism.

While this latest coordination effort comes at a time when Bahraini-U.S. relations continue to prosper, the recent Houthi attacks emphasize that the United States needs to reconsider its stance towards the Houthis, due to both their current and recent actions. In February 2021, the Biden Administration [removed \(https://www.state.gov/revocation-of-the-terrorist-designations-of-ansarallah/\)](https://www.state.gov/revocation-of-the-terrorist-designations-of-ansarallah/) the Houthis from the U.S. list of officially designated terrorists shortly after its initial designation. Manama is hoping, however, that Washington will invest in counterterrorism efforts that can significantly hamper several terrorist organizations.

Washington should also remember that at difficult times, its strategic allies expect it to act on demands to designate enemies of the region as terrorist organizations, especially those Iran continues to fund. The previous U.S. stance towards the Houthis has disappointed this part of the world, but there is likewise the expectation that Washington will now reconsider its approach to the Houthis, including its decision of removing the Houthis from its designated list of terrorist organizations. More broadly, the international community should recognize that Houthi designation as a terrorist entity is important not only because of the current hijacking of ships, but because of the continual Houthi targeting of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain.

In fact, what we hope from this current coalition is to eliminate all forms of piracy practiced by Houthi militias and to stop the [transfer of weapons and supplies \(https://apnews.com/article/iran-politics-united-kingdom-yemen-government-239568283d236bc12e57a366fdc805d5\)](https://apnews.com/article/iran-politics-united-kingdom-yemen-government-239568283d236bc12e57a366fdc805d5) that take place across the sea to support this terrorist group.

The Houthi militias wreaked havoc and destruction in Yemen for years, sought to destabilize regional security and stability, have launched missiles and drones to target Gulf countries; creating a war zone in the Red Sea is only their latest attempt at destabilization. The hijacking of ships has finally made the United States realize that it cannot and should not take a soft stance towards terrorists, including those who stand with the current Iranian regime. This coalition may have come late—now that Houthis control strategic ports in Yemen such as Hodeida—but late is much better than never. ❖

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