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The strait of Bab El-Mandab is a strategic waterway located between Yemen, Djibouti, and Eritrea, where the Red Sea joins the Indian Ocean. At its narrowest point, the strait is only 29 km wide between Yemen on one side and Djibouti and Eritrea on the other. The Bab El-Mandab Strait is a critical junction for world trade. Almost all of the trade between the European Union and China, Japan, India and the rest of Asia passes through the Bab El-Mandab. Up to 30% of the world's oil, including all of the oil and natural gas from the Persian Gulf heading west passes through the Bab El-Mandab strait.

The strait had been in the hands of the Iranian backed Houthis and their allies, units loyal to ousted former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, since March 2015. On October 1, 2015, Yemeni troops loyal to president Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi and Saudi coalition forces seized the island Perim and gained control of the Arabian side of the strategic Bab al-Mandab Strait linking the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden from Houthi fighters. But the rebels still control some of the heights which overlook the strait from the mainland and a number of ports along Yemen's Red Sea coast.

The missile attack on United Arab Emirates aid ship

United Arab Emirates aid ship was hit by missiles and nearly sank on October 1, 2016, in the Bab al-Mandab Strait. There were no reported injuries to the Emirati crew and the heavily damaged ship moved to the port of Assab in nearby Eritrea.¹

The attacked vessel, HSV-2 Swift, I, owned by the UAE's National Marine Dredging Company, was reportedly delivering medical aid and other supplies when it came under fire in the Bab al-Mandab Strait. The vessel is an Australian built high-speed logistics ship leased to the UAE. The ship was formerly contracted to the U.S. and at one time an American company owned the vessel.

It is not clear what type of missiles the Houthi rebels may have fired but according to Stratfor, the Houthis said they used a Chinese-designed, C-802 anti-ship missile system to conduct the attack. If such missiles have been delivered to the Houthis, the most likely supplier would be Iran, which has bought C-802 missiles from China and produced its own variant, the Noor.² Such arms supply to the Houthis is a violation of the U.N arms embargo.

The Houthi rebels claimed responsibility

Yemeni Houthi fighters say they have hit a vessel operated by the United Arab Emirates military, which is part of an Arab coalition fighting in support of Yemen's government. "Rockets targeted an Emirati warship as it approached the coast of Mokha on the Red Sea and It was completely destroyed," said the Iran-allied Houthis on their sabanews.net website.³

A video posted on the Houthi-run Al Masirah TV showed a vessel being targeted at night and later was on fire.⁴

Mohammed Al Bukhaiti, a spokesman for the Houthi fighters, said he did not believe the ship was carrying aid material. "In any case, the Yemeni people consider the Emiratis and Saudis their enemies and so anything belonging to them is a legitimate target," said al-Bukhaiti, speaking by phone from the Yemeni capital, Sana'a.⁵

Iranian Press TV reported rebels warned the coalition if it sent a ship into "territorial waters" it would be attacked.

The missile attacks on USS Mason

The United States strongly condemned the "unprovoked attack" by the Houthis on the UAE ship. "We call on the Houthi-Saleh groups to immediately cease attacks against all vessels. These provocative actions risk exacerbating the current conflict and narrow the prospects for a peaceful settlement," State Department spokesman John Kirby said.⁶

The U.S. Navy dispatched three warships to the southern end of the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Two U.S. Navy guided-missile destroyers, **USS Mason** and USS Nitze, joined USS Ponce, a floating staging ship which includes a complement of special operations forces.

Sending the warships to the Bab al Mandab strait is a show of force and message that the U.S Navy will ensure that shipping continues unimpeded in the strait.

On October 9, 2016, the **USS Mason** has been targeted, in a failed missile attack from territory in Yemen controlled by Houthi rebels. The destroyer at the time of the missile fire was north of the Bab al-Mandeb Strait.⁷ The USS Mason fired missiles defending itself and the USS Ponce, an amphibious dock ship, after it detected inbound cruise missiles presumably fired from Houthi militants on shore in Yemen.⁸

Both missiles impacted the water before reaching the ship. There were no injuries or damage to the ship. A Houthi military official denied reports that the rebel group had targeted the destroyer.⁹

Captain Jeff Davis, a Pentagon spokesman, has said that it is considering a military retaliation against Houthi militants in Yemen. The type of missiles fired at the Mason is still being assessed but Davis characterized the missiles as a shore-launched cruise missile. "Anytime anyone engages a U.S. Navy ship at sea in hostility... they do so at great peril to themselves," said Davis.¹⁰

The attack on the U.S destroyer occurred a day after Saudi coalition airstrikes on a funeral in Sana'a killed more than 140 people and wounded at least 525.¹¹

In response to the attack on the funeral, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps of Iran, widely seen as the main backers of the Houthis, issued an angry statement saying the rebel group, which Iran refers to as the Ansarullah movement, would “avenge” the bombing, which the statement called “a U.S., Saudi, Israeli joint conspiracy.” The statement concluded: “The glorious and sublime nation of Iran will continue to support the resistance of Muslim nations, especially the innocent people of Yemen, against the Zionist wrongdoing of House of Saud and calls all divisions of the Islamic nation to condemn the great and brutal crime in Sana and unveil the face of hypocrites who claim to be servants of the holy shrines.”¹²

The U.S strike against Houthi radar facilities

The US military launched cruise missiles, on October 13, 2016, against three coastal radar sites in areas of Yemen controlled by Iran-aligned Houthi forces, after failed missile attacks on a U.S. Navy destroyer.¹³

US official said US Navy destroyer USS Nitze launched the Tomahawk cruise missiles. The official identified the areas in Yemen where the radar were targeted as: near Ras Isa, north of Mukha and near Khoka.¹⁴

Pentagon spokesperson Peter Cook said in a statement: ‘The United States will respond to any further threat to our ships and commercial traffic, as appropriate, and will continue to maintain our freedom of navigation in the Red Sea, the Bab al-Mandeb, and elsewhere around the world.’¹⁵

The Houthis condemned the strikes and denied the allegations that the missiles fired against the U.S ship were launched from areas under their control. Brigadier General Sharaf Luqman, a spokesman for Yemeni forces fighting alongside the Houthis, was quoted as saying ‘The direct American attack targeting Yemeni soil this morning is not acceptable’.¹⁶

Iran announced it had sent two warships to the Gulf of Aden, according to the semi-official Tasnim news agency, establishing a military presence in waters off Yemen.¹⁷ Although ostensibly deployed as part of a regular anti-piracy patrol, the timing suggested it was aimed at sending a signal to the U.S., which has vowed to retaliate against any new provocations from the Houthis.¹⁸

The US missile strikes, authorized by President Barack Obama, represent Washington’s first direct military action against suspected Houthi-controlled targets in Yemen’s conflict and raised questions about the potential for further escalation.

The Pentagon appeared to stress the defensive nature of the strikes, which were aimed at radar that enabled the launch of at least three missiles against the US Navy destroyer USS Mason. “These limited self-defense strikes were conducted to protect our personnel, our ships, and our freedom of navigation,” Pentagon spokesman Peter Cook said.

The third missile attack against U.S ships

On October 15, 2016, Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen may have launched missiles at U.S. Navy ships for the third time. Two guided-missile destroyers, the USS Mason and USS Nitze, as well as the amphibious transport ship USS Ponce were patrolling north of the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, when the incident occurred. The vessels detected possible inbound missile threats and deployed appropriate defensive measures. U.S. defense official said multiple missiles were fired at three ships patrolling international waters in the Red Sea, again from the coast of Yemen.¹⁹

The incident occurred two days after President Obama authorized a Tomahawk cruise missile strike against three Houthi radar facilities in Yemen in retaliation for two missile attacks against the US Navy ships.

The Houthi threat to the Red Sea maritime route

The rapid expansion of Houthi rebel control over large swathes of western Yemen, and their takeover of the Yemeni capital Sana'a in September 2014, with Houthi rebels in control of the Bab al Mandab straits and a number of ports along Yemen's Red Sea coast, has drawn the attention of those major regional and global players with an interest in Yemen's stability and continued access to the Gulf of Aden and the Bab al-Mandeb waterway.

Saudi coalition forces and forces loyal to President Hadi recaptured Perim island in the Bab al-Mandeb strait in October 2015, gaining a foothold on the strategic shipping lane which connects the Suez Canal and Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. But the Houthi fighters still control some of the heights which overlook the strait from the mainland, where there has been fierce fighting in recent days.²⁰

During the current civil war in Yemen the Houthis are launching a coastal defense campaign that appears to employ advanced anti-ship missiles. The units responsible for operating these systems hail from the elite Strategic Operations Command of the Saleh-aligned Yemeni armed forces.²¹ The Houthis have deployed the Chinese C-802, supplied by the Iran. The strike on the UAE ship was executed at night, possibly to avoid detection. During the 2006, Lebanon war, Hezbollah hit an Israeli Saar 5-class corvette with a C-802.

Since March 2015, the Houthis have claimed ten successful attacks on Saudi coalition vessels near the crucial Bab al-Mandeb Strait or off the coast of Mokha, but all were denied by the coalition.

Summary

Since March 2015, a Saudi-led Arab coalition has fought against the Iran backed Shi'a Houthis in Yemen. The UAE is a key member of the coalition that has been battling Houthi fighters and their allies in support of President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi's government.

The war in Yemen and the competition over control of the Bab El Mandab straits and the Red Sea maritime route are part of the regional conflict between Iran and its allies and Saudi Arabia and Egypt led moderate Arab Sunni coalition.

While a Houthi military official denied reports that the rebel group had targeted the U.S destroyer, the episode seemed to represent the first known instance in which the Houthis had fired on an American vessel since Yemen's civil war began in 2014.²²

Houthi attacks on American and coalition ships by anti-ship missiles would rise questions about safety of passage for military and civilian ships around the Bab al-Mandab Strait, one of the world's busiest shipping routes.

In Yemen, the United States actions have previously been confined to drone strikes against al-Qaida's affiliate there. The United States has provided limited support to the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthis over the past year with intelligence, weapons and mid-air refueling aircraft. The strikes, authorized by President Barack Obama, represent Washington's first direct military action against Houthi-controlled targets in Yemen's conflict.

The current threat to the maritime traffic in the strategic Bab El Mandab strait demands an increased presence and involvement of U.S and other western naval forces in the area, not only to guard shipping lanes and to enforce the naval blockade but to destroy the Houthi anti-ship missiles and to deter Iran from direct and indirect intervention in Yemen and the Red Sea region. Such active involvement has broad implications for the region and beyond.

Notes

¹ Lucas Tomlinson, US warships sent to area where Iran-backed rebels attacked Saudi-led coalition ship, FoxNews.com, October 03, 2016.

² A New Threat to Red Sea Shipping, Stratfor, October 5, 2016.

³ Yemen: Houthis claim attack on UAE military vessel, Al Jazeera, October 2, 2016.

⁴ Schams Elwazer and Joel Williams, UAE: Aid ship en route to Yemen struck by rebels, CNN, October 2, 2016.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Lucas Tomlinson, US warships sent to area where Iran-backed rebels attacked Saudi-led coalition ship, FoxNews.com, October 03, 2016.

⁷ US: Navy destroyer in missile attack from Yemen, Al Jazeera, October 9, 2016.

⁸ Alex Lockie, 'This is obviously a huge deal': US Navy ship fires 3 missiles in defense after being targeted near Yemen, Business Insider, October 12, 2016.

⁹ Saudi denounces Yemeni militia attack on US ship, Al Arabiya, October 10, 2016.

¹⁰ Luis Martinez, US Considering Retaliation for Missile Firing at Navy Ship, ABC News, October 12, 2016.

¹¹ Missiles fired from Yemen fall short of US warship: Navy, Ahram Online, October 10, 2016.

¹² Eric Schmitt and Thomas Erdbrink, U.S. Navy Ship Comes Under Fire Near Yemen, The New York Times, October 10, 2016.

¹³ Navy destroyer USS Mason was fired on again Saturday evening or Sunday morning Yemen time, two US officials said.

¹⁴ US retaliates, strikes Houthi militia radar sites, Al Arabiya, October 13, 2016.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Matthew Lee and Lolita C. Baldor, US strikes in Yemen risk wider entanglement in civil war, AP, October 14, 2016.

¹⁹ US warship possibly targeted by Yemen rebels for a third time, FoxNews.com, October 16, 2016.

²⁰ Yemen: Houthis claim attack on UAE military vessel, Al Jazeera, October 2, 2016.

²¹ "Yemeni Forces Send Another Saudi Warship Down," FARS News Agency, December 5, 2015. <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13940914000353>.

²² Eric Schmitt and Thomas Erdbrink, U.S. Navy Ship Comes Under Fire Near Yemen, The New York Times, October 10, 2016.