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Intelligence Report: Update on Houthi missile attacks off Yemen, and US strikes against Houthi radar sites.



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UPDATE 1 (13Oct16)

- Advice
- Developments
- Analysis

Advice

It is believed by the US led Coalition Maritime Forces (CMF) based in Bahrain that the targeting of the HSV-2 Swift and USS MASON by land to sea missiles was assisted by skiffs operating close to the target vessel. The close up video of the strike against HSV-2 further supports this.

For this reason, vessels operating in the southern Red Sea and the Straits of Bab el Mandeb (BAM) should, so far as possible, avoid CPA's with small local craft of less than 3 nautical miles. While we fully appreciate this can be difficult to achieve, if it is used as a guiding principle it will make it more difficult for small vessels to aid the targeting of a specific vessel

CMF has expressed concern that vessels transiting the southern Red Sea and BAM are turning off AIS in the mistaken belief that this will protect them from shore based missile strikes. MAST has previously warned that vessels should **transmit vessel details on AIS at all times**. This advice is reiterated as it is clear that the Houthis are deliberately targeting vessels associated with the Saudi led coalition operations off the coast of Mocha and Hodeidah. Vessels not transmitting on AIS their status as a commercial vessel risk being mistaken for a warship and may find themselves being targeted. The attack on the HSV-2 and USS MASON occurred during hours of darkness. Visual identification of vessels may not be obvious or apparent, and AIS used in lieu. Vessels should make best speed to reduce the time spent within the region of Mocha to Hodeidah.

Developments

1. It has been reported that the US has evidence to suggest that Houthi rebels used small craft to assist the targeting of the 2 missiles fired against the USS MASON on Sat 8th Oct.



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2. Reporting from US Navy sources suggests weapons and decoys fired from the USS MASON might have brought down the missiles targeting her.
3. It has reported that the Houthi's had US warships under surveillance and may have fired missiles at them on Wed 12th Oct. These attacks were not successful.
4. In response, the US has conducted its first direct military engagement in Yemen's civil war. Cruise missiles appear to have been used to destroy three fixed radar stations.

Analysis

The use of small boats and skiffs as spotters for target identification for Yemeni shore side missile batteries now makes them an extension of the threat, and they must be treated accordingly. These could be fishing vessels or standalone skiffs. From the HSV – 2 video we believe that these skiffs were used to provide close up video evidence of attacks, and to follow up the missile attack with small arms. This supports the notion that small boats and skiffs are being used for multi-purposes; target identification, media coverage and follow up attacks.

Reports detail that USS MASON launched two Standard Missile-2s (SM-2s) and a single Enhanced Sea Sparrow Missile (ESSM) to intercept the two missiles that were launched at 1900LT, Sat 8th October. In addition to the missiles, the ship used its Nulka anti-ship missile decoy. The deployment of the USS MASON's counter measures suggests a text book defence against the sea-skimmer threat, as well as demonstrating the USS MASON's ability to provide air defence to other vessels close by her.

There is speculation that the Houthi missiles fired were C-802 Saccades, which have a greater range than the C-704 - 120km as opposed to 35km. That missiles fired against MASON may have fallen short indicates either a weapon malfunction, or that it was a C-704 operating at maximum range.

The US strikes on the Houthi held fixed radar stations follows the likely course of action anticipated in MAST's original report below. According to U.S officials these radar systems were active during previous targeting attempts on their vessels, and that they have therefore acted in self-defence.

It remains to be confirmed if the destruction of the three radar stations will deny the Houthi's the ability to conduct land to sea attacks against coalition warships. It is possible that they possess mobile radar units within the region which have yet to be used. Time will tell.

End of Update 1



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Background

USS MASON, an Arleigh Burgh class guided missile destroyer, was reportedly targeted by two missiles, while patrolling off the coast of Yemen on Saturday 8th October. It is believed she was patrolling along the coast adjacent to Hodeidah and Mocha, though this has yet to be confirmed. The US Navy stated that the USS MASON was operating off the coast of Yemen, north of the Straits of Bab el Mandeb, which makes her position consistent with her being in the same area as the HSV-2 when she was struck by a missile on Saturday 1st October.

USS MASON is one of several US and coalition warships to have reinforced the Saudi-led coalition maritime operations off Yemen following the attack on the HSV – 2 last week.

To read MAST's Intelligence Report of the HSV-2 incident [click here](#).

It was reported that the total length of the engagement was over a period of 60 minutes. It is assumed that the USS MASON was being targeted by the surveillance and targeting radar associated with the surface to surface missile system during this period. At some point two missiles were fired and both reportedly fell short of the vessel. The vessel sustained no damage or casualties and did not fire any of her hard kill weapon systems against the missiles.

The Houthi's have released a statement denying responsibility.

Assessment

Given the sophistication of the Electronic Intelligence (ELINT) systems fitted to USS MASON, it is unlikely that the report of the attack is spurious or based on a misidentification of events. We believe that the attack will have unfolded much as the US Navy has stated.

The attack is most likely to have occurred in the Hodeidah to Mocha area where the Houthis are sufficiently in control that they are able to transport and position these surface to surface missile systems.

The missile used was possibly the same type as that used on the HSV-2, which was believed to have been a Chinese made C-704 sea skimming missile.

As was the case for the HSV – 2 attack, this was a military on military engagement and it supports MAST's earlier assessment that future attacks would involve the deliberate targeting of vessels associated with the Saudi-led maritime operations off Yemen.

We believe that the targeting of a US vessel was particularly foolish of the Houthis as by doing so they will gain the direct enmity of the US. It is therefore no surprise that they have denied the attack. However, given the nature of the operations in the southern Red Sea, it is difficult to see who else could have been involved in the attack. This incident may have exposed that by firing on a US warship the Houthi's have a targeting process which is not that sophisticated and that they were unable to distinguish between the USS MASON and Saudi / UAE vessels in the area.

The US and Saudi-led coalition have already increased their presence in the area and are likely to step up their Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance (ISTAR) systems to identify and locate the Houthi weapon systems.

Given the logistical demands of getting weapons into Yemen and safeguarding them once there, we believe the Houthis and their Iranian sponsors, are unlikely to have sufficient quantities of missiles to maintain a stream of attacks, though further attacks are a possibility. Positioning the missiles for subsequent firings will become increasingly difficult for them as the US and Saudi-led coalition increase their surveillance and counter-targeting efforts.

We believe further attacks will be mounted against military targets. The indications so far are that the Houthis are capable of a targeting solution (through use of AIS) that positively identifies military targets from commercial. Furthermore, attacks are likely to be conducted in the area between Hodeidah and Mocha and they are therefore unlikely to seek to engage targets further out in the shipping lanes.

As well as conducting operations to identify and interdict the missile batteries ashore, the US and Saudis will be able to establish a cordon of naval patrols that will be effective in isolating the shipping lanes from shore based attacks.

Advice

For the present, MAST believes that the risk of a missile attack against a commercial vessel in the southern Red Sea or Straits of Bab el Mandeb remains LOW. We strongly recommend that vessels transmit on AIS and maintain a steady course to make it clear the vessel is transiting in the shipping lane. Routing should, so far as the traffic separation schemes allow, be on the SW side of the Red Sea as close to the coast of Eritrea as possible.