Trump threatens to reignite war on Iran as Houthi/Saudi conflict escalates

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The war that US President Donald Trump claimed would be over in weeks is threatening to reignite as the conflict spreads across the region. The latest escalation came after Houthi forces claim they had bombed Saudi Aramco's facilities in the Saudi Arabian capital Riyadh, prompting Trump to threaten to "wipe Iran out" unless Tehran submits to US dictates.

On Sunday, Trump reiterated his threat in a telephone interview with *Fox News* to blow up the entire country. He said the only options on the table were "wiping Iran out," or letting its economy "rot," unless Iran reaches a deal with Washington.

The question was "if and when" it would be required to "blow the entire nation up" if Iran's government did not submit to his demands. "They better behave," he threatened, adding that the choices included "wiping them out, letting Iran rot economically, or making a deal".

While threatening Tehran with destruction, according to the *New York Times*, Trump told advisers on September 16 that he did not favour strikes on the Houthis, but ordered the Pentagon to prepare for them after Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman called the next day to demand them. By midday Sunday, the newspaper reported, officials were saying there would be no US strikes on the Houthis for the time being. However, two people briefed on the operation told the *Times* that US plans to bombard the Houthis were so advanced that when Trump reversed his decision to launch the strikes, commanders had already approved target lists, troops were loading bombs onto warplanes and thse first wave of attacks was about to begin.

While Saudi authorities said they had intercepted and destroyed a ballistic missile and reported no casualties or damage, residents reported at least one explosion. Photographs have circulated of a large plume of black smoke from the fuel storage area at King Khalid International Airport Saturday.

Saudi-led coalition forces spokesperson Major-General Turki al-Maliki said on X that the Houthis had also attempted to target civilians and infrastructure in several parts of the kingdom, on Saturday, though air defences had intercepted them.

Renewed clashes have taken place between the Houthis and the dysfunctional Yemeni coalition forces on the ground in the oil-rich province of Marib, as well as in Taiz, Lahj, al-Jawf and al-Bayda as part of the military escalation that began in early July. The Saudi Air Force has carried out strikes on key Houthi positions, including the capital Sana'a, and deployed elite units such as the Giants Brigade to prevent further Houthi advances on the capital in Aden, Marib province and the city of Taiz.

For the Yemeni people, the resumption of hostilities has been catastrophic. Already the poorest country in the Middle East before the civil war, around 4.5 million Yemenis have been displaced, nearly half of the country's health facilities are not functioning, and more than 18 million of its 43 million people face acute food insecurity, including 2.2 million acutely malnourished children. More than 3,000 casualties have been reported and at least 126,000 people have fled their homes in the past two weeks.

With the Houthi attack already producing consequences beyond Yemen and Saudi Arabia amid rising tensions in the Gulf, Trump cut short his weekend at Camp David to return to the White House on Saturday. The US State Department renewed a blanket alert for Americans in or travelling to the Middle East. It warned that the hostilities between Saudi Arabia and the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen "has the potential to escalate rapidly". Eleven US embassies in the region issued a warning that flight cancellations and airspace closures were possible.

Washington has tightened the economic pressure on Tehran. On Monday, US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent told CNBC, "On September 23rd, all Iranian airlines will

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be shut down around the world", as he announced new sanctions targeting Iran's civil aviation network. Foreign airports and companies refuelling Iranian aircraft, providing landing services or selling tickets risked losing access to the US banking system.

Iran said that in the event of a renewed US assault, it would retaliate against American bases and interests in the Middle East. It warned regional countries against helping Washington, saying that states that allowed their territory or facilities to support US attacks would be "considered complicit." Its top military command warned Sunday that the US appeared to be preparing to resume attacks.

Tehran has made the resumption of talks to end the seven-month conflict conditional on the Trump administration meeting seven new demands. National Security Advisor Mohsen Rezaee has publicly outlined five of the points from the June Islamabad Memorandum of Understanding (MOU): releasing frozen assets, halting the war across all fronts, ending interference in Iran's domestic affairs and territorial attacks, and lifting the US naval blockade. He did not explain the other two conditions, other than to say they are unrelated to Iran's nuclear program.

These latest developments follow the Houthis' capture of key ports and positions along the western coast of Yemen and the strategically crucial approaches to Bab al-Mandeb. The narrow waterway linking the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean carries 12 percent of maritime world trade.

The Houthis, while allied with Iran, are fighting their own battle against a Saudi blockade of its ports and airspace and demanding increased funding for government workers in Houthi-controlled territory, a guaranteed share of the country's oil revenues and reparations for Yemeni civilians who suffered during the 2015-22 war.

Coupled with renewed missile and drone attacks that have temporarily shut down the Saudis' vital East-West oil pipeline and halted oil shipments through the Red Sea route to Asia amid the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, the Houthi offensive has created a major crisis for the Saudis, having declared that the Red Sea is open to all shipping except Saudi vessels. Unless the Saudis can restart the pipeline and resume oil exports via the Red Sea within days, they will be forced to cut oil production.

The resulting loss could reach up to 4 percent of global supply, worsening the global shortage of fuel, which has already pushed fuel prices to record highs, spurred inflation, fuelled a cost-of-living crisis for billions in Asia and Africa and sent US bond yields to the highest levels since the 2008 financial crisis.

The Yemeni conflict and the resulting retaliation is thus drawing previously separate conflicts into a single interconnected war.

Washington has so far been unwilling to enter the Saudi/Yemen war directly, but continues to provide significant military and intelligence support, including via US Central Command (CENTCOM) to help Saudi forces target Houthi positions. On Thursday, US officials cleared the sale of up to 48 F-35 Joint Strike Fighters to Saudi Arabia, despite military and congressional concerns that China might gain access to the jets in Saudi Arabia, although they will not be delivered for several years. With the US munitions stockpile depleted, Riyadh, itself low on missile interceptors, has turned to France, Britain, Pakistan, and Egypt for air-defence help.

The Saudis' "Plan B", establishing binding alliances with powerful Sunni Muslim states including Türkiye and Pakistan via the August Mecca Agreement, has also so far failed to produce a battlefield coalition against the Houthis. Pakistan initially refused to commit itself, arguing that the fighting in Yemen was a "pre-existing" conflict that predated the Mecca Agreement. However, after Riyadh's claim that the Houthis last week launched a drone attack on Mecca—a claim the Houthis denied—Islamabad said it would reconsider its position.

On July 25, a Ukrainian drone hit an Iranian commercial vessel in the Caspian Sea, killing a sailor. On July 28, Iran fired ballistic missiles at US forces in Jordan, for the first time acting proactively rather than in response to an attack. On July 28-29, US and Saudi aircraft struck Iran-aligned groups in Iraq, Riyadh's first publicly acknowledged participation in such attacks. On July 29, a drone hit two liquefied natural gas vessels at Egypt's Damietta port, near the Suez Canal, though no party has claimed responsibility.

What began as separate conflicts in Iran, Yemen, Iraq and elsewhere is in this way becoming an interconnected regional confrontation, in which each new attack risks opening another front and every act of retaliation creates the conditions for the next.

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