

The Houthi Ecoterrorism of the Red Sea

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(www.rieas.gr) Publication date: 17 June 2021

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The Safer oil tanker often described by experts as a "ticking time bomb." An explosion or leak from the Safer would cause an environmental disaster with dire economic and humanitarian consequences, threatening millions of residents in the Idaho governorate in Yemen and the Red Sea riparian countries.

The United Nations Security Council held a special meeting on June 3, 2021, on FSO Safer at the request of Britain after the Iran backed Houthi rebels said an agreement to allow the UN mission to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the oil tanker had "reached a dead end."

Following a briefing from top UN officials, the members of the UN Security Council reiterated Houthi responsibility for the situation and called on the Houthi militia to facilitate unconditional and safe access for UN experts to conduct a comprehensive and impartial assessment and initial repair mission, without further delay, ensuring close cooperation with the United Nations.¹

The Security Council's previous special session on the FSO Safer was organized following the near-sinking of the ship when its engine room flooded in late May 2020.

Divers from the corporation that owns the ship managed to make emergency repairs that contained the leak.²

Back ground

The oil tanker Safer, is a Japanese-made vessel built in the 1970s and sold to Yemen's national oil company, the Safer Exploration & Production Operation Company, in the 1980s.

The Safer has been floating near the port city of Hodeidah since 1989 and has been operated like a mini-terminal to store and offload oil from Yemen's inland oil fields.

The Safer has not been used since March 2015, when the region fell under control of the Houthis, and there are serious concerns its structure has deteriorated significantly.³

Since then, no maintenance work has been carried out on the aging tanker. The Safer oil tanker which is currently carrying an estimated 1,400,000 barrels of crude oil needs critical maintenance to mend cracks that have been allowing water to leak into the control room.⁴

The seawater has entered the engine compartment of the tanker, causing damage to the pipelines and increasing the risk of sinking. Rust has covered parts of the tanker and the inert gas that prevents the tanks from gathering inflammable gases has leaked out.⁵

In March 2020, the UN ambassadors from Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, and Yemen, called the UN Security Council to exercise "maximum efforts" to persuade Yemen's Houthi militias to allow the United Nations to inspect the tanker.

For years, the UN has been trying to send inspectors to assess the damage aboard the vessel and looking for ways to secure the tanker. The solution proposed by the UN has three components: assessment and necessary repairs; basic maintenance to facilitate oil extraction; and finally, unloading the oil and pulling the ship to safety.

The Houthis have blocked several UN plans to inspect the ship to assess the scale of the damage. On July 18, 2019, Mark Lowcock, the UN's undersecretary-general for

humanitarian affairs, told the UN Security Council that its assessment team had been denied the necessary permits by Houthi rebels who control the area.⁶

A significant problem is the gap between the Houthis' expectations of the UN technical team and what the UN is able to achieve in an initial mission. The UN is offering to assess the ship's condition and carry out light repairs that are safe to conduct. However, the Houthis apparently want more extensive repairs, which the UN says it is unable to commit to without first inspecting the ship's condition to know what is feasible.

Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, tweeted on June 1, 2021, about the UN's "refusal" to implement its agreement regarding the Safer. The Houthis issued a statement saying that following recent meetings with the UN Office for Project Services, the current UN proposal excludes most of the maintenance work that the UN had committed to undertake in last November's plan. It claimed that the UN was reducing the scope of its assessment and accused it of deliberately prolonging discussions to exhaust the budget allocated for the operation.⁷

The "Safer issue " as a case study of Ecoterrorism

Ecoterrorism, also called ecological terrorism or environmental terrorism – is the destruction, or the threat of destruction, of the environment by states, groups, or individuals in order to intimidate or to coerce governments or civilians.⁸

The Houthis have been fighting against the UN-recognized government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi and the Arab Coalition since 2015 and currently control both the capital Sanaa and the strategic port city of Hodeidah, which is a key government target.

The Iran backed Houthi militia in Yemen has threatened on July 6, 2020, to blow up the Safer, which is currently carrying an estimated 1,400,000 barrels of crude oil and needs critical maintenance, causing major environmental damage to the Red Sea, if the port city of Hodeidah falls to the UN-recognized Hadi government and the Saudi coalition.⁹

The international concerns and involvement increased the political value of the "Safer crisis " to the Houthis and the Safer's fate had now become one of few bargaining chips available to the Houthis and they may be continuing to deny the U.N. access to increase leverage for their wider strategic aims.

The Houthis are using the Safer oil tanker as a tool of **Ecoterrorism** to achieve one of the following goals:¹⁰

- As a military and political tool to prevent attacks of the Arab coalition and the Hadi government forces on Hodeida.
- The crude oil on Safer is worth between \$40 to \$60 million and the Houthis want to resell it, but they cannot do so legally since it belongs to the Hadi government. Therefore, the Houthis put pressure on international parties in an attempt to get their hands on the oil.
- The Safer as a part of a wider agreement between the Houthis and the Hadi government.

The threat of Houthi Environmental terrorism

Inger Andersen, executive director of the UN Environment Program (UNEP), and Reena Ghelani, director for Operations and Advocacy in the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), briefed the Security Council on June 04, 2021 about the increasing environmental and humanitarian risks posed by the decaying Safer oil tanker.¹¹

The Safer tanker could face two main potential hazardous scenarios, an explosion or leak of oil.¹²

A leak of oil

The Red Sea is one of the planet's most important repositories of biodiversity, hosting internationally important marine mammals, sea turtles, sea birds and many other species.¹³

A leak of oil could lead to one of the worst environmental disasters the world has seen. The ship would flood the Red sea with oil and have a devastating impact on the Red Sea coral reef, Yemeni islands and the livelihood of Yemeni fishermen.¹⁴

Driven by waves and wind, large oil spills can spread for hundreds of kilometers. An oil spill could destroy some 850,000 tons of fish in the Red Sea, the Bab El Mandab waterway, and the Gulf of Aden and affect 1.7 million people working in the fishing industry and their families in littoral countries including Saudi Arabia, Djibouti and Eritrea.¹⁵

An oil leak could force the vital Hodeidah port to close, limiting food and fuel imports for two to three weeks.

A potential spill could also disrupt commercial shipping routes on the Red Sea, one of the world's busiest waterways that accounts for 10 percent of global trade.¹⁶

Explosion or fire

The tanker Safer is floating north of Yemen's port of Hodeidah. Some 3 million people in Hodeidah would be affected by toxic gases, four percent of productive agricultural lands in Yemen would be covered with dark clouds, destroying beans, fruits and vegetables.

About one million internally displaced people who live in Yemen could be covered by this smoke plume, triggering potentially severe health impacts in vulnerable populations.¹⁷

The port of Hodeidah handles about 70% of the country's commercial and humanitarian imports. Humanitarian organizations would suspend their services in Hodeidah, cutting off services for 7 million people in need.

Fuel prices would increase dramatically and double the price of goods and food and 1.7 million people would need food aid as the closure of the port can create shortages.¹⁸

The aftermath of a fire or explosion would prevent the recovery of nearshore species in nearly 25 years.

Summary

“The FSO Safer is rusting at anchor and could break or explode at any moment,” said Greenpeace spokesman Ahmed El Droubi on June 4, 2021. “It’s not if, it’s when,” Droubi added.¹⁹

The tanker Safer is used as a "bargaining cheap " by the Houthis to blackmail the international community. An explosion or leak from the Safer would cause an environmental disaster with dire economic and humanitarian consequences, threatening millions of residents in the Hodeidah governorate and the Red Sea riparian countries.

During UN Security Council meetings on Yemen, Council members have repeatedly called on the Houthis to cooperate with the UN to avert the looming crisis posed by the ship.

The UN approach is for an immediate technical assessment and urgent repairs, basic maintenance to facilitate oil extraction; and finally, unloading the oil and pulling the ship to safety.

But some experts claim that the Safer cannot be meaningfully made safe, and the oil has to be unloaded onto another oil tanker that can be moored nearby.

This solution would leave the "bargaining cheap " of a vessel containing the oil in the Houthis’ hands, but should reduce the risks of oil leak or unintended fire or explosion.

The international community and the UN must take a firm, decisive and strong stance against the Houthis before the oil tanker causes an environmental and human disaster. At the same time, plans for the worst-case scenario are also needed, preparing the necessary technical and operational tools to deal with an environmental disaster.



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