

### Maritime Summary

The situation in the Red Sea remains heightened this week after a string of missiles and drones were launched by Iranian-backed Houthi rebels on the night of 9 January, in what is the largest attack to date. Additionally, a vessel was boarded and seized by the Iranian Navy on 11 January. In the wake of these recent incidents, late on Thursday evening (UK time) US officials reported that US and UK forces have begun air strikes against Houthi rebel targets in Yemen. This comes just hours after reports emerged that the UK cabinet was meeting to discuss potential attacks on the Houthi rebels.

On 11 January, UKMTO received a report of a vessel being boarded by several armed unauthorized persons at approximately 0330 UTC in position 243500N – 0573500E, 50 nautical miles east of Sohar, Oman. The Iranian Navy has since confirmed that it has seized an oil tanker in the Gulf of Oman. This comes after the vessel *ST NIKOLAS* was reported to have been boarded by armed men during the morning hours of Thursday. While state-run IRNA news agency confirmed the boarding, it did not identify the vessel, stating only that it came as a



result of a judicial order. In a statement released earlier in the day, the Greek shipping company that the vessel is associated with acknowledged that it had lost contact with the ship, which has a crew of 18 Filipino and one Greek national. The *ST NIKOLAS* was previously involved in a dispute with the US justice department, which saw a million barrels of Iranian crude oil seized.

The latest incident comes amidst continuing heightened tensions in the region and regular missile and drone launched against commercial ships by Houthi militants in the Red Sea. The Iranian government has previously seized vessels on the grounds that they were transporting illegal.

On the night of 9 January, Houthi rebels fired their largest-ever barrage of drones and missiles targeting shipping in the Red Sea. The US and British navies shot down several projectiles, authorities confirmed on Wednesday, with no reports of any damage. According to US Central Command, Houthi militants launched a combination of anti-ship missiles, suicide drone UAVs and anti-ship ballistic missiles towards shipping lanes, beginning at about 2115 hrs on Tuesday. The attack defied a warning from the White House and coalition partners that was issued on 3 January. It also came as the United Nations Security Council on Wednesday voted to condemn the continued attacks as it demanded an immediate halt to the attacks by the rebels.

On 11 January, reports emerged that the UK cabinet was meeting to discuss potential strikes on Houthi rebels in response to the latest attacks on ships in the Red Sea. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's cabinet met on Thursday evening

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UK time amidst expectations of UK involvement in imminent military strikes against Houthi rebel targets. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken previously stated that any further attacks by the Yemeni rebels on international shipping could prompt a western military response. Any UK strikes are expected to involve US forces.

Hours after reports emerged that the UK cabinet was meeting to discuss these strikes, four US officials confirmed on Thursday that the US and Britain have started carrying out strikes against targets linked to Houthis in Yemen. The UK's strikes were carried out by jets flying from Akrotiri, Cyprus, with four RAF Typhoons conducting air strikes on two Houthi targets. The US meanwhile used warship-launched Tomahawk cruise missiles and fighter jets, which targeted Houthi logistical hubs, air defence systems and arms depots, according to US officials. The strikes have been confirmed by British PM Sunak and US President Biden. This is the first time that strikes have been launched against the group since it began targeting international shipping in the Red Sea late last year. Additionally, they are believed to be the first strikes that the US has carried out against the Houthis in Yemen since 2016. Earlier on Thursday, the Houthi's leader warned that any US attack on the group would not go without a response. Shortly after the UK and US strikes were launched, the Houthis' deputy foreign minister Hussein al Izzi was quoted by Yemeni TV channel Al-Masirah as saying that the US and UK will "pay a heavy price" for this "blatant aggression." Additionally on Thursday, the US military reported that Houthis had fired an anti-ship ballistic missile into international shipping lanes in the Gulf of Aden, in what is the 27<sup>th</sup> attack by the group since 19 November.

### Advisory

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. 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.