



Renewal of the UNMHA Mandate in Hodeidah: Between De-escalation Efforts and the Winds of Escalation

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Analytic Papers

2025

Introduction

On July 14, the UN Security Council unanimously voted to extend the mandate of the United Nations Mission to Support the Hodeidah Agreement (UNMHA) until January 2026. While this move might seem routine in the context of usual UN procedures, its timing raises significant questions, especially as it coincides with the Houthi group's renewed escalation in the Red Sea. The Houthis have attacked and sunk two cargo ships, resulting in the deaths of four crew members, the abduction of six others and several missing people.

In light of the lukewarm international response to this escalation, the decision to extend the mission's mandate for another six months provokes several inquiries: Is this a step toward freezing the battle to liberate Hodeidah in favor of a political settlement? Is it merely a delay of the confrontation until the Iranian file is resolved? Or, would the extension be just a marginal event with no real impact on the course of escalation against the Houthis?

This paper seeks to analyze the implications and consequences of this decision, considering both the signs of de-escalation and those of renewed conflict in the Yemeni file.

Contents of the Stockholm Agreement

The Yemeni government delegation and the Houthi group signed an agreement in the Swedish capital, Stockholm, under UN auspices on December 13, 2018. The agreement covered three tracks:

1. Provisions for the city of Hodeidah, its port and the port of Ras Isa.
2. An executive mechanism to implement a prisoner-exchange agreement.
3. A declaration of understandings concerning Taiz.

Key provisions of the agreement included: a comprehensive ceasefire in Hodeidah governorate, the withdrawal of forces from Hodeidah city and its ports (Hodeidah and Ras Isa) within 14 days of signing, in order to secure the ports and allow humanitarian aid to flow to those who need it. The agreement also stipulated that all port revenues would be deposited into the Central Bank of Yemen's Hodeidah branch to contribute to public sector salaries. Furthermore, it provided for the formation of a UN committee to coordinate the redeployment of military forces and monitor the implementation of the agreement, including the removal of landmines from Hodeidah and its ports, under the supervision of local authorities in accordance with Yemeni law.

Formation of the UN Mission

Following the agreement, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2452 on December 22, 2018, authorizing the UN Secretary-General to establish a UN team to support the immediate implementation of the agreement. Thus, the United Nations Mission to Support the Hodeidah Agreement (UNMHA) was formed.

The mission arrived in Hodeidah at the beginning of 2019 and established a Joint Operations Center comprising liaison officers from the mission, the Yemeni government and the Houthi group.

Violations and Breaches of the Agreement's Implementation

From the first weeks following the signing of the agreement, the Yemeni government reported violations committed by the Houthi militia stationed in the city. The group failed to comply with the withdrawal clause, and armed clashes between them and government forces resumed. The Supreme Relief Committee also announced that the Houthi militia had blocked the entry of more than 88 humanitarian, commercial and oil ships up until January 2019. Furthermore, they directly attacked seven ships, including four Saudi, two Emirati and one Turkish vessel in the Red Sea.

The committee also stated that the militia had seized several humanitarian aid trucks on roads linking the governorates of Hodeidah, Sana'a, Ibb, Taiz, Hajjah and Dhamar — including trucks carrying medicines for cholera and children's vaccines, as well as wheat supplies, which the World Food Programme provided.

Over the past years since the agreement was signed, none of its provisions have been fully implemented except for the ceasefire in Hodeidah. The Houthi group obstructed the agreement by interpreting its terms in their own way. For example, they deployed members dressed as local security and coast guard forces, refused to deposit port revenues into the government account designated for paying public sector salaries, and they seized the dilapidated "FSO Safer" tanker, denying inspection and maintenance teams access for several years.

Meanwhile, they continued using the port to bring in smuggled weapons for their ongoing wars.

The UN mission remained largely symbolic. According to a press release by Yemen's Ministry of Information, the mission had ceased its effective work since 2020, with no real action to enforce the agreement, especially given that Houthi forces control the mission's offices and accommodations, effectively holding the team hostage to pressure and extortion. In 2022, the government called for the relocation of the UN mission's headquarters to a neutral zone.

More recently, Yemen's Minister of Information and Culture, Moamar al-Eryani, accused the UN mission of utter failure to carry out its duties over the past seven years, claiming that it had become a political cover for allowing the Houthi group to avoid its obligations as well as to strengthen its military and economic grip over western Yemen. He called for the termination of the mission's mandate.

Despite these governmental stances, the international and UN communities have largely ignored them. This culminated in the Security Council's unanimous vote on July 14 to extend the mandate of the United Nations Mission to Support the Hodeidah Agreement (UNMHA) until January 2026. Critics argue that this extension offers the Houthis a favorable climate to continue their violations and maritime attacks, while restraining government forces from carrying out a military operation to liberate Hodeidah. After what is widely seen as the complete failure of the Stockholm Agreement, others believe that the mission's extension remains merely symbolic and will not hinder any future military escalation, especially amid signs of renewed conflict.

General Context

On March 15, the United States launched an air campaign against the Houthi group, which is designated — by the U.S., Australia, Canada and New Zealand — as a foreign terrorist organization. The campaign lasted for seven weeks. On May 6, the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump announced an agreement with the Houthis to halt U.S. air strikes in exchange for the cessation of Houthi attacks on American ships in international shipping lanes.

On June 13, Israel launched an air campaign against the Iranian regime, which responded with missile strikes. The reciprocal attacks between the two sides lasted for 12 days, after which the United States joined in with air strikes targeting Iranian nuclear facilities. The U.S. administration then announced that Israel and Iran had reached an agreement to cease fire.

Both campaigns — in Yemen and Iran — were marked by surprise announcements regarding their initiation and cessation, with no declared agreements outlining terms, obligations or guarantees. This has left the future of both deals uncertain and vulnerable to renewed confrontation at any time. This ambiguity is not limited to these two events but is a dominant feature across several developments in the region, which appears to be undergoing a new phase of geopolitical reconfiguration.

The Funding Dilemma and Pressure Tactics

In recent months, events have largely surpassed the role and purpose of the UN mission, especially after the Houthis carried out attacks in the Red Sea and international military escalation resumed in Yemen — including recent U.S. air strikes, which were more effective than previous ones since the Houthis became a key player in Iran's strategic influence operations in the Red Sea under the pretext of supporting Gaza.

Several European and Arab countries have avoided participating in the campaign. European states opted for a defensive approach through the Prosperity Guardian coalition and the EU-led Aspides mission to protect their shipping vessels. The UK's involvement in the U.S. campaign was limited and ended shortly before its conclusion.

According to various media reports, both Saudi Arabia and Egypt declined to take part in the campaign. Saudi Arabia reportedly feels betrayed by the international community throughout the years of war since the launch of Operation Decisive Storm. International policies have contributed to prolonging the war in Yemen, turning it into a multidirectional political and economic investment, including Iran-backed Shiite militias' repeated attacks on Saudi oil infrastructure. These policies have also obstructed the Yemeni government's ability to resolve the conflict at several critical junctures. Saudi Arabia may now view the Houthi problem as having transformed into an international issue that affects Red Sea and Gulf of Aden security and global interests. Accordingly, the kingdom appears unwilling to finance an international campaign on behalf of all affected parties.

As for Egypt, The Wall Street Journal reported that Cairo rejected a U.S. request in early April to participate in military operations against the Houthis aimed at securing shipping lanes, despite the Egyptian economy being harmed by reduced shipping traffic through the Suez Canal. Egypt also objected to remarks President Trump said suggesting that U.S. ships should transit the canal without paying the imposed fees. Egypt's current focus appears to be on its immediate national security priorities, which are increasingly threatened by the fallout of ongoing conflicts across its bordering regions.

On another front, multiple U.S. and European reports indicate that Russia and China have provided the Houthis with technical support and assistance through intermediaries, as part of their broader geopolitical rivalry with the United States.

Given these dynamics, the U.S. administration seems to have opted — with a merchant's mindset — to secure its own interests unilaterally, by reaching a deal with the Houthis that protects American ships and interests from Houthi attacks, regardless of ongoing threats to global maritime traffic and the interests of other nations that have not contributed to the cost of confronting the Houthis. Still, the conflict remains highly volatile, and a broader war may reignite at any moment, potentially through a larger coalition that shares both the costs and consequences, in a campaign that could begin in Tehran and end with dismantling its remaining proxies in the region.

Throughout this entire context, it is evident that the world no longer views the Yemeni conflict through the lens of its local complexities, but rather through the prism of its impact on international interests.

Many analysts and observers point to a lack of effective leadership from the legitimate Yemeni government in advancing its cause, instead waiting for shifts in international priorities to bring about solutions and implement them on the ground on its behalf.

Indicators of Renewed Escalation in Yemen

Despite the complex nature of the Yemeni file, recent regional developments suggest potential shifts that could lead to an end of the crisis in Yemen — whether through war or a political settlement. In this section, we review indicators that may support the hypothesis of renewed escalation, either in Yemen or in relation to Iran, given the interconnected impact of developments in Iran on the situation in Yemen.

- Renewed and Unprecedented Houthi Escalation Against Maritime Navigation:

Recently, the Houthi group has resumed its attacks on international maritime routes in the Red Sea. Throughout a course of 21 months — since the start of Houthi attacks on ships (September 2023) in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, up to June of this year — only two commercial ships were sunk, in just one week of July 2025, alone, the group managed to sink two additional vessels. They also launched attacks using drone boats, ballistic missiles and engaged in close-range combat with firearms against the crews of targeted ships.

This escalation came after the Houthis had halted attacks on ships following the announcement of a pause in U.S. air strikes. Although the U.S. agreement with the Houthis covered only American ships, Trump declared at the time that maritime navigation was now safe.

However, this latest round of attacks casts serious doubt on the credibility of the U.S. position and its public statements, placing Washington's assurances under international scrutiny.

- U.S. Call to End the UN Mission in Hodeidah:

The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations called for the termination of the UN Mission to Support the Hodeidah Agreement (UNMHA) a week before the UN Security Council voted on its extension. The ambassador argued that the mission had become incapable of keeping up with field developments and that events on the ground had overtaken its mandate.

This American stance was met with strong opposition from Russia's envoy, who defended the mission and emphasized that its continued presence was essential for preserving stability. Subsequently, the Security Council unanimously voted to extend the mission's mandate, including a yes vote from the United States, itself. This revealed that the earlier U.S. call may have been a tactical maneuver, aimed at placing responsibility on Russia for the ongoing harm to international maritime interests.

Nevertheless, the U.S. representative added a qualifier to the approval, stating that the support for the extension was conditional on the mission fulfilling its obligations and that its performance would remain under evaluation. This reservation leaves the door open for a possible return to escalation in the Red Sea if deemed necessary for protecting Western interests.

- *Renewed Israeli Escalation:*

During the week of July 14, 2025, the Israeli entity resumed its air strikes on Yemen in an operation called “Black Flag,” targeting the Port of Hodeidah, Ras Isa Port and the Ras Khathib power station. The strikes also destroyed the “Galaxy” ship, which had been held by the Houthis since the beginning of their Red Sea attacks. According to Israel, the ship contained a naval radar system used to monitor vessel movements. Late in the week of July 21, 2025, Israeli radio reported that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had asked U.S. President Donald Trump to resume U.S. air operations against the Houthis. Israel’s Defense Minister stated that the Houthis would pay a heavy price.

- *Escalation in Security Reports in the Media:*

Western media outlets have increasingly circulated reports claiming that the Houthis have acquired advanced weaponry, including radioactive and chemical materials. Some Arab TV channels have aired extended segments discussing the topic, while certain Israeli reports allege that Iran is supplying these new weapons to the Houthis as a potential alternative to Hezbollah in Lebanon. This media escalation likely aims to justify renewed military action against the Houthis — whether through air strikes, ground operations, or both — as well as to legitimize potential military action against Iran.

- *Tightening the Noose Around the Houthis:*

Security forces affiliated with the legitimate Yemeni government have arrested several figures loyal to the Houthis. Among them was the tribal leader Mohammed Al-Zaidi, who was detained at the Sarfait border crossing in Al-Mahra Governorate while attempting to leave for Oman.

Additionally, former Houthi Foreign Minister Hisham Sharaf Abdullah was arrested at Aden Airport while trying to travel abroad. These events point to a noticeable shift in how Houthi-affiliated leaders' movements are being handled.

- *Indicators of Renewed Escalation Against Iran:*

Signs of renewed escalation against Iran suggest a potential parallel escalation in Yemen, especially if broader regional conflict reignites. Recently, it was announced that Abdolrahim Mousavi, chief of staff of the Iranian Army, had been assassinated in an explosion on the 14th floor of one of the Chitgar Towers in Tehran. Bombings and assassinations have continued across the Iranian capital and the wider country. It is believed that both Mossad and Western intelligence services are behind these incidents.

This indicates that Israel and the United States have not ended the war, but rather paused its first wave, and that a second wave is underway in the form of Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW), targeting the adversary from within their own territory without direct military engagement. This may escalate into direct confrontation aimed at regime change.

Furthermore, accusations and rhetoric against Iran continue to escalate — both officially and through media outlets — signaling a climate conducive to a return to open hostilities.

Indicators Supporting the Hypothesis of De-escalation

or Political Settlement in Yemen In contrast to the signs of potential escalation, several indicators point toward the likelihood of de-escalation or a move toward a political settlement in Yemen. These include:

- *Weak International Response to Houthi Attacks:*

The international community has shown a muted reaction to the Houthis' bold moves, particularly their direct targeting and sinking of ships. So far, global responses have fallen short of the severity of these actions. This may suggest coordinated international positions aimed at supporting de-escalation in the Red Sea through dialogue and negotiation, rather than a return to war.

- *The UN Envoy's Recent Activities:*

The UN Special Envoy to Yemen has resumed active engagements after a period of relative inactivity. Recently, he visited Riyadh, Muscat and Aden, met with several officials and conducted field visits to roads in Al-Dhalea that were being considered for reopening. Some media sources also reported that the envoy met with a Houthi delegation in Muscat before returning to Aden. These diplomatic moves signal a renewed push toward confidence-building measures and possible negotiations.

- *UN Mission Mandate Extension:*

The Security Council's decision to extend the mandate of the UN Mission to Support the Hodeidah Agreement (UNMHA) can be interpreted as a sign of support for maintaining the freeze on the Hodeidah battle.

Since the Stockholm Agreement was announced in 2018, this deal has functioned as a legal barrier, one that the Houthis have exploited as political cover without fulfilling their obligations under the agreement. Nevertheless, its continuation suggests a preference for diplomatic, rather than military, solutions.

- *Economic Pressure on Yemeni Parties:*

The ongoing economic deterioration, the collapse of the local currency and the lack of regional or international support to rescue the Yemeni economy or fund the national budget point to a strategy of economic pressure. This may be intended to push all Yemeni factions toward accepting a political settlement as a way out of total collapse and state failure.

- *Divisions Within the Pro-Government Camp:*

Persistent infighting and lack of cohesion among components of the legitimate government hinder any serious military confrontation with the Houthis. These include the lack of coordination between executive and legislative institutions, the inability of parliament to convene and the Southern Transitional Council's refusal to allow parliamentary committees to visit southern governorates. Additionally, some factions' media campaigns within the government target other national components, further deepening the rifts. These divisions undermine efforts to unify military formations under a single strategic vision necessary for waging war against the Houthi group.

Conclusion

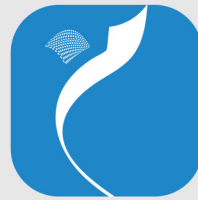
The six-month extension of the UN mission's mandate under the Hodeidah Agreement indicates that there are international and regional policies aimed at continuing — or postponing — the freeze on the Hodeidah battle for another half-year. The international community may be betting on achieving the goal of regime change in Iran within the coming months and accomplishing that could help untangle some of the international complications surrounding the resumption of the battle in Yemen to secure global maritime routes, likely within the framework of a new coalition where stakeholders share both the costs and outcomes.

According to this assessment, signs of both escalation and de-escalation can coexist — suggesting that Yemen is undergoing a temporary calm to complete the conditions and factors required for a possible future war. However, this outcome remains uncertain given the rapid changes and shifts in international policies toward the region and its power dynamics.

The weak effectiveness of Yemen's legitimate leadership, its ongoing internal conflicts and divisions and its submission to the priorities of external actors have created a vacuum that international players are actively filling. The prolonged state of exhaustion not only affects the legitimacy and the Yemeni people, but it also extends to the Gulf and Arab region, as long as chaos-driven projects and tools persist in Yemen, keeping the region under continuous threat and harm to its interests.

Unless the legitimate government reforms its policies in managing the national cause, enhances its effectiveness and improves its performance and mechanisms to seize opportunities and adapt to changing dynamics, it will remain hostage to the agendas of others — unable to influence them in favor of its national goals and would fail to realize that there mutual interests with regional and international partners.

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