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Strategic patience pays off: Yemen's response to Saudi escalations

The safe return of detained Yemeni Hajj pilgrims, following a single threat of force from Sanaa, is a testament to Yemen's strategic surge in West Asia – able today to counter renewed US-backed Saudi escalations with mere words.



(Photo Credit: The Cradle)

Ever since Yemeni authorities in Sanaa announced their [full support](#) for the Palestinian resistance's Operation Al-Aqsa Flood last year, the country's crisis with Saudi Arabia has reverted to its original state before the unsteady 2022 UN-brokered truce took effect.

That truce had followed nine years of relentless aggression, continuing in fits and starts during the intervening 18 months. But now, despite the understandings reached between the Saudis and Yemenis, Riyadh has [resumed](#) escalatory, non-military measures that Sanaa believes exacerbate the suffering of Yemenis as severely as military aggression.

The Ansarallah-aligned government has dealt with recent developments according to the principle of strategic patience – common among the region's Axis of Resistance members

– which suddenly culminated in a vague and controversial tweet by Brigadier General Yahya Saree, official spokesman for the Yemeni Armed Forces.

(3 days)

Tensions peaked between Sanaa and Riyadh after the recent Hajj season when Saudi authorities [detained several Yemeni pilgrims](#) in Jeddah and prevented their return to Sanaa International Airport.

This move aimed at reinforcing a recent Saudi decision to transfer the Yemenia Airlines office to Aden – the interim capital of the Saudi-backed “internationally-recognized” government, effectively bypassing Sanaa.

Sanaa viewed this as an open challenge by Riyadh, aiming to re-impose the siege on areas controlled by the Supreme Political Council by re-closing Sanaa airport. The decision posed [risks for travelers](#) who would have to transit through Aden airport, controlled by UAE-supported separatist groups, and could impact Yemeni nationals whom the government is duty-bound to protect.

In response, Sanaa took two measures to discourage the Saudis from imposing this bypass: detaining several Yemeni planes and communicating through intermediaries with Riyadh. However, with no response from Saudi Arabia, Sanaa moved to more direct measures. Saree took to the X platform, posting a brief but ominous message: “[\(3 days \)](#).”

Strategic ambiguity

The cryptic post sparked widespread speculation, especially in light of Yemen’s [growing regional influence](#). Some interpreted it as a prelude to escalating the conflict against western-facilitated war crimes in Gaza or as an ultimatum related to the US aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt following Ansarallah’s targeting of the [USS Eisenhower](#).

Many Yemeni officials and activists, however, correctly interpreted Saree’s tweet as a [deadline for Saudi Arabia](#) to allow the return of pilgrims to Sanaa or risk retaliatory action from Yemen’s armed forces.

Brigadier General Abed al-Thawr, a Yemeni military and strategic expert, tells *The Cradle* that Saudi Arabia’s actions aimed to pressure Sanaa despite an agreement obliging Riyadh to ensure the pilgrims’ safe return to the capital. The official delegation with the Yemeni pilgrims, led by Major General Yahya al-Razami, was aware of Saudi Arabia’s non-compliance.

We were surprised in Yemen by Saudi Arabia’s repudiation of the agreement, as usual in repeated maneuvers to circumvent the agreements, and its insistence on returning pilgrims to Aden, which means that they will be subject to arrest in areas controlled by

mercenaries, and here the Yemeni Armed Forces resorted to announcing a three-day deadline to return them unless Saudi Arabia bears all responsibility for any Yemeni response.

A day before the deadline expired, Ansarallah Leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi warned in his weekly speech of serious consequences if Saudi Arabia did not release the stranded pilgrims, linking Riyadh's recent actions to US interests and pressures.

Thawr, who is also assistant director of the Moral Guidance Department at the Yemeni Ministry of Defense, explains:

Saudi Arabia only understands the language of force, and therefore, the content of the message from Sanaa was military, meaning that we will resort to military options and escalate military actions against the Saudi regime.

In the last hours of the second day of the ultimatum, the Deputy Spokesman for the Yemeni Armed Forces, Brigadier General Abdul Allah bin Amer, published a post on X stating that signs of a solution were already materializing before the expiration of the announced deadline while questioning the possibility of its success.

Pilgrims safely home amid Saudi standoff

Then, on the afternoon of 5 July, Yemeni planes returned to Sanaa with the stranded pilgrims. Saree tweeted, "[It was done thanks to Allah](#)," emphasizing the resolve and strength of Yemen in securing their rights through force, not negotiation. As the head of the Yemeni news agency, SABA, said in a subsequent tweet:

Our planes went to our pilgrims and returned to their airport safely and will be in the service of our people to various destinations, Allah willing, and this is one of our rights, and whoever takes our right, we will snatch his soul from between his sides, and all the American plans and measures aimed at stopping our operation with Gaza will fail.

Speaking to *The Cradle*, political activist Abdul Hamid Jahaf believes that the Yemeni threat was not solely related to securing the freedom of the pilgrims. He suggests hidden factors connected to other obligations that Saudi Arabia has neglected in service of US interests.

This includes perceived procrastination in the Muscat negotiations and the cumulative impact of Saudi Arabia's frustrating actions through its mercenaries, such as their recent decisions to request the transfer of Sanaa-based banks to Aden, along with unresolved issues involving Yemeni Airlines and reservations.

Jahaf says, “This is an urgent topic and brings to mind the 1923 [Tanomah massacre](#),” in which 3,015 Yemeni pilgrims heading to Mecca to perform the annual Hajj were massacred by gangs belonging to the founder of Saudi Arabia, Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud. “For us, it may have been the straw that broke the camel’s back.”

Despite the pilgrims’ successful return, tensions between Yemen and Saudi Arabia remain high. Emboldened Sanaa’s demands have grown, leveraging its recent success to push for broader entitlements.

Asserting Yemen’s hard power in the region

In his latest speech, Houthi [escalated his rhetoric](#), warning Saudi Arabia against “colluding” with the US and UK to take “aggressive steps” against Sanaa and in support of Israel:

The Saudis must realize that their reckless, foolish steps cannot be tolerated, and they must get off their misguided path ... The US sent us messages that it would push the Saudi regime to take aggressive steps [against us], and there were American visits to Saudi Arabia for that reason.

According to Thawr, “America and Israel pose the real threat to peace in the region, and Saudi Arabia today is one of their tools, and perhaps America, with its statements that it sold weapons to Saudi Arabia, is one of the evidence or indicators that Saudi Arabia does not want peace, but wants escalation.” He adds:

As long as Saudi Arabia and the UAE are under the tutelage of the American cloak, it becomes impossible to deal with them except by military force. Perhaps a military solution is the only way to achieve or implement our rights and prevent them from going too far and committing crimes.

Yemenis have endured the harshest conditions over nine years of Saudi-Emirati aggression, backed by US, British, and Israeli support. They have adapted, overcome, and emerged more powerful and influential on the regional and international stage despite the brutal war waged against their country.

This includes asserting their dominance in naval conflicts against [imperialist forces in West Asia](#). What has become clear in the interim is that the US-led military alliance bent on stopping Yemeni operations against Israel-bound shipping vessels has been unable to protect its own naval assets – let alone safeguard Saudi Arabia and its interests.

Furthermore, Yemen was able to gain the release of its Saudi-held detainees in three short days, with a single threat of retaliation, whereas Israel – and its western alliance – has struggled to free its Gaza-held captives in nine months of constant bombardment.

Thus, Yemen believes that the language of force is the most effective means of imposing its will on its larger neighbor and securing its sovereignty.

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