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Risk Anticipation:

# The Various Complexities of the «Safer» Crisis on the Red Sea Coasts

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**The** ongoing failure of managing the Yemeni crisis along with the growing Houthi threats against the international trade's sources and lanes, especially after Biden Administration decision on Feb 16<sup>th</sup> to remove the Houthis from the Terrorist Organizations list, gave the movement a morale boost to make field expansion, and helped it to gain more bargaining cards based upon the increase of field operations maps. For example, internally, the Houthis have intensified their attacks on Marib, while they continued assaulting the KSA at the external level, along with the qualitative developments regarding the maps and tracks of external skirmishes and using them as negotiating cards. This has a direct impact on managing the crisis of the oil tanker "Safer" and its related negative complexities in regard with the whole challenges and risks threatening the Red Sea's regional environments as shown below.

### The developments of the "Safer" crisis

The crisis of "Safer" oil tanker is an embodiment of one of the disputing cards between the internationally recognized Yemeni Government and the Houthis. This dispute emerged on June 21<sup>st</sup> 2014, and the entailing unilateral measures including dissolving the parliament, the Houthi domination over the state institutions, the downfall of the city capital of Sanaa and their subsequent control over the governorates of Ibb, Al Baida and Al Hudaydah. All these dynamics contributed to disrupting\delaying any maintenance operation for the floating oil storage.

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It is worth noting that the Houthis seek to use the "Safer card" for political blackmail against the international community and the Arab Coalition's forces. The Houthi leaders previously threatened to unload the oil into the Sea, or to blow up the tanker if the Coalition forces attempted to control Al Hudaydah and its seaport, given the Safer's geographical position in the Red Sea as shown in the following map:



**Source:** Chris Baraniuk, Yemen's deadly ghost ship, 18 February 2020, <https://bit.ly/3nqPLWp>

Therefore, by using “Safer” card as a pressure tool, the Houthis seek to achieve several political and economic goals including:

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- Pressure for the withdrawal of the joint forces from Al Hudaydah Governorate.
- Dodging about opening the Sanaa Airport, as well as seeking for relocating the Houthi wounded, as well as the exit to the Iranian and Lebanese experts.
- making a swap to secure lifting sanctions against Iran.
- Obtaining the sale revenue of approximately one million barrels of oil in the tanker.

Accordingly, the Safer crisis went through a number of phases which gained weight by the political and security evaluation of the development relevant with the crisis management as shown below:

- 1- The internationally recognized government sent a number of warning messages about Safer erosion, and the negative ramifications caused by neglecting maintenance which led to water leakage into the operation unit in March 2018, May 2019, June 2019, November 2019, May 2020, February 2021 and June 2021.

- 2- In light of pushing for solving the Safer crisis, the Yemeni government announced its approval on all initiatives recommended by the UN to allow treating the issue. On the other hand, the Houthis intended to obstruct the accession of the UN's technical missions in charge of making periodical exploration, evaluation and maintenance required for the Safer. They do not care for a possible oil spill which puts the world under the threat of economical, environmental and humanitarian crises, in addition to the Houthi condition about the existence of a third international neutral party due to their rejection of the UN role in Yemen.
- 3- The Houthis relied on the bargain policies by talking about calling for UN help in selling the stored oil. However, they did not reach an agreement due to their disputes with the Hadi Government about how to use the revenue generated from the selling operation.
- 4- This case has been always discussed in the UN Security Council due to its related security threat on the commercial and political environment in the Red Sea, though no decisive measure has been yet adopted to avoid the disaster. The latest step in this regard was on July 15<sup>th</sup> as the Houthis were called to immediately respond to the demands of the inspection team in charge of the Safer file.

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In this regard, there is a geopolitical dilemma related to the geographical position of "Safer" as the Hudaydah Seaport is under Houthi control. Therefore, managing this crisis will be subjected to any political or military arrangements among the disputing parties, sponsored by the UN or any regional party such as the KSA.

It is worth mentioning that the Stockholm Agreement. Signed in Sweden in December 2019 included a cease-fire in Al Hudaydah, the withdrawal of all forces from the city and the seaport which will be subjected to UN troops. This would have enabled the UN mission to access and inspect the oil tanker. However, the collapse of the agreement destroyed this attempt from the early beginning. As a result of the complexities of the political settlement of the Yemeni affair and the current blurry scene with the appointment of the fourth UN Envoy, the Yemeni government called for separating the management of the Safer Issue from the other UN measures in the face of the Yemeni crisis.

## Various threats

There are a number of threats which directly impact the stability of the Red Sea interaction environment, top of which are as follow:



### 1. Geopolitical threats:

They are among the most difficult threats caused by the “Safer crisis”, especially in light of its geographical position in Al Hudaydah Seaport overlooking the Bab Al Mandab which is one of the most important straits in the world. Its strategic importance is due to its being the southern entrance of the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, as well as being the main trade route between Europe and Southeast Asia instead of the Cape of Good Hope, as well as its importance for the world navigation movement. This could constitute clear threats which directly impact the scale of the possible world trade damages in general and the oil trade in particular, and the halt of the navigation movement through the strait if being blocked by a big oil slick caused by the leakage as shown in the following map:



Source: Infographic... The strategic importance of Bab Al Mandab Strait, Sky News Arabia July26<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
<https://bit.ly/3Ces7T2>

Accordingly, the exacerbation of the “Safer crisis” would lead to a possible global economic crisis, basically represented in the rise of oil prices and the subsequent impact on the world growth rate as well as the inflation rate. This will harm the European and Asian countries which highly depend on importing oil.

### 2. Economic threats:

The “Safer crisis” could have its impact on various economic threats as shown below:

- The possible losses in the fish production volume for the states overlooking the Red Sea along with the expected devastation of the fish farms which negatively impacts the fishing industry as 126,000 fishermen will lose their source of revenue including 76,000 fishermen in Al Hudaydah Governorate.

- The possible losses as a result of the disruption of the desalination plants in the region due to the Safer oil spill. This could directly impact the availability of drinking water in the neighboring countries that depend on desalinating sea water. For example, on the shores of the Arab Gulf, the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea, there are more than 290 desalination plants, including tens of giant plants, which produce more than 100 million gallons per day, that constitute about 4% of the entire production.
- The possible losses of the Egyptian economy as a result of the probable suspension of navigation in the Suez Canal, which is one of the most important national income for the Egyptian State.
- The complexity of the humanitarian crisis inside Yemen. In the worst possible scenarios, the oil spill could lead to the immediate closure of the vital Hudaydah Port which would obviously impact the food security levels through the possible halt of the commercial and humanitarian imports of which the port constitutes nearly 70 % of the Hudaydah Port. This could lead to doubling the good prices and food, along with obstructing the access of the humanitarian aid as well as a large increase in the fuel prices.

### 3. **Environmental threats:**

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The threats related to Safer have their own impact on the marine environment of the Red Sea given some points, top of which are <sup>1</sup>:

- The possibility of negative effect on the biological diversity in the Red Sea environment includes the possible death of 850,000 fishes, equivalent to 600 species of fish, the disappearance of 300 species of the coral reefs, the suffocation of 139 species of marine plankton that lives in water and the loss of biological diversity in 15 Yemeni islands.
- The possible pollution of the marine environment as the waves and winds could contribute in the spread of large oil spill along hundreds of kilometers, beginning with Yemen to the Suez Canal, through the Global Strait and the Suez Gulf, and through the Bab Al Mandab Strait in the South till reaching the Strait of Hormuz via the Arabian Sea.
- The crisis may lead to the devastation of the Northern Island of Kamaran due to its spatial proximity from the tanker. This could in turn lead to the loss of mangrove, avicennia trees, the coral reefs and several fish and shark species.

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<sup>1</sup> Mohamed Abdelraouf, Safer: [An Environmental Bomb off Yemen's Coast](#) , the Gulf Research Center.

- On the long run, the poisons could accumulate in the tissues of larvae and microorganisms which are considered a basic food source for the big fishes.

## Houthi-UN tussles

There are some scenes through which we can understand the general political context of managing the Safer crisis. This comes through the most prominent negotiation attempts between the UN and the Houthis, that witnessed a whole “various complexities” which thwarted the negotiation frame to solve the existent crisis as shown below:

- Two years after complicated and intensified discussions which led to alienating the Hadi Government regarding this file, the Houthis and the UN reached the so-called “scope of work document” agreement in last November by which the UN’s Experts Mission has to be allowed to perform “comprehensive evaluation and some necessary primary repair” to the dilapidated tanker. However, no progress in the implementation steps has been achieved so far. This was followed by exchanging accusations between the two parties (the UN and the Houthis) by procrastination, lack of seriousness, in dealing with the Safer crisis which has been politicized. They hold each other fully responsible for the occurrence of the possible disaster.
- In December 2020, a UN report said that the Scope of Work, which was officially approved by the Houthis in late November 2020, “has three clear objectives: Firstly, to assess the condition of the SAFER oil tanker through analysis of its systems and structure; Secondly, to conduct urgent possible initial maintenance that might reduce the risk of an oil leak until a permanent solution is applied Thirdly to formulate evidence-based options on what solutions are possible to permanently remove the threat of an oil spill”.<sup>2</sup>
- Although the “Scope of Work” enjoyed the consensus of the international community as being a positive step toward solving the crisis, but on the other hand, there has been doubts, especially at the part of the Yemeni government and the Arab Coalition about the extent of the Houthi willingness in abiding by it. They cited a number of Houthi statements, especially that the agreement on this Document “is based on the Houthi keenness to avoid the occurrence of environmental disaster in spite of the rejection of the United Nations Office for Project Services Team to Providing a nitrogen generator as a suitable alternative to the inert gas system within the equipment that will be brought in to carry out the evaluation and urgent maintenance process. They noted that the focus of the UNOPS team was “limited to carry out maintenance that prevents oil leakage from the floating tank” This reflects

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<sup>2</sup> Questions and answers about the [UN mission to the SAFER oil tanker](#) in Yemen, United Nation, 30 December 2020

their insistence on the necessity of full maintenance of the tanker in order to restart it at a later time.

- In February 2021, the UN expressed its concern about the “circulating talks” regarding the Houthi review of its approval on the arrival of the UN Mission to evaluate the Safer crisis. This would create more obstacles which could lead to delaying the mission tasks.

- On the other hand, the Houthis said in different statements that the UN deliberately obstructed the “resolution of the crisis”, adding that “the UN requested further demands out of the agreement, and away from the agreed Framework” These points pushed the “group” to announce reviewing their approval of the agreement. There is another point related to the Houthi desire to make a bargain between the Safer card and the developments of the situation as well as the change in the specific relationships between the Houthis and the US. After the Biden Democratic administration took office.

- The UN and the Houthis continued to push for more negotiating complications, until the end of February 2021, when the UN announced the Houthis' obstruction of the mission's tasks, as they submitted “additional requests” and did not grant entry visas to the UN experts. On the other hand, the Houthis confirmed that these “additional requests” are matters agreed upon in the context of the existing agreement. As for not granting the experts entry visas, they stated that the United Nations “did not submit the final list of experts until February 14, and later a number of experts was substituted by new ones and expired passports were given to others.” The Houthis renewed their commitment to the agreement, calling on the UN to “show seriousness in implementing it and stop making misleading accusations and statements.”

- In June 2021, the Houthis declared the failure of the joint efforts to solve the tanker crisis. They justified this by saying that the “UNOPS team provided a plan which excluded Most of the agreed-upon urgent maintenance, and kept only the evaluation works on the pretext that the time and funding were not enough to carry out the maintenance works”. They added that many of the evaluation works were also undone and turned into mere visual examinations that are not subject to any recognized standards. However, a prior statement, released in April 2021 was different as both parties “UN-Houthi” expressed their optimism for conducting “constructive discussions” on logistical issues and outstanding security arrangements.

The Security Council held two sessions, one which was closed, on June 3<sup>rd</sup> 2021. It is the second time since July 2020 that the Council met to discuss the Safer crisis. In a statement at the end of the closed sessions, the Security Council’s members said that “the Houthis must facilitate an unconditioned and safe accession to the UN experts to make a comprehensive and imperial evaluation as well as initial repair without more



delay. They should guarantee close cooperation with the UN”. The statement again “holds the Houthis responsible for the situation of Safer”. The Security Council’s members expressed “their great concern about the growing threats of a possible explosion of the tanker which will cause environmental, economic, marine, and humanitarian disaster for Yemen and the entire region”<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, the Hadi Government said that the statement is “a step below the dangerous environmental and humanitarian threat level”. The government added that the UN Security Council “didn’t help Yemen and the region enough to get out of this disaster. Accordingly, it has to issue a complementary international resolution about the Safer tanker including an implementation mechanism on the ground to unload the tanker immediately”.

- In July 2021, the exchange of accusations between the two parties (the UN- the Houthis) was renewed, when the group accused the United Nations of “procrastination, Postponement and wasting time and the money in sterile meetings and discussions while the Safer conditions became worse than it was at the time of signing the agreement. This increases the possibility of an environmental disaster in the Red Sea. For its part, The UN stressed that it will continue its attempts to convince the Houthis to allow the Experts Mission to access the Safer location. The UN obviously indicated that there is a focus on making a full maintenance for the tanker, and this can’t be done before making an evaluation about its current status”.

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According to the above -mentioned points, the current scuffles and various complexities in managing the crisis between the Houthis and the UN, along with not reaching an abiding road map portend the exacerbation of the threats at all political, security, economical, environmental and humanitarian levels regionally and internationally.

## Possible tracks

There are three possible tracks for the Safer crisis as follow:

### 1. The first Scenario- the failure to find a solution:

This scenario will be likely a result of the continuous Houthi intransigence and the exacerbation of the crisis without reaching any guarantees or real facilities that allow the UN to deploy the Experts Mission, at least in the short term based upon some data and evidence, top of which are the Houthi attempts to raise doubts about the mission’s tasks. This is related to a number of justifications including the Houthi desire to push for the participation of their own team along with the UN experts in everything

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Officials Call for Access to Decaying FSO ‘Safer’ off Yemen’s Coast, Warn Security Council of Potential Environmental, Humanitarian Crisis, SECURITY COUNCIL, 3 JUNE 2021, <https://bit.ly/3b45cob>

relevant with the Safer file. Secondly, they want to keep Safer as a negotiating card, and to exploit the crisis, the whole discussions with the UN, and the international community's concerns about the Safer's danger to guarantee full maintenance of the tanker in order to reuse it later. Such assumptions would lead to the failure to find a solution. Moreover, the procrastination would cause more erosion for the dilapidated tanker, and increase the possibility of oil spill, fires or explosions.

## 2. The second scenario-new formulas

This scenario is based upon the possibility of reaching new formulas\understandings between the Houthis and the UN by which the accession of the UN mission of experts will be facilitated. This will take into consideration the scale of developments which would increase the possibilities of explosion or leakage of the oil stored in the tanker. This pushes for the increase of the international and regional efforts to crystallize a strong international movement that adopt a more serious position towards the Houthis, pushing them to reduce their conditions and lower their expectation ceiling about the tasks of the UN's team of experts, especially their stress on acquiring the maximum maintenance, evaluation and equipments that will allow them to operate the tanker later. In the same context, the Houthis seek to maintain a bargaining card by sticking to their demands and conditions about the "Safer crisis" to make some gains in return of showing readiness for serious cooperation with the UN to reduce the danger of oil spill until a permanent solution will be applied, especially that the Houthis is the stronger party in the negotiation process. This is relevant to the desire of the international community to avoid any environmental or security threats related to Safer.

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## 3. The third scenario-indecisiveness

This scenario leads to a negative assumption related to the idea of "the point of no return" in conjunction with the beginning of Safer's oil spill or explosion. This is based upon some data during the stages of managing the crisis, especially "the international laxity against the Houthi stubbornness towards how to manage the crisis". The continuation of this international laxity portends an out-of control catastrophe on the security, environmental and political levels regardless to the technical reports and what the UN, the "Regional Organization for the Conservation of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden" and the "International Maritime Organization" about their full readiness and the joint coordination to put contingency plans in the event of an oil spill from the tanker.

## Finally

More than 10 months after the UN-Houthi “Scope of Work” agreement, and reaching new formulas about the accession of the UN’s team of experts to evaluate and make initial necessary repair for “Safer”, the UN, international and regional efforts to bridge the gap and solve the outstanding issues between the two sides failed to pave the way for the UN mission to begin its tasks and contain the crisis repercussions. Until now, it is difficult to predict whether the mission will be allowed to access or not amid exchanging accusations between the two sides which has increased recently.

Therefore, the first scenario “the failure to reach a solution” remains the most likely one currently amid the exacerbation of the tanker's conditions. However, the occurrence of the second scenario, “new formulas” by which the Houthis will be convinced to facilitate the UN accession should not be excluded.

This scenario remains possible in spite of the difficulty related to its steps. We can’t either exclude the third scenario “the indecisiveness” especially amid the possibility of an Iranian intervention by providing the Houthis with experts as an attempt to make some urgent repair for the tanker, or at least “the Houthi declaration this as one of political evasiveness card” that intends to prolong the crisis without reaching a solution, and moving it from the traditional level “the environmental threat” to another different specific different level related to the whole threats on the regional and the international community, especially that the Houthis still bet on the resumption of oil exportation again through “Safer”, decades after the end of its expiration date regardless to any negative repercussions related to the complexities of the crisis management.

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Cover: South24 Center

Photo: FSO Safer in the Red Sea off Yemen. (File/AP)

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