



## The EU Engagement in the Red Sea

by George N. Tzogopoulos

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict contains a maritime dimension in the Red Sea. The Houthi offensive, ostensibly directed against Israel, is not only targeting Israel itself but also commercial and passenger ships under several flags, thereby creating a critical international strategic challenge. The EU has decided to respond by launching Operation ASPIDES. Unlike the US- and UK-led Operations Prosperity Guardian and Poseidon Archer, ASPIDES is not attacking Houthi targets but intercepting their strikes. While this wholly defensive approach can play a useful role in protecting vessels and can contribute to deterrence, it concerns the Israelis, who fear that the EU's limited response to the Houthi threat reflects a similar stance toward Iran.

On 19 February 2024, [the EU announced the launch of Operation ASPIDES](#). Named after the Greek word for "shields," the operation aims to safeguard maritime security and ensure freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. Its purpose is to protect vessels from multi-domain attacks at sea conducted by the Houthi rebels. ASPIDES is a defensive operation, meaning it will respond to attacks but refrain from striking Houthi targets.

ASPIDES has an initial [duration of a year and a budget of €8 million](#). Four frigates – the German Hessen, the Greek Hydra, the French Alsace, and the Italian Caio Duilio – are participating, as well as an aerial asset. ASPIDES is run from a military base in Larissa, a city in central Greece. The operation commanders are Greek

Commodore Vasileios Gryparis and Force Commander Italian Real Admiral Stefano Constantino. A recent [press release](#) revealed that 35 merchant ships were protected by ASPIDES in its first month of operation. This was accomplished by shooting down eight unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and repelling three other UAV attacks.

Before the launch of ASPIDES, four EU member states, namely France, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain, had started – at least partly – to participate in [Operation Prosperity Guardian](#) in the Red Sea. This US/UK-led mission was announced in December 2023 and is supported by Bahrain, Canada, Norway and the Seychelles. Two additional EU member states, Denmark and Greece, joined later and decided to provide warships.

Several European frigates have been assigned tasks in the area that are arguably associated with both ASPIDES and Prosperity Guardian. France, for instance, [has sent the frigate Languedoc to the Red Sea](#), and [Italy has sent naval ship Virginio Fasan](#). Reportedly, [the Netherlands has dispatched its Tromp frigate](#). Only the Netherlands, however, is directly involved in both Prosperity Guardian and Poseidon Archer.

The Netherlands has participated in the organization and implementation of US/UK-led strikes against a number of Houthi targets in Yemen (Poseidon Archer). On one such occasion, [on 11 January 2024](#), President Joe Biden acknowledged the Dutch contribution, along with that of Australia, Bahrain and Canada. Strikes of this kind were regularly conducted throughout the first third of 2024. The names and number of participating nations differ, as this is a coalition of the willing. [Denmark provided support](#) for several strikes on 24 February.

In the words of Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, the US-UK action “[is based on the right of self-defense](#).” The Netherlands, which has a long history as a sea-faring nation, places great importance on the right of free passage and is demonstrating that commitment with its participation in the Red Sea. But many believe that Rutte’s decision to take part [is linked, at least to some degree, with his candidacy for the position of NATO Secretary General](#).

The stance of Denmark can likely be explained by its interest in protecting the shipping giant Maersk, which is based in that Scandinavian country. Maersk's vessels have been hit by the Houthis.

Irrespective of Dutch and Danish motivations, not all EU member states agree that the US-UK strikes are necessary. Importantly, France, Italy and Spain have distanced themselves from the American leadership [as they fear a new round of escalation](#). France and Italy [prefer that their frigates remain under national command in the Red Sea](#). For its part, [Spain is linking its potential involvement in the Red Sea to a European or a NATO umbrella](#). Further to this, Madrid has been critical of Israel's war in Gaza from the outset, and this likely contributed to its decision to preserve some autonomy.

Disagreements among various EU member states and the US on how to respond to Houthi attacks reveal their different understanding of Middle Eastern affairs. Some foresee a ["worrisome transatlantic rift"](#) while others doubt that a defensive European mission [can bring positive results in the Red Sea](#). But what matters more is the extent to which different operations can complement each other and if some degree of coordination is feasible. The EU has [experience in implementing a maritime strategy in the area](#). Operation Atalanta was set up in 2008 to fight piracy in the northwestern Indian Ocean, while Operation Agenor was launched in 2020 to ensure safe navigation in the Strait of Hormuz.

[An Atlantic Council essay](#) argues that the rather mild European approach in the Red Sea, as reflected in ASPIDES, could help the EU better engage with some Arab states. According to the essay, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE might find it politically easier to support the EU operation than the American one. Although prognostications are risky for a naval operation that remains limited in scope, it does seem likely that the limited approach of ASPIDES will do little to repair strained EU-Israeli ties. Even if Jerusalem agrees with the complementary character of ASPIDES with respect to Prosperity Guardian, it will be wary. [The Financial Times has reported](#) that the EU, France, Germany and Italy are endeavoring to persuade other member states never to enter into a confrontation with Iran. Naturally, the Jewish State does not perceive the Iranian threat the way the Europeans do.

*Dr. George N. Tzogopoulos is a BESA contributor, a lecturer at the European Institute of Nice (CIFE) and at the Democritus University of Thrace, and a Senior Fellow at the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy.*