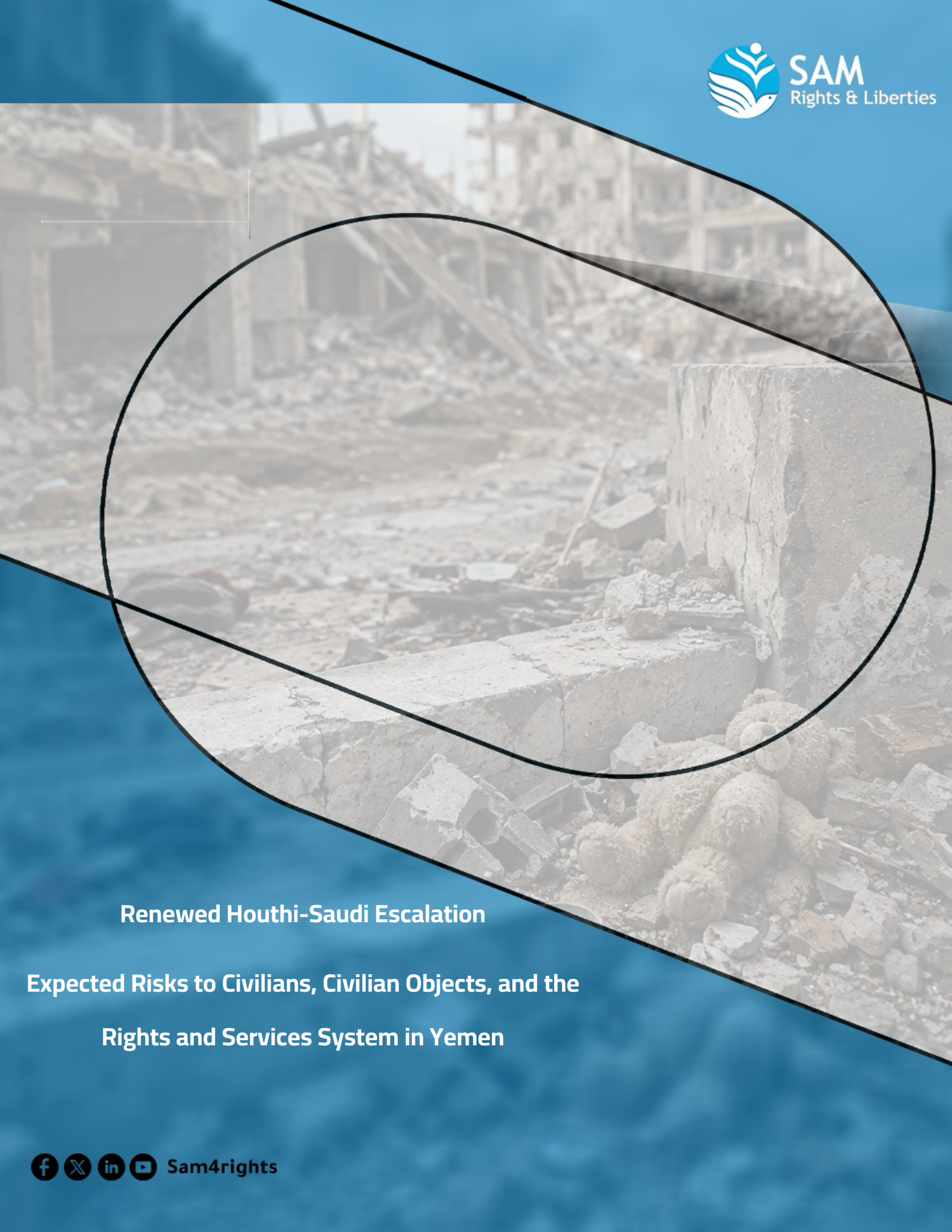




Renewed Houthi-Saudi Escalation

Expected Risks to Civilians, Civilian Objects, and the Rights and Services System in Yemen



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Executive Summary

The state of ‘no war, no peace’ that had prevailed between the Houthi group and Saudi Arabia since the end of the UN-brokered truce in October 2022 entered a more fragile phase in July 2026. On 20 July, the group announced what it described as a ‘naval blockade’ on Saudi Arabia, saying that the measure took immediate effect and covered shipping linked to Saudi ports—a development corroborated by [Reuters](#) and the [Associated Press](#). The announcement did not remain merely political rhetoric: specialized and news sources recorded changes in tanker routes, the switching off of Automatic Identification System (AIS) transponders, and a decline in traffic through Bab al-Mandab, reflecting the transfer of risk into the decisions of operators and insurers. [Lloyd’s List Intelligence](#) documented the beginning of diversions and rerouting, while [Reuters](#) tracked data showing tankers transiting while ‘dark.’

At the same time, strikes inside Yemen resumed, including on sites in Hodeidah that Saudi Arabia said were military facilities linked to threats to shipping, while Houthi-affiliated media reported that civilian facilities had been hit. The fact that strikes occurred does not, by itself, determine the legal status of each target; that requires evidence concerning the site’s actual use, the anticipated military advantage, the munitions employed, and the direct and reverberating effects. [Reuters](#) provided context on the strikes and the Saudi move to form a maritime coalition, while [Al Jazeera](#) reported the Houthi account concerning Hodeidah. A professional human-rights approach requires separating the occurrence of an incident from claims about the nature of the target and from the attribution of individual responsibility.

From 7 to 10 August 2026, the scope of military operations inside Yemen expanded markedly, with attacks reported in Marib, the western coast, and Shabwa, alongside the disruption of a major road linking the center of the country with the east. This indicates a growing risk that the escalation may shift from isolated attacks to a broader pattern affecting civilians, infrastructure, and supply flows.



This escalation is unfolding in an environment with little capacity to absorb shocks. According to the [2026 Yemen Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan](#), more than 22 million people need assistance and protection, 18.3 million face acute food insecurity, more than 2.2 million children under five suffer from acute malnutrition, and only 59.3 percent of health facilities are fully functional. The [World Bank](#) adds that the economy contracted by 1.5 percent in 2025 and is expected to contract by 0.5 percent in 2026, while nearly three quarters of the population live below the poverty line and international assistance covers a shrinking share of needs. Given Yemen's heavy dependence on imports, disruptions to shipping, insurance, or fuel translate directly into shocks to purchasing power, food, water, and health.

This assessment concludes that the most serious human-rights risk does not lie in a single strike or a single vessel, but in the cumulative effect of simultaneous pathways: higher shipping and insurance costs; reduced supplies of fuel and essential goods; disruption of services and facilities; expanding displacement and economic deprivation; and increased arrests and rhetoric of treason amid declining judicial oversight. In this context, the shelling of the judicial complex in Taiz on 25 July is a qualitative warning sign. Even without reported casualties, disabling a judicial facility can delay judicial review of detention, postpone trials, and disrupt alimony, custody, violence-related, and financial-rights cases. The incident was reported by the [official Saba News Agency via Anadolu](#), but attributing the shells to a specific party still requires an independent technical investigation.

The most likely near-term assessment is the continuation of limited, gradual escalation in which shipping and energy are used as pressure tools while the parties exercise some restraint to avoid full-scale war. Yet this is not a low-impact scenario: persistent threats and changes in shipping behavior alone can raise prices and disrupt imports. The more dangerous scenario would involve recurring attacks on ports, energy infrastructure, and roads, or the reopening of ground fronts in Taiz, Marib, and Hodeidah, potentially triggering new displacement and the collapse of local services. Containment remains possible if mediation is accompanied by monitorable guarantees for the protection of civilian shipping and ports, an end to attacks on civilian objects, unhindered passage of relief, and the release of arbitrarily detained persons.



First: Methodology and Limits of the Assessment

This report is based on broad open-source research covering specialized UN sources, international humanitarian law databases, economic reports, maritime and shipping data, international news agencies, local Yemeni sources, and materials published by SAM. Cross-checking was used not as a mechanical count of news reports, but as a test of three factors: the source's independence from a party to the conflict, its technical ability to know the facts, and the consistency of temporal and geographic details with other sources.

For military incidents, the report distinguishes between 'establishing that an incident occurred,' 'establishing the nature of the target,' and 'establishing responsibility.' The Houthi announcement of the naval blockade is assessed with high confidence because it was made publicly and reported by multiple agencies, and the change in the behavior of some vessels is also assessed with high confidence because of navigation data and monitoring by specialized companies. By contrast, whether facilities struck in Hodeidah were civilian or military varies according to the parties' accounts; confidence in their legal characterization is therefore medium to low until satellite imagery, independent inspection, or reliable information about their use becomes available. Likewise, the impact of shells on the judicial complex in Taiz is supported by government and local sources, but attribution of the source of fire remains less certain in the absence of forensic examination of the munitions.

With humanitarian figures, the report does not assume that every difference between agencies is a contradiction. Response plans may use different reference dates, definitions, and target categories. The report therefore uses the [2026 OCHA plan](#) as a multi-sector baseline and then relies on sector-specific estimates, such as the [World Health Organization](#) for health, the [United Nations Population Fund](#) for maternal health and protection from violence, and [UNICEF](#) for children's rights. Where figures differ, they are presented as ranges or sectoral estimates rather than merged into a single figure that cannot be defended.



Second: Political and Military Context of the Escalation

The end of the formal truce in October 2022 produced a reduction in violence, not a political settlement. Front lines, armed forces, missiles, and drone capabilities remained in place, while institutional and economic divisions continued. A number of analyses described the period as 'no war, no peace,' a formula that concealed structural fragility: no durable guarantees against renewed attacks, no final agreement on salaries, revenues, and ports, and no comprehensive settlement of detention, road-access, and front-line issues. Any regional shock could therefore reactivate the Yemeni-Saudi confrontation.

On 20 July 2026, the Houthi military spokesperson announced that the 'naval blockade' on Saudi Arabia had entered into immediate effect, linking the decision to what he described as a blockade imposed on Yemen. The [Associated Press](#) noted that the announcement did not provide full operational details on how it would be implemented, while [Reuters](#) reported that Saudi Arabia had vowed a firm response. This gap between the breadth of the threat and the ambiguity of targeting criteria increases risk because shipping companies cannot limit exposure to Saudi vessels alone if the criteria may also include ownership, cargo, the last ports visited, or previous commercial dealings.

[Lloyd's List Intelligence's operational briefing of 23 July](#) confirmed that some very large tankers and other vessels had begun diverting, while Bab al-Mandab traffic was already 40 to 60 percent below pre-2023 crisis levels. The briefing also recorded dozens of Saudi vessels switching off AIS transponders, with owners varying in their willingness to accept risk. These indicators show that the economic impact does not require a complete closure: it is enough for the risk to become difficult to price, or for the criteria of association with Saudi Arabia to broaden, for voyage decisions to change.



This coincided with the importance of Yanbu as an alternative outlet for Saudi oil exports when the Strait of Hormuz is disrupted. Pressure on Bab al-Mandab therefore threatens more than bilateral trade; it links the Red Sea and Gulf theaters in a single network of risk. [Reuters](#) reported that Saudi Arabia moved to build international cooperation to protect shipping, indicating official recognition that the threat exceeds the capacity of a purely national response, while at the same time raising the risk of further militarization of the maritime corridor, misidentification of vessels, or reciprocal escalation.

This dynamic is connected to the experience of Red Sea attacks since 2023, when targeting criteria expanded from publicly stated links to Israel to changing ownership, operating, and commercial-destination connections. [UNCTAD's Review of Maritime Transport 2025](#) notes that vessels that once crossed the Red Sea in days came to spend weeks sailing around the Cape of Good Hope, with longer voyages increasing costs, delays, and emissions and affecting developing economies more severely. The current assessment should therefore read the Houthi announcement in light of the capacity of recurring threats to reshape markets even when the number of actual attacks remains limited.



Third: Facts Under Assessment

1. The Announced Blockade: Between Political Description and Legal Status

The use of the term 'naval blockade' by an armed group does not automatically confer the legal status of a naval blockade as understood in the law of international armed conflict. Its legal characterization depends on the classification of the conflict, the entity imposing it, its capacity to enforce it effectively, its declaration, scope and exceptions, and compliance with rules protecting civilians and humanitarian assistance. Yemen is primarily affected by non-international armed conflicts with cross-border dimensions, while direct confrontation between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia adds a complex legal and political layer. This report therefore avoids assuming the existence of a 'lawful blockade' and treats the announcement as a threat to use force to restrict navigation, each application of which requires independent assessment.

Merchant vessels, their crews, and civilian cargo are protected from attack unless, at a given time, the vessel meets the conditions of a military objective: it must make an effective contribution to military action, and its neutralization must offer a definite military advantage in the circumstances ruling at the time. This standard is set out in the [ICRC's customary Rule 8](#). Carrying oil, calling at a Saudi port, or contributing to the general economy is not sufficient in itself to make a vessel a lawful target; there must be an actual military nexus and a definite military advantage, alongside continuing obligations of proportionality and precautions.

Ambiguous targeting criteria may also lead to indiscriminate or uncontrolled attacks if the weapon cannot distinguish the intended vessel from others, or if decisions rely on outdated or inaccurate commercial data. [Customary Rule 11](#) prohibits indiscriminate attacks, while [Rule 16](#) requires verification that intended targets are military objectives. Given the density of maritime traffic and the diversity of flags, ownership, and management structures, the duty to verify cannot be replaced by broad lists of commercial association.



If actual implementation of the blockade prevents essential goods from reaching civilians or results in starvation, additional prohibitions arise. [Rule 53](#) prohibits the use of starvation of civilians as a method of warfare; [Rule 54](#) protects objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population; and [Rule 55](#) requires allowing and facilitating the passage of humanitarian relief, subject to the parties' right of control. Merely announcing humanitarian exemptions is not enough if operational risks or procedures in practice deter vessels from carrying food, medicine, and fuel.

2. Tankers and Oil Facilities: Conditional Civilian Protection, Not Its Removal

Oil facilities and tankers are, as a rule, civilian objects under the definition in [Rule 9](#). A specific facility may lose protection 'for such time' as it becomes a military objective, as [Rule 10](#) explains. That change, however, cannot be established merely by economic value or by describing a facility as strategic. It is necessary to identify how the facility actually contributes to military operations and what military advantage its neutralization would offer at that time. This is critical because expanding the concept of a target to include the economy or revenues in general would empty the protection of civilian objects of its substance.

Even where a facility or vessel meets the definition of a military objective, an attack remains constrained by the prohibition on excessive civilian harm. [Rule 14 on proportionality](#) provides that an attack is unlawful if the expected incidental harm is excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated. [Rule 15](#) requires feasible precautions, while [Rule 18](#) requires an assessment of the effects of the attack. In the case of oil infrastructure, that assessment should include fires, marine and land pollution, risks to residential areas, disruption of electricity, water and transport, and foreseeable market effects.

Environmental consequences also carry independent weight. Spills and fires can damage fishermen's livelihoods, coastlines, water sources, and public health. [Customary Rule 43](#) confirms that the principles of distinction and proportionality apply to the natural



environment. In a country where the state has limited capacity to respond to pollution or repair infrastructure, a single environmental incident can outlast the fighting and turn a limited military event into a long-term livelihood crisis.

Data from late July and early August show that fear of attack affected maritime behavior. [Reuters documented on 30 July](#) the departure of two tankers carrying Saudi oil to India with AIS transponders switched off, and [on 2 August](#) reported a decline in vessels transiting Bab al-Mandab and the diversion of another tanker around Africa. Switching off AIS may reduce exposure to targeting, but it creates collision and safety risks and weakens maritime transparency, illustrating how threats can generate new security effects even without a vessel being hit.

3. Strikes in Hodeidah and the Risk of an Expanding Target Set

The 24 July strikes in Hodeidah came as part of an escalation cycle that began on 13 July, when a strike carried out by Yemeni government forces with support from the Saudi-led coalition [targeted](#) the runway at Sana'a Airport to prevent the landing of an Iranian Mahan Air aircraft. The Houthis responded with attacks on Abha Airport, then on 20 July announced restrictions on shipping linked to Saudi Arabia in the Red Sea, before targeting tankers and Saudi oil facilities. From the outset of this cycle, [UN Special Envoy Hans Grundberg warned](#) that the developments could open a 'new cycle of violence' and threaten the relative calm in place since 2022.

On 24 July, the Saudi-led coalition [carried out](#) strikes in Hodeidah Governorate and said officially that it had targeted 'legitimate military objectives' linked to threats against vessels in the Red Sea, stressing that Hodeidah port was not among the targets and that the ports of Hodeidah, Salif, and Ras Isa remained open. Houthi-affiliated media, by contrast, said the strikes [hit](#) facilities belonging to the Public Telecommunications Corporation in Hodeidah city and on Kamaran Island. [Xinhua](#) reported that a worker at a telecommunications facility and a woman on Kamaran were injured, while witnesses [told](#)



[EFE](#) they heard multiple explosions and saw smoke rising from the port area. Reuters was unable to independently verify the account concerning civilian sites allegedly struck.

The significance of these strikes, however, goes beyond the sites directly hit. Hodeidah is a key hub for ports, communications, and roads on the western coast. The UN Mission to Support the Hodeidah Agreement has [estimated](#) that the [ports of Hodeidah, Salif, and Ras Isa](#) receive about 70 percent of Yemen's imports, in a country that relies on imports for around 90 percent of its food and where 18.3 million people face acute food insecurity. Extending operations into the vicinity of this infrastructure—even without directly targeting the port—therefore raises the risk of disrupting trade, transport, communications, services, and humanitarian operations.

Hodeidah is also significant because escalation did not stop there. After the strikes, the Houthis announced [attacks on Aramco facilities in Jazan and Yanbu](#), while Yemeni officials [told Reuters](#) that government forces had struck missile and drone launch sites and weapons depots in Marib and Al Jawf, alongside military movements on front lines. Subsequent developments in Marib, Mokha, and Shabwa confirm that the escalation did in fact move toward a broader geographic and operational scope rather than remaining a limited exchange in Hodeidah and the Red Sea.

From a human-rights perspective, strikes on telecommunications facilities raise a particular question about target classification. International humanitarian law does not turn a civilian facility into a military objective merely because it is capable of military use. Rather, by its nature, location, purpose, or use, it must make an effective contribution to military action, and its destruction or neutralization must offer a definite military advantage in the circumstances ruling at the time. The [ICRC explains](#) that this test also applies to communications and transport infrastructure serving both civilian and military functions, while the obligations of proportionality, precautions, and assessment of direct and indirect civilian harm remain in force.



Accordingly, the most important indicator is not simply that airstrikes occurred in Hodeidah, but the possibility that operations may move from specific military capabilities to a broader range of infrastructure associated with command, communications, transport, and supply. Subsequent developments make this possibility more serious, but they do not permit every such facility to be treated automatically as a military objective. Each target [must be assessed individually](#) according to its actual use, the anticipated military advantage of attacking it, and the potential harm to civilians and essential services.

4. Shelling of the Judicial Complex in Taiz: From Building Damage to Disruption of Justice

On the evening of 25 July, [Anadolu Agency](#), citing [Saba News Agency](#) and local sources, reported that mortar shells struck the judicial complex in the Jabal Jarrah neighborhood of central Taiz without causing casualties. Saba News Agency and the [Yemeni Prime Minister's Office](#) also published statements attributing the shelling to Houthi positions north of the city. At the time of this assessment, no published independent investigation had examined the trajectory or remnants of the munitions; the attribution is therefore treated as a government allegation supported by local sources, not as a final finding.

Courts and judicial complexes are civilian objects protected by the [principle of distinction](#) unless used in a manner that turns them into military objectives, and the available open sources contain no verified indication of military use of the complex. The use of mortars in an urban area raises additional questions about weapon accuracy, range, and the attacker's ability to control the point of impact, particularly where the alleged target is close to civilian facilities.

The human-rights impact of damage to a judicial complex extends beyond repairing walls. Disruption of case files, archives, prosecutors' offices, or judges' offices can delay the presentation of detainees before a court, prolong pretrial detention, disrupt family and civil cases and victims' claims, and increase the cost of access to justice for poor people and residents of remote areas. The [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) protects the rights to liberty and security, a fair trial, and an effective remedy, while the [Basic](#)



[Principles on the Role of Lawyers](#) emphasize lawyers' ability to perform their functions without intimidation or obstruction. Continuity of the justice system should therefore be regarded as part of civilian protection, not as a marginal administrative service.

The risk is heightened because Yemen's judiciary already operates under pressure from institutional division, resource shortages, and detention outside effective oversight. If expanded detention coincides with court disruption, the duration of deprivation of liberty increases and challenges to the lawfulness of detention become harder. Any investigation into the shelling of the complex should therefore include an assessment of functional harm: the number of postponed hearings, files damaged, available alternative premises, and detainees whose status reviews were delayed.

Attack on Mokha and Its Port

On 9 August, the city of Mokha and its port were subjected to a [large-scale attack](#) with ballistic missiles and drones that lasted for hours and affected the port, sites within the city, and areas along the western coast. The Houthis acknowledged carrying out the operation, saying they targeted military positions and concentrations, while [local sources](#) reported that strikes also hit civilian and service facilities and caused deaths and injuries. Initial casualty figures varied, but they confirm [deaths among civilians and military personnel](#) and injuries to dozens of people, as well as damage to the infrastructure of Mokha port and strikes reaching the vicinity of the Saudi field hospital.

Attacks on Civilians and Displacement Camps in Marib

On 7 August, residential neighborhoods and displacement camps in Marib [were attacked](#) with missiles and drones. According to the Ministry of Health's preliminary toll, two civilians were killed and 14 others injured. The affected sites [included the Jaw al-Naseem and Al-Mil camps](#), amid reports of injuries to women, children, and older persons. These attacks compound risks to displaced people in a governorate hosting large displaced populations, particularly given the fragility of shelters and the lack of adequate protection from missile attacks.



Expansion of Front Lines and Disruption of Roads

Escalation also reached Bayhan in Shabwa, where a drone attack [killed two and injured eight](#) members of the Shabwa Defense Forces, according to a military source quoted by the German Press Agency (dpa). At the same time, the Houthi group [closed the Dhamar-Al Bayda-Marib road](#) to vehicles and trucks carrying goods toward Marib, Shabwa, and Hadramawt, according to a commercial source. The closure caused travelers and trucks to accumulate and threatened to raise transport costs and disrupt supply chains. The combination of military operations and road restrictions increases the risk that the effects of escalation will spread from battlefields to food, transport, and essential services.

Fourth: Governing Legal Framework

1. Nature of the Conflict and the Complementarity of Humanitarian and Human Rights Law

Hostilities inside Yemen are governed by Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and by customary rules applicable in non-international armed conflicts, while [Additional Protocol II](#) provides an important reference for civilian protection in non-international conflicts. In cross-border situations or direct confrontations between a state and an armed group, additional questions of classification may arise that cannot be resolved without examining the specific facts. Nevertheless, the principles of distinction, proportionality and precautions, the prohibition of starvation, and humanitarian access apply as customary law in all armed conflicts, reducing the practical effect of classification disputes on the core protections owed to civilians.

Human rights law continues to apply during armed conflict, with some obligations interpreted in light of international humanitarian law as the more specialized body of law governing hostilities. The right to life, the prohibition of torture, guarantees of liberty and fair trial, protection of the family, and victims' right to an effective remedy remain fundamental obligations. A state of war cannot be invoked to justify enforced disappearance, torture, or detention without a legal basis and judicial review.



2. Distinction, Military Objectives, and Doubt

[Rule 7](#) requires parties at all times to distinguish between civilian objects and military objectives, while [Rule 8](#) limits military objectives to objects that make an effective contribution to military action and whose neutralization offers a definite military advantage in the circumstances ruling at the time. [Rule 10](#) confirms that loss of protection lasts only for such time as those conditions are met. This prevents ports, roads, courts, or oil facilities from being treated as military objectives by their nature or merely because of their general importance.

In cases of doubt, lack of information should not be converted into a presumption of military status. This principle is particularly important in Yemen because of widespread unverified claims, the occasional military use of civilian sites, and the difficulty independent investigators face in gaining access. Parties should develop multi-source verification procedures and cancel or suspend an attack when information indicates that the target is civilian or that the expected harm has become disproportionate.

3. Proportionality, Precautions, and Reverberating Effects

Expected civilian harm is not limited to those killed or injured at the moment of impact. Foreseeable reverberating effects—such as a hospital losing electricity, water pumps stopping, or a bridge used to transport food becoming unusable—must be included in the assessment when they are reasonably foreseeable. The [rules of proportionality, precautions, and attack assessment](#) provide a basis for requiring planners to consider the interdependence of civilian systems, especially in an acutely fragile environment.

Precautions include verifying the target, choosing the weapon, timing, and angle of attack that cause the least harm, giving effective advance warning when circumstances permit, and cancelling an attack if the information changes. A warning does not remove other obligations, does not make people who cannot leave lawful targets, and does not make civilian infrastructure open to attack.



4. Prohibition of Starvation and Humanitarian Access

The law prohibits the use of starvation of the civilian population as a method of warfare, protects food, water, agricultural areas, and other objects necessary for survival, and requires the facilitation of impartial humanitarian relief. In its explanation of the rules on humanitarian access, the [ICRC](#) states that consent may not be arbitrarily withheld when civilians lack essential supplies. Maritime, air, and land restrictions should therefore be assessed by their actual effect: are goods reaching civilians in sufficient quantity and at the required time, and do inspection and insurance procedures make passage practically unworkable?

The legal prohibition of starvation does not require a fully developed famine. A violation may arise where a measure is designed to deprive civilians of objects indispensable to survival, or where such objects are attacked with the intent to deny them to civilians. Even if intent is not established, restrictions may still be unlawful because they are disproportionate or because humanitarian relief is arbitrarily withheld. Investigations should examine intent, design, effects, and the information available to decision-makers, rather than focusing only on the final outcome.

5. Detention, Enforced Disappearance, and Torture

Arrests that lack a clear legal basis, do not inform a person of the reasons for arrest, or deny access to a lawyer and the ability to challenge detention before a judge remain arbitrary. Torture and ill-treatment are absolutely prohibited, and holding a person in an undisclosed location while refusing to reveal their fate creates a risk of enforced disappearance. The [United Nations](#) has documented the continued detention of 73 UN personnel, the death of one staff member in custody, and the incommunicado detention of some personnel, all of which has impaired organizations' ability to assist the population.

This pattern is not confined to Houthi-controlled areas. Human rights reports also document unlawful detention facilities and violations in areas controlled by other parties.

[SAM has published a briefing on secret prisons](#) and [a report on violations in areas formerly](#)



[controlled by the Southern Transitional Council](#). Including these facts is necessary to avoid selective accountability and to affirm that protecting detainees is an obligation on all de facto authorities and forces allied with them.

Fifth: Humanitarian and Economic Baseline Before the Escalation

1. An Economy With No Margin to Absorb Shocks

The [World Bank's May 2026 economic update](#) shows that real GDP contracted by 1.5 percent in 2025 and is projected to contract by 0.5 percent in 2026, amid continued disruption of oil exports and weak demand and financing. Funding for the response plan also fell to 28 percent of requirements, compared with 56.5 percent in 2024. These figures mean that the state, households, and aid organizations are entering the escalation without sufficient financial buffers to offset higher transport or import costs.

Purchasing power is affected through three simultaneous channels: the exchange rate, income, and the cost of bringing goods to market. In its [November 2025 update](#), the World Bank pointed to higher costs for the minimum food basket in government-controlled areas and a rise in inadequate food consumption. If insurance and freight costs increase, the cost passes from importer to trader and then to the household. Poor families cannot absorb it through savings; they respond by reducing food quality and the number of meals, delaying medical treatment, withdrawing children from school, borrowing, or selling assets.

Yemen imports most essential goods, and the [UN 2025 Results Report](#) points to dependence on food imports of around 90 percent. Yemen's food security is therefore linked to the functioning of ports, the currency, roads, and the fuel market. 'Maritime security' cannot be separated from the right to food: delays at sea become shortages in the market, then price increases, and ultimately deprivation within households.

2. Hunger and Malnutrition

The [2026 OCHA plan](#) estimates that 18.3 million people face acute food insecurity and that more than 2.2 million children under five suffer from acute malnutrition, including more than half a million with severe acute malnutrition, in addition to 1.3 million pregnant and



breastfeeding women expected to suffer from malnutrition. In government-controlled areas, the [Integrated Food Security Phase Classification](#) found that nearly five million people faced Crisis or worse conditions in spring 2026, including 1.4 million in Emergency, with further deterioration expected.

[FAO's Yemen brief](#) confirms that insurance, transport and fuel costs, together with shortages of foreign currency, have pushed prices upward. [FAO and the World Food Programme](#) have also placed Yemen among the most serious hunger hotspots. These sources show that escalation does not need to destroy food stocks to cause harm; higher import costs, delayed shipments, or weakened humanitarian funding are enough to worsen food insecurity.

[UNICEF](#) reports that only 15 percent of children receive the minimum acceptable diet and that around 2.2 million children suffer from acute malnutrition. When both quantity and quality decline, children become more vulnerable to death from common illnesses, and physical and cognitive development may be irreversibly harmed. Higher fuel prices or road disruption are therefore indirect drivers of mortality, not merely market problems.

3. Health and Water

The [World Health Organization](#) reports that only about 60 percent of health facilities are fully functional and is seeking emergency funding to reach 10.5 million people in 2026. The [OCHA plan](#) states that 14.4 million people need water, sanitation and hygiene assistance. Any disruption to fuel therefore directly affects generators, ambulances, vaccine cold chains, and water pumps, while increasing the risk of cholera, measles, dengue fever, and polio.

When launching its funding appeal, [WHO](#) described the health system as under severe strain and warned that funding gaps lead to reduced services and delayed responses to outbreaks. A system in this condition has no reserve capacity to absorb mass-casualty incidents, a displacement wave, or a prolonged fuel interruption. De-escalation plans



should therefore include operational guarantees for health and water facilities, not only general pledges to protect them from direct attack.

4. Women and Girls

According to the [United Nations Population Fund](#), 10.95 million women and girls need assistance and protection. UNFPA estimates that around 662,000 pregnant women need life-saving services, including 340,000 who require emergency obstetric care, while the funding gap reached 87 percent at the end of March. These figures mean that a road closure, an ambulance stopping, or a health facility losing fuel can become a direct threat to life during pregnancy and childbirth.

Food shocks are not distributed equally within households. In conditions of extreme poverty, women often reduce their own food intake for the sake of children, increasing the risk of anemia and malnutrition among pregnant and breastfeeding women. Displacement, overcrowding, lack of lighting, and the absence of separate facilities also increase risks of violence, exploitation, and early marriage. In its material on the cycle of violence against women, [SAM](#) describes the intersection of conflict-related violence with domestic, security-related and digital violence and restrictions on movement—an intersection likely to worsen with escalation.

Court disruption has a specific gendered impact: alimony, custody, domestic violence, and inheritance cases are delayed, while women's ability to recover documents or obtain legal protection becomes more difficult. The problem is greater where women lack the resources to travel to an alternative court or face movement restrictions. Justice-continuity plans should therefore include safe reception units, specialized female staff, free legal services, and confidential reporting mechanisms.



5. Children

[UNICEF's update on the Yemen crisis](#) states that 10.8 million children need humanitarian assistance, around 3.2 million are out of school, and 40 percent of health facilities are partially functioning or out of service. The [UN monitoring mechanism on children and armed conflict](#) also documented 742 grave violations against 652 children in 2025, including the recruitment and use of 262 children and the killing or maiming of 431 children. The risks of escalation extend beyond bombardment. Loss of household income can push children into hazardous work, begging, or recruitment by armed groups, while interruption of education increases early marriage for girls and recruitment risks for boys. Unexploded ordnance and landmines remain a persistent source of death and disability; [UNICEF](#) has documented more than ten thousand children killed or maimed since the conflict escalated, alongside hundreds of attacks on, or military uses of, schools and health facilities. In its report on Yemen's children, [SAM](#) links poverty, displacement, school dropout, recruitment, and early marriage, treating childhood as a measure of the collapse of social protection. Assessment of any military operation should therefore ask about schools, roads, treatment, food, and psychological trauma—not only the number of direct casualties.



6. Displacement, Marginalized Groups, and Persons With Disabilities

The [OCHA plan](#) estimates the internally displaced population at around 5.2 million and identifies persons with disabilities, migrants, refugees, and marginalized communities as groups disproportionately affected. [IOM's displacement-tracking program](#) continued to record new displacement in 2026, including from Hodeidah, Marib, and Taiz. If internal fronts reopen or roads are damaged, short-distance and unplanned displacement is likely to be the first response for many families.

Persons with disabilities face compounded risks in receiving warnings, evacuating, and accessing shelters, water, and services, and may lose assistive devices or caregivers during displacement. Many emergency plans do not include alternative communication methods for people with hearing or visual disabilities, making universal accessibility essential in warnings, services, and judicial and health facilities.

7. Humanitarian and Civic Space

On 10 June 2026, the [United Nations](#) reported that 73 UN personnel remained arbitrarily detained by Houthi authorities, that one staff member had died in custody, and that some were being held incommunicado. The [Security Council](#) affirmed that these detentions and threats against aid workers worsen the humanitarian situation. The impact of detention is not limited to the victim: it leads organizations to restrict movement and programs, raises security costs, and weakens access to millions of people in need.

[SAM](#) has warned about the continued detention of UN and humanitarian personnel, linking it to deteriorating legal safeguards and health and psychological consequences. The organization has also documented the [arrest of lawyer Abdulmajid Sabra](#). A [communication by UN Special Procedures](#) confirms that his detention in an undisclosed location raised concerns of enforced disappearance. With any renewed escalation, the risk increases that allegations of espionage and treason will be used to broaden repression and silence independent documentation.



Sixth: Expected Human Rights Impact Pathways

These developments reinforce the assessment that the risk is no longer confined to Houthi-Saudi confrontation or regional shipping but is increasingly moving into Yemen itself. Attacks on displacement sites, ports, and service facilities, alongside renewed military activity on front lines and the closure of major roads, raise the likelihood of interconnected human-rights and humanitarian effects—including death and injury, displacement, service disruption, and higher food and transport costs—and make the risk of a return to broader conflict inside Yemen more serious.

1. From Maritime Disruption to Food and Medicine

The chain begins with an announcement or attack that raises perceived risk, leading insurers to increase premiums and shipowners to demand surcharges or change routes. A longer voyage consumes more fuel and time and reduces effective fleet capacity. The additional cost then reaches the importer, increasing demand for foreign currency and delaying customs clearance and inland transport, so prices rise and quantities available in markets decline. [UNCTAD's rapid report on Red Sea disruptions](#) explains how the effects of attacks extended beyond the region to inflation, food security, and energy, and how freight and insurance prices rose as vessels diverted around Africa.

In Yemen, this chain is amplified by currency weakness, divided institutions, road restrictions and levies, and inadequate humanitarian funding. Harm should therefore not be measured only by the number of vessels hit, but by changes in delivery times, import volumes, insurance premiums, wholesale and retail prices, and availability of goods in remote governorates. The most severe effects may occur far from the coast in areas dependent on costly overland transport.

2. From Fuel Disruption to Hospitals and Water

Fuel is a common input across essential services. A price increase raises the cost of pumping water, running generators, transporting waste, patients, and flour. When supply falls, facilities prioritize some services and suspend others, causing cumulative health and



environmental effects. Because a large share of facilities is already not fully functional, any further reduction could close maternity, immunization, or dialysis units.

This pathway should be monitored through weekly operational indicators: hours of electricity available in hospitals, fuel stocks, the number of functioning ambulances, halted water pumps, transport prices, and delayed patient referrals. Direct-casualty data alone cannot capture deaths that occur because a patient could not reach care or because medicines lost their cold chain.

3. From Attacks on the Judiciary to Detention and Impunity

Damage to a judicial building, or fear of accessing it, may suspend hearings, prevent judges and lawyers from attending, delay the transfer of detainees, and result in lost files or evidence. This can extend detention without review, weaken victims' ability to lodge complaints, and give security bodies more space to operate beyond oversight. In an environment where [Human Rights Watch](#) has documented arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, and torture by multiple parties, continuity of the judiciary becomes an urgent protection measure.

4. From Escalation to Arrests and Repression of Civic Space

Escalation is often accompanied by mobilizing rhetoric that broadens the definition of the 'internal enemy.' Criticism of the war or reporting on losses may be turned into allegations of espionage or weakening the front. [SAM's reports on the human rights landscape](#) document a pattern of arrests, restrictions, and incitement against journalists and activists, while [SAM's reports on torture](#) describe the risks of detention outside judicial oversight.

If arrest campaigns coincide with restrictions on the internet and movement and raids on organizations' premises, the flow of independent information declines and verification of strikes becomes more difficult. This is not a secondary effect: lack of information weakens early warning, assistance, and accountability. The United Nations and donors should treat the protection of local staff, data, and witnesses as part of continuity of response.



5. From Displacement to Violence and Exploitation

Bombardment or fear can force families to flee rapidly before securing shelter, income, or documents. In displacement sites, rents rise and risks of gender-based violence, child labor, school dropout, and early marriage increase. People may also become cut off from courts, treatment, or support networks. Response efforts should therefore measure the quality and safety of displacement, not only the number of displaced persons.

Protection requires safe registration points, water, lighting and separate facilities, legal services, health and psychosocial referrals, and confidential complaints mechanisms. Schools should not be used as long-term shelters in ways that deny children education, and displacement sites should not be established near military objectives or areas contaminated by mines.

Seventh: Risk Matrix

The following matrix ranks risks according to their likelihood in the coming weeks and months, the severity of their impact, their geographic reach, and the reversibility of the harm. A risk described as 'critical' is capable of generating deaths, widespread deprivation, or long-term effects, even if it is not the most likely scenario.

Risk	Likelihood	Severity	Scope	Basis for Assessment
Disruption of shipping and imports	High	Critical	National/Regional	Route changes and higher insurance costs rapidly increase the cost of food, medicine, and fuel.



Risk	Likelihood	Severity	Scope	Basis for Assessment
Rising hunger and malnutrition	High	Critical	National	An acutely fragile baseline, with 18.3 million people facing acute food insecurity.
Disruption of health and water services due to fuel shortages	High	Critical	Widespread	Around 40% of facilities are already only partially functional or out of service.
Attack on or disruption of oil and energy infrastructure	Medium to High	High to Critical	Regional	Fires, pollution, higher transport and insurance costs, and market effects.
Attacks on ports, roads, and bridges	Medium	Critical	Local/National	Reverberating effects on supplies, emergency response, and movement.



Risk	Likelihood	Severity	Scope	Basis for Assessment
Reopening of front lines in Taiz, Marib, and Hodeidah	Medium	Critical	Broad Local Impact	Displacement, explosive ordnance, and disruption of services and education.
Arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, and torture	High	High	Areas controlled by the parties	An existing pattern that expands with espionage accusations and mobilization rhetoric.
Disruption of courts and the justice system	Medium to High	High	Local/Cumulative	Prolongs detention and delays the rights of victims and women.
Harm to women and girls	High	High/Long-term	Widespread	Maternal health risks, violence, food shortages, and access restrictions.



Risk	Likelihood	Severity	Scope	Basis for Assessment
Harm to children	High	Critical/Long-term	Widespread	Malnutrition, education disruption, recruitment, explosive ordnance, and trauma.
Contraction of humanitarian operations	High	Critical	National	Detention of aid workers, funding shortages, and movement risks.

Eighth: Possible Scenarios

Scenario One: Limited and Gradual Escalation - Relatively Most Likely

Under this scenario, threats and intermittent attacks on vessels or selected facilities continue, while Saudi Arabia responds with calibrated strikes and mediation channels remain open. Bab al-Mandab is not fully closed, but traffic remains below normal and some vessels use alternative routes or transit under heightened precautions. The parties' objective remains to raise the opponent's costs without crossing into full-scale war.

The human-rights impact of this scenario would remain high despite limited combat: higher insurance and transport costs, pressure on fuel and prices, tighter security measures and arrests, and further deterioration in funding and access. Indicators would include a small number of maritime incidents each week, limited airstrikes, and mediation messages that prevent expansion. The likelihood of this scenario is high in the near term, but its potential



to slide into wider conflict remains significant if there are large-scale casualties or a major energy facility is hit.

Scenario Two: Air and Maritime Expansion - Possible and Highly Dangerous

This scenario would materialize if criteria for targeting vessels broadened, large tankers sustained serious damage, or Saudi Arabia repeatedly struck ports, warehouses, energy facilities, and communications infrastructure in Hodeidah, Sana'a, and the coast. Wider international protection arrangements could emerge and the military presence at sea could grow, increasing the risk of miscalculation and collision.

The impact would be critical: a larger drop in maritime traffic, sharp increases in insurance premiums, disruption to Yemen's imports, possible pollution, and damage to health and water services. Retaliatory strikes on cities and facilities could also intensify. This scenario becomes more likely if tankers divert en masse, attacks on Yanbu succeed, strikes on Hodeidah recur, or an official announcement broadens the list of vessels subject to attack.

Scenario Three: Reopening Internal Front Lines - Less Likely but Highest Civilian Cost

The crisis could shift from the sea to front lines in Taiz, Marib, Hodeidah, and Al Jawf, with troop movements, road closures, and the use of artillery and drones. This scenario would require a broader political and military decision but could arise if one party concludes that its opponent is regionally distracted or weakened.

Its effects would emerge quickly in deaths and injuries, displacement, contamination of new areas with explosive remnants, disruption of schools, courts, and hospitals, and increased child recruitment. Taiz would be particularly sensitive because of population density, partial siege conditions, and limited roads. Warning indicators include troop concentrations, new fortifications, increased artillery fire, road closures, and local evacuation warnings.



Scenario Four: Rapid Negotiated Containment - Possible but Fragile

This scenario would occur if regional and international mediation succeeded in halting attacks and threats and linked the pause to practical measures protecting shipping, ports, and the flow of goods. Some vessels could gradually return, risk premiums could fall, and prices could stabilize to some extent.

A ceasefire alone, however, would not address detention, disruption of the judiciary, or funding shortages. Containment should include the release of aid workers and arbitrarily detained persons, a maritime communication mechanism, guarantees against military use of civilian ports, investigations into incidents, and continuity plans for essential services. Without these measures, Yemen would simply return to an unstable truce vulnerable to collapse at the next shock.

Ninth: Early-Warning Indicators

Maritime and economic indicators: monitoring should cover the number of vessels transiting Bab al-Mandab, the proportion switching off AIS transponders, diversions around Africa, insurance premiums, and arrival schedules for grain and fuel at Yemeni ports. Importer inventories, the exchange rate, and prices for flour, fuel, and transport should also be tracked. A simultaneous fall in maritime traffic and rise in insurance and prices would be a strong signal that the threat is turning into a livelihood crisis.

Military indicators: these include deployment of missile and drone launchers near the coast, increased maritime warnings, repeated strikes on Hodeidah, attacks on Yanbu or vessels linked to it, and troop movements toward fronts in Taiz, Marib, and Al Jawf. A shift in official language from 'Saudi vessels' to 'vessels dealing with Saudi Arabia' would also signal a widening risk perimeter.

Humanitarian and service indicators: these include health facilities ceasing operations because of fuel shortages, water pumps stopping, increasing delays in medical referrals, reduced food distributions, school or court closures, and rising displacement. These



indicators should be collected weekly at district level because national averages may conceal local collapses.

Repressive and institutional indicators: these include a rise in rhetoric of treason, raids and arrests targeting journalists and aid workers, restrictions on movement and internet access, referral of civilians to exceptional courts, and denial of visits by lawyers and families. Attacks on lawyers or civil-society premises should be treated as early warnings of shrinking documentation and accountability space.

Tenth: Recommendations

To the Houthi Group

Attacks and threats against merchant vessels based on ownership, flag, or general commercial relationships should cease. Any use of force must be limited to objects that individually and precisely meet the definition of a military objective, with verification, proportionality, and precautions. Clear criteria should also be announced for the protection of civilian and humanitarian vessels, and no measure should be taken that in practice prevents food, medicine, or fuel from reaching civilians or raises the level of risk to the point that delivery becomes impossible.

An independent and transparent investigation should be conducted into the shelling of the judicial complex in Taiz, with neutral experts allowed to examine munition remnants and launch sites and the findings made public. The use of inaccurate weapons in populated areas should cease, and military sites should be kept away from civilian objects to the greatest extent feasible. In the civilian sphere, UN and humanitarian personnel and all arbitrarily detained persons should be released immediately and unconditionally, the locations of disappeared persons disclosed, and lawyers, families, and medical professionals granted access to detainees.

To Saudi Arabia and Allied Forces

Strikes should be limited to specific military objectives verified through multiple sources, and attacks on ports, roads, energy infrastructure, and communications should be avoided



when foreseeable reverberating effects on civilians would be excessive. Post-strike information should be released to enable independent assessment, including the nature of the target, precautions taken, and the scale of damage, while protecting legitimate operational information. Any tactic should be suspended when evidence emerges of recurring or disproportionate civilian harm.

Maritime-security and inspection measures must not become restrictions that impede Yemen's imports. Saudi Arabia and allied forces should work with the United Nations and shipping companies to establish reliable corridors and notification procedures for essential goods. Where unlawful civilian harm is established, there should be an independent investigation, compensation and other forms of reparation, and rapid repair of civilian infrastructure.

To the Yemeni Government and Forces Under or Allied With It

Courts, hospitals, schools, and ports should be protected by refraining from using them for military purposes or storing weapons near them, and any attack on such facilities should be documented in a manner that preserves the chain of custody of evidence. In the case of the judicial complex, an engineering and functional assessment should be published, affected hearings and files identified, a safe alternative venue provided, and review of detainees' cases prioritized.

Unlawful detention facilities in areas controlled by the government and allied forces should also be closed, all places of detention brought under prosecutorial and judicial oversight, and allegations of torture and enforced disappearance investigated. In its [position on unlawful prisons](#), SAM has stressed that administrative measures are insufficient without an independent judicial investigation. Calls for Houthi accountability lose force if impunity continues among other parties.



To the United Nations, the Special Envoy, and Mediators

Priority should be given to a maritime and air de-escalation agreement that includes a communication mechanism to prevent incidents, explicit protection for ports and civilian vessels, guarantees for the passage of food, medicine, and fuel, and a prohibition on the military use of civilian ports. The agreement should not be limited to stopping strikes but should include measurable indicators such as vessel traffic, clearance times, prices, and fuel availability.

The security track should also be linked to protection of humanitarian and judicial space: the release of the 73 UN personnel and other detained workers, an end to raids and seizures, guaranteed access to lawyers, and support for continuity of the courts. An independent mechanism should also be established or supported to collect evidence of attacks on civilians and civilian objects, in the absence of a comprehensive international accountability mechanism for Yemen.

To Donors and International Financial Institutions

Flexible emergency funding should be provided for health, nutrition, water, and the protection of women and children, with a reserve to cover increases in shipping and insurance costs. Guarantee mechanisms should support humanitarian importers and essential goods so that risk premiums do not become market shortages. Resources should also be directed to continuity of the justice system, backup of records, and free legal services.

[World Bank data](#) confirm that Yemen has no financial buffers to absorb the shock. Funding should therefore not be delayed until famine or systemic collapse emerges. Early investment in fuel for essential facilities, therapeutic nutrition stocks, water, and income support is less costly than responding to a broad collapse.



To Shipping, Insurance, and Energy Companies

Risk and incident data should be shared with maritime mechanisms and the United Nations in ways that protect crews and do not unnecessarily disclose sensitive information. Special arrangements should be put in place to maintain the transport of food, medicine, and fuel to Yemen, and the full risk premium should not be passed on to the final consumer. Joint guarantees or subsidized insurance could be developed for essential humanitarian and commercial voyages.

Navigation safety must be maintained when deciding whether to switch off AIS transponders, with collision, rescue, and transparency risks fully assessed. Crews should also be trained to respond to warnings and attacks, and damage and threats documented in ways that support investigation and accountability.

To Civil Society Organizations and the Media

A methodology should be adopted that distinguishes between the underlying incident, competing narratives, and legal attribution, while avoiding the reproduction of parties' statements as final facts. Indirect harm—such as the shutdown of a health facility, delay of a detainee's case, or increase in the price of a basic commodity—should be documented because it represents a major part of the impact of escalation on civilians. Witness identities and sensitive location data should be protected, and evidence stored securely.

Media coverage of attacks should include their humanitarian and legal context rather than focusing only on military performance and oil prices. Space should be given to women, children, displaced persons, persons with disabilities, health workers, and legal professionals, while images and videos are verified for date and location.



Eleventh: Overall Assessment

Renewed Houthi-Saudi escalation is not simply a return to an old pattern of missiles and airstrikes. The regional context in 2026 makes the Red Sea, energy infrastructure, and ports interconnected instruments of pressure across multiple maritime corridors, and markets react to threats before physical damage occurs. In a country dependent on imports and burdened by poverty, hunger, and weak services, the effect of a threat can move rapidly from the sea into the household.

The first risk is disruption to supplies and prices; the second is expansion of strikes into interconnected civilian infrastructure; the third is the use of mobilization to broaden arrests and repress civic space; and the fourth is the weakening of justice institutions at the very moment they are needed most. These risks do not operate separately: fuel shortages disrupt hospitals and courts, arrests weaken documentation, disruption of the judiciary prolongs detention, and displacement increases violence, school dropout, and malnutrition. On this basis, the report assesses the overall risk level as 'high, with the potential to shift rapidly to critical.' Limited escalation remains the most likely scenario, but it carries substantial humanitarian consequences because of the fragility of the baseline. A shift to repeated strikes on ports and energy infrastructure or the reopening of internal front lines could make the crisis critical within a short period. The success of mediation should therefore be measured not only by a reduction in the number of strikes, but also by the safety of civilian vessels, stability of imports and prices, continuity of health, water, and justice services, reduced arrests, and the ability of humanitarian workers to resume their work freely.



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Renewed Houthi-Saudi Escalation

**Expected Risks to Civilians, Civilian Objects, and the
Rights and Services System in Yemen**