

Key events and impacts of escalating tensions between Israel and the DFA in July 2024

LATEST DEVELOPMENT

In July 2024, tensions between Israel and the de-facto authority (DFA) in the north of Yemen (also known as the Houthis) reached a new peak. On 19 July, the DFA launched a one-way attack drone through the Mediterranean Sea into Tel Aviv, marking the first direct attack on the city and resulting in significant civilian casualties (AP 19/07/2024; WP 20/07/2024). This attack underscored both the DFA's growing capabilities and the conflict's increasing complexity. The drone navigated through civilian flight paths, leading to a delayed activation of air raid sirens, contributing to the high casualty rate (AXIOS 19/07/2024; Doron Kadosh X 21/07/2024). On 20 July, in response, the Israel Defence Forces conducted a major airstrike on military sites and critical civilian infrastructure in Al Hodeidah, including setting fire to the port, for the first time since the conflict in Gaza began in October 2023 (Mwatana 22/07/2024; AXIOS 20/07/2024).

These events mark an escalation in tensions between Israel and the DFA, which were initially triggered by Hamas's 7 October 2023 Al-Aqsa Flood operation – implemented by its Qassam Brigades – against Israel. The events of 7 October led to continuous Israeli assaults on Gaza from the very next day (OCHA 23/11/2023; Times of Israel 09/10/2023). On 19 November, the DFA began attacking Israel and Israel-bound ships in the Red Sea, launching over 60 attacks on vessels and firing missiles in support of the Palestinians (AP 20/06/2024; OCHA 23/11/2023). This marked the beginning of a broader regional response, which has seen increased international involvement.

On 11–12 January 2024, in response to DFA actions, the US, UK, and France deployed warships to the Red Sea, successfully intercepting most of the missiles and conducting airstrikes on DFA military sites in Yemen (ICG 13/01/2024). By early July, the situation had deteriorated further, with reports of DFA military preparations leading to multiple airstrikes by Israeli, American, and British forces on DFA militias at Al Hodeidah airport on Yemen's Red Sea coast (Alarabiya News 08/07/2024; Reuters 26/07/2024). Following these significant escalations, DFA leader Abdulmalik al-Houthi announced the start of the DFA's fifth phase of escalations against Israel, named 'Operation Jaffa', on 21 July (SABA 21/07/2024). This conflict has resulted in substantial civilian displacement, with many families forced to flee their homes in affected areas (Yemen Future 21/07/2024; Mwatana 22/07/2024).

ABOUT THE REPORT

Aim

This analysis examines and provides an overview of the key events preceding Israeli airstrikes on Al Hodeidah, Yemen, in July 2024, including the DFA drone attack on Tel Aviv and subsequent international responses. This report highlights the pre-existing needs in Al Hodeidah, the immediate effects of the airstrikes, and the broader humanitarian implications across Yemen.

Methodology

Including limitations: this analysis is primarily based on a review of publicly available secondary data, including analytical reports from humanitarian organisations, government statements, and media coverage. There were significant challenges to data collection and verification, however, given the limitedness of publicly available data on the humanitarian impacts in Al Hodeidah and the limited access to real-time information as a result of security constraints.

Anticipated scope and scale

The implications of Israel's attack on Yemen are far-reaching and could have serious consequences for the region. Escalating conflict in Yemen could further aggravate the humanitarian crisis in the country, which has already been devastated by years of conflict. The attack also raises concerns about the potential for further destabilisation in the region and the impact of such on international relations (Country Local News 20/07/2024).

UN Secretary-General António Guterres has expressed deep concern over Israel's strikes on Yemen and the risk of regional escalation. He highlighted that the strikes had aggravated the country's already dire humanitarian situation, where millions are in need of assistance as a result of continuing conflict and economic instability (UN NEWS 21/07/2024).

TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS

19 NOVEMBER 2023

The DFA starts its phase of escalation against Israel, referred to as 'initial warning attacks', which involve sporadic attacks targeting commercial and military vessels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden

MARCH 2024

The DFA expands its target to include US and British ships in the Red Sea and Arabian Sea. This escalation involved targeting vessels associated with Israel and its allies, further complicating maritime security.

19 JULY 2024

The DFA launches a drone attack into Tel Aviv Israel. The attack carried out using an Iranian-made Samad-3 drone, results in one fatality and at least 10 injuries

21 JULY 2025

The DFA announces the start of its fifth phase of escalation, known as 'Operation Jaffa'

FEBRUARY 2024

The DFA starts its second phase of escalation, involving increased and intensified attacks on commercial shipping and military vessels in the Red Sea and Persian Gulf. The attack on the Rubymar cargo ship in the Bab el Mandeb strait, which released oil and resulted in an environmental disaster, was a notable incident of this phase

3 MAY 2024

The DFA announces the start of its fourth phase of escalations against Israel, involving the targeting of all ships heading to Israeli ports in the Mediterranean Sea, and threatens to implement a comprehensive blockade if Israel launches a military operation in Rafah.

20 JULY 2024

In retaliation for the strike on Tel Aviv, Israel conducts heavy airstrikes on Al Hodeidah port, targeting oil and diesel storage facilities and the local electricity company. Israel airstrikes also continue, focusing on the Al Hodeidah airport and surrounding areas

CRISIS IMPACTS

Damage to Al Hodeidah port: strikes on Al Hodeidah port targeted fuel storage tanks and transport cisterns, as well as cranes and a power supply station (Mwatana 22/07/2024; Almasirah TV X 20/07/2024). High-resolution satellite images from Maxar Technologies showed flames consuming a heavily damaged fuel storage area at Al Hodeidah harbour (Maxar Intelligence accessed 24/07/2024). Analysis of satellite imagery from Planet by Dutch peace organisation PAX revealed at least 33 destroyed oil storage tankers (Le Monde 23/07/2024). The destruction of the port's 150,000-ton fuel storage capacity has left just 50,000 tons of stored fuel at the Ras Issa port, 48 miles north of Al Hodeidah port, straining essential resources for civilians and humanitarian operations, evident by crowded fuel stations in Sana'a and other governorates (AJ 21/07/2024; Navanti Group 21/07/2024).

The damage to Al Hodeidah port and the disruption to container uploading capabilities comes at a time when Yemen has been ravaged by years of conflict and humanitarian crisis. Yemen is currently struggling with severe food insecurity, inadequate healthcare, and a lack of clean water (UN Yemen 23/05/2023; County Local News 20/07/2024). Al Hodeidah port is a crucial hub for Yemen, handling about 44% of the country's fuel, food, and container shipments since 2023 (ACAPS accessed 30/06/2024). Given its strategic location near population centres, the port plays a vital role in receiving both commercial imports and humanitarian aid (IOM 05/10/2018). Yemen relies heavily on imports for about 90% of its staple cereals and is vulnerable to supply disruptions and international price fluctuations (FAO 028/02/2024; ACAPS 02/08/2023). The port also supports Yemen's economy via tariffs and customs duties (The National News 21/07/2024).

In the initial days following the airstrikes on Al Hodeidah, the impact was expected to be severe and lead to disruption to essential services, including food imports, humanitarian assistance, and fuel. In the days following the initial devastation, however, despite the initial shock and massive fires, the port managed to resume operations more quickly than anticipated. Yemeni port authorities have reported that Al Hodeidah is operating at full capacity and there are no supply-chain concerns around the supply of food, medicine, and oil derivatives (France 24 22/07/2024).

Damage to other critical infrastructure: the airstrikes also hit a power plant, leading to a large, difficult-to-manage fire (The Manila Times 23/07/2024; MEE 20/07/2024). In May, the rate of inadequate food consumption reached an alarming 58% nationwide (WFP 24/07/2024). Compounding this crisis are concerns that the blaze could spread to nearby food storage facilities, further aggravating the food insecurity situation (The Manila Times 23/07/2024). The extent of power outages are not clear, but given the reach of the power plant, it is possible that hundreds of thousands of Al Hodeidah residents may be experiencing resultant power outages (Alghad 21/07/2024). This impact is particularly severe given that it is currently summer in Yemen, a season characterised by extreme heat. Power outages during this period aggravate the already challenging living conditions, affecting access to essential services such as cooling systems and refrigeration, further straining the population's resilience amid continuing crises (FAO 14/07/2024).

OUTLOOK

Further escalation of tensions

The political dynamics underpinning a potential further escalation between the DFA and Israel are complex, driven by both regional and international factors (BBC 14/04/2023). The DFA, which primarily operates in Yemen, is not only engaged in local conflicts but also finds itself entangled in broader geopolitical rivalries (Eurasia Review 22/07/2024). Iran's support for the DFA – providing weapons and logistical backing – aims to counter Saudi influence in Yemen and the broader Gulf region (BBC 14/04/2023). This support emboldens the DFA, allowing it to conduct more sophisticated operations, including the recent airstrike on Tel Aviv (CNN 22/07/2024).

The likelihood of further escalation between the DFA and Israel is rising, especially after the airstrike on Tel Aviv and the retaliatory strike on Al Hodeidah (AP 19/07/2024). On the DFA side, Abdul-malik al-Houthi, the DFA leader, warned that as long as the conflict in the Gaza Strip continues, the DFA will escalate its operations (AJ 21/07/2024). He indicated that the group has entered the fifth phase of its operation and suggested that aggression against Yemen will only lead to further escalation and increased challenges (SABA 21/07/2024).

Humanitarian outlook

By 30 July, the humanitarian outlook in Yemen remained uncertain, as the full extent and effects of the damage were still unknown. The region's continuing conflict, coupled with disrupted essential services, poses significant challenges to the population's wellbeing.

ACAPS will continue to closely monitor and assess the situation, as further escalation could lead to more severe humanitarian consequences.