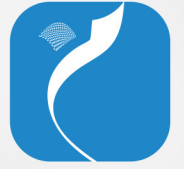


**Position Evaluation**  
October 2024

المركز  
لدراسات الاستراتيجية  
MOKHA  
for strategic studies



# In the Context of its Threats: How Likely Is Another Israeli Attack on the Houthis?

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**FOREIGN STUDIES UNIT**

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**In the Context of its Threats:  
How Likely Is Another Israeli Attack  
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**Position Evaluation**



October / 2024



We are a research institution concerned with studying Yemeni affairs and the regional and international influences on it. Through interpreting history, analysing the present, and predicting the future, in the aim of positive participating for better future of Yemen

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## Abstract

A year after the Israeli war on Gaza, along with its failure to achieve its stated objectives, Israel shifted the conflict northward toward Lebanon. On September 30, 2024, the Israeli army announced the start of a ground military operation in Lebanon, noting that it was being conducted alongside ongoing operations in Gaza and other areas. This escalation followed a series of intense strikes against Hezbollah, culminating on September 27 when Israel targeted the group's main headquarters in the southern suburbs of Beirut with missiles and precision bombs. The strike killed Hezbollah's Secretary-General, Hassan Nasrallah, along with other senior leaders of the group and the Quds Force commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard in Lebanon.

These events triggered further escalation in the region, adding to the chaos Hezbollah had been facing for days and increasing anticipation of Iran's next move before deciding to launch a full-scale attack on Israel. U.S. efforts to restrain the actions of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his hardline government appeared ineffective. Initially, the strikes created significant confusion among Iran's allies, including the Houthi movement. However, this uncertainty diminished after Iran launched missile attacks on Israel on the eve of October 2, killing more than eight Israeli soldiers and wounding nearly 30 others as they attempted to push into Lebanese territory.

In response to the death of Nasrallah, the Houthis fired a missile toward Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv just as Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu was returning from addressing the United Nations General Assembly in New York. Following the Houthi missile launch, the Israeli army responded on September 28, stating that although Ansar Allah (the Houthis) would eventually be dealt with, their immediate focus remained on continuing the offensive against Hezbollah in Lebanon.

On September 29, Israeli aircraft carried out air strikes on power plants in Yemen's Al-Hali area and port of Hodeida. The strikes also hit oil tanks at the port of Ras Issa, causing destruction and leading to casualties. This raises the question: Will Israel carry out more attacks on the Houthis, and what is the broader context behind these actions? This paper seeks to explore and address that issue.

## Escalation of the Conflict

Since the outbreak of the Israeli-Gaza war on October 7, 2023, the Houthi group declared its involvement in the conflict as part of what is referred to as the “unity of the arenas,” which is a coalition of armed groups across the region, supported or influenced by Iran. The Houthis’ role has primarily been focused on launching attacks on international shipping vessels in the Red Sea and sending drones and missiles toward Israel.

In response to these actions, the United States, under the banner of a naval coalition called “Guardian of Prosperity,” rallied several nations to protect maritime routes. However, this alliance struggled to prevent Houthi attacks, particularly as many regional countries declined to participate, linking the tensions in the Red Sea to the ongoing Israeli-Gaza conflict. There was a growing sentiment that halting the war in Gaza would also de-escalate clashes across the region, including in the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

Despite the alliance’s efforts, Houthi attacks on commercial vessels persisted. In retaliation, U.S. and British forces launched several strikes on Houthi-controlled areas, claiming to target weapons storage facilities, drones, radars and missile launch sites. However, these strikes did not target Houthi leadership or fighters directly. The most recent wave of these strikes took place on Friday, October 4, with 15 air raids on targets in Hodeida, Sana’a, Dhamar and Al Bayda, which were believed to be tied to the Houthis’ offensive capabilities. The strikes did not have a significant impact on the group’s military strength.

Unlike the ongoing clashes between Hezbollah and Israel since October 8, which have largely followed established rules of engagement, this new escalation has broken those boundaries. In a significant move, the Israeli government assassinated Fouad Shukr, the commander of Hezbollah’s Radwan Brigades. The situation took a dramatic turn on Tuesday, September 17, when thousands of pagers carried by Hezbollah members were simultaneously detonated across Lebanon. The following day, Icom F82 walkie-talkies were also detonated, leading to the assassination of many Hezbollah members. On September 27, Israel launched a targeted air strike that led to the assassination of several high-ranking Hezbollah military leaders, including the party’s Secretary-General, Hassan Nasrallah.

In response, the Houthi group declared that “the Zionist enemy will not achieve its security and stability by assassinating the resistance leaders” and vowed support for “the dear peoples” of Lebanon and Palestine, as well as their “comrades in jihad.” On September 28, the Houthis launched a ballistic missile targeting Ben Gurion Airport in Israel, coinciding with Prime Minister Netanyahu’s arrival in Tel Aviv. They also claimed responsibility for a series of attacks on ships in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

In reaction, on September 28, the Israeli Broadcasting Corporation reported that the Israeli army acknowledged that the Yemeni Ansar Allah group (Houthis) would eventually be targeted, but for now, the primary focus remained on attacking Lebanese Hezbollah members. The following day, Israel launched air strikes on power plants in the Al-Hali area and the port of Hodeida, also hitting oil tanks in the port of Ras Issa, resulting in casualties and significant damage.

For several days, it appeared that Israel was entering a phase of dominance, poised to punish the groups that had challenged it in recent confrontations. However, the dynamics shifted after an Iranian strike, the failure of Israel’s ground assault in southern Lebanon and the resulting casualties among Israeli forces. These events brought the region back to a familiar state of conflict, pitting Israel and the United States against Iran and its allies.

Several factors will determine whether Israel might launch strikes against Houthi leaders. While Israel has threatened the Houthis, any such action depends on a range of variables. These include the progress of Israel’s ground operations in southern Lebanon, the extent and persistence of Houthi attacks on Israel, the type of attacks if they occur, the evolving nature of the Israel-Iran conflict and the stance of the United States on these developments. These elements collectively shape the likelihood of strikes against Houthi leadership.

### **Here’s a closer look at these factors:**

#### **1. The Progress of Ground Operations in Southern Lebanon**

On September 30, the Israeli army announced the start of a “targeted and precise” ground operation against Hezbollah near the southern Lebanese border. According to Israeli radio, special commando units crossed into Lebanon. However, there is speculation that the operation may not remain limited, and that the Israeli army’s description of it as “precise” could be an attempt to manage expectations in case of failure.

The success of this operation is critical for the potential of launching significant strikes against the Houthis in Yemen, as it would likely boost domestic support for Netanyahu's government and encourage more military actions in the region, including against the Houthis, who have already been threatened.

On the other hand, failure or setbacks in the ground invasion would reduce Israel's likelihood of carrying out severe attacks on the Houthis. Early signs point to a decreasing chance of success, given the losses the Israeli army has sustained since the beginning of the intervention, including the deaths of eight soldiers and injuries to around 30 others. At the same time, the Israeli military is increasingly preoccupied with responding to an Iranian attack and managing its potential repercussions, further complicating its ability to escalate against the Houthis.

## **2. The Extent of the Security Breach in Iran and Hezbollah**

Recent events have exposed significant security breaches within both Iran and Hezbollah. Over the past two years, Israel has successfully carried out operations in Iran, while, on September 17, thousands of pagers carried by Hezbollah members in Lebanon were detonated simultaneously, along with Icom F82 walkie-talkie devices the next day. These incidents, along with the assassination of numerous senior political and military leaders in Hezbollah, highlight the deep penetration of Israeli intelligence into both Iran and Hezbollah.

This breach has been a key factor in Israel's successes, including assassinations inside Iran, the bombing of strategic sites, as well as the disruption of Hezbollah's communications and leadership. However, the full extent of Israel's infiltration of Hezbollah remains unclear.

The depth of this intelligence penetration plays a significant role in the outcome of Israel's ground operation in southern Lebanon. If Mossad's infiltration is extensive enough to reveal the locations of missile launchers, tunnel networks and military gathering points, it would make targeting these assets much easier, reducing the cost and risks for Israeli forces. This would increase the likelihood of a successful operation, which in turn could embolden Israel to carry out retaliatory strikes against other regional actors, including the Houthis.

However, if the breach is more limited — only tracking the movements of senior leaders without providing actionable intelligence on lower-level military activities — the Israeli army would face greater uncertainty. This could expose their forces to ambushes and result in higher casualties, making the operation more likely to fail. In such a scenario, the likelihood of Israel launching additional strikes, including those against the Houthis, would diminish.

### **3. The Scale of Mutual Attacks Between Iran and Israel**

Following the Iranian attack on October 2, the Israeli army announced that it would choose the right moment to “demonstrate our precise- and surprise-attack capabilities,” signaling that a response to Iran is inevitable. This response has been backed by the United States, and current discussions between Israeli and U.S. officials seem to focus on the scope and objectives of the retaliation. While Israeli leadership appears to favor a broader response to strengthen its deterrence, U.S. President Biden has cautioned against targeting Iran’s nuclear reactor, urging that any retaliation be proportionate. The U.S. National Security Advisor downplayed the Iranian attack as ineffective, supporting a measured response.

On the Iranian side, President Masoud Pezeshkian and other officials have warned that any Israeli response would trigger a devastating retaliation, raising the risk of a series of mutual attacks that could escalate into a full-scale regional conflict.

This confrontation with Iran could divert Israel’s attention away from striking the Houthis, as Israel is likely to prioritize more significant actors in the conflict. The Houthis, though aligned with Iran, play a relatively minor role in this larger clash. However, their involvement could provoke a response from the United States and its Western allies. If the Houthis, possibly at Iran’s command, attack U.S. warships, Washington, D.C., may be forced to retaliate harshly, including potentially targeting Houthi leaders — something the U.S. has previously avoided but might reconsider in such a scenario.

### **4. Houthi Attacks and Their Role in the Regional Conflict**

The Houthi attacks on Israel and international shipping in the Red Sea are key factors in the possibility of Israeli retaliatory strikes. Israel’s aim in any such strikes would be to stop the Houthis from continuing their attacks, restore its damaged deterrence and assert its dominance in the region.



The likelihood of Israeli strikes appears to depend on the scale and persistence of Houthi attacks. If the Houthis continue their assaults, it will almost certainly prompt military retaliation from Israel. Conversely, if the Houthis halt their attacks, Israel may hold back on responding. The intensity of any Israeli response will also be influenced by the nature of the Houthi attacks. If the attacks inflict significant damage on Israeli interests, Israel's retaliation will be more forceful. However, if the impact is minor or ineffective, Israel may choose not to respond, or it would have a limited reaction.

It seems that the Houthis are trying to strike a balance — continuing to launch missiles and drones toward Israel to remain relevant in the broader conflict, while ensuring these attacks do not cause significant harm to Israeli vital interests, to avoid provoking a harsh retaliation.

### **5. The Iranian Position**

Iran's stance significantly influences any Israeli retaliatory strikes against the Houthis, as Iran is a key regional factor shaping Israel's actions and its broader conflict in the region. Iran is carefully considering its responses to avoid being dragged into a large-scale war with Israel and the United States, given the threats to its regime and political goals. This caution was evident when Iran refrained from military retaliation after the assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh was killed on Iranian soil during his stay as a guest at the inauguration of Iranian President Pezeshkian on July 31. Similarly, Iran's reaction was muted following the assassination of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and Quds Force commander Abbas Nilforoushan in Lebanon on September 27, which some interpreted as Iran yielding to Israel's actions.

However, the situation changed dramatically with Iran's attack on the night of October 2, marking a shift in its approach. Overall, Iran's response could limit Israel's ability to carry out military strikes against other regional actors, including the Houthis. If Iran remains passive, Israel may feel emboldened to conduct more operations.

Iran's reaction to any Israeli strikes on the Houthis may not be strong, given the Houthis' relatively modest role within the broader network of Iranian-aligned militias. However, if Israel were to target the group's leader, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, this could prompt a stronger response due to the significant media and psychological impact such a move would have on Iran's "axis of resistance."

## 6. The American Position

U.S. support for Israel has long been a cornerstone of American policy, backed by key institutions, such as the military, intelligence agencies and both chambers of Congress. This support persists across different administrations, although the level of backing may vary. During presidential election seasons, support for Israel often peaks as candidates seek to win favor with the influential pro-Israel lobby in the U.S.

The Biden administration has provided robust military, political and media support to Israel during the conflict, sparked by Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. The U.S. has also deployed deterrent military forces to the region to prevent other actors from joining the war on the side of Palestinian resistance. However, Biden's administration has also pursued a strategy of containment, urging Israel to de-escalate and pressing for an end to the conflict to avoid broader regional instability.

Despite this, Israel's government, led by Netanyahu and far-right factions, has resisted U.S. pressure to stop the war, likely understanding that an extended conflict could benefit Donald Trump's campaign for re-election. It's possible that Israel's decision to initiate a war against the Hezbollah in southern Lebanon was made against the wishes of President Biden, but the U.S. administration has felt compelled to support Israel, nonetheless. It appears Israel is pushing the U.S. into more aggressive positions, including a potential confrontation with Iran.

While the U.S. has issued warnings about the dangers of Iranian intervention and the risk of a wider regional war, a retaliatory Israeli strike against the Houthis would likely be tolerated by Washington. However, the Biden administration may not endorse a strike that targets Houthi leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi directly, preferring to avoid significant escalation that could jeopardize broader U.S. interests in the region. Strikes on other Houthi military or political figures, as part of Israel's response, might be overlooked, given that the U.S. also really wants to see a political resolution to the conflict in Yemen.

## 7. Challenges in Identifying and Striking Houthi Targets

Israel faces significant challenges in successfully carrying out military strikes against the Houthis, mainly due to the difficulty of establishing an effective "target bank." Several key factors contribute to this:

**A. Geographical Distance:** Yemen is much farther from Israel than Gaza or southern Lebanon — more than 2,000 kilometers (1,243 miles) away.

This distance makes military operations much more complex, akin to attempting to light a match in a storm. Attacking aircraft would need refueling support and coordination with American and Western naval forces in the Red Sea to avoid accidental confrontations. The Houthis would also have ample time to detect and prepare for incoming attacks.

**B. Challenging Terrain:** The areas controlled by the Houthis are mostly mountainous, with valleys and ravines. This type of geography provides hiding spots for missile launchers and other military assets, making it harder for Israel to monitor their movements. Surveillance drones are often at risk of being shot down, adding another layer of complexity to any military operation.

**C. Houthi Military Structure:** The Houthi group operates more like a militia than a traditional army, using small, mobile units to carry out their operations. Their leadership has developed a heightened sense of security over years of conflict, making it challenging for outside forces to accurately locate their key figures and infrastructure.

**D. Seven Years of Conflict:** After seven years of relentless conflict, there are few viable targets left to be destroyed. Many military camps and strategic sites have already been heavily bombed, resulting in significant damage over the years, in addition to the bombing carried out by the United States and Britain, which could be an alternative to direct Israeli bombing.

**E. Increased Houthi Caution:** Since the assassination of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, Houthi leaders have become more cautious. They've implemented tighter security measures, particularly around their leader, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, who is believed to be a potential target for Israeli strikes.

Given these challenges, Israel's recent strikes against Houthi-controlled areas have primarily focused on economic facilities near the port of Hodeidah. These targets are relatively easier to hit and provide a dramatic visual impact, such as large fires resulting from strikes on oil storage facilities. This aligns with Israel's strategy to create a spectacle of destruction that conveys a strong message of deterrence, rather than engaging in the complex task of dismantling Houthi military capabilities.

## Conclusion

Given the current situation, it's unlikely that Israel will launch retaliatory strikes against the Houthis, if Hezbollah manages to regroup and Israel finds itself locked in a drawn-out conflict in southern Lebanon, while still dealing with the ongoing war in Gaza. If Iran escalates further, leading to direct exchanges with Israel, and Houthi attacks decrease or cause only limited damage, the chances of Israel focusing on the Houthis would be minimal.

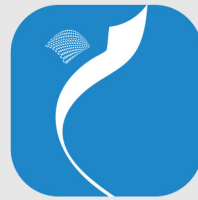
The likelihood of Israel conducting operations against the Houthis increases if Israel achieves military success against Hezbollah, if the threat of a direct military confrontation with Iran decreases, or if a broader regional conflict erupts those results in damage to American warships by the Houthis.

Should strikes take place, they are likely to target economic interests that generate significant media attention, like the previous attacks on Hodeidah. Additionally, Israel may attempt to assassinate mid-level military or political leaders within the Houthi ranks and potentially even the group's leader, especially if Houthi actions significantly threaten Israeli interests.

## Source

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