

Armed Conflict



13

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**Saudi Arabia & Yemen Alert (UPDATE):
Houthis on July 13 claim attack against
Saudi Arabia's Abha International Airport,
warn international carriers against flying
over Saudi airspace; take precautions,
conduct frequent risk assessments**

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Current Situation:

- During the late evening hours of July 13, following Saudi Arabia's statement on engaging with a Houthi aerial attack, the Houthi Military Spokesperson, Yahya Saree, formally claimed responsibility for targeting the kingdom.
- Saree stated that the Houthi forces have targeted the Abha International Airport in Asir Province with ballistic missiles and UAVs.
- Saree accused Saudi Arabia again of targeting the Sanaa International Airport earlier in an attempt to block an Iranian flight from reaching the airport, alleging that the strike was conducted by Saudi fighter aircraft.
- Saree also warned "all airlines against flying through Saudi Arabia's airspace," urging them to take Houthi warnings seriously until the "blockade on Sanaa International Airport is lifted."

Assessments & Forecast:

1. This formally breaks the long lull in Houthi attacks against Saudi Arabia, which was thus far facilitated by the Yemen truce. As we [previously](#) noted, the development highlights the gaps and distrust between the Houthi movement and Saudi Arabia, which has functioned as the primary ally and patron of the Presidential Command Council (PCC), over the implementation of the 2023 UN-brokered peace roadmap.
2. The trigger for the Houthi escalation has been their opposition to Saudi/PCC attempts to continue enforcing the aerial blockade over Houthi territories amid an Iranian attempt to breach it by sending flights to and from Houthi-controlled airports. This pattern [emerged in early July, triggering hostile Houthi rhetoric and threats against the kingdom](#).
3. In this context, the development on July 13, in which the PCC/Saudi conducted strikes against the Sanaa Airport in an attempt to block an Iranian flight from landing at the facility, constituted an immediate trigger, prompting the Houthis to fulfill their threats against Saudi Arabia. This is despite the fact that the flight, which was diverted from Sanaa, landed at the Houthi-controlled Hodeidah Airport and took off afterward, which effectively means that Iran and the Houthis did eventually breach the aerial blockade again.
4. **The timing of this development is highly notable in this context and bears significant geopolitical ramifications. It constitutes an indication that Iran and the Houthis are currently emboldened.** This is likely a direct result of the June 17 signing of the MoU to end the war, which was widely viewed in the region as a US capitulation to Iran and a signal that the US seeks to withdraw from the war, despite Tehran's continued defiance of Washington. The perception that the US desperately aims to conclude the conflict, and Iran's ability to endure and survive months-long military campaigns by the US and Israel, has bolstered Tehran's prestige and deterrence vis-a-vis its regional allies and foes, and likely prompted Iran and the Houthis to maneuver to change the status quo in the Yemen arena, which remains a primary interest to Iran. This is especially true given that Tehran seeks to regenerate and bolster support for members of its Axis of Resistance, including the Houthis, which was hampered during the Israel-Hamas war and the US/Israel-Iran conflict.
5. In addition, by opening a new front that is distinct from the [tension and current escalatory dynamic between the US and Iran](#), Tehran and its allies in the Axis of Resistance likely wish to bolster Iran's regional leverage and deterrence against the US and its allies, with the Yemen front functioning as another "card" and a pressure mechanism on the negotiation table. This will particularly become more relevant if the Houthis decide to escalate their measures further, for example by extending their current hostile posture to resuming their maritime attack campaign in the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea.
6. **The Houthi attack, combined with the subsequent Houthi threats against Saudi Arabia and international air carriers, thus likely signals a more concerted Houthi policy stance and a decision to increase pressure against Saudi Arabia, in an effort to normalize regular Iranian flights to Houthi-controlled territories.**
7. This places Riyadh in a predicament and dilemma over how to respond to such a breach of the status quo. Its go-to approach is more likely to be capitulation to the new Iranian-Houthi stance or the introduction of alternative incentives to avoid the escalatory dynamic via backchannel communications. This is due to Riyadh's primary interest in preserving calm and keeping itself as far as possible from regional hostilities. This is especially since it has been one of the few Gulf countries that managed to offset the adverse impact of the closure of the Strait of Hormuz by using its western bypass in the Red Sea. An escalation with the Houthis would pose a credible threat to Riyadh's economic viability and efforts to create an image of stability, as [Houthi aerial attacks can extend to all parts of Saudi Arabia](#), including its strategic Red Sea Oil terminal in Yanbu. **The Saudi decision to eventually allow the Iranian flight to land in Hodeidah lends credence to the assessment that Riyadh seeks to de-escalate and resort to finding a non-military solution to the current tension. This effort will likely continue over the coming hours and days.**

8. That being said, Riyadh will be wary of incoming Iranian flights, especially those associated with Mahan Air. This is because Mahan Air is a designated Iranian carrier believed to be operating in service of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). In this context, Saudi Arabia likely acknowledges that the reopening of such a direct line between Iran and the Houthis by the IRGC's operational arms effectively means a steadier flow of military hardware and operatives, which would pose long-term risks for Riyadh.
9. Another risk vector is Riyadh's management of its relations with the PCC, and the PCC's expected backlash over any perceived capitulation to the Houthis, with the reconstitution of the Iran-Houthi aerial link posing a long-term risk to the anti-Houthi camp within Yemen. In this context, a rejection of the newly introduced Iranian-Houthi equation can also emerge as a grassroots trend, thereby bolstering the [simmering tensions](#) on the ground within the context of the Yemeni civil war.
10. **FORECAST:** As a whole, the above currently increase the prospects for additional Houthi attacks against Saudi Arabia's territory, with an emphasis on airports and air travel. As of the time of writing, the Houthis appear to have devised a gradual escalatory stance, which may explain their decision to conduct a single attack against the southern Abha airport. This airport, which was frequently targeted before the Yemen truce, will remain a primary flashpoint in the coming hours and days.
11. **FORECAST: Nevertheless, a Houthi decision to expand its list of targets to include additional airports and/or strategic infrastructure in the country, particularly energy installations, is plausible. Flashpoint installations, as reflected in current official Houthi threats, include the King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh, King Abdulaziz International Airport in Jeddah, and the King Fahd International Airport in Dammam. Additional strategic installations include Jazan Port, Jeddah Port, King Abdullah Port, and Ras Tanura oil terminal.**

Recommendations:

Saudi Arabia

1. Avoid nonessential travel to Saudi Arabia at the current juncture and reconsider the necessity of travel plans amid increasing prospects for Houthi attacks and the regional escalatory dynamic between Iran and the US.
2. Avoid travel to key, strategic civilian infrastructure in Saudi Arabia, especially the abovementioned sites the Houthis explicitly threatened.
3. Conduct frequent and timely risk assessments ahead and during operations in the kingdom, including before utilizing international airports. This includes monitoring flight tracking platforms to identify anomalies in aerial traffic.
4. Monitor updates by the Saudi-led Arab Coalition and the Houthis' Military Spokesperson and leadership.
5. Avoid all travel to southern Saudi territory near the Yemeni border and avoid the Abha International Airport at this juncture.
6. Establish/refresh business contingency plans (BCPs), with an emphasis on Houthi-Saudi escalation scenarios.
7. Train personnel on how to identify and use protected areas/shelters during operations in the kingdom, especially on the premises of strategic infrastructure.

Yemen:

1. Continue to avoid travel to Yemen at the current juncture, especially to Houthi-controlled territories, amid elevated risks posed to foreign nationals.

2. In PCC-controlled areas, avoid all travel to airports, energy facilities and ports in light of escalated tensions and potential for Houthi attacks against these assets.