

THE BAB AI – MANDEB CRISIS

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Saudi Arabia, the world's top oil exporter, temporarily suspended all oil shipments through the Bab El-Mandeb Strait after two Saudi Very Large Crude Carriers (VLCCs) came under attack by Yemeni Houthi militia on July 25, 2018

The vessels, each carrying 2 million barrels of oil, belong to the Saudi National Shipping Co. The attack resulted in minor damage to one of the two carriers. There were no casualties or spillage of crude oil into the sea¹.which would have led to an environmental disaster

The Bab Al-Mandeb Strait is one of the world's busiest shipping routes, connects the Red Sea with the Arabian Sea. It is one of the world's key shipping lanes for crude oil and other petroleum products. According to the US Energy Information Administration, around 4.6 million barrels of crude and refined petroleum exports per day flowed through the Strait in 2016, headed towards Europe, Asia and the United States

Saudi Arabia's Energy Minister Khalid al-Falih said the kingdom would halt all oil shipments through the strait immediately and the suspension will last "until the situation becomes clearer and the maritime transit

¹Saudi Arabia suspends crude oil shipments through Bab El-Mandeb, Al-Arabiya , July 26, 2018

².through Bab El-Mandeb is safe", Falih said in a statement

This attack in the Red Sea falls in line with previous attacks conducted by the Houthi group in the region. The group has used anti ships missiles, unmanned maritime vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (UMVBIED) and sea mines to attack Saudi coalition ships, as well as U.S .warships and oil tankers

The attack on Saudi VLCCs

The Coalition Forces Spokesperson, Colonel Turki Al-Maliki, issued a statement noting that a Saudi oil tanker (named Arsan) was the subject of an Iranian-backed Houthi militia attack while in international waters, west of the port of Hodeidah, which is under the control of the Houthi .militia

A statement by the Saudi coalition said one tanker was attacked west of Yemen's Hodeidah port, but did not describe how it was hit. The most likely cause was a large unguided rocket fired from a fast-attack craft following behind the tanker. Less likely, it could have been a sea-skimming anti-ship missile such as Iranian-origin C-802, or perhaps a ³.large, explosive-laden aerial drone

The attack resulted in minor damages to the tanker and the ship was escorted under its own power to the Saudi port of Jizan, accompanied by .the Saudi frigate HMS *Al-Dammam*

Earlier on July 26, 2018, the Houthi-run Al-Masirah TV network reported rebels targeted a warship named the Dammam off the western coast of Yemen. The rebels later said they launched a missile attack on the ⁴.vessel

²Saudi Arabia suspends oil exports through Bab El-Mandeb, Al Jazeera, .July 26, 2018

³Michael Knights and Farzin Nadimi, Curbing Houthi attacks on civilian .ships in Bab Al Mandeb, Policy Watch 2998, July 27, 2018

⁴Saudi Arabia suspends oil exports through Bab El-Mandeb, Al Jazeera,

In a separate statement carried on the Houthi-run SABA news agency, the group said it had also targeted a coalition frigate off the coast of al-Durayhmi in southern Hodeidah

:There are two main reasons for the last attack on the Saudi oil tankers

The Houthi threat - Yemen's armed Houthi movement threatened to block the Red Sea shipping lane if the coalition keeps pushing toward the Houthi-controlled port of Hodeidah

The Iranian threat - This attack is linked, to recent Iranian threats to close the Strait of Hormuz, through which tankers carry 18 million barrels per day if Iranian oil exports are banned under the US sanctions expected to be implemented on November 4, 2018.

The new development is believed to be an Iranian involvement in threatening the maritime movement by encouraging the Houthis to attack oil tankers in the Red Sea

The Houthi threat and the battle of Hodeida

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirate's main justifications for the intervention was to protect shipping routes such as the Red Sea, which is used to bring Middle Eastern oil and Asian goods to Europe through the Suez Canal

Yemen's armed Houthi movement threatened to block the Red Sea shipping lane if the coalition keeps pushing toward the Houthi-controlled port of Hodeidah. On January 8, 2018, Saleh al-Samad, the head of the Houthi rebel government, told a visiting UN delegation that his group could "turn to strategic options ... including cutting off the Red Sea and international navigation" if the coalition continued to threaten Hodeidah, the only major port under its control

On June 13, 2018, Yemeni government forces, backed by the Saudi coalition, waged a wide-ranging operation to retake Hodeidah and its strategic seaport from the Houthis. Government forces continued to

advance towards the city and on June 19, 2018, they seized Hodeidah's international airport

The coalition has called a halt to the offensive to give U.N. efforts a chance to reach a political solution that would avert an assault on the port, a lifeline for millions of Yemenis, which the United Nations fears risks triggering a famine in the impoverished country

The Iranian threat

The commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force Qassem Suleimani has issued a direct threat to the United States President Donald Trump, adding new fuel to weeks of tension between⁵.Iran and the US

In a speech broadcast by Iran's al-Alam channel, Suleimani threatened "Trump by saying that "The Red Sea is no longer secure

You know that this war will destroy all that you possess. You will start "this war but we will be the ones to impose its end. Therefore you have to be careful about insulting the Iranian people and the president of our Republic," Soleimani said in a speech, as reported by al-Alam in Arabic. "You know our power in the region and our capabilities in asymmetric⁶.war. We will act and we will work," he said

This is believed to be related to Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthi militias' attack on two Saudi oil tankers on July 25, 2018,, which temporarily halted all oil shipments through the Red Sea shipping lane of Bab al-Mandeb

The Iranian president said on July 25, 2018, that "oil supplies from the region cannot be exported when Iran's oil supplies not exported."

In another event he said that Iran has many "straits" apart from the

⁵Iran's Suleimani threatens Trump: 'The Red Sea is no longer secure', Al .Arabiya, July 26, 2018

⁶Iran's Suleimani threatens Trump: 'The Red Sea is no longer secure', Al .Arabiya, July 26, 2018

Strait of Hormuz, through which to ship its oil, in case Iran's exports are⁷.blocked

Iranian commander of the Islamic Republic Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) Major General Mohamad al-Jafari announced that the Strait of Hormuz either is for everyone or it is not for anyone. Al-Jafari said that Hassan Rouhani's stance was to counter what he described "the recent American threat to impose new oil sanctions against Iran" adding that the "enemies must understand that the Strait of Hormuz is either for⁸".everyone or not for anyone

The Quds commander added: "You know that this war will destroy all that you possess. You will start this war but we will be the ones to impose its end. Therefore you have to be careful about insulting the⁹.Iranian people and the president of our Republic," Suleimani said

(Houthi attacks on Saudi oil tankers and facilities (2016 – 2018

It is not the first time that Houthi rebels targeted Saudi tankers in the :Red Sea

On May 24, 2018, the Saudi-led coalition said it had destroyed two Houthi speedboats that were planning to target an oil tanker in the Red Sea. Fighter jets from the UAE coalition forces destroyed two Iran-allied¹⁰.Houthi boats while another two escaped

On May 10, 2018,the Turkish-flagged bulk carrier Ince Inebolu was

⁷Is targeting of Bab al-Mandeb by Houthi militias linked to Iranian .threats? Al Arabiya, July 26, 2018

⁸Is targeting of Bab al-Mandeb by Houthi militias linked to Iranian .threats? Al Arabiya, July 26, 2018

⁹Iran's Suleimani threatens Trump: 'The Red Sea is no longer secure', Al .Arabiya, July 26, 2018

Iran-allied Houthi boats destroyed in Red Sea in Arab coalition strikes, ²¹⁰.The Baghdad Times, May 24 2018

struck by a rocket in what the European counterpiracy mission EU NAVFOR characterized as "non-state Yemen-based actors firing a land-¹¹".based missile or rocket at the vessel

On April 3, 2018, a Saudi tanker, VLCC Abqaiq, carrying 2 million barrels of crude oil came under fire, west of Hodeidah in the Red Sea. Houthi fast-attack craft fired on the Saudi ship either rocket-propelled grenades¹² .or tactical rockets

The attack resulted in only superficial damage to the ship in question. At some point, a coalition warship intervened and accompanied the ship as it continued North in the Red Sea. The Houthis said they had targeted a .warship in response to an air strike that killed civilians

On January 6, 2018, an attempt to attack a Saudi oil tanker off Hodeidah with a remote-controlled bomb boat was thwarted. An unmanned maritime vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (UMVBIED) was used to attack a Saudi frigate on January 30, 2017 and a second was intercepted heading towards the Saudi port of Jizan in April 2017.

The examination of third that was captured in October 2017, revealed¹³ .that its guidance system was made in Iran

On June 16, 2017, a self-guiding Shark-33 explosive drone boat, which can be programmed to home in on a target using electro-optical television systems, was used in an unsuccessful attack on a Saudi¹⁴ .offshore loading facility in Jizan

¹¹Michael Knights and Farzin Nadimi, Curbing Houthi attacks on civilian .ships in Bab Al Mandeb, Policy Watch 2998, July 27, 2018

¹²Michael Knights and Farzin Nadimi, Curbing Houthi attacks on civilian .ships in Bab Al Mandeb, Policy Watch 2998, July 27, 2018

¹³Saudi-led coalition says thwarts Houthi attack on oil tanker, Reuters. .January 10, 2018

¹⁴Michael Knights and Farzin Nadimi, Curbing Houthi attacks on civilian .ships in Bab Al Mandeb, Policy Watch 2998, July 27, 2018

On May 31, 2017, Houthi militants attacked the Marshall Islands-flagged oil tanker MT MUSKIE in the Bab al-Mandab Strait. The militants fired RPG – 7, rocket-propelled grenades at the tanker before breaking off their assault.¹⁵ When attacked the vessel was on way to Jeddah in Saudi .Arabiya

The attack occurred near Perim Island, a few kilometers off the coast of Yemen and the site of a lighthouse for ships passing through the Bab al-Mandab.

The Perim Island has been controlled by Saudi led coalition forces since .2015 when they seized it from Yemeni Houthi rebels

October 25, 2016, Houthi assailants opened fire on the LNG (liquefied natural gas) tanker, Galicia Spirit. The attack on the Galicia Spirit occurred near Perim Island, a few kilometers off the coast of Yemen. The vessel .suffered minor damage with no injuries to the crew

The skiff that engaged in an attack on the Galicia Spirit using small arms was also carrying a substantial amount of explosives. When the skiff was approximately 20m from the vessel, the explosives detonated, destroying .the skiff and ending the attack

An LNG vessel has a double skin, but if the explosives were enough to penetrate the main hull, then it is certainly possible damage would have .been done to the inner skin and gas could have escaped and ignited

Summary and conclusions

Saudi Arabia has been fighting with the Houthi militia in Yemen, backed by Iran, for more than three years. The Saudi coalition has repeatedly raised alarm that Houthi rebels threaten vessels in the Red Sea through .their control of the strategic Hodeida port

Much of the Crude oil that leaves Saudi Arabia to the North West via the Suez Canal and the SUMED pipeline is first shipped through the Bab al-

¹⁵Hani al-Sufayan, Strategic sea trade routes near Yemen under threats .from Houthi militias, Al Arabiya, June 1, 2017

Mandeb Strait, which passes close to Yemen. A full closure of the Bab Al Mandab strait, would force tankers sailing from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates around the southern tip of Africa, which¹⁶.would add to transit time and cost

Saudi Arabia can still use its East-West mega-pipeline to ship crude oil from its oil fields in the Persian Gulf into the city of Yambu on the Red Sea, bypassing the strait and keeping the European market within regular reach. The East-West pipeline has a capacity of about 5 million barrels a¹⁷.day

Iran's backing of the Houthi rebels necessarily raises comparisons between the Bab al-Mandeb situation and the significant chokepoint in the Persian Gulf's Strait of Hormuz. The main threat is that Iran or Iran-backed Houthi militia are now posing a threat on both waterways. Iran is watching how the Trump administration and the Saudi coalition .respond to the incidents

Houthi forces will be able to threaten international shipping as long as they control any part of Yemen's Red Sea shoreline. The message of Saudi Arabia is that the current threat of the Iran backed Houthis is not a local or a regional problem but a global challenge and the world powers should take the necessary steps to ensure the safety of this vital .waterway

Ensuring the free and safe movement of oil is important for all consumers and producers. The United States has a longstanding commitment to ensuring the security of international sea lanes. The United States should warn the Houthis against further antishipping attacks, as well as drone and missile attacks on Saudi west coast energy .installations and prepare to strike if attacks continue

Saudis Halt Oil Shipments Via Bab el-Mandeb After Attack, ¹⁶Javier Blas .Bloomberg, July 26, 2018

Saudis Halt Oil Shipments Via Bab el-Mandeb After Attack, ¹⁷Javier Blas .Bloomberg, July 26, 2018

