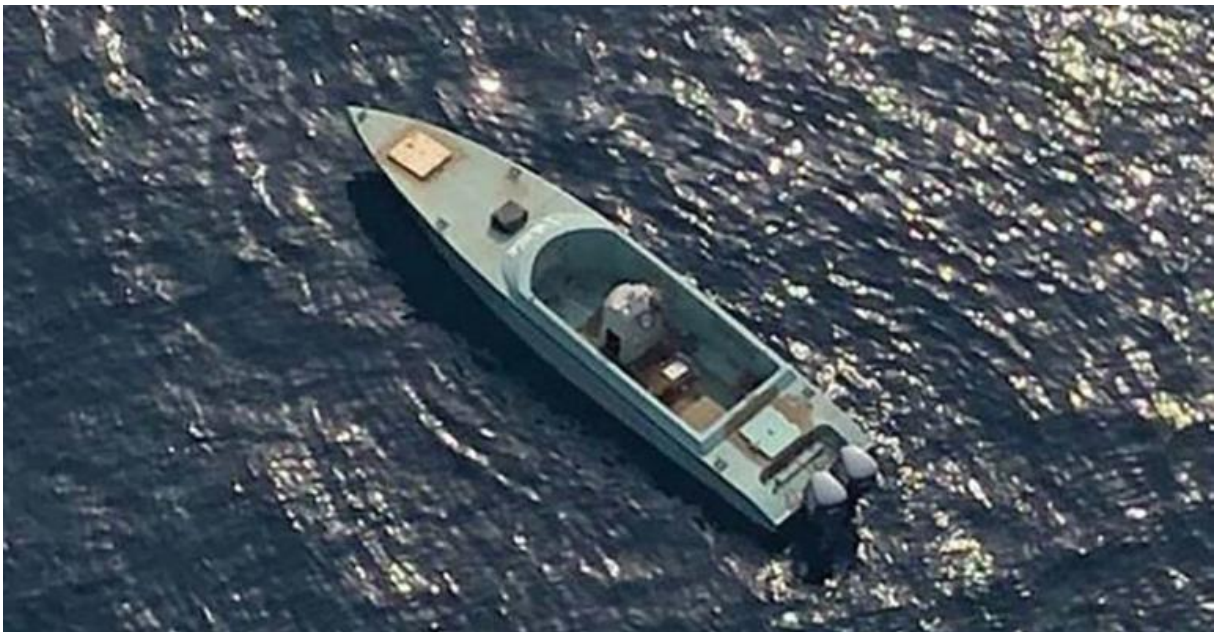


Houthi tactics take a dangerous new turn



Attacks on merchant shipping in the Red Sea by the Houthis are growing in number, range, and sophistication, despite continued destruction of their assets by coalition forces.

Nick Savides | Jul 03, 2024

On 1 July the US CENTCOM social media site reported it had destroyed a Houthi radar station, because the site “presented an imminent threat to US, coalition forces, and merchant vessels in the region”.

Attacks of this nature by coalition forces have been ongoing for more than six months, yet the threat from the Houthi movement appears to be growing rather than diminishing with attacks increasing, becoming more sophisticated and the area of Houthi operations spreading.

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Scarlett Suarez, senior intelligence analyst at Dryad Global believes that for all its sophisticated weaponry, “NATO retaliatory strikes have been largely ineffective,” and that the “Houthis are winning the propaganda war, and their supporters are putting pressure on their respective governments to not retaliate.”

According to Suarez, the Houthis have most likely co-located weapons caches, manufacturing and training facilities in the centre of civilian population centres to deter any coalition attacks.

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“Some arms imports take place via dhows; however, the Houthis main supply lines are land-based. The Houthis have developed a robust infrastructure of arms manufacturing within Yemen, only relying on Iran for certain components,” said Suarez.

More worryingly is the latest twist in this war of attrition as Houthi tactics have evolved, with the use of motherships to launch attacks first seen last month against the Tutor, and an incident last Sunday involving the 72,000 dwt bulker Summer Lady.

Dryad Global reported: “The Master of the Marshall Island-flagged cargo ship Summer Lady reported being approached by 12 small craft, including fast boats and smaller kayak-style boats, some of which were uncrewed service vessels (USVs).”

USVs are cheap to build, fast, can target vulnerable sections of the ship and can carry a larger weapons payload than missiles or crewed boats.

The security firm said: “Using a combination [of USVs] makes it more difficult to determine which ones carry explosives. The Houthis can launch attacks from a

distance using unmanned vessels, making it difficult for their targets to defend themselves. Furthermore, unmanned vessels can be used to gather intelligence and conduct surveillance on enemy ships.”

Motherships have in the past been used for vessel confirmation, targeted harassment and attempted boardings but the attack on the 82,400dwt Tutor, a two-year-old bulk carrier, took the life of a Filipino seafarer and ultimately sank the ship, thought to be the second loss of a ship and the fourth loss of a seafarer's life in this maritime conflict.

“The use of motherships controlling uncrewed vessels isn’t new, however, the incident with the Summer Lady is significant due to the number of boats used. This seems to indicate that the Houthis are expanding and refining their USV usage after the successful sinking of the Tutor,” explained Suarez.

The attack on the Tutor, which saw the ship sink on 19 June, was the first confirmed successful deployment of an USV.

That attack was launched from a mothership which, Dryad says, are difficult to identify as combat craft because they are typically fishing vessels and, unless they exhibit suspicious behaviour, are unlikely to be searched. With the political pressures now exerted on western forces they “are more on the defensive rather than offensive,” said Suarez.

Normally the Houthis use motherships to tow USVs, pick up pilots, and provide command and control during attacks. The basic design of USV's is an advantage in that the vessels do not rely on satellite communications, and can be used to launch attacks without endangering the lives of Houthi fighters, said Dryad Global.

“Aside from not traversing the area, crew members have no means to defend themselves from such attacks,” concluded Suarez.

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