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# Country Report

Regional Programme Gulf States &  
Regional Programme Security Dialogue for East Africa



## Escalation in the Red Sea

### The military dimension, the deployment of the Bundeswehr and the calculus of regional players

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The deployment of the frigate Hessen to the Red Sea was described in advance as the most dangerous deployment of the German navy in the history of the Bundeswehr and is aimed at protecting fundamental national interests. This naval mission fundamentally challenges central assumptions and plans of Germany's defence policy of the past two decades. A return of the Bundeswehr to East Africa was long considered just as unlikely as an air defence scenario against a non-state armed group. Now the Yemeni Houthi militia is confronting the US naval forces with a primarily Iranian arsenal of weapons that is clearly superior in quality to that of many other non-state armed groups. While in terms of defence policy, Europe is almost completely tied down along NATO's eastern flank, it is becoming apparent that the conflict-ridden region around the Red Sea could pose an additional security challenge in the long term and require additional commitment and resources. After all, the maritime trade route between the Suez Canal and Bab al-Mandab and access to the Indo-Pacific region are of key economic and security importance for Germany and Europe.

### Conflict in a Key Economic Region

Since 19th October 2023, the Iran-backed Yemeni Houthi militia has been attacking targets in Israel and, in particular, civilian merchant ships in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman. The political leadership of the Houthis controls significant parts of the former Yemeni state apparatus and approximately half of Yemen's population. They are employing their attacks as leverage to demand that the Israeli government cease its military operations against HAMAS, a designated terrorist organization, in the Gaza Strip and elsewhere. Contrary to statements by Houthi representatives that their attacks are solely aimed at Israeli targets and ships heading to Israel, vessels with no connection to Israel are also frequently targeted.

The economic impact of the Houthi attacks on shipping traffic in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden is enormous. The submarine cables laid on the

seabed there provide the infrastructure for almost one fifth of global internet traffic.<sup>1</sup> Before the attacks began, twelve per cent of global trade travelled via the shipping route through the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Suez Canal. Europe received even 99 per cent of its container imports from its most important trading partner China via the Red Sea.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, Europe is more economically dependent on stability in the region than the USA and is thus particularly affected by the current situation. Since the beginning of the Ukraine conflict, Europe has become more reliant on energy from the Gulf states, part whose shipments of oil and gas traverse the waterways along Yemen's coast. Forced by the Houthi attacks, diverting ships up to 6,000 kilometres around the South African Cape of Good Hope and up the West African coast leads to a doubling or tripling of transport costs, which means an average of two percent additional price inflation in the EU. According to the European External

<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of 2024, the Houthis threatened to attack the undersea cables, although experts doubt that they have the necessary military capabilities. See Schneider, Jan 2024: Können die Huthi das Internet lahmlegen?, ZDF Heute, 09.02.2024, in <https://t.ly/CBku9> [26.02.2024] and Gardner, Frank

2024: Could the Houthis sabotage undersea cables?, BBC, 07.02.2024, in <https://t.ly/SfHFd> [26.02.2024].

<sup>2</sup> See Economist 2024: Is China a Winner from the Red Sea attacks?, 01.02.2024 in [https://t.ly/2bW\\_t](https://t.ly/2bW_t) [26.02.2024].

Action Service, this results in additional costs of 360 million euros per hour for the global economy. The longer or, in some cases, completely interrupted supply chains led to temporary production stops in Europe, including for Suzuki in Hungary, Volvo in Ghent and Tesla in Grünheide, Brandenburg.

### **Prosperity Guardian: The Immediate US Response**

After US, British and French warships deployed in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden intercepted multiple missiles fired by the Houthis last autumn, US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin announced the establishment of an international maritime security initiative on 18th December 2023, which immediately began operations under the name Operation *Prosperity Guardian*.

The multinational coalition is led by a US Navy admiral from the headquarters of the US 5th Fleet in Manama, Bahrain. The coalition, primarily backed militarily by the USA and Great Britain, initially included 18 other states, with some opting not to publicly announce their support. The other known coalition members include Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Denmark, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway, Bahrain, the Seychelles, Singapore and Sri Lanka. Contrary to their original statements, France, Italy and Spain did not join and consequently did not place their warships in the region under US command. British and US air and naval forces began engaging in combat against Houthi positions on land on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2024. This military action, supported by several states participating in Prosperity Guardian, is formally conducted independent of the naval mission.

Germany condemned the Houthi attacks several times within the G7, the EU and NATO and was asked by the US on 19th December 2023 to participate militarily in Prosperity Guardian, but this never happened. In the end, most European states decided in favour of their own EU mission, which was decided exactly two months after the

start of the US-British operation. Denmark and the Netherlands have thus far participated in Prosperity Guardian but have held on to the prospect of placing their units under the EU mission in future. As maritime and trading nations, the decisive factor for this was apparently the desire to make an immediate contribution, as opposed to a preference for a particular mandate.

### **Long Wait for EUNAVFOR Aspides**

Initially, the German government favoured a return to EUNAVFOR Atalanta, although its mandate, which was aimed at combating piracy in the Horn of Africa, would have had to be fundamentally changed. After this approach was rejected by Spain, the current lead nation of Atalanta, for domestic political reasons,<sup>3</sup> there was brief talk of expanding the EU mission in the Strait of Hormuz – European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH) – which existed under French leadership since January 2020. Finally, on 8th February, the decision was made to establish a new mission under the name EUNAVFOR Aspides (the ancient Greek word for shield) – over 100 days after the first Houthi attack. The existing EU missions in the region, Atalanta and EMASoH, will continue independently of Aspides, although some areas of operation overlap.

In accordance with the decision of the Council of the EU, the mission's mandate is to protect freedom of navigation and maritime traffic in the comparatively broad area of operation. This includes the straits of Bab al-Mandab and Hormuz as well as the international waters in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf. The headquarters of the mission will be established in Larissa, Greece, and will be led by a Greek admiral. Operational command will be the responsibility of an Italian admiral, who has embarked with his staff on the destroyer CAIO DUILIO operating in the Red Sea. In addition to

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<sup>3</sup> Apparently, the Spanish government was unable to achieve a majority and cites that it feels firmly committed to other missions such as Atalanta, which is very demanding, as the official reason for Spain not taking part in a mission in the Red Sea; see Reuters 2023: Spanish PM open to creation of new EU mission

to protect vessels in Red Sea, Reuters, 27.12.2023, in <https://shorturl.at/elt47> [26.02.2024] and Reuters 2024: Spain will not intervene in Red Sea - defence minister, Reuters, 12.01.2024, in <https://shorturl.at/jpY49> [26.02.2024].

the Italian ship, Greece, France, Germany and Belgium are each initially participating with a frigate. In principle, the EU mission envisages the simultaneous deployment of at least four ships as well as escort aircraft and helicopters. The mandate of EUNAVFOR Aspides provides for close coordination with Operation Prosperity Guardian, on the one hand, and EUNAVFOR Atalanta, on the other, and also allows for the future participation of non-EU states.

### Military Situation in the Red Sea

The Houthis control an approximately 300-kilometre-long stretch of the Red Sea coast, extending from the Hanish Islands almost to the border with Saudi Arabia. Since 19th October 2023, the militia has been launching attacks on merchant ships and warships, particularly in the southern regions of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. They utilize a diverse range of weapon systems deployed from positions along the coast and from launch sites, with some locations extending as far as 100 kilometres inland. By late February, 48 attacks on civilian and military ships had been documented.<sup>4</sup> The three main categories of missiles used by the Houthis against sea targets are ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and drones with a confirmed range of up to 800 kilometres. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) lists six types of ballistic missiles and cruise missiles. These are systems of Soviet, Chinese and, above all, Iranian origin, some of which have been optimised for use against sea targets.<sup>5</sup> The Houthis also have drones, most of which belong to the Samad or Shahed types of Iranian origin that are widespread in the Middle East. These are used for intelligence gathering or as a loitering weapon, i.e. in kamikaze mode.<sup>6</sup> While the militia has been using these types of drones with a

reliable range of several hundred kilometres for years in the Yemeni civil war, an attack against a US Navy warship with an unmanned underwater vehicle (UUV) took place for the first time in mid-February 2024. While the US ship successfully repelled the attack, the deployment occurred simultaneously with the approach of cruise missiles and a ballistic missile, representing a new quality of attack.<sup>7</sup> At the beginning of January this year, the Houthis deployed an unmanned surface vehicle (USV) for the first time.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from the ongoing attempts to damage or sink ships using rockets, cruise missiles and drones, the militia made several attempts to capture merchant ships in the initial phase of the conflict. On 19th November 2023, for example, the Houthis used small speedboats and a medium-sized Mi-17 transport helicopter to board and hijack the car carrier *Galaxy Leader*, which had been chartered by a Japanese company. As a result of the intervention of the US Navy, a further hijacking attempt failed eight days later after an initially successful seizure of the tanker *Central Park*.

The international naval forces stationed in the area, tasked primarily with safeguarding merchant ships along the Suez Canal route to prevent their damage or complete loss, are now facing a multifaceted operational strategy employed by the adversary. Firstly, there is a serious threat to the warships of the international coalition. To date, the frigates and destroyers deployed have been able to fend off all missiles and watercraft aimed at them. Nevertheless, the danger faced by a given unit increases with the number of different types of systems fired simultaneously by the enemy. As far as the threat to merchant ships from hijacking

<sup>4</sup> Scarr, Simon, Arranz, Adolfo, Saul, Jonathan, Huang, Han und Chowdhury, Jitesh 2024: Red Sea attacks. How Houthi militants in Yemen are attacking ships in one of the world's busiest maritime trade routes, Reuters, 02.02.2024, in <https://t.ly/I96r> [26.02.2024].

<sup>5</sup> Hinz, Fabian 2024: Houthi anti-ship missile systems: getting better all the time, International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 08.01.2024, in [https://t.ly/zdf\\_2](https://t.ly/zdf_2) [26.02.2024].

<sup>6</sup> Sabbagh, Dan 2024: Deadly, cheap and widespread: how Iran-supplied drones are changing the nature of warfare, *The Guardian*, 02.02.2024, in

<https://rb.gy/9csq9q> [26.02.2024] und Jalal, Ibrahim 2024: The Houthis' Red Sea missile and drone attack: Drivers and implications, Middle East Institute, 20.10.2023, in <https://rb.gy/te48g4> [26.02.2024].

<sup>7</sup> Barnes, Julian E. 2024: U.S. Says It Struck 5 Houthi Targets in Yemen, Including an Underwater Drone, *The New York Times*, 18.02.2024, in <https://rb.gy/2fq7kw> [26.02.2024].

<sup>8</sup> Copp, Tara 2024: Houthis launch sea drone to attack ships hours after US, allies issue final warning, *AP News* 05.01.2024, in <https://rb.gy/3lw6g7> [26.02.2024].

is concerned, the scenario is very similar to the fight against piracy in the Horn of Africa in the past decade and seems manageable. Deploying embarked marines or special forces on the merchant ships requiring protection is indeed an expensive endeavour, but it can be feasibly managed in terms of both costs and manpower. However, defending civilian ships against missiles, cruise missiles and drones is more difficult. As soon as a merchant ship is not sailing in the immediate vicinity of a frigate or destroyer, it cannot be protected by the warship's short-range defence systems. In this case, which is the rule due to the size of the sea area and the large number of ships to be protected, the frigates or destroyers deploy their ship-based surface-to-air missiles. The naval vessels currently operating in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden are therefore primarily specialised in aerial and anti-aircraft defence and thus have long-range radar and vertical launch systems for missiles, from which surface-to-air missiles with ranges of up to 200 kilometres can be fired. The US Navy primarily uses missiles of the SM-2 (Standard Missile 2) variety, which is also used in some European navies, or its successor SM-6, which has led to a debate among experts about the cost of the defence measures compared to the cost for the attacker. An SM-2 has a unit price of 2 million US dollars, while the price of a kamikaze drone is estimated to be between 2,000 and 20,000 US dollars, depending on the type.<sup>9</sup> It is rightly pointed out that it is not only the cost of defence missiles and attacking missiles that should be set against each other, but also the value of the individual protected merchant ship.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the current economics of the war in the Red Sea are problematic from the point of view of the US Navy and its allies, as the total number of suitable interceptor missiles available in the arsenals is not inexhaustible and production capacities are (still) relatively

limited.<sup>11</sup> This implies that the US Navy and its allies are at risk of depleting the very weapons systems that would be in demand in potential conflicts on NATO's flanks to the east or north, in the Persian Gulf, the Taiwan Strait or the Korean peninsula.

It is precisely this background – and not intentions of escalation or retaliation – that explains the attacks by the US and UK on land targets in Yemen. The calculation is to reduce the total number of missiles attacking shipping traffic on the Suez Canal route by destroying launch pads and ammunition depots, thereby reducing the costs of defence measures. In this context, surveillance of the Houthi militia's logistical infrastructure and intercepting supplies of missiles and vessels – which are apparently being supplied by Iran and possibly North Korea – are also important.<sup>12</sup> In mid-January, two US Navy SEALs were killed during an operation to capture a vessel suspected of carrying supplies for the Houthis. Additionally, two MQ-9 Reaper drones were recently lost during a reconnaissance mission over Yemen. This loss suggests that the Houthis have acquired an air defence system capable of engaging even high-altitude targets.

## Germany's Contribution

In March 2023, a high-ranking representative of the Federal Ministry of Defence (BMVg) said on the sidelines of a KAS event that a return of the Bundeswehr to the Horn of Africa could almost be ruled out. Now, on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2024, the German Bundestag decided on a mandate, limited as usual to one year, which provides for the deployment of up to 700 German soldiers. Essentially, the mission consists of protecting ships against multidimensional attacks at sea within the area of operation defined by Aspides. However, the text of the mandate states: "The executive task of protecting ships against

<sup>9</sup> Seligman, Lara and Berg, Matt 2023: A \$2M missile vs. a \$2,000 drone: Pentagon worried over cost of Houthi attacks, Politico, 19.12.2023, in <https://rb.gy/6wjzq1> [26.02.2024] and Rumbaugh, Wes 2024: Cost and Value in Air and Missile Defense Intercepts, Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), 13.02.2024, in <https://shorturl.at/CHSVY> [26.02.2024].

<sup>10</sup> Geiger, Waldemar 2024: Die falsche Kosten-Nutzen-Rechnung der Flugabwehr, Hartpunkt, 20.02.2024, in <https://shorturl.at/cnwIS> [26.02.2024].

<sup>11</sup> The current production capacity is 125 per year and is set to increase to 200 by 2026, see Department of Defense 2023: Selected Acquisition Report (SAR) Standard Missile-6 (SM-6), 09.05.2023, in <https://t.ly/H2vdZ> [26.02.2024].

<sup>12</sup> Yeo, Andrew 2024: Expect to see more North Korean weapons reach nonstate armed actors in 2024, Brookings, 21.02.2024, in <https://shorturl.at/ftL13> [26.02.2024].

multidimensional attacks is not to be carried out, and hereby excluded, in sea areas north of the latitude of Muscat in the Gulf of Oman, the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf." The areas of operation of the EU mission and the Bundestag mandate are congruent, with the restriction that no armed force may be used in the above-mentioned sea area.



NordNordWest via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0

*The EUNAVFOR Aspides mandate area, along with the latitude line north of which the use of weapons by the Bundeswehr in the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf is ruled out.*

In the planning of the BMVg, it quickly became clear that the German military contribution would have to consist of the deployment of a unit with special air defence capabilities. The three units of the F124 class (also referred to as the "Sachsen class", following the ship type), recognised as air defence frigates, were the primary contenders for this role. Consequently, the frigate Hessen was chosen for deployment to the Red Sea early on, despite having only returned from a five-month deployment as the flagship of NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (Maritime), VJTF (M), shortly before Christmas 2023. Its sister ship, the frigate Hamburg, is currently preparing to replace the Hessen in April, thus ensuring that the German side's on-the-ground staying power will last at least until the summer. However, these ships are missing for the German navy to perform other tasks in the context of national

and alliance defence, along with deterring Russia in the Baltic Sea region and North Atlantic.

For participation in missions outside the NATO alliance area or for deployments in asymmetric conflict scenarios, German defence policy has primarily earmarked the ships of the newer F125 class ("Baden-Württemberg class"). The design of this frigate class was developed during a period when the Bundeswehr was significantly involved in operations in Afghanistan (ISAF and OEF), conducting surveillance missions off the Lebanese coast (UNIFIL), and combating piracy in the Horn of Africa (EUNAVFOR Atalanta). The ships are designed for a wide range of missions and very long deployments in the area of operation, but do not have vertical launch systems for firing ship-borne surface-to-air missiles. Given the prevailing assumption at the time that non-state actors like the Taliban or Hezbollah lacked significant air warfare capabilities, both the German army and navy significantly neglected areas of air defence and air warfare.<sup>13</sup>

Developments in weapons technology, such as in drone warfare, were apparently given too little importance, even with respect to non-state armed groups. This is hardly surprising, given the years-long German debate on the introduction of its own drone systems.<sup>14</sup> The old principle still holds true here: it is difficult to devise effective defence measures against weapons systems that you do not control or possess yourself. *De facto*, it is now evident that even asymmetric confrontations with non-state armed groups can have such high intensity as to render necessary the deployment of ship types that are already in short supply for the purposes of national and alliance defence – tasks which many had come to believe were no longer necessary to fulfil. It is in this context that the following statement, made by the Inspector of the German Navy, Jan Christian Kaack, at the historical-tactical

<sup>13</sup> The decommissioning of the German Army's Air Defence branch in 2012, the failure to exercise the option to build a fourth Sachsen-class unit and the design of the Baden-Württemberg-class without a vertical take-off system illustrate that threat scenarios in the context of air warfare were underestimated for a long time.

<sup>14</sup> Szymanski, Mike 2020: SPD will doch keine Kampfdrohnen für die Bundeswehr, Süddeutsche

Zeitung, 08.12.2020, in <https://shorturl.at/czGJ5> [26.02.2024] and Deutscher Bundestag 2024: Antrag der Bundesregierung. Beteiligung bewaffneter deutscher Streitkräfte an der durch die Europäische Union geführten Operation EUNAVFOR ASPIDES. Drucksache 20/10347, 16.02.2024, in <https://shorturl.at/ijqAC> [26.02.2024].



conference of the Navy in January, should be understood: "Just looking at the current ammunition consumption of our partners in Operation Prosperity Guardian, I am very concerned about the sustainability of our units – and with respect to the activities in the Red Sea, we are not even talking about national or alliance defence!" The background to this statement is apparently the relatively low stockpile of SM-2 air defence missiles in Germany. As production of this type of missile ceased some time ago in favour of the successor version, it is not currently possible to acquire additional rounds of the SM-2. The successor type has not yet been introduced into the navy. Hence, it remains uncertain how long Germany will be able to contribute to the Aspides mission with only three air defence frigates at its disposal.

### **Houthis Undeterred, Regional States in a Dilemma**

Despite increased international presence in Yemeni waters and the destruction of approximately 30 percent of the Houthi's offensive capabilities as a result of the initial wave of US and British airstrikes, the radical Islamic militia has so far continued to pursue its course of confrontation undeterred. Firstly, this is due to the domestic political calculations of the Houthi leadership around Abdulmalik al-Houthi. By propagating resistance to Israel, the Houthis can score easy political points, diverting attention from the catastrophic humanitarian situation in areas under their control and from their year-old tactic of stalling ceasefire talks with Saudi Arabia. This diversion tactic helps the leadership boost its profile among its own, notoriously Israel-critical population, and across the wider region.

Secondly, after almost ten years of civil war, the military structures of the Houthis are very resilient. This means their weakening or destruction is only possible to a limited extent under the US and UK's restricted rules of engagement. Even during the air war by the Saudi-led military coalition against the Houthis from 2015 onwards – which was largely dependent on intelligence, reconnaissance and target acquisition by US forces – the Houthis could not be decisively defeated militarily. Furthermore, the effectiveness and resilience of the Houthis' missile units has recently increased

due to substantial Iranian arms supplies, training by Lebanese Hezbollah military advisors and years of combat experience.

Ultimately, it should not be forgotten that the Houthis remain an essential component of Tehran's response to the war in the Gaza Strip. Experts disagree on the exact form of coordination between Iran and the Houthis. Western intelligence services assume that cooperation between Sana'a and Tehran is less close than in the case of Iran and Hezbollah, for example. However, representatives of the Houthis are frequently in Iran for political talks and training purposes. This suggests, if not the receipt of direct orders, at least some level of collaboration. To date, Iran has not intended to fuel a broad regional escalation against Israel, the USA or the Gulf states with the help of allies like the Houthis, but it has been interested in keeping tensions simmering at a low level. Attacks by Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria, along with sporadic skirmishes between Hezbollah and Israel on the country's northern border, indicate to regional allies that the "axis of resistance" is retaliating – without provoking a decisive counter-reaction, such as an Israeli offensive in southern Lebanon. Iran primarily wants to maintain its political and moral legitimacy through limited counterattacks. The Houthi attacks fit perfectly into Tehran's calculations. The Islamic Republic will therefore continue to have an interest in the Houthis continuing their attacks and supporting them both materially and immaterially. In this context, a looming Israeli offensive on the border town of Rafah could lead to a further escalation in the Horn of Africa.

This puts the other littoral countries in the Red Sea area, above all Saudi Arabia, in a dilemma. Riyadh does not want its nearby region to become unstable, especially because it relies on vital shipping routes for its trade. Additionally, it does not want to see any increase in power from an Iran-related actor along its own border. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is attempting a political-strategic balancing act vis-à-vis Israel, reconciling Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's interest in normalisation, on the one hand, with the kingdom's leadership role in the Muslim world and expectations of support for the Palestinians, on the other. Under no

circumstances does Riyadh want to confront the Houthis in the current context in such a way that this could be misunderstood as support for Israel. For this reason, the kingdom, like the United Arab Emirates – the second major foreign player in Yemen – has not yet officially joined any of the international naval coalitions in the Red Sea. In any case, Saudi Arabia has been trying for some time to end the unpopular military intervention in its southern neighbour Yemen and has consequently refrained from direct military confrontation with the Houthis since spring 2022.

This leaves Bahrain as the only Gulf state officially involved in Prosperity Guardian. Among its neighbouring states, the kingdom has the tensest relationship with Tehran. Iranian authorities have used Bahrain's Shiite majority to destabilise the country in the past. Despite an unofficial ceasefire in Yemen, Bahraini troops were also attacked by the Houthis in autumn 2023, resulting in the deaths of four soldiers. The fact that the headquarters of the US 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet is located in Manama also likely played a role for decision-makers in Bahrain.

The Houthi attacks on international shipping in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden also pose a dilemma for Djibouti. The Djiboutian government made it clear early on that it sees the responsibility for the outbreak of violence in Israel and the Palestinian territories exclusively on the Israeli side. Moreover, it sees the attacks by the Houthis as a justified reaction to relieve the Palestinian side. Consequently, Djibouti has not only refused to actively support Operation Prosperity Guardian but has also refused to deploy missile systems and to allow US and British ships to use its harbour facilities. The fear of being drawn into an exchange of strikes between the Houthis and the US military is too great as soon as the USA operates from Djiboutian soil against targets in Yemen. An attack on US facilities in Djibouti is the worst-case scenario for the government of President Ismail Omar Guelleh. Ironically, however, Djibouti is dependent on the income from foreign military bases in the country and is facing an existential threat to its economic basis because of the decline in shipping traffic in the Red Sea. The Djiboutian economy is heavily dependent on the

utilisation of its six major ports by ships passing through Bab al-Mandab.

## Conclusions & Outlook

The assumption that a return of the Bundeswehr to the Horn of Africa is very unlikely has proven to be just as wrong as the years-long denial of the need to assert control over national and alliance defence and the underestimation of the importance of aerial and anti-aircraft defence in asymmetric conflicts. Now, the navy is embarking on what is probably the most dangerous Bundeswehr mission since the end of the ISAF mandate in Afghanistan and is deploying a ship that is in fact required elsewhere in view of the threat from Russia.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt about the correctness and importance of the mission, which is aimed at protecting fundamental German and European interests. The fact that Germany can provide one of the most capable ships of the NATO partners with an excellently trained crew for this purpose is also perceived very positively by international partners. The development of the situation in the Red Sea once again shows quite clearly how urgently a real turnaround is needed in German foreign, security and defence policy. The German navy is far too small to make a substantial contribution to the EU or NATO across the entire spectrum of operations, from national and alliance defence to the protection of trade routes against non-state actors. One approach to augment the limited number of units available for high-intensity combat in the medium term is to activate the option for a fifth and sixth unit of the F126 frigate class currently under construction. This would have to occur before June 2024.

In the Gulf region, which prior to 7<sup>th</sup> October was characterised by de-escalation and cautious convergence between adversaries, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran, the escalation in the Red Sea presents an increasing threat to the (yet) ongoing stability. The developments are exacerbating the situation in the civil war in Yemen. In particular, the internationally recognised government, which is already struggling with a catastrophic economic situation due to the destruction caused by the war, is being put under further pressure by the almost

complete cut-off of its most important port, Aden, from international trade. The fact that the Houthis have a large number of systems in their arsenal that are specially designed to combat sea targets and are not necessary for fighting other armed groups in the country shows that their allies in Tehran are trying to use the militia primarily as a deterrent against Saudi Arabia and the USA. In view of the war in the Gaza Strip, the Houthi attacks are therefore likely to continue despite the international military presence.

For the Bundeswehr, this scenario entails the possibility of German naval units getting drawn into further regional conflicts. For years, the US and its allies have repeatedly detained Iranian tankers that violate sanctions, in response to which Iran arbitrarily attacks Western ships. Should these confrontations escalate in the future, the German navy would also be called upon in the Persian Gulf. While EUNAVFOR

Aspides already covers this area, the current Bundeswehr mandate does not permit such missions. If required, the mandate would then need to be rapidly expanded. This means Berlin is already facing its next political challenge.

*This is the English translation of the German version of the Country Report that had been issued with almost identical contents on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2024.*

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