

RED SEA SHIPPING ATTACKS BY HOUTHJI REBELS: EXTREME CAUTION REQUIRED

Maritime Mutual Risk Bulletin No. 78

January 23, 2024



INTRODUCTION

Members will be aware that transits of the Red Sea and its Gulf of Aden approaches are currently very dangerous due to anti-ship missile and drone attacks by Yemen based Houthji rebels ("Houthjis"). Houthji attacks on shipping have taken place since 2022 but have now intensified to over 40 [Geocollect](#) recorded incidents since the Israel/Gaza war erupted on 7 Oct 2023. This Risk Bulletin highlights the dangers to MM Member ships and crews and provides guidance on risk assessment and loss prevention.

BACKGROUND

In 2014, Houthi rebels – reportedly supported by Iran – attempted to topple Yemen’s elected government. The Yemeni army were unable to regain full control. This prompted the provision of military assistance by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), as led and supported by Saudi Arabia.

After years of deadly and inconclusive fighting, negotiations to reach a ceasefire were conducted in early 2023 and were evidently close to resolution. Regrettably, at the outbreak of the hostilities between Israel and Gaza, the Houthis declared their support for Hamas – also reportedly supported by Iran – and the people of Palestine. As noted above, the Houthis then intensified their Red Sea missile and drone attacks on commercial shipping.

Initially, the Houthis declared that the attacks – inclusive of the attack and seizure of the Bahamas flag car carrier GALAXY LEADER on 5 Dec 2023 – would only be on ships owned or controlled by Israeli interests. This has not proved to be the case as a wide range of vessel types, flags, managers, charterers, and shipowners with no apparent connection to Israel have since been attacked.

Fortunately, and primarily due to US and other naval force anti-missile and gun defences and shipboard private security teams, none of the Houthi attacks have yet proven lethal. These defence efforts have been assisted by the apparently erratic control of many of the Houthi drones which resulted in their explosion well away from their intended targets.

CURRENT SITUATION

On 18 Dec 2023, the US announced the establishment of Operation Prosperity Guardian (OPG) as a multinational security task force operating under the remit of the Combined Maritime Forces and the US Navy’s Red Sea fleet. A formal warning was also issued to the Houthis by 12 of the participating OPG states to advise that retaliatory action would be taken if the Houthis continued their attacks on commercial vessels.

Regrettably, the Houthi attacks did not stop and, following a 10 Jan 2024 attack on British and US Navy warships, the US and UK governments launched naval ship based missiles and fighter jets against Houthi drone and missile launching and storage locations in Yemen on 12 and 13 Jan 2024. The retaliatory response from the Houthis was to launch a cruise missile attack against a US Navy vessel on 14 Jan 2024. It was successfully destroyed mid-air by a US Navy fighter plane.

The most recent US Maritime Administration (MARAD) [MSCI Alert 2024-001B Red Sea and Gulf of Aden](#) is as follows:

“There continues to be a high degree of risk to commercial vessels transiting the Southern Red Sea between 12N and 16N. While the decision to transit remains at the discretion of individual vessels and companies, it is recommended that U.S. flag and U.S. owned commercial vessels remain North of 18N in the Red Sea or East of 46E in the Gulf of Aden until further notice. Additional updates will be provided when available.”

NOTE: Based on the experience of Houthi attacks on shipping to date, Members should consider the MARAD advice as being applicable to all ships which have an association through flag, registration, ownership, operation, or management with or by parties in any of the 12 declared members of the OPG. In addition to the US, this includes the UK, Bahrain, Canada, Australia, France, Italy, and Netherlands. Seychelles and Spain. A further 10 countries have not yet officially announced their OPG membership.

SHIPOWNER/MEMBER PRECAUTIONS

Major shipowners, including liner companies MSC, Maersk, Hapag Lloyd and tanker operators BP, have ceased Suez Canal and Red Sea transits and are instead rerouting around the Cape of Good Hope. This ‘detour’ adds about 4,000 n. mi. and 10-12 days to the passage from the Far East to Europe with a corresponding large increase in bunker and freight costs. It is also complicated by the fact that the Panama Canal is suffering major transit problems due to a shortage of water in the Gatun Lakes.

For those Shipowner/Members who are still transiting the Suez Canal and the Red Sea or who may be operating their vessels anywhere in Middle Eastern waters, the risk of attack by Houthi or allied military groups is currently high. It also seems likely that the current political tensions, fighting and attacks on shipping in these areas will continue and may well expand.

Members are referred to [MM Risk Bulletin No. 75, ISRAEL/PALESTINE WAR AND INCREASED THREATS TO MERCHANT SHIPS IN MIDDLE EAST WATERS](#), which set out the security threats listed by MARAD on 6 Sept 2023. These threats included the potential for attack by Yemen based Houthi rebels. They also included the return of Piracy and Armed Robbery to the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden and several ship boardings by what appear to have been Somali pirates have occurred since that time.

Members are also referred to [MM RB No. 42, BIMCO Ship Security Update for Middle Eastern Waters 2021](#). This RB includes links to [BIMCO \(IIG\) Guidance Update](#) and others of critical importance to Members, their Managers, DPA's and Masters. The advice and recommendations provided in RB No. 42 are still current and applicable to all Member vessels navigating in the affected areas.

CONCLUSION AND TAKEAWAY

From a humanitarian viewpoint, the Israel/Gaza conflict, the tragic carnage on both sides, its rapid expansion to neighbouring Middle East areas and its negative impact on shipping and crew safety have been devastating. Regrettably, a ceasefire and a lasting solution both appear to be a long way off.

Members who may be operating their vessels in the affected sea areas must therefore ensure frequent references to [MARAD Alerts](#). Members should also keep a close check on the [UKMTO website](#) for incident updates and should ensure that their vessels are participating in the UKMTO Voluntary Reporting Scheme (VRS).

Finally, Members are again respectfully referred to the MMIA Rulebook and The General Rules of the Association, Rule 29, Specific Exclusions, which excludes cover for losses and liabilities caused by war (actual or threatened) and terrorist acts. Members need to understand that MMIA does not provide supplementary War Risk cover. In the circumstances, Members should ensure that if their vessels are now or will be trading in a Joint War Committee (JWC) defined 'Hull War, Piracy, Terrorism and Related Risks' area (last JWC circular issued Oct. 2023), they confer with their P&I broker to obtain and/or confirm they have suitable War Risk cover placed elsewhere in the market. Members are also reminded that kidnap and ransom (K&R) risks are excluded absolutely from P&I cover offered by MMIA. Members should likewise confer with their P&I broker to obtain K&R insurance in the specialist insurance market.