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Will Yemen turn its missiles on the UAE and Saudi Arabia?

As Washington's latest military campaign drags into its second month, Yemen's battle lines remain firmly drawn – with growing questions over whether Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are next to be pulled into a war they can neither control nor win.



Photo Credit: The Cradle

The [US war on Yemen](#), now in its second round, has passed the one-month mark with no clear gains and no timeline for success. What is emerging instead is the growing risk of escalation – one that could force regional players, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, into direct confrontation.

Still, several factors may delay or even prevent such a scenario, much like what played out last year. Understanding where this war may be headed requires a clear grasp of the terrain: how Yemen views the conflict, how its Persian Gulf neighbors are reacting, and what could trigger a wider eruption or a negotiated backtrack.

Sanaa ties its military strategy to Gaza's resistance

Even in western circles, there's little dispute that the war on Yemen is now deeply intertwined with Israel's brutal war on Gaza. Washington tried, under former US president Joe Biden, to separate the two. But the reality on the ground tells a different story – one where Sanaa's military operations were in lockstep with events in Palestine.

That link became even clearer after the January 2025 ceasefire between Hamas and Israel, which prompted a [pause](#) in Yemen's attacks – until Tel Aviv predictably walked back its commitments. US President Donald Trump's return to the White House brought with it a resumption of strikes on Yemen, under the pretext of defending international shipping.

Yet those attacks would not have taken place had the US not already committed to shielding Israeli vessels. The new administration, unlike the last, makes no real attempt to disguise the [overlap](#) between the two fronts.

Yemen's strategy has been clear from the outset: Its military activity is calibrated with the resistance in Gaza. Palestinian factions determine the pace of escalation or calm, while Yemen remains prepared to absorb the fallout.

Sanaa has paid a steep price for this stance. Washington has moved to freeze economic negotiations between Yemen and Saudi Arabia, effectively punishing the former for refusing to abandon its military support for Gaza. The US has dangled economic incentives in exchange for neutrality – offers readily accepted by Arab states across the region – but Sanaa has refused to fold.

Faced with a binary choice – either maintain its support for Palestine and accept a freeze on domestic arrangements, or open a second front with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi – Yemen chose to stay the course.

That decision was rooted in three core beliefs: that Palestine must be supported unconditionally, even if it means sacrificing urgent national interests; that Ansarallah's political identity is grounded in opposition to Israeli hegemony and thus incompatible with any alignment with Persian Gulf normalization; and that Yemen must deny Washington and Tel Aviv the opportunity to distract it with side wars designed to weaken its strategic focus.

Gulf frustration builds over Yemen's defiance

Arab coalition partners Saudi Arabia and the UAE have not taken kindly to Yemen's decision. Both countries have used the moment to begin backpedaling on the [April 2022 truce](#) and to impose punitive costs on Sanaa for throwing its weight behind Gaza.

The optics have not favored either of the Gulf monarchies. Abu Dhabi is fully normalized with Israel, while Riyadh is edging ever closer. Yemen, meanwhile – still scarred from years

of Saudi–Emirati aggression – has moved swiftly to back the Palestinian cause. The contrast could not be more stark: The Arab state most brutalized by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi is now standing up for Palestine while the aggressors look away.

Yemen’s stance also clashes with the broader geopolitical alignment of both Persian Gulf states, which remain deeply embedded in Washington’s orbit. But their frustration has remained mostly rhetorical.

Despite their roles in the so-called “[Prosperity Guardian](#)” alliance, neither Saudi Arabia nor the UAE has made major military moves against Yemen since the new round of US airstrikes began. Initially, Riyadh attempted to tie Yemen’s maritime operations in the Red Sea to the Gaza war, but that framing soon gave way to vague talk of threats to commercial shipping – code for backpedaling.

Saudi political messaging shifted sharply in January when it refused to take part in joint US–UK bombing raids. Its defense ministry moved quickly to deny reports that Saudi airspace had been opened for US strikes, and later distanced itself from any Israeli involvement. The message from Riyadh was clear: It does not want to be dragged into another full-scale war with Yemen – not now.

Yemen counters with a policy of containment

Despite Saudi Arabia’s retreat from its prior commitments, Yemen has actively encouraged Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to maintain a posture of neutrality. This is not out of optimism but pragmatism: Avoiding a wider war with the Persian Gulf would prevent a dangerous regional blowout. Sanaa’s goal has been to steer Saudi and Emirati decision-making away from military confrontation, proxy mobilization, or economic escalation.

That last point nearly tipped the balance in July 2024, when Riyadh instructed its puppet government in Aden to relocate Yemen’s central banks from Sanaa. It was a clear economic provocation – and a red line.

Within days, Ansarallah leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi delivered a sharp warning, framing the Saudi move as part of an Israeli–American playbook.

“The Americans are trying to entangle you [Saudi Arabia], and if you want that, then try it ... The move towards aggressive escalation against our country is something we can never accept,” he revealed in a [7 July 2024 speech](#).

He warned Riyadh that falling for this trap would be “a terrible mistake and a great failure, and it is our natural right to counter any aggressive step.”

Sanaa responded with an unmistakable deterrent equation: “banks for banks, Riyadh Airport for Sanaa Airport, ports for ports.”

The Saudi maneuver may have been a test of Yemen's resolve, possibly based on the assumption that Sanaa was too overextended – facing down a US-led coalition and spiraling domestic hardships – to respond decisively.

If so, Riyadh miscalculated. Houthi's reply was blunt:

“This is not a matter of allowing you to destroy this people and push it to complete collapse so that no problems arise. Let a thousand problems arise. Let matters escalate as far as they may.”

No appetite in Riyadh or Abu Dhabi for a war without guarantees

The day after Houthi's warning, massive protests erupted across Yemen. Millions marched in condemnation of Saudi provocations, offering the clearest signal yet that public opinion was firmly aligned behind the resistance – and willing to escalate.

Riyadh knows this. Even before the latest crisis, much of Yemeni society held Saudi Arabia and the UAE responsible for what even the UN called the world's worst humanitarian disaster. Any new conflict would only deepen that anger.

Faced with the threat of direct retaliation, Riyadh backed off its banking gambit. The memory of past Yemeni strikes on Saudi oil facilities – particularly those between 2019 and 2021 – still haunts the Saudi leadership.

Today, Yemen's capabilities have expanded. It now possesses [hypersonic missiles](#) and increasingly sophisticated drone technologies. And it is precisely because of these advances that Washington has failed to strong-arm the Gulf into renewed warfare. There are no meaningful US security guarantees on the table – nothing that would shield Saudi oil fields, critical infrastructure, or commercial shipping lanes from blowback.

The failures are already evident. The “Prosperity Guardian” coalition has done little to stop Yemeni strikes on Israeli-linked vessels, and US–UK airstrikes have failed to stem Yemen's ability to hit deep inside Israel. These battlefield realities have changed the calculus in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Escalation, for now, is off the table.

Yemen's red lines are expanding

That does not mean Washington has stopped trying to drag Saudi Arabia and the UAE into the fight. The Biden administration failed to do so. The Trump team, however, is seen as more aggressive and more likely to provide advanced weapons systems that might tempt Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to take the plunge.

There is also the perception among Gulf elites that this is a strategic opening: Syria's collapse, Hezbollah's supposed decline, and shifting regional dynamics may provide a rare window to redraw the map.

But for the Saudis, Yemen remains the central concern. A liberated, ideologically defiant state on their southern border is an existential threat – not only to security, but to the cultural rebranding project that the Kingdom has invested so heavily in. The UAE shares similar anxieties. A rising Yemeni Resistance Axis threatens its carefully curated image as a regional player in sync with Israeli and western interests.

That is why Sanaa has placed its forces on high alert. Ansarallah is monitoring every move by Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and their local proxies – many of whom are eager to join the war. These groups have signaled readiness to participate in an international coalition to “protect shipping,” and have already held direct meetings with US military and political officials.

But the Sanaa government knows these factions would not act without orders. If they are mobilized for a broad ground offensive, Yemen will respond by targeting the powers behind them. Any ground war will be seen as a Saudi–Emirati initiative, not a local one. The same logic applies to renewed airstrikes or deeper economic war. These are Sanaa’s red lines.

A warning to the Axis of Normalization

Abdul Malik al-Houthi laid it out clearly during a [4 April](#) address:

“I advise you all [Arab states neighboring Yemen], and we warn you at the same time: Do not get involved with the Americans in supporting the Israelis. The American enemy is in aggression against our country in support of the Israeli enemy. The battle is between us and the Israeli enemy.

The Americans support it, protect it, and back it. Do not get involved in supporting the Israeli enemy ... any cooperation with the Americans in aggression against our country, in any form, is support for the Israeli enemy, it is cooperation with the Israeli enemy, it is conspiracy against the Palestinian cause.”

He went further:

“If you cooperate with the Americans: Either by allowing him to attack us from bases in your countries. Or with financial support. Or logistical support. Or information support. It is support for the Israeli enemy, advocacy for the Israeli enemy, and backing for the Israeli enemy.”

This was not just a warning. It was a strategic declaration. Any country crossing these lines will be treated as an active participant in the war – and subject to retaliation.

The message is aimed not just at Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, but at other Arab and African states that might be tempted to join the fray under the guise of “protecting international navigation.”

Yemen is preparing for all scenarios. It will not be caught off guard. And this time, it won't be fighting alone.

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