



RED ALERT

United States Navy supply ship Kanawah replenishes HMS Diamond with fuel in the Red Sea

Matthew Borie examines the Yemeni Houthi Iranian-backed militant group attacks amid the Israel-Hamas conflict

In wake of the Hamas attacks from Gaza on Israel, which began on 7 October, the Yemeni Houthi Iranian-backed militant group (IBMG) has initiated a campaign of attacks targeting Israeli territory as well as against commercial and military vessels in the Southern Red Sea, Bab al-Mandeb Strait and Gulf of Aden. Since late October, over 100 Houthi missile and drone incidents/shoot-downs have occurred in the vicinity of the Gulf of Aqaba, Red Sea, Bab al-Mandeb Strait and Gulf of Aden. In addition, several commercial

vessels have been hit by Yemeni Houthi drones and/or missiles, causing damages to the ships; however, no casualties have occurred.

Egypt, Israel and/or Jordan have reportedly employed military air and air defence assets to shoot down Yemeni Houthi missiles and drones near the Gulf of Aqaba on at least 10 dates since late October. Near daily Yemeni Houthi drone and missile attacks are occurring in the Southern Red Sea, Bab al-Mandeb Strait and Gulf of Aden at present. US, UK, French and Saudi military air and air defence forces have reportedly shot down dozens of Yemeni Houthi missiles and drones

in recent months. The Yemeni Houthis are employing a variety of Iranian-made military-grade weaponised drones, ballistic missiles and cruise missiles in these attacks. The most capable Yemeni Houthi military-grade weaponised drones have a range of 2,500km (1,553 miles) and its most capable cruise as well as ballistic missiles have ranges out to 2,000km (1,242 miles).

On 3 October 2022, a UN-mediated ceasefire between the Saudi-led coalition (SLC) – along with its aligned forces in Yemen – and the Houthis ended. The UN envoy to Yemen has said that negotiations remain ongoing to revive the ceasefire; however, an agreement has not been reached to date. The initial ceasefire ran from 2 April to 2 October 2022 and there have been no confirmed SLC strikes in Yemen against the Houthis since. The Houthis had refrained from launching attacks into Saudi Arabia or the Gulf states since April 2022 – until the most recent resumption of attacks outside of Yemen noted above. During 2023, the Houthis have regularly threatened to target areas within Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states that are members of the SLC, as well as expand their attacks to US and Israeli interests in the region.

Aviation authorities in the US, UK, Canada, Germany and France, as well as the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA), have issued advisories for Yemeni airspace in the past year. Germany, France and Canada all have advisories in place for Saudi Arabia at present. During December and November, EASA and the UK issued revised advisories to aviation operators regarding the potential risk from heightened military activity when conducting flights over the Red Sea and in the vicinity of the Gulf of Aqaba.

The security situation in the region amid the war in Gaza remains fluid and subject to rapid change. On 18 December, the US military announced the formation of an enhanced maritime security task force as part of 'Operation Prosperity Guardian' to ensure freedom of navigation in the Red Sea region amid the spike in Houthi attacks on commercial vessels operating in the area. On 19 February, the EU officially announced the start of a naval mission to defend international vessels from attacks by the Houthis.

On 11 and 22 January and 3 February, US naval assets reportedly conducted multiple sets of cruise missile launches from the southern Red Sea and/or Gulf of Aden into Yemen coupled with US & UK military airstrikes against circa 225 Houthi missile and drone programme sites. The strikes reportedly hit targets in the areas of Sanaa, Hajjah, Bayda, Dhamar, Jawf, Hodeidah, Saada and Taizz in Yemen, including the military base co-located with Sanaa International Airport (OYSN/SAH). In addition to the 11 and 22 January and 3 February strikes, the US military has unilaterally conducted circa 25 additional sets of airstrikes against Houthi missile and drone programme sites in the past month – including on 3-5, 7, 9, 10 and 13-17 February.

Multiple US, UK and French naval vessels equipped with conventional surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems capable at all altitudes reportedly remain deployed in the Red Sea. The US military has deployed an aircraft carrier strike group to the Southern Red Sea region near the Bab al-Mandeb Strait and Gulf of Aden off the coast of Yemen. Several Iranian military vessels are also present in the Red Sea region amid tensions. The

US president has vowed to continue to respond with military action if the Houthi attacks persist. The Houthi military spokesman and other officials within the group have vowed to respond to any US and UK strikes and to continue attacks on Israeli interests in the region amid the Gaza war.

The US military has reportedly deployed Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) and MIM-104 Patriot conventional SAM systems to Saudi Arabia and Jordan, which both have Red Sea coastal access near Southern Israel. The THAAD and Patriot conventional SAM systems are capable up to approximately FL820 and out to around 160km (100 miles). The US, UK and French militaries in the Middle East region along with the Saudi, Egyptian, Jordanian and Israeli armed forces all have a variety of air assets and air-defence weapons as well as conventional SAM systems capable at all altitudes.

TEHRAN CONTINUES TO PROVIDE THE IBMG IN YEMEN WITH A VARIETY OF CONVENTIONAL WEAPONS

In recent years, Iran has consistently provided the Houthis with weapons shipments to Yemen, as evidenced by the below activity. A lack of Saudi-led coalition airstrikes in Yemen over the past two years has allowed Houthis to re-equip their forces with a variety of Iranian-made weapons. This is also evidenced by a Houthi parades in the Yemeni capital, Sanaa, in September 2022 and 2023, when the rebel forces displayed a large quantity and variety of Iranian-made weapons. The US military has interdicted a number of ships bound to Yemen from Iran weapons in recent years: **15 February**: US Coast Guard interdicts advanced weapons and missiles; **16 January**: US Navy interdicts advanced weapons and missiles; **6 January 2023**: US Navy seizes illegal weapons; **1 December 2022**: US Navy seizes ammunition, illegal weapons; **8 November 2022**: US Navy finds 70 tons of ballistic missile fuel; **May 2021**: US Navy seizes illicit shipment of weapons; **June 2020**: US Navy interdicts advanced weapons and missiles; **February 2020**: US Navy discovers shipment of Iranian weapons; and **November 2019**: US Navy seizes guided missile parts.

The UK's Royal Navy interdicted shipments of smuggled Iranian weapons likely bound for Houthi forces on 28 January 2022, 25 February 2022 and 23 February 2023. The French Navy interdicted a shipment of smuggled Iranian weapons and ammunition likely bound for Houthi forces on 15 January 2023. The Saudi-led coalition conducted interdictions of weapons shipments sent by Iran to Houthi forces on 17 April 2020. Yemeni forces aligned with the Saudi-led coalition seized drone equipment and rocket fuel material destined for Houthi forces on 31 December 2022, 22 January 2023 and 10 July 2023.

An agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran to re-establish diplomatic ties and normalise relations was announced on 10 March 2023 after

an agreement was negotiated in China, establishing a two-month timetable to reopen embassies and further discuss trade and security. Key to the deal was Iran agreeing to halt direct and proxy attacks on Saudi Arabia, as well as curtailing support for militants and terrorist groups that have previously targeted Saudi Arabia. However, Iran has not ceased its support to the Yemeni Houthi and Tehran continues to provide the IBMG in Yemen with a variety of advanced conventional weapons.

THE SECURITY SITUATION IN THE REGION AMID THE WAR IN GAZA REMAINS SUBJECT TO CHANGE

Poor provision of security through porous borders and an influx of weapons – including ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and military-grade weaponised drones – has facilitated a resurgence in Houthi activity in Yemen in recent years. Yemen has historically been a hub of militant activity and a key route for arms smuggling given its remoteness and anti-government sentiment due to the lack of economic opportunities. The presence of large, relatively unpoliced areas of Yemen are also vulnerable to security and terrorism threats due to instability and porous borders, where militant groups are present.

Houthi drone/missile attacks with associated air and air-defence engagements in response – including via conventional SAM systems capable at all altitudes – by several military forces (ie US, UK, French, Israeli, Egyptian, Jordanian and Saudi-led coalition) are likely to occur at least weekly in the Gulf of Aqaba, Red Sea region, Bab al-Mandeb Strait and Gulf of Aden in the short term. Further US-led airstrikes and cruise missile launches from the Red Sea region, Bab al-Mandeb Strait and Gulf of Aden against Houthi targets in Yemen are likely in the short term in response to any Houthi drone/missile launches. Miscalculation and/or misidentification is likely at all altitudes over the entirety of Yemen, the Southern Red Sea, the Bab al-Mandeb Strait and parts of the Gulf of Aden at present.

Should the situation in the region deteriorate further, then Yemeni Houthi ballistic missile as well as cruise missile and military-grade weaponised drone attacks by the rebels into Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states are possible to sporadically occur during 2024. Saudi Arabian air assets and air defences capable at all altitudes will likely be employed in main urban centres of the Kingdom and the Gulf states within the SLC to shoot down Houthi missiles and drones, should attacks resume. The Jizan, Najran and Asir provinces of South-West Saudi Arabia are most likely to be affected by such activity; however, areas deep within the Kingdom such as Jeddah, Riyadh, Yanbu and Dammam, and areas in the Gulf states that are members of the SLC, may be affected should the Yemen conflict return to early 2022 levels of attacks ●

Matthew Borie is the Chief Intelligence Officer and co-founder of Osprey, he provides strategic direction for Osprey's data collection and analytical output, as well as expert analysis on a wide range of aviation-related issues, with a focus on conflict zone activity.

HMS Diamond's bridge team as the ship assists an oil Tanker in distress in the Red Sea

