

Red Sea Uncertainty: A 2026 Forecast for the Houthis Actions

By
Mohamed ELDoH

Published: March 10, 2026

(Editor's Note: This article was submitted before the U.S.-Iran conflict began. We intentionally left the article as "forward looking" to signify the value of the analysis.)

The Red Sea theater sits in a fragile equilibrium. Commercial shipping lines have cautiously begun returning to the Suez corridor after months of rerouting around the Cape of Good Hope. Insurance premiums remain elevated but are no longer crisis-level. Western naval task forces maintain a visible deterrent presence. Meanwhile, the Houthis continue to signal both restraint and readiness. The question is no longer whether the Red Sea crisis of 2024-2025 can return. The question is what specific trigger conditions will lead to its return. Accordingly, the escalating U.S.-Israeli-Iranian confrontation will make the Houthis resume maritime attacks, if not also targeting different spots of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

The earlier claims about trench networks around Hodeidah, Yemen and coastal missile positioning, whether fully verified or partly exaggerated, fit within a broader pattern: the institutionalization of a long-term defensive and deterrent posture by the Houthis along Yemen's western coastline. When combined with February 2026 reporting that maritime traffic is resuming but threats persist, a clearer strategic picture emerges. This is not a de-escalation. It is a structured pause under tension.

The Current Operational Baseline

This month, several dynamics defined the Red Sea environment. This included the cautious resuming of shipping traffic via the Suez route; major new Houthi missile or drone strikes on international vessels were not confirmed in this window, and Western naval forces remained deployed. However, Houthi rhetoric tied potential future maritime action to broader regional developments, particularly U.S.-Iran and Israel-related escalation scenarios. In this respect, the Houthis have announced that they will resume attacks on ships in the Red Sea.

The absence of active strikes should not be misread as capacity degradation. Instead, it reflects a conditional deterrence posture.

The Houthis have demonstrated in prior cycles that they calibrate attacks based on political timing rather than purely military opportunity. That suggests that the past few months' relative quiet has been strategic, not structural. The Houthis were only preparing more for a bigger scale of maritime attacks.

Hodeidah and Coastal Entrenchment: Defensive Depth as Strategic Signaling

Whether or not the claims of the Houthis' trench dimensions are independently verified, the logic behind coastal fortification is consistent with Houthi behavior. Hodeidah serves multiple functions for the Houthis. It serves as a coordination hub, a political stronghold, and a strategic maritime access point as well as a symbolic center of resistance. If significant defensive works are underway or expanded, they serve three interlocking objectives.

Firstly, for the purpose of anti-assault preparation, large-scale trenches are classic anti-armor and anti-vehicle barriers. They complicate any amphibious or ground-based incursion supported by regional actors. Secondly, for the purpose of airstrike mitigation, defensive depth complicates targeting and disperses assets such as mobile launchers. When it comes to psychological signaling, massive projects communicate permanence. They project the message: “We are not a temporary militia. We are entrenched.” The current environment, characterized by paused attacks but intact infrastructure for renewed confrontation, aligns with this.

Iran-U.S. Tensions as Activation Factor

The strategic linkage between the Houthis and Iran remains central to forecasting. While the Houthis maintain operational autonomy, their Red Sea campaign historically synchronized with broader regional escalation cycles involving the U.S. and Israel. The emerging rhetoric linking maritime threats to wider geopolitical friction suggests a conditional doctrine: The Red Sea is a pressure valve for the Houthis as directed by Iran.

If the U.S.-Iran tensions spike, whether via direct strikes on Iranian assets or Israeli escalation involving Iran-backed actors, then the Red Sea becomes a low-cost, high-visibility response domain. This makes the Red Sea maritime security in 2026 structurally fragile.

Maritime Deterrence Architecture in 2026

Western naval presence in the Red Sea has shifted from reactive escort to semi-permanent deterrence architecture. The key characteristics of such a strategy included layered missile defense at sea, preemptive ISR monitoring of launch sites, rapid retaliatory strike frameworks, and European naval coordination alongside U.S. military assets.

However, this architecture carries its escalation risk. A single successful Houthi strike on a high-value commercial vessel could trigger renewed U.S. or allied airstrikes inside Yemen, re-divert global shipping flows, and force insurers to re-rate the corridor. Thus, deterrence holds, but it is deterrence under tension, not deterrence under resolution.

Forecast: Strategic Scenarios for 2026

There are multiple scenarios that one could anticipate. However, the most likely scenario would be a triggered escalation where the current regional military action involving Israeli-Iranian confrontation or direct U.S.-Iran confrontation activates Houthi maritime operations. Critical indicators from the Houthis to watch for would include repositioning of coastal missile batteries, increased drone launch activity, and explicit linkage in Houthi statements between Yemen and external theaters.

Another scenario would be the Houthis' internal consolidation and strategic freeze. Here, the Houthis prioritize internal governance and economic stabilization over external projection. In such a scenario, regardless of any U.S.-Iran military confrontation, the Houthis' maritime attacks remain suspended, and Red Sea threats become rhetorical rather than operational. However, structural drivers, including ideology, alignment, and leverage utility, make such a scenario highly unlikely.

Structural Realities and Final Strategic Assessment

Three enduring factors ensure persistent volatility. Firstly, the geographic leverage is critical where the Bab el-Mandeb chokepoint, a narrow passage that connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden, is irreplaceable in global trade. Disruption has a disproportionate economic impact. Secondly, the asymmetric cost structure of the Red Sea maritime attacks grants the Houthis leverage, where their drones and missiles are low cost, the Western defensive interception and naval deployment that are much higher cost. Thirdly, attacks in the Red Sea generate global headlines, thus providing the Houthis with a political signaling value. That makes the theater attractive for indirect signaling. Thus, even if the current situation is relatively calm in the Red Sea, the underlying incentive structure for renewed maritime disruption persists, and threats continue to increase.

The current situation does not reflect the active Red Sea crisis levels of 2024-2025. However, it reflects something equally important: institutionalized readiness. The Houthis appear neither demobilized nor strategically exhausted. Defensive consolidation around Hodeidah, if confirmed, suggests the Houthis' preparation for future confrontation, not abandonment of maritime leverage. The Red Sea will remain quiet only so long as broader regional dynamics remain contained. The moment those dynamics fracture, most notably with the U.S.-Iranian confrontation, the maritime corridor becomes the fastest and most globally visible arena for escalation. Accordingly, the conclusion is clear: the Red Sea is not stabilizing. It is waiting.

Dr. Mohamed ELDoh is a business development and consulting professional in the defense and security sector. Mohamed holds a Doctorate degree from Grenoble École de Management - France, an MBA from the EU Business School- Spain, and an Advanced Certificate in Counterterrorism Studies from the University of St Andrews, UK. He regularly authors articles addressing defense cooperation, counterterrorism, geopolitics, and emerging security threats in the Middle East and Africa.