

# Despite the Houthi Pledge to Limit Attacks, the Red Sea Remains Highly Volatile

by [Noam Raydan \(/experts/noam-raydan\)](/experts/noam-raydan), [Farzin Nadimi \(/experts/farzin-nadimi\)](/experts/farzin-nadimi)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Noam Raydan \(/experts/noam-raydan\)](/experts/noam-raydan)

Noam Raydan is a Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute.



[Farzin Nadimi \(/experts/farzin-nadimi\)](/experts/farzin-nadimi)

Farzin Nadimi, a Senior Fellow with The Washington Institute, is a Washington-based analyst specializing in the security and defense affairs of Iran and the Persian Gulf region.



Brief Analysis

**The Houthis have shown little willingness or ability to accurately distinguish between the ships they target, leaving Washington and its partners with no choice but to doubt the group’s supposed “ceasefire” and keep up the pressure.**

**O**n January 22, the Houthis released the crew of the *Galaxy Leader*, a car carrier that they seized in the Red Sea on November 19, 2023, as part of their wide-ranging, months-long anti-shipping campaign. The Yemeni group captured the vessel due to its Israeli links, but the twenty-five seafarers are nationals of Bulgaria, Mexico, the Philippines, Romania, and Ukraine. Their release came three days after a ceasefire was announced in the Hamas-Israel war in Gaza—a development that led the Houthis to pledge they would **immediately limit** (<https://www.loydslist.com/LL1152274/Houthis-announce-partial-stop-to-Red-Sea-attacks>) any further attacks to vessels flagged as Israeli or “wholly owned by Israeli individuals or entities.” The group also claimed it would end “sanctions” (threats) against Israeli ships “upon the full implementation of all phases” in the **three-phase Gaza agreement** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/opening-floodgates-gaza-deal-and-trumps-presidency>).

Although freeing the multinational crew of the *Galaxy Leader* (IMO identification number 9237307) is quite welcome

after years of [persistent calls \(https://www.bimco.org/news-insights/press-media/press-releases/2024/20240219-galaxy-leader/\)](https://www.bimco.org/news-insights/press-media/press-releases/2024/20240219-galaxy-leader/) for their release, the Houthis promise to halt attacks against non-Israeli vessels has been met with doubt, and several shipping companies and [insurance companies \(https://www.spglobal.com/commodity-insights/en/news-research/latest-news/shipping/012125-ship-cargo-insurers-reluctant-to-cover-red-sea-transit-until-ground-level-threat-near-zero\)](https://www.spglobal.com/commodity-insights/en/news-research/latest-news/shipping/012125-ship-cargo-insurers-reluctant-to-cover-red-sea-transit-until-ground-level-threat-near-zero) are still rightfully [cautious \(https://www.tradewindsnews.com/tankers/-infinitely-complex-situation-ardmore-shipping-still-steering-clear-of-red-sea-despite-houthis-ceasefire/2-1-1767622\)](https://www.tradewindsnews.com/tankers/-infinitely-complex-situation-ardmore-shipping-still-steering-clear-of-red-sea-despite-houthis-ceasefire/2-1-1767622). The Houthis have made clear they are ready to resume their military activities if the fragile Gaza truce falters, or if the U.S. and British militaries strike additional targets in the Houthi-controlled parts of Yemen. “We have our finger on the trigger,” warned leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi in a [televised speech \(https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/yemen-monitoring-ceasefire---we-have-our-finger-on-trigger\)](https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/yemen-monitoring-ceasefire---we-have-our-finger-on-trigger) on January 20. Moreover, they have repeatedly used inaccurate or outdated information to identify and target commercial ships over the past year, and this track record will ensure that the Red Sea remains a highly volatile route as long as the group controls traffic through the Bab al-Mandab Strait.

## What Makes a Ship “Israeli”?

**A**fter the Hamas-Israel war broke out, the Houthis pledged solidarity with Gaza and used a combination of weapons to attack ships trading globally and threaten the lives of seafarers. This campaign included the use of antiship ballistic missiles for the first time. The Houthis sank two vessels last year, and a couple other ships required urgent [salvage operations \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/five-lessons-sounion-salvage-crisis-red-sea\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/five-lessons-sounion-salvage-crisis-red-sea) to avoid environmental disasters (for details, see The Washington Institute’s [Maritime Incident Tracker \(https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/756ca769315d4b879ca7fdd6bd4a82be\)](https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/756ca769315d4b879ca7fdd6bd4a82be)). The attacks also killed at least one seafarer and wounded several others.

Making matters worse, it is unclear what shipping database the Houthis used to extract ownership information and determine their target list. Close examination of attacks since December 2023 shows that despite attacking some ships with direct and indirect links to Israel (and to Israeli partners the United States and the United Kingdom), the Houthis also used inaccurate information to strike many vessels with numerous other affiliations.

In February 2024, for example, they launched an antiship ballistic missile at the Belize-flagged general cargo ship *Rubymar* (IMO 9138898), labeling it as a “British” vessel. Yet the ship—which [sank \(https://apnews.com/article/yemen-houthi-rebels-rubymar-sinks-red-sea-fb64a490ce935756337ee3606e15d093\)](https://apnews.com/article/yemen-houthi-rebels-rubymar-sinks-red-sea-fb64a490ce935756337ee3606e15d093) in early March with its cargo of fertilizer—was owned by a Lebanon-based company and had no links to the UK.

The risk of such mistakes (intended or not) is compounded by the fact that ships often switch owners or operators, and these changes are not always reflected immediately in online databases. The same goes when investors withdraw stakes from certain shipping firms. For example, when the Marshall Islands-flagged oil/chemical tanker *Ardmore Encounter* (IMO 9654579) was attacked in December 2023, it was owned by Ireland-based Ardmore Shipping and had no clear links to Israel. Two weeks later, a report by [TradeWinds \(https://www.tradewindsnews.com/tankers/idan-ofer-sold-off-ardmore-shipping-shares-months-before-red-sea-attack/2-1-1575990\)](https://www.tradewindsnews.com/tankers/idan-ofer-sold-off-ardmore-shipping-shares-months-before-red-sea-attack/2-1-1575990) untangled the case of mistaken identity—the strike was seemingly driven by the belief that Israeli shipping magnate Idan Ofer had a stake in the company, but Ofer’s shares had been sold off months before the attack.

The Houthis also incorrectly slapped the “Israeli” label on certain vessels owned by the world’s largest liner operator, the Switzerland-based company MSC. These included the Liberia-flagged container ship *MSC Sarah V* (IMO 9181675), which was hit with a missile in June 2024 while en route to Abu Dhabi. Some attacks on MSC ships seemed to stem from the company’s vessel-sharing deals, slot-swapping agreements, and other trade cooperation with the

Israeli shipping firm ZIM. Unsurprisingly, MSC recently joined other companies in [announcing \(https://www.tradewindsnews.com/containers/msc-swerves-red-sea-return-as-cma-cgm-dips-a-toe-back-in-troubled-waters/2-1-1767773\)](https://www.tradewindsnews.com/containers/msc-swerves-red-sea-return-as-cma-cgm-dips-a-toe-back-in-troubled-waters/2-1-1767773) that it would continue diverting its cargoes around the much longer Cape of Good Hope route for now despite the Houthi pledge to halt Red Sea strikes.

In examining the 100+ Houthi ship attacks between November 2023 and December 2024, one can readily see that only a narrow subset of vessels have been permitted to transit the Gulf of Aden and the southern Red Sea. Ships linked to [China \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/ship-operators-shrugging-houthi-attacks\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/ship-operators-shrugging-houthi-attacks) and [Russia \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/even-after-houthi-attacks-russia-linked-tankers-return-red-sea\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/even-after-houthi-attacks-russia-linked-tankers-return-red-sea) in particular are key users of this route. Yet they are not completely safe—the Houthis [have attacked \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/houthi-attacks-russia-linked-tankers\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/houthi-attacks-russia-linked-tankers) a few vessels linked to Russia's oil trade, once again based on inaccurate data. Even two Iran-bound bulk carriers were attacked in the Red Sea in February and May 2024, including the *Laax*  [\(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/behind-houthi-attacks-ships-operated-greece-based-companies\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/behind-houthi-attacks-ships-operated-greece-based-companies) (IMO 9512355)

## Policy Recommendations

**T**he persistent Houthi military threat against international shipping will remain a pressing concern despite the group's announced pause in attacks. The Houthis will continue using the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab as strategic chokepoints to project power and exert leverage in regional conflicts. They can also be expected to establish a [maritime traffic center \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-evolving-approach-asymmetric-naval-warfare-strategy-and-capabilities-persian\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-evolving-approach-asymmetric-naval-warfare-strategy-and-capabilities-persian) to monitor and interrogate all passing vessels, similar to the one operated by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in the Strait of Hormuz.

Indeed, even if the Gaza ceasefire leads to a visible decrease in Red Sea attacks, it will not alter the Houthis' opportunistic nature or their hostility toward the United States, UK, and Israel. Despite numerous U.S. and British airstrikes against the group's military sites in Yemen, they still possess a sophisticated arsenal that includes ballistic and cruise missiles and long-range one-way attack drones, many of them supplied or developed by Iran.

Moreover, given the Houthis' history of using ceasefires to regroup and rearm, they may intend to exploit the current pause in hostilities to prepare for future offensives. And Iran can be expected to help them further expand their military industries and mass-produce advanced weapon designs more efficiently and independently. Even the group's existing weapons pose a severe risk to merchant and military vessels at considerable distances, as far away as the central Red Sea and western Arabian Sea. Its unmanned explosive-laden boats—often guided by GPS or remotely controlled—have been especially challenging to detect and intercept, adding another layer of complexity to maritime security operations in the area. Such weapons also pose risks to critical infrastructure in U.S. regional partner states.

To mitigate these threats, the United States and its partners must take firm steps on several fronts:

- Maintain a coordinated and constant naval presence aimed at preserving freedom of navigation in the region.
- Invest in advanced detection, intelligence-sharing, and countermeasure technologies.
- Impose stringent sanctions on Iran and other entities involved in transferring weapons and resources to the Houthis.
- Create new coalitions involving Red Sea nations such as Egypt, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan to coordinate defensive measures and maintain safe passage.

They must also build a coalition to sustain diplomatic and economic pressure on Iran, emphasizing that Tehran

cease its military support to the Houthis.

Noam Raydan and Farzin Nadimi are senior fellows at The Washington Institute and co-creators of its [Maritime Spotlight series \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/maritime-spotlight\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/maritime-spotlight). ❖

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