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Operation Aspides, or the Peril of Low Expectations in Yemen

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Introduction

Since the start of the conflict in Gaza, Yemen's maritime borders have become a battleground in a wider regional and international power play. Ansar Allah, better known as the Houthis, has hindered maritime traffic through the Bab al-Mandab Strait, which provides access to the Red Sea and Suez Canal, allegedly [to put pressure on the economies of Israel and Western countries](#) so they hasten a ceasefire in Gaza. The way the United States and European nations have addressed this problem is to establish naval missions to protect maritime traffic—efforts that have been mostly unsuccessful.

A case in point is the European Union's EUNAVFOR [Aspides](#), or Operation Aspides. Like the U.S.-led multinational mission [Operation Guardian Prosperity](#) (OPG), Operation Aspides has been characterized by a short-term focus and the absence of a comprehensive strategy to eliminate, or at least significantly reduce,

Ansar Allah's threat against maritime traffic. What the Europeans need is to find a balance between safeguarding commercial traffic in the Red Sea and putting in place conditions for a durable peace in Yemen that ensures that Ansar Allah will not again impede shipping through Bab al-Mandab.

Operation Aspides: An Exercise in Restraint

Operation Aspides was established on February 19, 2024, in line with United Nations [Security Council Resolution 2722](#) and is headquartered in Greece. It is a one-year defensive maritime security operation, with three primary objectives: to protect commercial vessels from Ansar Allah's attacks; to secure their safe passage through the Bab al-Mandab Strait; and to reinforce maritime awareness. As of late September



2024, Operation Aspides had escorted more than [250 merchant vessels and repelled at least eleven Ansar Allah attacks](#), on four occasions at least using anti-ship ballistic missiles. At the same time, it has avoided the entanglement of the U.S. and British strikes on Ansar Allah's military depots and launch sites in what has developed into a clear military campaign. "Operation Aspides seeks to mitigate risks, not neutralize them," remarked a senior Yemeni government official.¹

However, when considering that during the previous year [some 22,000 ships](#) sailed through the strait, protecting 250 vessels is a very small number. Figures indicate that, in 2024, maritime traffic through Bab al-Mandab has [declined by at least 55 percent when compared to 2023](#). This has disrupted global supply chains passing through the strait, which were worth [\\$1 trillion annually](#). Major shipping companies have preferred to reroute their vessels around the Cape of Good Hope. Moreover, there are multidimensional threats to ships passing through the strait that Operation Aspides and Operation Prosperity Guardian have had to address. Last August, for example, Operation Aspides helped to prevent an environmental catastrophe through [salvage efforts](#) for the Greek ship, *MV Sounion*, which was carrying 150,000 tons of crude oil, and rescued 27 sailors, after an Ansar Allah [attack](#).

The European Union's move to set up Operation Aspides came two months after Spain, France, and Italy [declined to operate under U.S. command](#) in Operation Prosperity Guardian. The reasons for this were [reportedly](#) command and control concerns, a desire to avoid offensive operations, and Washington's support for Israel. Operation Aspides's establishment and scope, which distanced EU efforts from the U.S.-led operation, sought to enhance strategic autonomy and cohesion, given the EU's heavy reliance on the United States in its defense policy, and avoid entanglement in an asymmetrical confrontation with Ansar Allah.² The EU also endeavored to develop trust with regional partners, demonstrate its commitment to defending

freedom of navigation and an international rules-based order as a maritime security provider, and protect its shipping interests.

In April 2024, the [statement](#) of the EU high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, Josep Borrell, emphasizing that the Aspides mission was "not engaged in any operation against the Houthis on land" and that it "operate[d] in self-defense" captured a key difference between the EU and U.S. naval security approaches. For example, Operation Aspides, unlike Operation Prosperity Guardian, does not launch preemptive strikes against Ansar Allah's military positions.

In bringing the maritime operation together within a month, the Council of the European Union [approved](#) the deployment of Aspides as an ad hoc maritime operation with a limited mandate. This allowed European states to reach the lowest common denominator of agreement among themselves over decisionmaking.³ For example, while Spain, [abstained](#) from joining both Operation Aspides and Operation Prosperity Guardian, countries such as Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, and Italy [contributed](#) security instruments such as fighter jets, naval forces, and intelligence capabilities, reflecting diverse calculations, interests, and perceptions with regard to Ansar Allah. The military bases of EU member states in East Africa and the Gulf, such as French naval assets in Djibouti, the United Arab Emirates, Madagascar, and the Seychelles, have extended logistical support to Operation Aspides, and [coordinated with EUNAVFOR Atalanta](#), the EU's anti-piracy mission for Somalia, and Operation Prosperity Guardian.⁴

The fact that Operation Aspides, like Operation Prosperity Guardian, has been largely a reactive mission tied to Ansar Allah's behavior during the Gaza war, and is limited in time to one year, means there are no guarantees Ansar Allah will not repeat its actions in the future. Depending on the interests of the [Axis of Resistance](#)—the alliance of pro-Iran actors throughout the Middle East—the group may again hinder seaborne

traffic through this vital maritime choke point. The implications would be more severe if done in parallel with efforts to block the Strait of Hormuz as well as seaborne traffic in the Mediterranean.

Operation Aspides has failed to change Houthi behavior, and has not managed to restore the pre-crisis level of commercial traffic through the Red Sea. This poses the question as to how the EU can better address Yemen within wider maritime security efforts in the area.

A More Effective EU Policy Toward Ansar Allah's Maritime Moves

The short-term, restrained nature of Operation Aspides underlines that EU nations involved in the naval mission are principally looking to address the symptoms of Ansar Allah's activities, not their source. Similar to the anti-piracy Operation Atalanta in 2008, which aimed to safeguard World Food Program and African Union Mission in Somalia vessels bound for Somalia, Operation Aspides focuses on defending commercial ships in a way that does not adequately acknowledge the broader threat environment.

In Yemen, there is a nonstate actor in control of 30 percent of the country's territory, as well as the presence of potential EU partners on the ground. Therefore, the situation is quite different from the organized piracy in Somalia. Yet Aspides has not focused on weakening Ansar Allah's capabilities or extending support to the internationally-recognized Yemeni government to address power imbalances in Yemen. One of the factors reinforcing this imbalance is Ansar Allah's continued control over the coastal city of Hodeida and its ports. This was effectively permitted thanks to the [Stockholm Agreement of 2018](#), a strategic miscalculation that backfired five years later. Ansar Allah's control over most of Hodeida [has allowed the group to maintain access](#)

to illicit arms, military equipment, and fuel through the ports of Hodeida city, Al-Saleef, and Ras Issa, and to launch booby-trapped boats, missiles, drones, and naval mines from the coastline. Had the Emirati-backed Yemeni government's battle for Hodeida received

international backing, it would have denied Ansar Allah the logistical, military, and financial resources allowing it to block Bab al-Mandab, [neutralizing the group](#).

Although Ansar Allah's attacks against maritime trade have recurred at an expanding rate during the Gaza war, they actually began in 2016 during the early years of the Saudi-led coalition's war against the group. This suggests that new maritime crises around the strait can be expected if Ansar Allah remains in control of northwestern Yemen under conditions of chaos, conflict, and regional turmoil. When Ansar Allah resumed attacking maritime traffic last year, most people expected the attacks to cease after several weeks. However, they continue to this day. By disconnecting the crisis from conditions for a durable peace in Yemen, the EU and the international community more generally have chosen to keep the Red Sea trade hostage to the political calculations of Ansar Allah, acting on Iran's behalf.

The Council of the European Union has [acknowledged](#) "the importance of Yemen for key sea-based supply lines of energy and other commodities and the objective to ensure the security and stability of the Gulf region as well as the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa; and the need to prevent further proliferation of terrorist organizations." In light of this, the Europeans must show political will and adopt long-term policies that can guarantee security and stabilization of the situation in Yemen. Instead, they have tended to support [ill-designed deescalation processes](#) that have rewarded and emboldened Ansar Allah, without bringing about a durable peace. This approach has faced obvious strains.



Both Operation Aspides and Operation Prosperity Guardian have not only been unable to restore freedom of navigation through Bab al-Mandab, they are unlikely to do so. If the EU wants to be more effective, its member states should collectively design a Yemen strategy that has a better chance of working. This may involve pursuing two parallel avenues.

First, the EU should reconsider its support for peace processes in Yemen. These tend to offer Ansar Allah carrots, but do nothing to prioritize talks on security and the ungoverned proliferation of conventional and nonconventional arms, especially those possessed by Ansar Allah and smuggled into Yemen by Iran. Such talks are essential in order to address long-term challenges and reduce the likelihood that peace will collapse.

For example, just before October 7, 2023, a United Nations-sponsored deescalation [roadmap](#), brokered by Saudi Arabia and Oman, was close to granting Ansar Allah political and economic dividends. These included contributions to salary payments in Houthi-held areas, including for civil servants and combatants. It also consisted of a freeze on the [United Nations Inspection and Verification Mechanism for Yemen](#), thereby allowing unmonitored entry of cargo, including [arms](#), to Hodeida, despite Ansar Allah's unsatisfactory record on human rights, power sharing, and governance. The implicit message was that if Ansar Allah's disruptive actions were confined to Yemen's borders, or targeted neighboring Arab countries, the international community could turn a blind eye to what the group did. However, the United States later withheld support for the UN plan after Ansar Allah's attacks on commercial vessels and redesignated Ansar Allah as a global terrorist organization. However, an internationally backed military operation to recapture Hodeida and address the Stockholm Agreement's shortcomings remains off the table.

During Yemen's armed conflict over the past decade, following the collapse of a transitional peace process for the country in 2014, the EU focused on dialogue and [conflict resolution](#) through support for the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary General to Yemen. It also extended technical support to the internationally-recognized Yemeni government that opposes Ansar Allah. These efforts accompanied [expanding communications with Ansar Allah](#).⁵ Yet the fact that this relatively soft approach did not alter Ansar Allah's behavior after the beginning of the Gaza war only underlined that, from a Western perspective, quick fixes and appeasement policies since the Stockholm Agreement had only emboldened Ansar Allah instead. This opens a window for the EU to reassess its Yemen policy and determine whether Ansar Allah is a threat to international peace, trade, and security.

In light of the most recent escalation near Bab al-Mandab, it is unlikely we will soon see much progress in the Yemeni peace process. If the EU indeed wants a stable and secure Yemen that assumes its legal and moral obligations to protect its coastline, it will be necessary to rethink the ways of establishing security in the Red Sea and reaching a durable peace settlement, as well as how to bring Ansar Allah to the negotiating table in good faith.

Second, the EU should extend strategic support to the internationally recognized Yemeni government as a long-term security partner in the Red Sea and Arabian Sea. Central to these efforts will be deepening and widening the partnership with the government to not only integrate it into a security framework for the Red Sea, but also to address power disparities in Yemen in the long term should Ansar Allah's threats continue. European policy tools could include investment in building the capacities of the Yemeni coast guard, but also those of Somalia, Sudan, Eritrea, and Djibouti in the African horn, as well as Egypt. This could be done

through training, transfer of know-how, financial aid, and the provision of equipment such as naval vessels and advanced intelligence material. The objective would be to open gateways for regional maritime security cooperation among states around the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, including Saudi Arabia. Such efforts would also deepen regional trust, increase partnerships among Red Sea littoral states, and allow the EU to avoid a direct confrontation with Ansar Allah, as intended. To give one example, in January of this year the French navy [prevented Iranian weapons from reaching Ansar Allah](#), but France did not find itself at war with the group. By diversifying its policy tools, including by means of regional cooperation and expanded security support, the EU can gradually empower and integrate regional coast guards into strengthened Red Sea security efforts, while reaffirming that its posture remains defensive, non-military, and mainly focused on threat mitigation.

Thus far, such considerations have not been discussed, despite growing international recognition of Ansar Allah's destabilizing conduct. However, if the EU deems Ansar Allah to be a threat to international peace and security, extends Operation Aspides after the February 2025 deadline, and eventually comes to the conclusion that preventing Ansar Allah's takeover of Yemen is in Europe's strategic interest, this could open the door to extending qualitative support that could enhance the defensive capabilities of Yemeni security and military agencies—steps currently outside Operation Aspides' mandate.

At the mission level, strengthening coordination and a division of labor between Operation Aspides and Operation Prosperity Guardian remains a work in progress. The near targeting of a Central Intelligence Agency drone by a Danish [frigate](#) in the first half of this year illustrates the necessity of such a step.⁶ The goals would be to lessen operational confusion, enhance intelligence sharing, iron out a deconfliction

protocol, and deploy advanced drones and satellites to improve early warning systems and interdict arms and equipment transfers to Ansar Allah. These combined efforts will not be successful immediately, but will push Western countries toward playing a more proactive role consistent with their strategic interests.

Conclusion

A year on from Ansar Allah's obstruction of the Bab al-Mandab Strait, despite the presence of two Western naval operations, we can see the impact of the decade-long mismanagement of peace and conflict in Yemen, especially through the Stockholm Agreement. This situation also points to the unresolved roots of the Yemeni conflict, as well as a misunderstanding, or underestimation, of Ansar Allah's ideology and its Iran-backed project that have turned Yemen's maritime borders into an international battleground, risking long-term militarization of the area. The record of Operation Aspides, while it seeks to reduce risks to Red Sea traffic and avoid undermining a fragile Yemeni deescalation process, albeit one that is largely frozen today, represents tacit acknowledgement of Western miscalculations, preceded by years of largely fruitless appeasement and containment policies.

The absence of Western political will to align with the security priorities of Arab Gulf states when the Arab coalition was formed to confront Ansar Allah a decade ago has complicated efforts to collectively contain the crisis today. Combined with the absence of a long-term strategy, this has only served to exacerbate strategic threats in the Red Sea. Moving forward, back-channel talks involving the United States, Iran, and Ansar Allah to halt Ansar Allah's Red Sea attacks will continue to be met with regional deescalation conditions set by Iran—whether pertaining to Iran itself, Gaza, Lebanon, or any combination of these—which will grant Ansar

Allah further reputational advantages. However, this will not prevent a recurrence of the crisis in the Red Sea. Maritime trade through its waters will remain a hostage to Ansar Allah and Iran, a negotiating card they can use to secure concessions elsewhere.

About the Author

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Notes


- 1 In-person interview with a senior Yemeni government official, identity withheld by request, September 28, 2024.
- 2 Online interview with a senior European diplomat, identity withheld by request, October 13, 2024.
- 3 In-person interviews with senior European diplomats, their identities withheld by request, Amman, October 27–29, 2024.
- 4 In-person interview with one of the senior European diplomats cited in note 4, identity withheld by request, Amman, October 27–29, 2024.
- 5 In-person interview with a European diplomat, identity withheld by request, Amman, October 20, 2024.
- 6 In-person interview with a mid-level European defense official, identity and location withheld by request, August 19, 2024.

For complete source notes, please read this article at [CarnegieEndowment.org](https://www.carnegieendowment.org).



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