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**Houthi armed attacks on shipping in the Red Sea also threaten Africa's maritime interests**

**Background**

Following the entry of the [multi-state Saudi coalition's intervention in Yemen](#) circa 2014 on the side of the Yemen Government to fight the [Houthi rebel movement](#), one unexpected outcome manifested at sea. Largely confined to the Gulf of Aden and the southern entrance to the Red Sea, the Houthi rebels [also extended operations out to sea](#) alongside their landward campaign. From the outset, naval mines, drone boats and anti-ship missiles from government stocks and Iranian support offered the Houthis armed means to attack civilian and naval shipping off the Yemen coast. Since December 2023 however, and in solidarity with the Palestinian cause stimulated by the destructive Israeli response to a deadly Hamas attack on Israel, the threat suddenly escalated with a Houthi declaration to attack [all shipping vessels bound for Israeli ports](#). This stance further escalated to include all shipping trading with Israel.

**Setting the scene**

Since February 2022 the naval standoff in the Russia-Ukraine War dominated maritime security debates. In November 2023 and in the wake of the Hamas-Israeli confrontation the focus shifted to the Red Sea and approaches off Yemen with a sudden spate of armed attacks on commercial and naval vessels from Houthi controlled territory. The sea lane between Yemen and the Horn of Africa [serves high volumes of shipping](#) travelling between the Indo-Pacific and the Mediterranean Sea as all traffic must pass through the Red Sea, Suez Canal, and the Bab el Mandeb. In addition, the latter waters are physically [hemmed in by geography](#) and bordered by unstable countries like Somalia, Yemen, Sudan and Eritrea that have already impacted maritime security in this region. Furthermore, a littoral country such as [Djibouti houses large international military bases](#) under the banner of also maintaining maritime security in the surrounding seas. These very waters [have now become subject to threats](#) that reach beyond maritime security threats such as piracy, robbery, smuggling, and illegal fishing activities.

During December 2023 the Houthi leadership based in Haidoa on the southern entrance to the Red Sea announced an all-out campaign to attack any vessels related to Israel or conveying Israeli connected freight. This follows in the wake [of several missile and drone attacks](#) and interception of vessels off Yemen in the preceding days. Overall, the situation off the coast of Yemen bordering the Red Sea and its southern entrance [suddenly assumed a much higher threat profile](#). Initiated by a helicopter borne assault, drone and missile attacks on commercial and naval vessels escalated. Given that the Houthi movement (parading as the official Yemen government versus the [official recognized government](#)) conducts the attacks, a non-state insurgent movement is now conducting indiscriminate armed attacks on shipping with standoff military systems uncommon to the inventory of non-state armed groups. It is probably no secret that the drones and missiles employed are primarily of Iranian origin and supplied directly or via the [Iranian supported Hezbollah movement](#).

Overall, the situation off Yemen demonstrates how a non-state actor with external military support and ideological solidarity adjacent to a strategic sea route can extend its operations offshore and threaten both naval and international commercial shipping. Unfortunately the impact of the escalation [cannot be confined to the waters off Yemen](#). Armed attacks and related threats to maritime security hold international ripple effects and in this case for Africa as well.

### **What implications for African maritime security?**

Following the successful suppression of piracy off Somalia, the Horn region is once again subjected to escalating maritime security threats of a [destructive nature](#) now depicting a clear political agenda. The attacks do not display the flashy piracy catchphrase, but a threat with strong militant, political and military features. This development arises as Somalia and the broader African Horn region emerge from the piracy yoke that for years disrupted international shipping in the surrounding waters. The latest Yemeni threat requires more than mere policing, [but naval action and wider international responses have already begun to take shape](#) to bring about an immediate dampening effect to help restore good order at sea.

The demonstration effect of the Houthi actions on irregular groups further south must not be ignored. Al Shabaab is still very active in Somalia, so are piracy syndicates slumbering or engaged in other criminal activities. A successful Houthi campaign against shipping will not go unnoticed and the successful coercion of Israel can become a catalyst for action in the overall irregular force architecture embedded along Africa's eastern littoral against actors deemed unwelcome in the region. Growing access to a supply of new generation standoff weapons is a development not to be underestimated given its rapid escalation in the Russia-Ukraine war and now used by the Houthis. In reality, the Houthi actions have breached the brittle divide between criminal and politico-military armed actions against international shipping.

Houthi-led attacks keeps raising the levels of maritime insecurity and shipping is increasingly being rerouted south around [South Africa and the Cape Sea Route](#). On this route some vessels must traverse the Mozambique Channel and sail close to the insurgency in northern Mozambique harbouring a radical movement having [declared its Islamic State sympathies](#). In this case, facilitating factors such as ideological affiliation, training, technology access, proximity to coastal waters, and target opportunities must be considered.<sup>1</sup> The one country that must play its role as a dependable maritime security provider given these developments, is South Africa.

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<sup>1</sup> Asal, V. and Hastings, J.V., 2015. When terrorism goes to sea: Terrorist organizations and the move to maritime targets. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 27(4), pp.722-740.

South Africa has an international obligation to help secure this route by maintaining good order at sea and help ensure safety of shipping around its coast. This implies a wide range of [constitutional, international, and related obligations](#) that South Africa is signatory to and expected to uphold for all shipping as a responsible maritime safety and security agent. In addition, South Africa must cope with the increased number of vessels of various kinds, assist with safety and rescue missions when called upon, probably coordinate the regional effort and be able to guarantee naval and coast guard services when required. South Africa must demonstrate, not merely declare its willingness and readiness to uphold international maritime security, trade, and safety regimes. The Cape Sea route has now become a critical alternative sea route in a fast-changing geopolitical landscape not only in the Middle East, but regarding the Indo-Pacific as well that raise the importance of the southern route with South Africa as a pivotal state for ensuring its safety and security.

### Concluding remarks

The growing Houthi military threat to international shipping is [rapidly escalating](#) and has migrated from the criminal to the politico-military domains. Directing shipping around the Cape Sea Route is the only viable alternative if softer counter-measures fail to blunt the spate of Houthi armed attacks and a military confrontation ensues. Redirecting shipping around Africa's southern tip highlights South Africa as a critical link in the global maritime architecture of secured maritime routes to maintain stability in the international maritime trade system. To this effect South Africa who presents itself as a cooperative international player and security provider must shoulder its [maritime obligations](#). To this effect government must capacitate its agencies to secure the Cape Sea route by cooperating with national, regional, and international state and non-state partners to prevent and if necessary, respond to threats. This once again turns the spotlight to the absence of a coordinated national maritime security strategy that still seems to be eschewed by South Africa's security agencies and their principles.

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