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Houthi Attacks on Saudi Arabia: Escalation, Strategic Pressure, and Regional Implications

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The latest reports indicate that Houthi's military campaign has now moved beyond the earlier pattern of attacks. On 6th and 7th of October, Jazan and Najran were hit, while Abha and King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh were subsequently targeted. Saudi authorities reported three deaths and 36 injuries in the Abha and Riyadh attacks. On 8th of October, the Houthis again claimed a ballistic-missile attack on King Khalid airport; the Saudi response had not yet been confirmed when Reuters reported it.²

What are the Houthis Trying to Achieve?

There are five overlapping potential objectives of the Houthis:

1. Raise the Cost Of Saudi Arabia's Yemen Offensive

This is the most immediate explanation. Saudi Arabia has returned to a much more active military role in Yemen, supporting Yemeni government forces attempting to recover territory from the Houthis. Saudi aircraft are striking Houthi positions, while Houthi forces are responding with missiles and drones against Saudi territory.³

The message is essentially: If Saudi Arabia expands the war inside Yemen, the war will be brought back into Saudi Arabia. Airports are particularly useful targets because even a relatively small strike can force temporary closures, diversions, inspections and heightened security without requiring the Houthis to destroy the facility. This is a form of *strategic punishment* rather than the territorial warfare.

2. Undermine Confidence in Saudi Arabia's Airspace

An airport does not have to be destroyed to become a strategic target. If airlines, insurers, passengers and international aviation authorities begin treating Saudi airspace as increasingly hazardous, the Houthis achieve something disproportionate to the physical damage inflicted.

The significance of targeting the city of Riyadh is therefore much greater than hitting an isolated military installation near the Yemeni border. King Khalid is the capital's principal international gateway. The reported renewed attack on it on 8 October is particularly significant because

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² Reuters, "Two Saudi Airports Targeted Monday as Fighting with Yemen's Houthis Escalates," October 6, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/two-saudi-airports-targeted-monday-fighting-with-yemens-houthis-escalates-2026-10-06>

³ Reuters, "Gulf Bourses Retreat as Saudi-Houthi Tensions Surge," October 7, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/gulf-bourses-subdued-saudi-houthi-hostilities-escalate-2026-10-07>

it suggests that the Houthis want to demonstrate that distance from Yemen does not provide complete protection.⁴

At the same time, the reported exclusion of Makkah and Madinah from the Houthi aviation warning is politically interesting. It gives the Houthis an opportunity to portray their campaign as directed against the Saudi state and military infrastructure rather than the holy places of Islam. Whether that distinction will hold if the conflict intensifies is another question.

3. Put Pressure on Saudi Arabia's Economic Transformation

Saudi Arabia's economic strategy depends heavily upon perceptions of security and stability. Airports, tourism, international investment, major sporting and entertainment events, logistics and ambitious infrastructure projects all depend upon an environment in which people believe that Saudi Arabia is safe. Consequently, the Houthis do not necessarily have to destroy an airport. Repeated disruption may be enough to impose economic and psychological costs.

This is consistent with the broader Houthi strategy identified by the Critical Threats Project (CTP) and Institute for the Study of War (ISW): using pressure on Saudi Arabia and the Red Sea to seek an end to Saudi military operations, relaxation of restrictions on Houthi-controlled areas and broader economic concessions.⁵

4. Demonstrate that Saudi Air Defenses Cannot Provide an Absolute Shield

Saudi Arabia possesses sophisticated air-defense systems, but no missile-defense architecture provides a 100-percent guarantee. The Houthis therefore benefit strategically even when missiles are intercepted. An intercepted missile can demonstrate Saudi defensive capability. A

missile that gets through demonstrates Saudi vulnerability.

The recent pattern—multiple targets, missiles combined with drones and attacks at different geographical locations—also creates a dilemma for Saudi Arabia: defend everything everywhere, or concentrate resources around the most important targets. That is an expensive contest for Saudi Arabia.

5. Influence the Political Calculations of Riyadh

Ultimately, the Houthis probably want Riyadh to ask whether the cost of continuing the offensive is becoming greater than the benefit. This is where the airport campaign connects directly with the wider Yemen battlefield. The Houthis appear to be saying: *You can bomb Yemen, but you cannot conduct the war without consequences at home.*

That is a classic coercive strategy. It does not require the Houthis to defeat Saudi Arabia militarily. They only need to convince Riyadh that the conflict cannot be brought to a satisfactory conclusion through military pressure alone.

How Could the Situation Develop?

There are four possible scenarios that could lead to the development of the situation:

1. Controlled Escalation

This may be the most important immediate possibility. Saudi Arabia continues its air campaign and Yemeni allies continue ground operations. The Houthis continue missile and drone attacks, but both sides deliberately avoid certain thresholds—major oil facilities, mass civilian casualties, Makkah and Madinah, or attacks that would invite direct participation by outside powers. In this situation, the conflict becomes a war of attrition.

⁴ Reuters, "Yemen's Houthis Say They Attacked Riyadh Airport with Ballistic Missile," October 8, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/yemens-houthis-say-they-attacked-riyadh-airport-with-ballistic-missile-2026-10-08>

⁵ Michael DeAngelo and Liam Karr, "Houthis Threaten the Bab al Mandeb; Sahel-Sahara Rivalries Fuel Rebel Groups: Africa File, September 17, 2026," Critical Threats, September 17, 2026, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/red-sea-saudi-arabia-houthi-niger-libya-chad-fla-fpl-lna-laaf>.

Saudi Arabia has the greater conventional military capability, but the Houthis possess geographical depth, hardened positions, relatively inexpensive drones and missiles, and considerable experience surviving air campaigns.

That combination makes a quick military solution difficult.

2. The Airport Attacks Become a Strategic Air War

This is the more dangerous trajectory. If the Houthis increasingly target Riyadh, Jeddah, major military airbases, oil infrastructure and other strategic facilities, Saudi Arabia may conclude that interception alone is insufficient.

The response could then shift from defense to systematic destruction of Houthi missile, drone, command-and-control, and launch infrastructure. Saudi Arabia has already reportedly responded to the escalation with extensive strikes against Houthi military sites.⁶

That creates the classic cycle:

Houthi missile attack → Saudi retaliation
→ Houthi retaliation → wider Saudi campaign → further Houthi attacks.

At that point the original objective of coercing Saudi Arabia could paradoxically produce a much larger war.

3. The Makkah Agreement Becomes the Game Changer

This is particularly important for Pakistan. Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Türkiye have now activated the collective-defense mechanism of their Makkah agreement. The three countries agreed to move towards rapid deployment of military capabilities in Saudi Arabia.⁷

Türkiye is reportedly providing primarily defensive and technical assistance, including air-defence and other capabilities.⁸

For Pakistan, the critical distinction should remain between the two stances: Defending Saudi territory and conducting offensive operations inside Yemen.

The airport attacks actually strengthen the case for the first role: air defense, surveillance, early warning, and protection of critical infrastructure and reinforcement of Saudi airspace. They do not automatically require Pakistani forces to participate in an offensive ground or air campaign against the Houthis. That distinction will become increasingly important if Riyadh decides to expand the war.

4. A Negotiated Off-Ramp

Paradoxically, increased military pressure could eventually create the conditions for negotiations. The Houthis have political as well as military objectives. Saudi Arabia has an interest in securing its territory, reopening stable economic links and avoiding an indefinite Yemen war.

There is therefore potentially a bargain somewhere between the two positions:

- cessation of Houthi attacks on Saudi territory;
- cessation or reduction of Saudi attacks inside Yemen;
- arrangements concerning Houthi-controlled ports and airports;
- guarantees concerning cross-border attacks;
- humanitarian and economic measures;

⁶ Reuters, "Attacks on Saudi Airports Kill Three People, as Fighting Escalates in Yemen," October 7, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/houthis-launch-missiles-yemens-aden-airport-fighting-intensifies-2026-10-07>

⁷ Abid Hussain, "Pakistan, Türkiye and Saudi Deterrence against Houthis: What That Means," Al Jazeera, October 6, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/10/6/pakistan-turkiye-join-saudi-deterrence-against-houthis-what-that-means>

⁸ Reuters, "Turkey Sending Technical, Defensive Support to Saudi Arabia to Help Fight Houthis, Officials Say," October 7, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/turkey-sending-technical-defensive-support-saudi-arabia-help-fight-houthis-2026-10-07>

- and eventually a political settlement concerning Yemen itself.

The difficulty is that neither side may believe that it has yet reached the point where compromise is preferable to continued military pressure.

The Most Dangerous Development Would be the Geographical Expansion

The real warning sign is not simply another missile hitting an airport. It would be the emergence of multiple simultaneous fronts:

Yemen → Saudi airports → Saudi oil infrastructure → Red Sea shipping → Bab el-Mandeb → Gulf shipping → wider regional confrontation.

The Bab el-Mandeb is particularly important. Fighting is already concentrated around the Red Sea coast and the strategic strait, while Saudi-backed forces are trying to recover territory there.⁹

If the Houthis conclude that Saudi Arabia's economic vulnerability is greater at sea than in the air, they could increase pressure on shipping. If Saudi Arabia responds by expanding naval operations, the conflict could become an international maritime-security crisis rather than merely another phase of the Yemeni civil war.

What Should Concern Riyadh—and Islamabad?

For Riyadh, the central problem is that there is no purely military answer to a low-cost

missile-and-drone campaign conducted by an entrenched adversary. Air defense can protect infrastructure, but it cannot eliminate the political source of the attacks.

For Islamabad, the equation is even more delicate. Pakistan has an obligation under its defense arrangement to assist Saudi Arabia's defense, but it also has a longstanding strategic interest in not becoming a combatant in the Yemeni civil war. The present airport attacks provide a strong rationale for a Pakistani defensive contribution without necessarily crossing that line.

Indeed, the best way for Pakistan to remain useful as both ally and potential mediator may be to concentrate its contribution on the defense of Saudi territory—air defense, surveillance, intelligence, logistics, communications and protection of critical installations—while keeping a clearly defined red line against offensive operations in Yemen.

The airport campaign therefore presents a paradox. The more the Houthis attack Saudi territory, the stronger the case for collective defense under the Makkah arrangement. But the deeper Pakistan and Türkiye become involved in offensive operations inside Yemen, the greater the danger that what began as a defensive alliance becomes another party to the Yemen war. That distinction could ultimately determine whether the present escalation remains a contained Saudi-Houthi confrontation or develops into a much wider regional conflict.

⁹ Reuters, "The War's Explosive New Front," October 7, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/wars-explosive-new-front-2026-10-07>

