

‘Gate of Tears’ could be a strait too far for Trump’s military

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The Bab al-Mandeb Strait, where the Houthis have a history of holding trade hostage by firing missiles at ships Credit: Gallo Images

Vicious winds, dangerous crosscurrents, reefs and shoals have made the Bab al-Mandeb Strait one of the most perilous of shipping chokepoints.

The Gate of Tears – its Arabic translation – connects the Suez Canal and the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. It now has another threat in the form of Houthi rebels spoiling to join [the war in the Middle East](#).

On Saturday, the terror group – which has a history of holding trade hostage in Bab al-Mandeb by firing missiles at ships – boasted of [launching ballistic missiles at Israel](#).

Yet entering conflict [with the Yemen-based Houthis](#) may prove difficult for the US military, already stretched by plans to secure the Strait of Hormuz, defending its allies from air attacks and locating and destroying Iranian targets each day.

“The bottom line is the US couldn’t suppress sufficient fire against the Houthis last time, and now most of our air powers are employed attacking Iran over the strait and we are yet to succeed in that,” Benjamin Friedman, the policy director at Defense Priorities, a Washington-based think tank, told The Telegraph.

“You could probably get the navy to escort the cargo ships – but even then, some of them would probably still get hit, even if a drone wouldn’t cause much damage.”

Mr Friedman added: “If we tried to do escorts in both places [including Hormuz], it probably would be a stretch for our navy’s resources without help from allies. It probably would be too much of a stretch to do it all at once.”

He said the issue was “not just a military problem” but a “business problem”, with ship owners and insurers unlikely to risk a transit in the Bab al-Mandeb Strait while under Houthi fire, even if the chances of a vessel getting hit were low.

Around 12 per cent of global maritime trade passes through the strait, which is 18 miles wide at its narrowest point between Yemen and Djibouti. The Suez Canal, meanwhile, carries around 10 per cent of global maritime trade, including 40 per cent of the world’s container traffic.

However, Ruth Pines Feldman, a senior fellow at the Jerusalem-based Misgav Institute, said she believed the US could take on this war of three fronts.

“The United States has currently assembled a significant military presence in the Middle East, creating a massive regional ‘armada’ that provides the flexibility to address multiple threats at once,” she told The Telegraph.



Houthi fighters boarded a Liberian-flagged bulk carrier in the Red Sea off Yemen in July Credit: EPA/Shutterstock

While confident in the capabilities and assets of the Americans, Ms Pines Feldman said she did not believe the US would go so far as to carry out ground operations in Yemen.

“Such a move would inevitably divert critical military and diplomatic attention away from primary goals, contradicting the clear American preference to stabilise the region and drive toward a decisive conclusion of the military campaign,” she said.

Even so, she said the US would still want to build a “broad coalition, including Nato forces to join the effort”, adding: “This is not because the US lacks the military capacity to handle it alone, but rather to send a powerful message of a united front against enemy forces.”

In 2024, the European Union launched its own collaborative effort against the Houthis, known as Operation Aspides, which refers to the Greek term for shields.

Commercial ships were shielded by warships that accompanied them in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, protecting them from Houthi attacks.

On Sunday, France condemned two attacks by the Houthis on Israeli targets, accusing them of escalating tension in the Middle East by entering the regional war.



The Houthis' attacks on Israel risk drawing Yemen further into the war and could threaten shipping in the Red Sea Credit: YAHYA ARHAB/EPA/Shutterstock

“The Houthis should abstain from all attacks,” Pascal Confavreux, the French foreign ministry spokesman, said.

Any missiles launched by the rebel group at ships on the strait are more than likely to impact the economy on an international scale.

[Hormuz](#) – through which a fifth of the world's oil flows – has been all but blocked to every vessel other than ships owned by countries friendly to the Iranian regime.

On Monday, Brent crude rose more than 3 per cent, [reaching its highest point since March 19](#), when it briefly touched \$119 a barrel. It is now on course for its largest monthly gain on record.

Nayeem Noor, the vice president for business development at GMS, the world's largest cash buyer of ships, told NDTV: "Once Hormuz comes under pressure, attention immediately shifts to the next major chokepoint that can disrupt both energy flows and global trade.

"As the southern gateway to the Red Sea and Suez corridor, any serious threat there affects not only tankers but also container services, break-bulk, dry cargo movements, vessel availability, insurance, war risk premiums, and overall voyage economics on the Asia-Europe route."

[After Hormuz, a new choke point threatens world shipping](#)

Ashley Kelty, an analyst at UK investment bank Panmure Liberum, said: "The key port at Yanbu [on the Red Sea coast] has become a source for crude exports for Saudis, and while the volumes are not huge relative to amounts shut in in the Gulf, they are key to reducing the shortfalls in supply.

"If the Houthis deter shipping further, then it won't just be crude that is in short supply, as there are the refined products that are also being exported from Yanbu."

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which backs the Houthis, has boasted of its control over the strait in gleeful rhetoric issued through regime-controlled news agencies.

The Houthis are one of Iran's proxies in the Middle East, which challenge governments aligned with the West and Israel. Iran's Quds Force, part of the IRGC, provides these proxy groups with training, weapons and funds to further the Islamic Republic's objectives across the region.

On Wednesday, an unnamed Iranian military official was quoted as saying: "The Bab a-Mandeb Strait is among the most strategic straits in the world, and Iran has both the will and the capability to pose a fully credible threat against it."



The US is carrying out flight operations against military targets in Iran as the USS Abraham Lincoln sails in regional waters Credit: US Central Command

However, Dr Pnina Shuker, of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, questioned whether the Houthis would even return to attack cargo ships in the Red Sea under current circumstances, for fear of escalation.

She told The Telegraph: “I think it is too soon to determine if they will fully commit to a high-intensity campaign alongside Iran.

“Their military capacity has been significantly degraded by American and Israeli air campaigns during 2025, and their leadership faces severe economic fragility that may force them to prioritise regime survival over a total maritime blockade.”

Instead, Dr Shuker said she defined the Houthi position as “calculated escalation”, adding that the group was still trying to rebuild arms and infrastructure following last year’s US attacks.

She said: “I do believe that they will try to avoid a serious escalation, like blocking Bab al-Mandeb, and will focus mainly on launching missiles from time to time.”