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Houthi Attacks on Saudi Arabia: Testing the Limits of Strategic Resilience

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In the attacks carried out on Riyadh's King Khalid International Airport between 10 and 12 October 2026, the Houthis have tested an important strategic threshold. The deaths, injuries, repeated interruptions to aviation and warnings to commercial airlines threaten not only public safety but also Saudi Arabia's international connectivity, economic confidence and Vision 2030 ambitions.

What Is Saudi Arabia's Threshold of Pain?

The threshold of pain is not a single casualty figure or a fixed number of days during which an airport remains closed. It is the point at which the cumulative military, economic, political and reputational costs of Houthi attacks become unacceptable to the Saudi leadership.

There are 5 indicators that could push Riyadh towards a more forceful response:

1. Sustained Paralysis of Civil Aviation

A temporary closure is manageable. Repeated closures, airline withdrawals and the loss of confidence among international passengers and investors are much more serious. Riyadh is a major international hub, and continued disruption could undermine Saudi Arabia's ambition to become a global tourism,

business and logistics destination.² Reuters reported on 12 October that the airport would remain closed until at least 17 October.³

2. Threats to Energy Infrastructure

If attacks begin to cause sustained damage to oil production, export terminals, refineries or electricity infrastructure, the stakes rise considerably. The September 2019 attacks on Abqaiq and Khurais demonstrated how relatively limited strikes can disrupt a strategically important part of Saudi energy infrastructure.⁴

3. A Loss of Confidence in National Protection

The inability to prevent repeated attacks on a prominent civilian target could raise questions about the effectiveness of Saudi air defense. The problem becomes more serious if the public begins to believe that no major city or essential facility is adequately protected. The reported failure to prevent the Riyadh strikes is therefore as important politically as it is militarily.

4. Damage To Vision 2030 and International Confidence

Saudi Arabia has invested heavily in tourism, entertainment, aviation, logistics and international events. If airlines,

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² Government of Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030 Annual Report 2025 (Riyadh: Government of Saudi Arabia, 2026), https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/ecdjfopq/vision2030_annual_report_2025_en.pdf

³ Reuters, "Airlines Cancel Flights to Saudi Arabia after Riyadh Airport Attacks," October 12, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/airlines-cancel-flights-saudi-arabia-after-riyadh-airport-attacks-2026-10-12/>

⁴ Saudi Press Agency, "Minister of Energy: Terrorist Attacks on 'Abqaiq and Khurais' Plants Have Resulted in a Temporary Halt in Production Operations," September 14, 2019, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/w1171746>

investors and conference organizers begin treating the kingdom as an unreliable or unsafe destination, the Houthis will have achieved strategic effects far beyond the physical damage caused by individual weapons.

5. Repeated Failure of Deterrence

If warnings, defensive deployments, diplomatic protests and retaliatory airstrikes fail to stop attacks, Saudi decision-makers may conclude that the existing approach is not working. A further attack causing substantial civilian casualties or damaging another strategic facility could intensify pressure for a broader military response.

The important qualification is that Saudi Arabia can absorb considerable financial losses. What it may find harder to tolerate is the perception that a non-state armed movement can repeatedly dictate the operating conditions of a major regional power.

Why Has It Been So Difficult to Deter the Houthis?

Saudi Arabia possesses a much larger conventional military, sophisticated aircraft and advanced air-defense systems. Yet these advantages do not automatically translate into the ability to prevent every attack. The problem is partly one of asymmetric warfare. The Houthis do not need to defeat the Saudi military. They need only to get enough weapons through Saudi defenses, often enough, to impose costs that Riyadh considers unacceptable.

The experience of the conflict since 2015 illustrates several difficulties:

- **An Unfavorable Cost Exchange:** Relatively inexpensive drones can force defenders to employ costly interceptors. However, comparing the purchase price of a drone with an interceptor alone ignores the much greater value of the civilian infrastructure being protected.
- **Dispersed Launch Capability:** Destroying known missile depots and launch facilities does not eliminate the ability to relocate, conceal or reconstitute capabilities.
- **Multiple Forms of Attack:** Drones, cruise

missiles and ballistic missiles present different detection and interception challenges. A defense optimized for one threat may not be equally effective against another.

- **Strategic Resilience:** The Houthis have survived years of air campaigns and maintained the ability to threaten Saudi territory. The historical record suggests that airstrikes alone are unlikely to guarantee a permanent end to their attacks.

What Can Saudi Arabia Do to Stop The Attacks?

There is no single military solution. Riyadh would need a combination of defensive improvements, carefully limited military pressure and diplomacy that gives the Houthis a reason to stop.

i. Make Saudi Arabia a Harder Target

The immediate priority should be to protect civilians and restore confidence in the kingdom's airspace.

Saudi Arabia should also consider the wider architecture of civil protection:

- Strengthen protection and emergency procedures at airports and other critical infrastructure.
- Improve coordination between military air defense, civil aviation authorities and emergency services.
- Develop continuity arrangements that allow essential aviation and commercial activity to recover quickly after an incident.
- Work with allies and partners on intelligence sharing, technical assistance and replenishment of defensive munitions.

ii. Shift From Retaliation to Deterrence

Saudi Arabia has already demonstrated that it can conduct air operations against Houthi-controlled territory. The question is whether additional strikes will change Houthi behavior.

Retaliation and deterrence are not synonymous. A retaliatory strike can

demonstrate resolve, but deterrence requires the adversary to believe that continuing the behavior will bring costs that outweigh its anticipated gains.

Riyadh's response should therefore have clearly defined political objectives:

- Stop attacks on civilian airports and other protected civilian infrastructure.
- Reduce the Houthis' ability to sustain repeated attacks.
- Avoid an open-ended campaign that consumes Saudi resources without delivering a durable security outcome.
- Preserve a diplomatic route towards de-escalation.

The measure of success of any action, military or diplomatic, should be a sustained reduction in attacks, not the number of targets destroyed.

iii. Address the Supply and Regeneration of Weapons

Saudi Arabia and its partners have an interest in restricting the transfer of weapons, components, expertise and other support that enables continued attacks.

This is a long-term task involving intelligence cooperation, maritime interdiction consistent with international law, enforcement of applicable arms restrictions and diplomatic engagement with states capable of influencing the Houthis.

But it is important to distinguish between external assistance and indigenous capability. Even if external weapons transfers were significantly reduced, the Houthis might retain existing stocks, local production capacity and the knowledge required to maintain some of their systems.

iv. Avoid a Ground War Unless the Strategic Objective Justifies it

A large Saudi ground operation in Yemen would be a particularly consequential decision. It could expose Saudi forces to protracted fighting, complicate relations with local Yemeni actors and create additional incentives for Houthi attacks on

Saudi territory.

The history of the conflict suggests that military superiority does not guarantee a satisfactory political settlement. A ground campaign might put pressure on Houthi-controlled territory, but it could also widen the conflict and impose new costs on Saudi Arabia.

Could Diplomacy Succeed Where Military Pressure Failed?

Diplomacy should not be treated as an alternative to national defense. It should be used to convert defensive resilience and military pressure into a political outcome.

The Houthis need to understand that attacks on Saudi civilian infrastructure will not compel Riyadh to accept their demands. Equally, the Saudi leadership needs a credible mechanism through which the cessation of attacks can produce reciprocal restraint.

A potential framework could include:

1. An immediate halt to missile and drone attacks on civilian airports and other civilian targets.
2. Reciprocal commitments against attacks on critical infrastructure.
3. A verification mechanism involving suitable international or regional intermediaries.
4. A phased process addressing cross-border security, humanitarian access and the wider Yemeni conflict.
5. Clearly defined consequences for violations, alongside a route back to negotiations.

Iran could potentially play a useful role if it is willing and able to exert influence on the Houthi leadership. Oman and the United Nations could also provide channels for engagement. None should be assumed to possess complete control over Houthi decisions.

What Would Constitute a Red Line?

Saudi Arabia would benefit from defining its thresholds privately and communicating its defensive objectives publicly:

Level	Situation	Appropriate Strategic Emphasis
1	Isolated attacks, limited damage, effective interception	Defend, investigate and communicate clearly
2	Repeated airport closures, civilian casualties and significant economic disruption	Strengthen defense, coordinate with partners and apply calibrated pressure
3	Sustained attacks on several strategic sectors or repeated mass-casualty incidents	Reassess deterrence, expand defensive cooperation and intensify diplomatic pressure
4	A broader campaign causing prolonged damage to essential national infrastructure	Consider a wider response, while explicitly weighing escalation risks and defining achievable objectives

Implications for Pakistan

The crisis also has implications for Pakistan, particularly given the defense cooperation between Riyadh and Islamabad and the potential for the conflict to widen.⁵

Pakistan has several interests to protect: the security of Saudi Arabia, the safety of Pakistani nationals, regional stability and the avoidance of a conflict that could place additional pressure on its own security and economy.

Pakistan can support Saudi Arabia through diplomatic coordination, intelligence cooperation where appropriate, defensive assistance within agreed arrangements and efforts to bring relevant parties towards de-escalation. Any military commitment would require a separate assessment of its legal basis, agreed obligations, operational purpose and risks of escalation.

The distinction between defensive support and participation in offensive operations is critical. Protecting Saudi airspace or helping strengthen early warning does not necessarily entail joining a campaign inside

Yemen. Nor should the existence of a defense agreement be interpreted as automatically settling every question concerning the scope of military involvement.

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia's threshold of pain will depend on whether the Houthis can continue imposing military, economic and political costs without facing consequences that alter their strategic calculations. Given the limitations of military retaliation alone, Riyadh must combine stronger defensive capabilities and credible deterrence with diplomacy to achieve sustainable security and protect its Vision 2030 ambitions.

For Pakistan, the crisis highlights the importance of supporting Saudi Arabia's security while safeguarding regional stability. Diplomatic coordination, appropriate defensive cooperation and de-escalation efforts remain essential. Ultimately, Saudi Arabia's challenge is to deter further attacks without triggering a wider regional confrontation, while Pakistan must carefully assess the implications of any military involvement.

⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, "Joint Statement on the State Visit of Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif, to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," September 17, 2025, <https://www.mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/joint-statement-on-the-state-visit-of-prime-minister-of-the-islamic-republic-of-pakistan-muhammad-shehbaz-sharif-to-the-kingdom-of-saudi-arabia>

