

## Yemen's Houthi Rebels Agree to Lift Red Sea Blockade



Houthi fighters sabotage the disabled bulker Tutor, sending it to the bottom, 2024 (Houthi Military Media)

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On Sunday, Yemen's Houthi rebels announced plans to phase down their campaign against shipping in the Red Sea, beginning with a cessation of hostilities against "non-Israeli" vessels.

The group's "Humanitarian Operations Coordination Center" issued a statement on Sunday reporting that the group is lifting its yearlong blockade on shipping in the Red Sea, following implementation of the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in Gaza last week. The first phase was a prisoner exchange between Israeli forces and Hamas; this took place successfully on Sunday with a trade of 90 Palestinian suspects for three Israeli hostages.

The center said that going forward, it would not attack most categories of ships, including ships bound for Israel; American or British ships; vessels partly owned by Israeli interests; or vessels operated by Israeli interests but owned by other nationalities. The Houthis still plan to attack vessels that are wholly Israeli-owned or are Israeli-flagged, at least until all phases of the ceasefire agreement are implemented. These fully-Israeli vessels are "prohibited from transiting the Red Sea, Bab-el-Mandeb, the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean at present," the HOCC said.

In a warning, the group said that it could resume hostilities against commercial shipping if U.S. and UK forces strike Yemen again. If that occurs, the group warned, it could resume its attacks on specifically American and British shipping.

On Friday, Houthi leader Malik Al-Houthi suggested that the group's "naval operations have reached a decisive result and a real victory" in the announcement of the ceasefire, but warned that the group's

activities could resume if fighting returns to Gaza. "At any stage in which the Israeli enemy returns to aggression and escalation, we will be ready to support [Hezbollah]," said Al-Houthi.

The group's decision to back away from further anti-ship missile and drone strikes had been anticipated by many in the shipping industry. Dimitris Maniatis, CEO of Marisks, told Reuters that the Houthis' capabilities have been significantly reduced by Israeli and American airstrikes over the past month, leaving the group eager for "a pretext to announce a ceasefire" and end their campaign. Multiple other sources told Reuters that shipping interests are already eyeing a return to the Red Sea route, though blue-chip carriers have emphasized that they still plan to wait and see how the situation stabilizes.

Whether or not their assurances for Western shipping stay in place, Houthi forces have appeared to select vessel targets that do not align with their criteria in the past, and have occasionally attacked ships tied to their own foreign sponsors.

The fate of the hijacked car carrier *Galaxy Leader* and her stranded crew remain uncertain. The ro/ro has been detained at anchor off northwestern Yemen for more than a year.

On the same day as the HOCC's announcement, Houthi leaders claimed an eighth attempt to target the carrier USS *Harry S. Truman* in the Red Sea. As with previous claims of Houthi attacks on aircraft carriers, U.S. Central Command has not commented.