

WORLD

US actions blamed for Red Sea crisis

Washington-led coalition may fuel further regional conflict, analysts say

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The Red Sea crisis is an extension of the Palestine-Israel conflict, exacerbated by the United States' continuous support to Israel and its double standards in dealing with the Palestinian question, experts said, warning that a US-led Red Sea coalition may further fuel regional conflicts.

In recent weeks, Yemen's Houthi militia have intensified their attacks on "Israel-linked" ships passing the Red Sea, demanding an end to Israel's military actions in the Gaza Strip, and the delivery of food and medicines to the enclave.

This has led to major shipping and oil firms halting operations along this important trade route. The US has responded by initiating the so-called "Operation Prosperity Guardian" to safeguard commercial ships passing the Red Sea.

Shu Meng, an associate researcher at the Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University, identifies two key motives for the US actions.

"First, the Red Sea is a vital maritime transport corridor, whose importance has been further highlighted by the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The security of transportation in this region is directly linked to US interests," she said.

Another motive is to protect Israel, as the Houthi militia's attacks are aimed at Israel, and protecting and supporting Israel has been a long-standing US policy in the Middle East, she added.

"The coalition launched by the US means to serve its self-interest, catering to its Middle East policy of maintaining hegemony in the region by supporting Israel. However, now the US itself is unable to fully control the situation in the Red Sea, which is why it seeks to bind its allies and partners to join in this effort," said Sun Xihui, an associate research fellow with the National Institute of International Strategy at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

Despite the US calling the Red Sea tensions "an international challenge" requiring a united response, the initial coalition support was limited, with only 10 nations, including Bahrain as the sole Arab state. The Pentagon later announced that 20 countries had joined the coalition, with Greece

and Australia among the new members.

In a setback to the US, France, Spain, and Italy have declined their participation in the alliance.

Some countries, possibly including Arab states, have chosen not to disclose their participation to avoid backlash for supporting Israeli interests, according to a report from the Maritime Executive, a US news website.

"This indicates that countries in the Middle East don't want to be deeply involved in the current Israel-Palestine conflict and will try their best to avoid the spillover effects of the conflict," said Shu.

No overt participation

"The US, as an external power, wishes to completely dominate Middle Eastern affairs and drive Arab nations to serve and comply with US policies in the region. It aims to align these countries with its support for Israel against Hamas. Such policy objectives and strategies put many Middle Eastern countries in a dilemma, leading to the current situation where some refuse to join the coalition and others, even if they join the US team, are unwilling to do so publicly," Sun added.

The US announcement of its formation of the military coalition has drawn a fierce response from the Houthis, who said the US move would not stop their attacks on Israel-bound commercial ships and vowed to retaliate by targeting US battleships and interests in the region if they were attacked.

The US move may lead to a further spilling over of the Gaza conflict, with other organizations possibly launching more attacks in or around the Red Sea, which would increase uncertainty in the Red Sea shipping routes, raise transportation costs, and mount greater pressure on the global supply chain, said Shu.

"The US-led coalition is not addressing the root cause of the Red Sea crisis. The Palestine-Israel conflict is the fundamental reason behind the escalating situation in the Red Sea. The US refuses to support a cease-fire between Israel and Palestine while blindly pulling its allies into the coalition will only escalate the situation," said Sun.

Xinhua contributed to this story.



Palestinians are waiting to collect food at a donation point in a school sheltering displaced Palestinians in Deir el-Balah, Gaza Strip, on Sunday. MAJIDI FATHI / GETTY IMAGES

78 killed in one of Gaza's deadliest strikes

GAZA/JERUSALEM — Israeli airstrikes killed at least 78 people in Gaza, Palestinian health officials said on Sunday, in one of the besieged enclave's deadliest nights of the 11-week-old conflict.

Strikes that began hours before midnight continued into Monday. Residents and Palestinian media said Israel stepped up air and ground shelling in Al-Bureij in central Gaza.

At least 70 Palestinians were killed on Sunday in an Israeli airstrike on the al-Maghazi refugee camp in central Gaza, reported the state-run Palestine TV.

Ashraf Al-Qedra, spokesman for the Gaza-based Health Ministry, said in a statement that the death toll is likely to rise as the airstrike hit a crowded residential area. He added that Israeli forces are bombing the central region's main roads between camps, which obstruct ambulances and civil vehicles from reaching targeted locations.

Al-Maghazi was one of the places the Israeli military had previously told the Palestinians in Gaza to evacuate to, yet the camp has been "completely flattened," according to Al Jazeera.

The Israeli army said it was reviewing the report on the al-Maghazi camp and was committed to minimizing harm to civilians. Hamas denies the Israeli charge that it operates in densely populated areas or uses civilians as human shields.

The Palestine Red Crescent Society published footage of wounded residents being transported to hospitals. It said Israeli warplanes were bombing main roads, hindering the passage of ambulances and emergency vehicles.

Medics said an Israeli airstrike in Khan Younis in southern Gaza killed eight Palestinians.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told his cabinet on Sunday that "the war is exacting a very heavy cost from us. However, we have no choice (but) to continue to fight."



A man removes rubble from a damaged room overlooking a building destroyed in Rafah in the Gaza Strip on Sunday. SAID KHATIB / AFP

He said in a video message that troops would fight deeper into Gaza until "total victory" over Hamas.

Israel has been under pressure from its closest ally the United States to shift operations to a lower-intensity phase and reduce civilian deaths.

On Monday, Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said China will continue to work with all parties to enhance coordination and galvanize more responsible and meaningful actions in the UN Security Council for an early cessation of hostilities in Gaza, the implementation of the two-state solution and peace and stability in the Middle East.

Mao made the remarks when asked to comment on Resolution 2720, which was passed by the UN Security Council with 13 votes in favor and two abstentions last Friday, calling for urgent action to expand humanitarian assistance to Gaza and to create the conditions for a sustainable cessation of hostilities.

Mao said that China voted in favor of Resolution 2720, which is the second resolution adopted by the Security Council since the start of the Palestine-Israel conflict. She also added that the resolution does not quite come up to international

expectations and has certain gaps that needed to be filled.

The tally by the Gaza-based Health Ministry showed on Sunday that the Palestinian death toll from Israeli attacks has reached 20,424, and 54,036 others wounded since the conflict broke out.

A total of 15 Israeli soldiers were confirmed killed in Gaza over the past weekend, said the Israeli army, bringing to 154 the total number of slain Israeli soldiers during its ground offensive in Gaza. About 1,200 Israelis were killed in the Hamas attack on Oct 7.

Meanwhile, the World Health Organization said it led missions to barely functioning hospitals in northern Gaza at the weekend.

The agency and its partners delivered aid, including fuel, to the devastated al-Shifa hospital, once Gaza's biggest and most advanced medical facility, WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said late Sunday on X, formerly Twitter.

What the participants in the Saturday mission witnessed was "rising desperation due to acute hunger," Tedros said.

AGENCIES—XINHUA

China's role as mediator applauded by experts

TEHRAN — China's efforts to address regional and global conflicts through talks and negotiations have created a win-win situation, benefiting all the involved parties and contributing to peace and stability worldwide, Iranian experts have said.

Over the past years, particularly in 2023, China has been actively seeking to help ease conflicts in different regions by playing a mediatory role.

An instance of such endeavors was a groundbreaking normalization deal reached between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Chinese capital in March, following several rounds of Teheran-Riyadh talks in Iraq on the resumption of diplomatic relations.

Meanwhile, China's position and proposition on the political settlement of the Ukraine issue and its efforts to achieve a sustainable cease-fire in Gaza, where a conflict has erupted since Oct 7 between Israel and Hamas, are all bids to achieving peace.

Hassan Beheshtipour, an Iranian international affairs analyst, said, "Such efforts by China have benefits for the involved parties, other regional states and even global ones, and help create a win-win situation."

For instance, he said, the resumption of the Teheran-Riyadh relations brokered by China without creating much media hype benefited not only Iran and Saudi Arabia but also regional countries, such as Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon.

"Iraq sees resumed cooperation and relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia in line with its own stability and security," said the analyst, adding that Syria and Saudi Arabia followed suit and resumed diplomatic missions in both countries, followed by Syria's return to the Arab League.

'Win-win situation'

Echoing similar viewpoints, Majidreza Hariri, the president of the Iran-China Chamber of Commerce and Industries, said that, of great importance regarding China's efforts to establish peace and resolve disputes was that "they eventually help create a win-win situation."

"I believe that China has managed to play a positive role in helping resolve international conflicts and differences, as it has never adopted an interference-based approach toward such issues, but a mediatory one," Hariri said.

XINHUA

Briefly

UNITED STATES 1 dead, 4 injured in Houston shooting

One person was killed and four others injured in a shooting following an altercation outside a Houston club on Sunday, authorities said. After the shooting at about 3 am local time, one man tried to run away to a service road "where he collapsed from his wounds"; Houston Police Assistant Chief Megan Howard said at a press conference. The man, identified by family as Isaiah Parker, in his 20s, was pronounced dead at the scene with several gunshot wounds, Howard said. Parker worked as a handyman who just attended an early Christmas Eve party with 14 of his siblings hours before the shooting, local media outlet ABC13 reported, citing the victim's family.

NIGERIA 16 killed as herders and farmers clash

Some 16 people have been killed in a clash between herders and farmers in the village of Mushu in north-central Nigeria, according to media reports on Sunday. The attack occurred around midnight Saturday and the investigation was underway to determine the cause of the bloodshed, said an AFP report citing a Nigerian army officer.

Police and security forces rushed to the scene to prevent further clashes in the area, where ethnic and religious conflicts are common, it said. State Governor Caleb Mutfwang condemned the latest attack as "barbaric, brutal and uncalled for" and vowed to bring the perpetrators to justice, his spokesman Gyang Bere told reporters.

UNITED KINGDOM Home secretary under fire for joke remarks

British Home Secretary James Cleverly was under fire on Sunday for joking about date rape just hours after announcing plans to crack down on what he had dubbed a "perverse" offense. Cleverly, who oversees national security and law enforcement in England and Wales, faced a call to step down after he reportedly joked at an event at the prime minister's home about drugging his wife. He told women guests at a Dec 18 reception that the secret to a long marriage was having a spouse who "is always mildly sedated so she can never realize there are better men out there"; the Sunday Mirror newspaper reported. Jenima Olchawski, the chief executive of the women's rights group the Fawcett Society, said the remarks were "sickening".

AGENCIES—XINHUA

Europe celebrates Xmas amid security concerns

BRUSSELS — Amid the festive atmosphere in European cities adorned with lights and decorations, this Christmas season has witnessed heightened security measures.

The recent university shooting in the Czech Republic, adding to the previous shooting and stabbing incidents in Belgium and France, respectively, has exacerbated security concerns, casting a shadow over the holiday celebrations in the continent.

Meanwhile, despite repeated warnings from security agencies, many tourists vowed these concerns will not affect their holiday plans. According to the travel analytics firm ForwardKeys, intra-European travel is exceeding 2022 levels, driven by sustained post-COVID demand.

A report from the United Kingdom National Counter Terrorism Security Office, citing data from Western Europe, said that terrorist attacks do not follow a discernible seasonal pattern. However, the Christmas period presents opportunities for attacks, not simply due to bustling celebrations but also because of its religious symbolism.

Authorities in Europe are on the edge during this holiday season, given the recent rise in antisemitic and Islamophobic attacks since the conflict in the Middle East escalated.

"With the war between Israel and Hamas and the polarization it causes in our society, with the upcoming holiday season, there is a huge risk of terrorist attacks in the European Union," the European Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson cautioned ahead of a meeting of EU home affairs ministers earlier this month.

Spain's Home Affairs Minister Fernando Grande-Marlaska, whose government holds the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU from July to December, said, "In an especially delicate international context, the situation in the Middle East could sharpen tensions, heighten polarization and fuel terrorism."

Safety threat

Their warnings came following security incidents in the bloc, including a radical Islamist fatally stabbing a German-Filipino tourist near the Eiffel Tower in Paris, France, on Dec 2, and the arrest of two teenagers — one of whom called for a "holy war" against the West on social media — in Cologne, Germany. They were suspected of planning an attack on a Christmas market or synagogue.

In light of Europe's history of terrorist attacks during the Christmas season, the security worries have a leg to stand on.



Police officers patrol the entrance of Cologne Cathedral, Germany, ahead of a Christmas Eve Mass on Sunday. ROBERTO PFEIL VIA AP

European security agencies have accentuated the growing risk posed by "lone wolves" — self-radicalized assailants with no formal ties to established extremist groups.

Thomas Haldenwang, president of Germany's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, cautioned that much of the safety threat arises from the potential for radicalized individuals to attempt attacks on "soft targets".

In response to the heightened risks, the European countries have enacted various measures. EU Commissioner Johansson announced a financial boost, with the European Commission allocating an additional 30 million euros (\$33 million) to

enhance security in vulnerable areas, including places of worship.

Governments are intensifying the surveillance of extremists, a challenging task given the substantial number of individuals in Europe on terrorism watchlists.

German authorities, at both federal and state levels, are collaborating to identify potential threats early on while increasing police presence.

Austria on Sunday said three people were detained for suspected involvement in an "Islamist network" as police in the capital of Vienna stepped up controls to ensure Christmas security, local authorities said.

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