

Update on Red Sea Threats to Shipping

The Houthis' New Target Profile

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In yet another escalation of its maritime campaign, Yemen's Houthi movement have announced an update to their target profile for vessels in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The announcement included a declaration that any vessel that has called at the Port of Haifa – Israel's largest seaport – would be considered a legitimate target for attack by the militant group. This expansion is the latest in a well-documented evolution in the Houthi target profile, which has changed over time to include a broader range of commercial vessels.

The Evolution of the Houthi Target Profile

Attacks by the Houthis started on 19 November 2023 following the declaration of a blockade on Israel-linked vessels in the Red Sea. Weeks later, the group expanded this scope to include any vessel that had called at an Israeli port, regardless of nationality or flag. After retaliatory airstrikes by the US and the UK on 11 January 2024, the Houthis further broadened their profile to include American and British-linked vessels.

In May 2024, the Houthis included vessels owned, operated, or chartered by companies with other vessels that have called at Israeli ports. In a move that further extended the risk of attack to merchant vessels in the region, the group declared in November 2024 that changes in ship ownership or flag registration would no longer be considered grounds for immunity. A vessel's historical association with Israel therefore became a sufficient justification for attack.

The Houthis' latest decision to target vessels linked to the Port of Haifa goes along with the group's consistent intentions to threaten as many commercial vessels as possible in an ongoing bid to assert control over the maritime space. There has not been a confirmed Houthi attack targeting a merchant vessel since December 2024, and since then it had appeared that the group's focus had shifted to attacks targeting Israel directly. However, the new blockade on Haifa is an indication that this control is too valuable to give up.

Discrepancy Between Target Profile and Actual Targets

Despite the increasingly defined target profiles, the Houthis have consistently struck vessels that fall outside their stated criteria. ARC carried out an analysis of 113 confirmed attacks involving 109 merchant vessels between November 2023 and the end of 2024. Of the vessels targeted, nearly 28% had no clear links to any part of the evolving target profile. An additional 13% may have been targeted due to outdated or inaccurate information which was likely sourced from public maritime databases or vessel tracking systems.

These figures show trends that suggest an amplified risk to all vessels in the region. Should attacks resume, the Houthis may attempt to justify attacks based on indirect or historical ties

to Israeli-linked entities, even when those connections are weak or based on old data. In light of the newly declared blockade on the Port of Haifa, the Joint Military Information Centre (JMIC) has recently warned that any vessel affiliated with a company that owns, operates, or charters vessels that call at Haifa is at risk.

Current Risks

As the threat has essentially remained consistent throughout the Red Sea crisis, the Houthis' new specification of Haifa-linked vessels does not constitute an expansion of risk. Instead, it is a reminder of the persistent threat the Houthis have posed to commercial shipping. The Houthis have maintained that the attacks against shipping are a response to the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, and therefore this threat will persist for as long as the conflict continues. This threat continued even when the group announced a suspension in attacks against vessels during the short-lived Gaza ceasefire, as this pause only applied for non-Israel-linked vessels and an attack was always a realistic possibility.

The newly updated target profile will inevitably include an extensive range of vessels. Given the data and current developments, it is clear that no vessel is truly safe transiting through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The Houthis have consistently demonstrated a willingness to target vessels and are still very capable of carrying out attacks, as evidenced by their continued attacks targeting Israel directly.

Strategic Implications

The Houthis' success in disrupting major global trade routes in the last 18 months underscores a broader vulnerability in the global shipping system. Despite limited geopolitical influence, the group has managed to exert control over strategic maritime chokepoints using relatively extensive networks, unsophisticated methods, and minimal resources. The nature of their campaign – using drones, missiles, and other low-cost techniques – shows how fragile maritime security can be. Beyond the economic and security ramifications, the long-term threat of this protracted crisis lies in the potential for copycat actors. Other militant groups or adversarial states may seek to replicate this means of disruption in other strategic maritime locations around the world, leading to more complications for global trade.

The Houthis' new targeting of Haifa-linked vessels is the latest chapter in an unpredictable and damaging era for the shipping industry. As the industry grapples with this evolving threat, it will need resilience and foresight to prevent future crises on the world's seas.

Africa Risk Compliance Threat and Intelligence Assessments

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