

The Saudi-Houthi War at Sea

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Brief Analysis

This week's apparent suicide strike on a Saudi warship highlighted the difficulty of protecting military vessels against small-boat attacks, as well as the ongoing struggle to break the stalemate in Yemen.

On January 30, a Saudi frigate was reportedly struck by a Houthi suicide operation while patrolling the Red Sea. Claimed [video of the incident \(http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38808345\)](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38808345) taken from two small boats suggests a powerful attack against what appears to be a French-built frigate of the Saudi navy. From a distance, the footage shows a third small boat approach the frigate, hit its stern, and explode in a massive fireball, seemingly contradicting initial reports of a missile strike. The attack happened off a Houthi-controlled portion of Yemen's coast, and the video includes audible shouting of a known Houthi slogan.

The Saudi military acknowledged that two of its sailors were killed and three injured, but also claimed that the ship continued its patrol duties. If so, it was lucky to escape serious damage to its steering and propulsion.

Good fortune aside, the incident suggests troubling vulnerabilities in the Saudi navy. Western forces in the region believe the kingdom's fleet is limited to daytime operations because of crewmen's inability to fully operate the sophisticated technology on their otherwise top-of-the-line equipment. Yet this attack happened in broad daylight, and a potential suicide boat should never have been allowed to get so close given the ship's capabilities.

For example, U.S. forces use maneuver and warning actions in such situations to determine if hostile intent exists,

including bridge-to-bridge communications, changes in speed and direction, flares, nonlethal cautionary actions, and warning shots. This allows them to either justify the use of force or deescalate the situation. Yet video of the Saudi incident shows no evidence of such action.

To be sure, the ship was largely designed for air defense and antisubmarine roles, so it may have been more vulnerable to a seaborne attack. While its 70 mm and 40 mm guns can be used against surface targets, they are primarily for air defense, and their location on the bow and midship may have limited field of fire astern and complicated defense measures once the smaller, faster boat closed within striking range. Even so, the frigate was designed to carry a helicopter, and there is no indication one was in the air during the incident. In a U.S. encounter, Navy helicopters would have tried to block the small boat early on, using flares, smoke floats, and warning shots to keep it well away from the ship.

Yesterday's attack also echoes certain aspects of [other naval attacks in the Yemeni theater](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/missile-attacks-on-the-uss-mason-principles-to-guide-a-u.s.-response) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/missile-attacks-on-the-uss-mason-principles-to-guide-a-u.s.-response>). On October 1, an antishipping missile launched from a Houthi-controlled coastal missile site severely damaged the *Swift*, a former U.S. Navy High Speed Vessel sold to the United Arab Emirates and operated by the Saudi-led coalition as a troop landing and logistics ship. Similar to the Saudi frigate, the *Swift* was shadowed and filmed by another vessel before being fired upon. The United States responded to that incident by sending a trio of warships to protect the narrow Bab al-Mandab shipping lane from further disruption. Over the following two weeks, the USS *Mason* warded off two further missile attacks, spurring Washington to order Tomahawk cruise missile strikes against Houthi-operated radar sites.

These strikes seemed to end the antishipping missile threat in the area, but yesterday's attack shows that the conflict's ripples are still being felt in the waters off Yemen. Although the Saudi frigate's presumed military mission -- enforcing a blockade on the nearby Houthi-controlled port of Hodeida -- may have been affected, the incident has wider implications than demonstrating the stalemate in the coalition campaign. The Bab al-Mandab Strait between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean is a potential chokepoint for international vessels using the Suez Canal to the north. On December 21, an Iranian-flagged cargo vessel was allegedly attacked there, though sources are unclear whether it was hit by a Saudi airstrike or rocket fire from a nearby boat. Further attacks on commercial shipping would likely cause an immediate reaction in the insurance market.

Moreover, Iran's reported backing of the Houthi rebels necessarily raises comparisons between the Bab al-Mandab situation and the even more significant chokepoint in the Persian Gulf's Strait of Hormuz, through which a significant portion of the world's oil supplies flow. Small, fast boats deployed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps regularly harass U.S. Navy ships and others transiting that narrow waterway, using tactics similar to those seen in the Saudi frigate attack.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

Warships operating in the Bab al-Mandab will be at risk until Yemen's 1,100-mile coastline is secure.

Accordingly, the U.S. military should increase its transfer of tactics, techniques, and procedures to Saudi Arabia and the UAE so that they can better defend themselves against antishipping missiles and hostile small boats. Such efforts would quickly help Saudi-led naval forces operating against the Houthis to protect their vessels while deterring future aggression through denial of its effects. Additionally, U.S. forensics experts should be sent to discover the origin of weaponry used against the frigate, thus providing the coalition with further information on thwarting future attacks. More broadly, Washington may want to treat the incident as an opportunity to press Riyadh on seeking a diplomatic resolution to the conflict rather than persisting with what appears to many as an unwinnable war.

For its part, Iran will no doubt be watching closely to see how the Trump administration responds to yesterday's incident. In that sense, Houthi tactics in the Bab al-Mandab might even be a dress rehearsal for Iranian behavior in the Strait of Hormuz. Although Tehran would be loath to block its own oil exports through that waterway, it also remains eager to be seen as the Gulf's dominant power, so escalating provocations are possible.

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