

Maritime Summary

On Thursday 11 January, the US and UK militaries launched strikes against Houthi targets in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen, in what is a significant response to the ongoing attacks by the militant groups on commercial shipping in the Red Sea. The global shipping industry is currently advising all vessels in the region to avoid the southern Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb Strait. The threat of further strikes on commercial shipping in this region remains **HIGH**.

US and coalition forces struck over sixty targets with more than 100 precision-guided munitions at 16 Iranian-backed Houthi militant locations, according to US Air Forces Central Commander Lt. Gen. Alex Grynkeiwich. He added that the Houthi assets included command and control nodes, munitions, depots, launching systems, production facilities, and air defence radar systems. A spokesperson for the Houthi rebels, Yahya Sare'e, has said that the strikes killed five and wounded six others, adding that they would not deter further Houthi attacks on shipping in the region. On 12 January, British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said that the strikes were an act of "self-defence," adding that the aim was to "de-escalate tensions and to restore stability to the region." The strikes have been condemned by several leaders across the Middle East. Iran has condemned the US and British attacks, while other nations have also criticized them. Russia has called for an urgent meeting of the UN Security Council to discuss the issue, while Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan disclosed on Friday that he considered the strikes a disproportionate use of force. Saudi Arabia has also called for restraint and "avoiding escalation."



Strike locations as of Jan. 12, 2024 at 8 a.m. ET. Houthi-controlled area as of Nov. 27, 2023.

Source: CNN

The air strikes come as the Houthis have defied international calls to halt their continued missile and drone attacks on Red Sea shipping routes. On 12 January, vessel-tracking data showed that a number of tankers that were heading towards the Bab el-Mandeb Strait either slowed down or u-turned around the time of the attacks. UKMTO reported on the evening of 12 January that a new missile attack had occurred off Yemen. The missile was fired towards a vessel some 90 miles southeast of Aden, Yemen, while the vessel was being followed by three small ships. The vessel's master

reported that the missiles had landed in the water 400 – 500 metres away from the ship, causing no damage or injuries.

Advisory

The global shipping industry is currently advising temporarily avoiding the Red Sea region in the wake of the UK and US bombing Houthi targets in Yemen overnight 11 – 12 January. The Combined Maritime Forces, which represents 39 navies including the US and UK, is currently advising all vessels to stay “well away” from the Bab el-Mandeb. The US Navy on 12 January also warned American-flagged vessels to stay out of areas around Yemen in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden for the next 72 hours. UKMTO is currently warning that “vessels are advised to transit with caution.” More than sixty airstrikes on Houthi targets in Yemen were launched in a bid to stop the attacks on commercial shipping in the southern Red Sea. In the wake of these airstrikes, the Houthi’s leader has vowed a big response – this highlights the immediate need for caution amongst merchant shippers in this region. The White House has said that the US expects the Houthis to try to strike back.

With the US and UK launching strikes on targets linked to Houthi militants in Yemen on 11 January, tensions in the region are likely to rise further in the coming days, and could include additional attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea, as well as possible seizures of vessels by the Iranian navy in the Gulf of Oman. Possible attacks targeting commercial shipping in the region could include deliberate sinkings, damage to vessels or seizure of vessels; hazards to safe navigation in shipping lanes; helicopter attacks; aerial threat and indirect fire risks from drones, missiles, ship and shore launched rocket systems; helicopter borne capture parties; small craft attacks and capture parties; sea drones and sea mines; state boardings and seizures (by Iran or other state actors); non-state actor boarding and capture of vessels (by Houthis and other non-state actors); pirate attacks and hijacking by Somali-based pirates. While initially, the Houthis stated that they would target Israeli-shipping, vessels with no links to Israel have been targeted, and in the wake of the US and British airstrikes, all vessels transiting this region are now at risk of being targeted.

Any vessels operating in the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandeb at this time are advised to exercise caution at all times. A pre-voyage risk and threat assessment should be carried out prior to entering this region, as well as a review of the vessel’s security plan. Security training and drills are advised and should be carried out prior to entering any areas of increased risk and strict observance of any exclusion zones or guidance issued by coastal states is strongly advised. When transiting this region, vessels are advised to ensure that AIS is always transmitting, except in extraordinary circumstances, and in accordance with the provisions of the International Convention for Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) and should monitor VHF Channel 16. Vigilance is critical when transiting this region and vessels should pay careful attention to any small craft approaching the vessel; it should be noted that fishermen regularly operate in these waters and may attempt to protect their nets by aggressively approaching merchant ships. Vessels are advised to immediately report any incidents and/or suspicious activity.

In addition to the heightened security situation in the Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandeb, there is also a risk of piracy in the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden off Somalia. Since late November 2023, Somali pirates have been implicated in three incidents that have targeted commercial shipping in the area – two hijackings in the Arabian Sea and one boarding in the Gulf of Aden. Additionally, a number of Iranian fishing vessels operating in the area have also been targeted and at least five Iranian fishing vessels have been hijacked. These attacks are allegedly in response to illegal Iranian fishing in Somali waters, which has threatened the livelihoods of local fishermen. Somali pirates have also threatened to use these hijacked vessels as motherships to target other vessels transiting this region.