

Britain steps up military action in Middle East, threatens Iran, Russia and China

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Britain is stepping up its military provocations as part of the US-led Operation Prosperity Guardian, the naval operation in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden targeting Houthi rebels in Yemen. The main aim is to ratchet up tensions with Iran, as a precursor to direct military action against Tehran.

Backing Israel's genocidal onslaught against Gaza, the Biden administration authorised a significant increase in the naval and air power it deploys in the region.

Operation Prosperity Guardian was mounted under the guise of protecting the flow of trade through the Red Sea, following a series of attacks on merchant ships by the Houthis in Yemen. It was launched by the US alongside a group of imperialist powers including Britain, France, Spain, Italy and Canada, plus the Netherlands, Norway, Bahrain and the Seychelles.

The *Guardian* noted that such are the sensitivities involved with military deployments in one of the world's critical trade "choke points" that "nine others [countries] do not want to be named for now." It added, "There are some notable absentees: India (although they might send ships), Egypt and Saudi Arabia, for example."

Britain's main military asset in the operation is HMS Diamond, described by the Royal Navy as "A jewel in the naval crown". It is "the third of the highly capable Type 45 air defence destroyers and one of the most advanced warships in the world." The ship is loaded with the Sea Viper missile system capable of launching eight missiles in under 10 seconds, and up to 16 missiles simultaneously. Also onboard is a Wildcat helicopter with Martlet air-to-surface missiles.

HMS Diamond was already in the Middle East region before Operation Prosperity Guardian was announced by US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on December

19.

It was sent to the Persian Gulf earlier in the month as part of an operation to bolster the UK's main warship in the region, the Type 23 Frigate HMS Lancaster, which has been in the Gulf since November 2022. Also backing Lancaster, "to ensure the safe and free flow of trade by sea", were "minehunters HMS Chiddingfold, Middleton and Bangor, their command/support ship RFA Cardigan Bay and the RN's headquarters east of Suez, UKMCC in Bahrain," announced the Royal Navy.

At the same time a joint statement by the Ministry of Defence, Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, and Home Office, headed "UK military activity in the Eastern Mediterranean", announced, "In support of the ongoing hostage rescue activity, the Ministry of Defence will conduct surveillance flights over the eastern Mediterranean, including operating in air space over Israel and Gaza."

Having transited the Suez Canal on December 14, the evening of the next day HMS Diamond downed with a Sea Viper missile an attack drone launched from a Houthi-controlled area of Yemen. The Royal Navy said the drone had been targeting commercial shipping in the Red Sea.

Britain has maintained a permanent maritime presence in the Persian Gulf since 1980. The Royal Navy boasted, "Diamond's actions in the small hours of Saturday morning is the first time a Type 45's Sea Viper missile has been used in action and the first such shootdown by the Royal Navy since the 1990-91 Gulf War."

While the Royal Navy statement announcing Diamond's deployment to the Gulf put it in the context of protecting sea lanes and combatting Houthi attacks, Minister of Defence Grant Shapps made clear that the

real target was Tehran. Diamond's deployment, he said, would "send a very clear message to Iran in particular and their proxies not to get involved" in opposing Israel's decimation of Gaza.

"With the activity in the Red Sea [and] the Houthis from Yemen, not just firing missiles, but also now intervening with vessels, we think it's the right time to step up that force presence... to really assure our many partners there."

Shapps added, "They [our partners] have been asking for it. They want us to be there. They want us to provide that level of reassurance."

In the last days, military action under Operation Prosperity Guardian has escalated. On December 31, US helicopters associated with the Dwight D. Eisenhower aircraft carrier strike group fired on and sank three boats used by Houthi militants in the Red Sea. Their crews were reportedly killed in the attack. A fourth boat fled the scene.

US Central Command said they acted in "self-defence" to protect a commercial ship, the Maersk Hangzhou, which is registered to Singapore and operated and owned by a Danish firm.

The previous day, the USS Gravelly shot down two ballistic missiles it said had been launched at the Hangzhou from Houthi-controlled areas.

Following these actions, UK Foreign Secretary David Cameron said he had informed Iran's foreign minister that Tehran "shares responsibility for preventing these attacks given their long-standing support to the Houthis".

Britain's media were immediately onboard as Downing Street stepped up its offensive, with articles by the BBC state broadcaster and the *Times* upping the ante, alongside a *Telegraph* op-ed by Shapps warning Iran that military action was being prepared.

In the article "UK preparing for attacks on Houthi rebels with US", the *Times* reported, "Britain's military is preparing to launch a wave of air strikes against the Iranian-backed Houthis creating chaos in the Red Sea, raising the prospect of a significant spiralling of tensions in the region." The newspaper cited Shapps who said, "If the Houthis continue to threaten lives and trade, we will be forced to take the necessary and - appropriate action."

The *Times* revealed, "Under the plans the UK would join with the US and possibly another European

country to unleash a salvo of missiles against pre-planned targets, either in the sea or in Yemen itself, where the militants are based." The "co-ordinated strikes could involve RAF warplanes or HMS Diamond."

UK Typhoon war planes stationed at RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus, and "currently carrying out missions over Iraq and Syria", could be used in the attacks.

The widening war aims of British imperialism are made clear, with the *Times* noting that the mission over Iraq and Syria has already "expanded to spy on Iranian-backed militia believed to be smuggling weapons into Lebanon."

The annihilation of Gaza and the expanding military operations of the imperialist powers in the Middle East is only one front in a developing global conflict. NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine, in which Britain is involved up to its neck as provocateur-in-chief, has already claimed hundreds of thousands of lives.

In his *Telegraph* comment, after first drawing attention to the "first time that our Navy had shot down an aerial target in anger in more than 30 years," Shapps declared, "There is a wider issue at risk here as well. This is a test for the international community—not least in terms of contested waterways elsewhere in the world."

In a warning made against Russian and China, he added, "If we do not protect the Red Sea, it risks emboldening those looking to threaten elsewhere including in the South China Sea and Crimea." Shapps concluded, "As HMS Diamond illustrated earlier in the month, we are willing to take direct action."



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