

Current Situation

On Sunday 19 November 2023, a Bahamas-flagged cargo vessel was seized in the Red Sea by Yemen's Houthi rebels, raising concerns that already heightened regional tensions, stemming from the ongoing Israel-Hamas war, could now be impacting maritime in this vital shipping region. According to UKMTO, the vessel *GALAXY LEADER* was hijacked some 150 km (90 miles) off the coast of the Yemeni port city of Hodeida, near the coast of Eritrea. A Houthi official has confirmed that the vessel has been taken while a maritime source in the city of Hodeida is reporting that the ship has been taken to the port of Salif. Israel has also confirmed the incident, with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office reporting that 25 crewmembers were on board the hijacked vessel, including Bulgarian, Filipino, Mexicans and Ukrainians. No Israeli nationals are believed to have been on board the vessel at the time of the hijacking.



This hijacking incident comes after Yemen's Houthi leader disclosed last week that his forces would make further attacks on Israel and they could target Israeli ships in the Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandeb Strait. Additionally earlier on Sunday, the rebels threatened to target Israeli-linked vessels in the Red Sea. A spokesperson for the group urged "the world to withdraw its citizens working on the crews of these ships, avoid shipping on or handling such vessels, and to stay away from them." Last month, Houthi rebels were suspected of sending missiles and drones over the shipping lane in the Red Sea. Overall, tensions in this region have been significantly heightened in the wake of the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war.

Advisory

Since 7 October 2023, tensions have been heightened in this region due to Hamas' attack on Israel and the ongoing Israel-Hamas war. This includes the Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandeb, which currently are areas of concern. In the wake of the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war, the United States and United Kingdom have increased their naval presence in the region and since 7 October, a number of incidents have been reported in this area. On 19 October, the guided-missile destroyer *USS CARNEY* intercepted at least three missiles that were fired from Yemen. The vessel also took down an unspecified number of drones that had been launched from Yemen. US officials currently believe that the vessel was not specifically targeted, and that these drones and missiles were being fired towards Israel. More recently, the *USS THOMAS HUDNER* shot down a suspicious drone, with the Pentagon confirming on 15 November that the destroyer "engaged and shot down the drone to ensure the safety of US personnel." Additionally this week, the Houthi rebel group has threatened to attack Israeli shipping in the Red Sea.

Maritime Advisory: Red Sea (19 Nov 2023)

In the wake of the heightened threat level in this region, IMSC and the Coalition Task Force Sentinel from Bahrain have issued recommended procedures for vessels transiting this area. They advise that vessels should, whenever possible, carry out transits at night “to reduce the likely hood of visual identification by ‘malign actors.’” They further recommend that vessels communicate either with the UKMTO or US Naval Forces Central Command of their movements ahead of time or in the event that there is reason for elevated concern. Additionally vessels should report any incidents or suspicious activity and should exercise caution when transiting this region. In recent years, commercial vessels transiting this region have been harassed and/or seized. Small boats and/or helicopters have been used to board commercial vessels in an attempt to force them into territorial waters. Due to the heightened tensions, the possibility for misidentification remains high and could potentially lead to aggressive actions against any commercial vessel transiting this region. Additionally, threats in the wider Gulf of Aden and Red Sea regions remain, and come from drones, limpet mines, explosive boats, armed robbers and pirates. Vessels transiting this region could also encounter navigational or communication disruptions, such as GPS interference and AIS spoofing.

Vessels operating in the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandeb 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 to 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 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 vessels. Immediately report any incidents and/or suspicious activity.

The implications of this incident are clear. If it is verified that Houthi rebels used a helicopter to land a boarding party and hijack a vessel then existing ISPS code practices and BMP5 drills will not be sufficient alone to deter and resist future incidents of this type. As long as an air threat exists from Yemeni territory Masters will need advice on posture and response. This may include temporarily ensuring watches include air sentries with ongoing communication with authorities to verify the identity of aircraft activity and intentions when spotted. Against this backdrop there is a risk that Somali pirates may attempt attacks and vessels with low freeboard in particular need to ensure adherence to normal drills and preparations to deter this risk. Industry leaders will need to work closely with international agencies and friendly naval forces to develop drills that are practicable to cascade and give confidence to maintain planned seagoing operations.