

Informal Note — United States request for New Zealand support for action against the Houthi

- This note provides information for Ministers on the context, options, and implications of responding to the request from the United States seeking a New Zealand Defence Force contribution to potential “limited military action” against the Yemen-based Houthi militia, or a political statement of support for coalition action.
- Key questions for Ministers’ consideration are:
 - Are New Zealand’s actions to date on the issue of Houthi attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea sufficient, relative to our interests and an assessment of the risks and implications?
 - Is it in New Zealand’s overall interest to deploy NZDF personnel to contribute to coalition operations to degrade the Houthi military capability to attack commercial shipping in the Red Sea, and have those personnel involved in the targeting chain? If so, this would require Cabinet agreement for New Zealand to participate in armed conflict.
 - [Redacted] s6(b)(i), s9(2)(g)(i) [Redacted]
- [Redacted] s9(2)(f)(iv), s9(2)(g)(i) [Redacted]

Summary/Context

Situation in Yemen and the Red Sea

- The Houthi are an [Redacted] s6(a) [Redacted] Shia political and military group that emerged in North Yemen during the 1990s. The Houthi have occupied much of northern Yemen (which borders the Red Sea) and the capital Sana’a since the beginning of the Yemeni civil war in 2014, forcing the Government of Yemen into exile in 2015. Since the onset of the Israel-Hamas armed conflict in October 2023, the Houthi have closely aligned themselves with Iran’s so-called “axis of resistance” (including Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah and some Syrian and Iraqi militant groups) against Israel. The slogan of the Houthi movement invokes “death” to America and Israel and “a curse upon the Jews”.

In November 2023, the Houthi announced their intention to “target all ships owned or operated by Israeli companies or carrying the Israeli flag.” In December, the Houthi widened their targeting to all ships bound for Israeli ports, regardless of nationality.

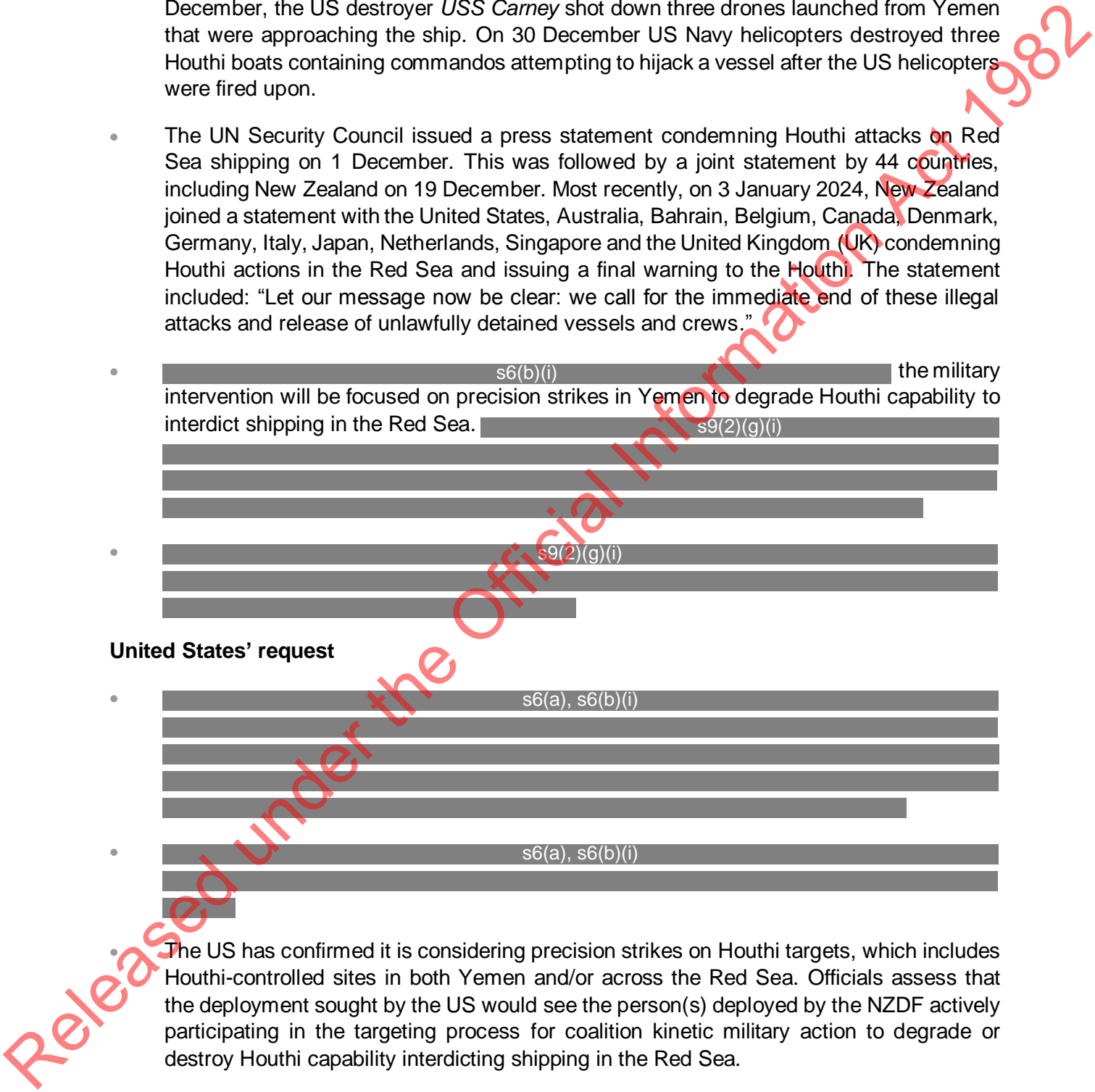
- Since then, the Houthi have perpetrated over 20 high-profile attacks and hijackings against commercial ships. These attacks have included the use of Anti-Ship Cruise Missiles (ASCM), Armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) and hijacking of ships by boat and helicopter. The Red Sea, the major sea-lane through which 15% of global trade travels (including to and from New Zealand), and a critical transport link between Europe, Asia

and the Pacific. An increasing number of shipping companies have chosen to avoid the Red Sea and divert around southern Africa, adding 10-12 days (and considerable cost) to most voyages.

- According to open source information, the Houthi have also attacked US warships. On 3 December, the US destroyer *USS Carney* shot down three drones launched from Yemen that were approaching the ship. On 30 December US Navy helicopters destroyed three Houthi boats containing commandos attempting to hijack a vessel after the US helicopters were fired upon.
- The UN Security Council issued a press statement condemning Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping on 1 December. This was followed by a joint statement by 44 countries, including New Zealand on 19 December. Most recently, on 3 January 2024, New Zealand joined a statement with the United States, Australia, Bahrain, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Singapore and the United Kingdom (UK) condemning Houthi actions in the Red Sea and issuing a final warning to the Houthi. The statement included: "Let our message now be clear: we call for the immediate end of these illegal attacks and release of unlawfully detained vessels and crews."
- [REDACTED] s6(b)(i) the military intervention will be focused on precision strikes in Yemen to degrade Houthi capability to interdict shipping in the Red Sea. [REDACTED] s9(2)(g)(i)
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
- [REDACTED] s9(2)(g)(i)
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

United States' request

- [REDACTED] s6(a), s6(b)(i)
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
- [REDACTED] s6(a), s6(b)(i)
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
- The US has confirmed it is considering precision strikes on Houthi targets, which includes Houthi-controlled sites in both Yemen and/or across the Red Sea. Officials assess that the deployment sought by the US would see the person(s) deployed by the NZDF actively participating in the targeting process for coalition kinetic military action to degrade or destroy Houthi capability interdicting shipping in the Red Sea.
- [REDACTED] s6(b)(i)
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]



Response options

- With Cabinet approval, the NZDF could deploy [REDACTED] s6(a) [REDACTED].
The deployed personnel would likely be tasked to engage in planning and targeting for strike operations, placing them in the targeting chain.
- [REDACTED] s6(b)(i), s9(2)(g)(i) [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
- Should Ministers wish to consider a NZDF contribution to this operation then officials would provide a deployment Cabinet paper for your consideration.
- [REDACTED] s6(b)(i) [REDACTED] It is possible there might be a further joint statement before taking military action, which New Zealand could choose to join. In the event of subsequent military action, Ministers could either issue their own media statement or make remarks to the press conveying New Zealand's support.

Implications

New Zealand's interests

- New Zealand's strategic interests in relation to this issue are: protecting the free flow of trade to and from New Zealand; [REDACTED] s9(2)(g)(i) [REDACTED] and demonstrating our support for freedom of navigation, and of the international rules-based system.
- Houthi actions jeopardise the free flow of trade back and forth through the Red Sea and Suez Canal. As a trading nation with high reliance on stable and predictable shipping lanes, restricting Houthi actions in the Red Sea would align with New Zealand's interests in international commerce and maritime security. Some exporters, particularly those in the primary sector, have already reported lost orders due to the delay added by shipping around southern Africa. Transport and insurance costs have increased with anticipated implications for the competitiveness of New Zealand exports and the prices consumers will pay for imported goods.
- Although no data is available on New Zealand exports/imports specifically, the Suez Canal is an important shipping route for our goods trade with Europe and North Africa. The European region is a sizable market for New Zealand's agriculture exports, (especially lamb, wine, butter, and fruit). For instance, 16% and 28% of New Zealand's meat and wine exports respectively went to Europe in the year to September 2023. In addition, Algeria imported \$1.1bn of milk powder from New Zealand over the same period.
- New Zealand has a clear interest in the rules-based international order, due to the Houthi's illegal hijacking and targeting of commercial ships and civilian crews. The Houthis have shown no sign of respect for international law, and the law enforcement actions available under existing conventions would likely be insufficient to respond to the military threat posed by Houthi forces.

- [REDACTED] s6(b)(i) [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

s6(b)(i)

Risks and considerations

- s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)
[Redacted]
- [Redacted]
- [Redacted]
- [Redacted]
- [Redacted]
- [Redacted]
- [Redacted]
- [Redacted]
- [Redacted]
- [Redacted]

Released under the Official Information Act 1982

s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)

[Redacted]

Legal implications (legally privileged)

- s9(2)(h)
 - s6(a), s6(b)(i) s9(2)(h), s9(2)(g)(i) s6(b)(i)
 - s9(2)(h)
 - s9(2)(h)
- [Redacted]
- [Redacted]
- [Redacted]

Likeminded partners

- s6(b)(i)
- [Redacted]

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s6(b)(i)

- s6(b)(i)

For context: Operation PROSPERITY GUARDIAN

- For completeness, officials note that another opportunity for the NZDF to contribute to Red Sea maritime security alongside partners is Operation PROSPERITY GUARDIAN (OPG), a new operation under the existing Bahrain based Combined Maritime Forces (CMF)¹ intended to protect commercial shipping in the Red Sea through defensive military actions.

s9(2)(f)(iv)

s6(b)(i)

- The NZDF already has approval to contribute up to 12 personnel to CMF operations through the Cabinet approved Middle East Maritime Security mandate. s9(2)(f)(iv)

[Redacted]

- s9(2)(f)(iv)

- s9(2)(f)(iv)

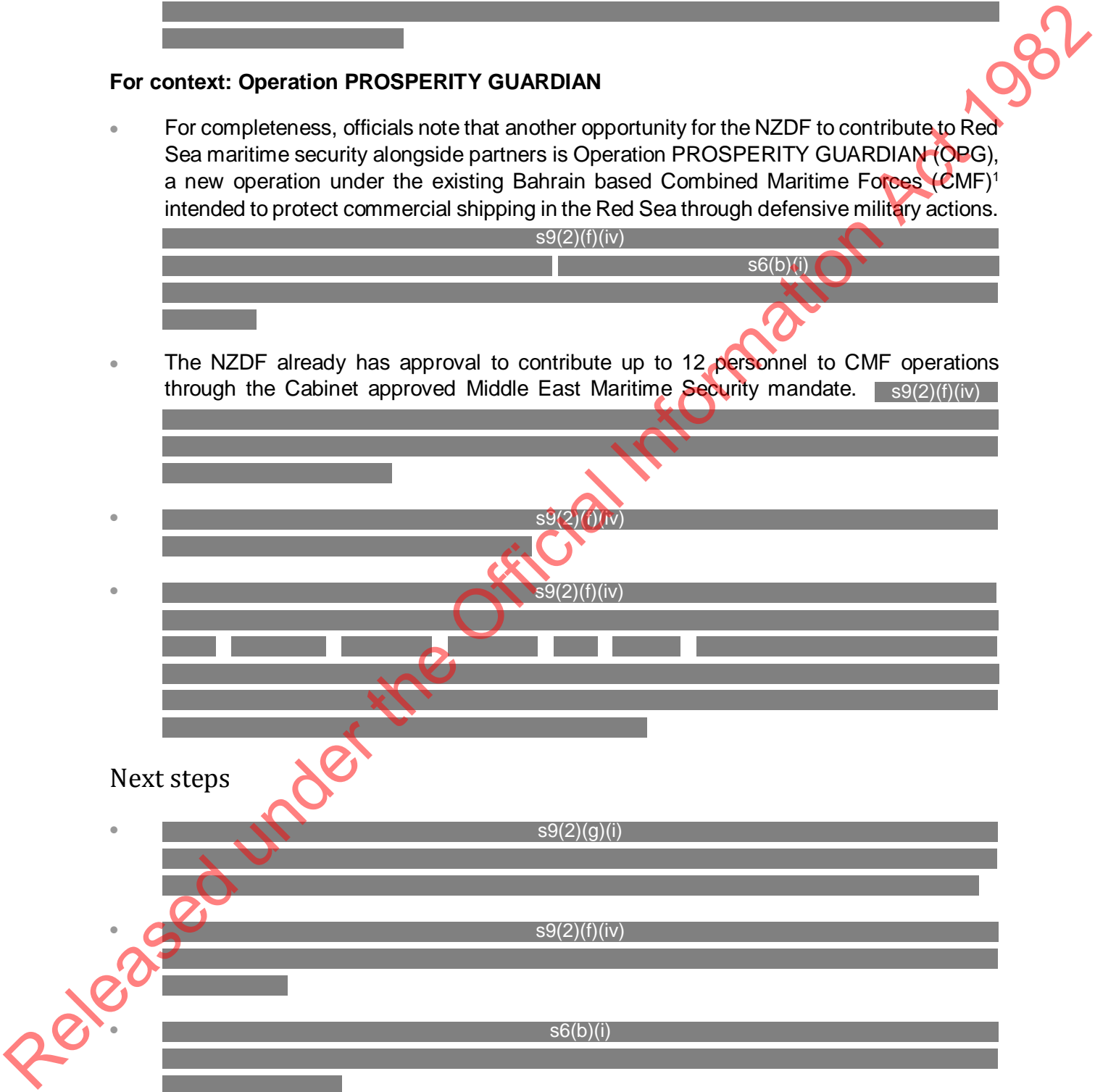
Next steps

- s9(2)(g)(i)

- s9(2)(f)(iv)

- s6(b)(i)

¹ CMF is the world's largest multinational naval partnership, consisting of 39 nations. New Zealand has contributed to CMF since the mid-1990s.



Annex 1 – Map of southern Red Sea and Gulf of Aden



Source: Google Maps,

Annex 2 – NZDF deployments in Middle East region

	No. of personnel	Location
Op PUKEKO	s6(a)	s6(a) CMF Headquarters, Manama, Bahrain
Op TROY	6	s6(a)
Op GALLANT PHOENIX	Less than 10	s6(a)
Multinational Force and Observers (MFO)	Up to 28 for the core contribution and 3 in the Force Commander contingent.	Egypt-Israel border
United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO)	Up to 8	Golan Heights/Lebanon

Middle East and Africa Division, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade

International Branch, Ministry of Defence

Strategic Commitments and Engagement, NZDF

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