

# War of attrition could prolong Cape diversions

May 30, 2024



A Houthi forces helicopter approaches cargo ship Galaxy Leader in the Red Sea off the coast of Yemen on 19 November 2023 / Uncredited photo released by Houthi Media Center via AP Images

Conflict in the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandeb region could be entering a prolonged period of attrition as coalition forces seek to degrade the Houthi's military capability with both sides considering a tactical shift in operations, with failure of western military to prevent attacks.

Security firm Dryad Global reported this week that attacks on commercial vessels have reduced, while strikes against coalition forces have continued at a steady pace. The reduction of strikes on commercial vessels can be attributed to the fact that many ships have diverted around the Cape.

Corey Ranslem, CEO at Dryad Global, told *Container News*: "International coalition troops will most likely have to conduct land operations to lessen the Houthi threat if Houthi strikes continue to impede marine channels in the Red Sea.

"The US and UK have launched expensive military efforts to fight the danger to international sea waterways because of fear of extended attrition, but the results have been negligible."

Houthi Movement tactics may be changing as a result of the shift of most commercial shipping via the much longer route to Europe from Asia around the African Cape.

"Evidence suggests a move away from full offensive operations and toward a war of attrition strategy by the Houthis," claimed Ranslem.

However, rather than ending the conflict the current tactics are expected to presage a war of attrition.

"There is a possibility this could prolong the conflict within the Red Sea. At this point, the overall number of attacks against commercial ships is down, but they are still happening," said Ranslem.

The Houthis will continue to attack, said Dryad, as long as they have the weapons to carry out the attacks or until the conflict in Gaza comes to an effective end.

In the meantime, coalition forces are continuing to mount operations against Houthi targets in Yemen.

"The multinational coalition led by the US and the UK continues to launch airstrikes to weaken Houthi military capabilities. To date, they have targeted over 90 sites, destroying roughly 25% of the Houthi arsenal of ballistic missiles, anti-ship cruise missiles, coastal radar systems, and suicide drones," claimed Ranslem.

However, Dryad admits that the calculation of Houthi capabilities is partly based on educated guesses as well as information gathering from both government and non-government sources.

Meanwhile, Dryad is continuing to question the coalition tactics with the implication that the costs may be prohibitive in the longer term.

"The global coalition uses million-dollar missiles to intercept low-cost Houthi rockets and drones worth thousands of dollars, significantly reducing the alliance's military capabilities. Each US\$5,000 drone launched by the Houthis in the Red Sea costs the Americans US\$2 million in air defence weapons," said Ranslem.

Houthi attacks, which are assisted by Iran in the Red and Arabian Seas, and the Gulf of Aden, through the provision of ship identification data, advanced

drones, anti-ship missiles, sea mines, and booby-trapped vessels, are considerably lower cost and more sustainable.

Moreover, Ranslem added: "A command centre was created in Sanaa to coordinate ship strikes, and the Iranian [vessel] MV Behshad provided C2 [command and control] capabilities until recently, enhancing aiming precision and frequency."

MV Behshad is a 23,200dwt general cargo vessel capable of handling up to 970 TEU containers, which was built in 1999. VesselsValue AIS currently shows this vessel steaming towards the Gulf of Oman.

Iranian involvement effectively means that eradicating Houthi attacks "will be a long-term effort, depending on whether Iranian weapons continue to be smuggled into Houthi-controlled ports."

As such Ranslem believes that this costly war for the coalition may require a change of tactics by the coalition too.

"Coalition forces may need to adopt a new strategy, such as launching an advanced offensive on weapons and missile depots, mobilisation and training camps, targeting commanders, and inflicting material losses, to force the Houthis to stop attacking ships in international shipping lanes," he noted.

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Mary Ann Evans  
Correspondent at Large