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The Houthi Movement's Attacks on Israel-linked Ships and Iran's Motives

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The Houthi movement, Yemen's pro-Iranian militia, is calling for a halt to Israel's attacks on Gaza and is ramping up its attacks on "Israel-linked ships" passing through the Red Sea. Approximately 12% of the world's trade passes through the Red Sea, and over the period from January to November 2023, 8.2 million barrels a day (8.2 million b/d) of petroleum was transported via this seawater inlet. Of the petroleum that passes through the Red Sea, a total of 3.9 million b/d is petroleum headed from the Middle East and India to countries in Europe via the northbound route, while a total of 2.9 million b/d is petroleum headed from Russia to countries in Asia via the southbound route¹.

Accordingly, the string of attacks on Israel-linked ships by the Houthi movement has begun to be recognized as posing a new threat to the world's supply chains. It is said that if shipments were switched from the Red Sea to routes that pass around the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa, it would lengthen the number of days at sea by one to two weeks, resulting in an approximately 30% increase in transport costs. Nevertheless, major maritime transport companies in Europe and Asia have begun taking "measures to avoid the Red Sea, Yemen, and the Middle East region in the case of Israel-linked ships" one after another.

< The U.S.' response >

Facing the attacks on ships by the Houthi movement, the U.S. government announced the establishment of a coalition of the willing whose purpose is to "ensure security in the Red Sea." The U.S. military has from the outset been in a position of overseeing maritime security in the Middle East region, and the U.S. Naval Forces Central Command's Fifth Fleet, which is headquartered in Bahrain in the Persian Gulf, is assigned maritime law and order activities. The Fifth Fleet forms part of the multinational Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), in which 39 nations including Japan take part, and the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden come under the jurisdiction of Combined Task Force 153 (CTF 153), which

¹ [How would the Red Sea attacks affect gas shipping? | Reuters](#)

operates under the CMF's umbrella.

The recently founded coalition of the willing announced by the U.S. government will come under the command of this CTF 153 and will engage in "Operation Prosperity Guardian." According to the announcement by the U.S. government, 20 or more countries have already declared they will take part in this operation, which will oversee the safe passage of merchant ships in the Southern Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, and the Bab al-Mandab Strait, which divides them.

However, of these "20 or more countries," at least eight are reportedly "not officially admitting" their participation in this coalition of the willing, and conceivably, the deep sympathy that people in Arab nations feel for the Palestinian people forms a backdrop to that. The Houthi movement is attacking ships in the name of "support for Palestine," and the fact is, opposing the Houthi movement through participation in the coalition of the willing is likely to be interpreted as supporting the Israel-side, which continues to attack Gaza.

For example, Saudi Arabia, which faces the Red Sea, and Egypt, which generates an important source of revenue from tolls off the Suez Canal, which ships passing through the Red Sea are required to pay, both desire stability in the Red Sea, and neither country has a poor relationship with the U.S. either. That being the case, it would not be strange for them to be participating in this coalition of the willing, but in fact, whether or not they will take part remains unclear. That is because, amid their citizens' mounting animosity toward Israel, the governments of both Egypt and Saudi Arabia are refraining from even expressing an opinion on this coalition of the willing.

< Iran's motives >

The Houthi movement is described as a "pro-Iranian militia." It is conceivable that Iran is entrusting a number of expectations to this string of activities by the Houthi movement.

The first is that Iran, like the Houthi movement, wants to bring a halt to attacks on Gaza by Israel. U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin has censured the series of attacks by the Houthi movement, saying such action "threatens the free flow of commerce, endangers innocent mariners, and violates international law." However, people in the Middle East (including Iran) are asking the simple question of whether the large-scale attacks on Gaza by Israel are not "endangering innocent Palestinians." Many civilians are being caught up in Israel's attacks on Gaza, and United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres is also explicitly censuring the attacks, calling them "violations of international humanitarian law." Nevertheless, the U.S. Biden Administration is sticking

to a stance of not calling for the cessation of Israel's Gaza attacks. It is possible to conclude that in response to this, Iran is trying "all possible means to halt attacks on Gaza by Israel."

Second, it can also be noted that Iran is continuing to attach importance to holding dialogue with the U.S. In September 2023 Iran succeeded in a prisoner exchange and a partial lifting of a freeze on its overseas assets with the U.S., and U.S.-Iran talks on the nuclear issue had also been scheduled to take place in Oman in October. However, due to the shock of Hamas' attack on Israel, which occurred on October 7, the possibility of talks in Oman evaporated. The U.S. is currently keeping a close eye on moves by China in Asia and finds itself compelled to deal with the Gaza conflict on top of the Russia-Ukraine war, so holding nuclear talks with Iran is declining as a U.S. priority. It could be argued that in response to this, Iran is hoping to create a state of affairs that leads the U.S. to "reopen talks with Iran" (with the intent of curtailing the activities of pro-Iranian armed groups, for example). Even amid the U.S.' ongoing sanctions, Iran is certainly able to export petroleum to China and elsewhere. However, if the sanctions are lifted Iran will become able to officially export petroleum to countries other than China as well, and one would expect this is what Iran desires.

As yet there is no prospect of Israel ceasing its Gaza attacks nor any prospect of U.S.-Iran talks being realized following the string of attacks by the Houthi movement. However, the Houthi movement's attacks are continuing in a way that is intertwined with the motives of Iran outlined above. One would expect that dealing with Iran's motives would have some impact on halting the attacks by the Houthi movement also.

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