OPTARUS MARITIME INSIGHT

Bab el-Mandeb: Control Without Closure

The coastal realignment, maritime coercion and the limits of a shipping recovery

20 November 2026 | Source cut-off: 20 November 2026 | Stephen J. Taylor

Yemen western coast · Bab el-Mandeb · Gulf of Aden | Open-source assessment



CONTESTED COASTAL DEPTH | SELECTIVE MARITIME RISK

Illustrative generated image; not a photograph of an identified vessel or incident

15 NOV	SUBSTANTIAL	426	−24%
Southern-force redeployment	**Southern Red Sea threat**	**Oct boxship passages**	**Recent Bab transits vs July**
Local statement [4]	JMIC [22]	Lloyd's [8]	UKMTO [1]

KEY JUDGEMENT

The 15 November withdrawal of government-aligned southern forces from Dhubab Airport and the Bab el-Mandeb area changes the landward security balance, but does not verify durable Houthi control of every coastal approach or island. The strait remains in commercial use. Container transits increased in October even as the 15 November JMIC update retained a **SUBSTANTIAL** threat rating and the Houthi selective blockade remained in force. A lull in verified ship attacks is therefore not proof of degraded capability or benign intent. The most defensible near-term reading is **selective coercion within an unstable territorial contest**. Consolidation, replenishment and Iran-related timing remain live hypotheses, not established explanations. [1-3, 4-6, 8, 15, 22]

Evidence status: withdrawal CONFIRMED | wider control CONTESTED | rebuild hypothesis UNVERIFIED

Assessment: moderate confidence in changed exposure; low confidence in the motive for maritime restraint.

EXECUTIVE ASSESSMENT

WHAT CHANGED SINCE THE 24 SEPTEMBER OPTARUS MARITIME INSIGHT

The September assessment asked whether the Kahboub high ground and wider coastal gains could convert existing Houthi strike capability into more persistent maritime coercion. The intervening October government counteroffensive and the **15 November redeployment** have made that question more urgent: the territorial outcome is still disputed, while the commercial return to the corridor has become materially clearer. [4-6, 8, 15, 22]

Development	Evidence boundary	Decision relevance
Southern forces left Dhubab Airport / Bab el-Mandeb positions on 15 November.	Southern-force statement is direct evidence of announced withdrawal and priority. Houthi account of its cause and resulting control is disputed. [4-6]	Reduced landward opposition may increase coercive options, but no verified new strike architecture follows from a withdrawal alone.
October boxship transits increased to 426, from 315 in September.	Lloyd's List Intelligence track of cargo-carrying ships >10,000 dwt; approximately half of October boxship transits were AIS-dark. [8]	Commercial confidence differs by cargo, affiliation and network. Physical risk can coexist with route restoration.
UKMTO reported no verified Red Sea ship attack since 24 August, with transits ~24% below the pre-blockade level.	13 November report, traffic baseline prior to 22 July; monitoring is not exhaustive. [1]	Attack frequency is not the same as threat or access; avoidance, target scarcity and selective restraint remain plausible.
Saudi missile interceptions continued into 19-20 November.	Saudi-led coalition official statements, not independently verified attribution of every launch. [10,21]	Houthi or attributed cross-border pressure persists while verified ship strikes remain absent.

PUBLICATION THRESHOLD

The decision-relevant change is **not** a fresh claim that the Houthis can close Bab el-Mandeb. It is the intersection of a redeployed landward front, persistent selective maritime threat, recovering liner traffic and continuing Saudi exposure. This warrants an Insight, rather than a claim of closure or a short-cycle incident Flash.

TWO CONCLUSIONS THAT MUST NOT BE MERGED

Route accessible: commercial passage remains possible and a growing number of container operators are using it. **Route safe:** not established for all vessels; association, cargo, fleet exposure, crew acceptance, cover and political escalation remain separate decision variables. [1-3, 8-9]

LOCAL REPORTING AND TERRITORIAL CLAIMS

A source-traced local-language review separates what the parties say from what an independent observer can establish. Southern reporting describes a purposeful repositioning to defend Aden and improve support to Taiz. Houthi-aligned sources describe a wider encirclement and withdrawal under pressure. Both accounts serve political and military messaging objectives. [4-7]

Source family	What is actually stated	Optarus evaluation
Southern-force statement, 15 Nov (Aden Times / Al-Ayyam).	The force announced repositioning out of Dhubab Airport and the Bab el-Mandeb area, citing Aden, adjoining provinces and Taiz priorities. [4]	High confidence in the announced decision; only party evidence for its rationale and the exact resulting control.
Houthi-aligned Yemen Eco citing Saba / Al-Masirah, 15 Nov.	Claims that Houthi manoeuvre forced withdrawals across the strait approaches and provided greater strategic depth. [5]	A statement of Houthi claimed success; recycled quotations do not create independent corroboration.
Saudi Al Riyadh, 16 Nov.	Frames the redeployment around Aden protection, national responsibility and need for wider maritime security support. [7]	Useful Saudi editorial/policy framing, but it largely repeats the southern-force statement.
Reuters independent reporting, 15 Nov.	Describes a serious setback to the government push and continued conflict around coastal/highland approaches; notes some government positions remained. [6]	Stronger external check; reporting does not independently prove full and stable control of all approaches.
JMIC / UKMTO, 12-15 Nov.	Update 113 records disputed high-ground control; Update 114 keeps Bab el-Mandeb open but volatile and SUBSTANTIAL. [1-2,22]	Update 114 captures the maritime position on 15 Nov but does not independently settle the land-control dispute.

> **GEOLOCATION AND VIDEO INTEGRITY**
>
> Do not treat circulating withdrawal video as contemporary battlefield proof without provenance checking. Misbar traced one widely shared clip to an older June event. Optarus does not publish a definitive November territorial-control map from partisan footage. [19]

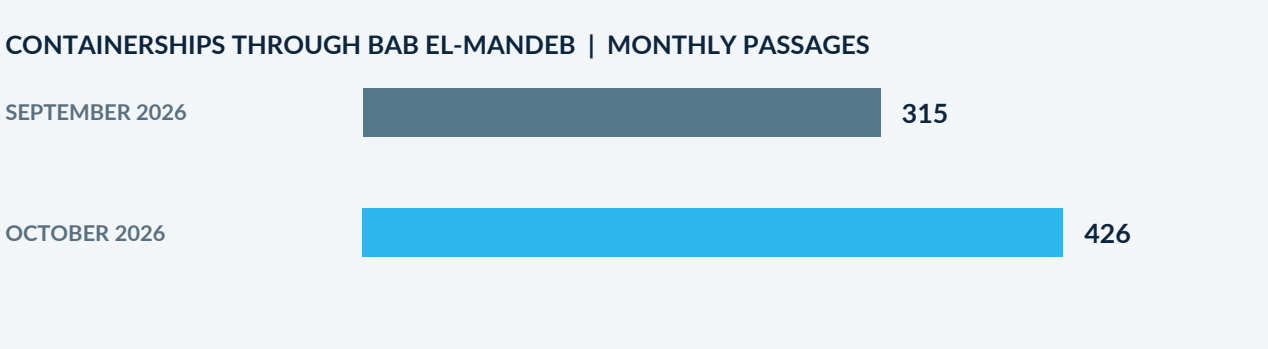
WHAT CAN BE STATED AS OF THIS SOURCE CUT-OFF

A landward redeployment was publicly declared; the Houthis probably benefited from the reduction in government-aligned coverage around the southern approaches. **The line of durable control, island status, weapons deployment and any new maritime surveillance/strike integration remain unverified in this collection.** This is not equivalent to saying the entire strait is Houthi-controlled. [1-6]

MARITIME OPERATING PICTURE

RISING THROUGHPUT DOES NOT MEAN NORMALISED EXPOSURE

Lloyd's List Intelligence counted **1,363 Bab el-Mandeb transits in October** (112.3m dwt), with transiting dwt up 17% month-on-month. Containership passages rose 35% to 426 from 315 in September. Approximately half of boxship passages occurred with AIS switched off. This is consistent with selected carrier re-entry under continuing security concerns, not proof that every vessel group or tanker segment is returning. Lloyd's scope is cargo-carrying ships over 10,000 dwt. [8]



Source: Lloyd's List Intelligence [8]. Count: cargo-carrying ships >10,000 dwt.

Separately, UKMTO assessed Bab el-Mandeb traffic to be approximately **24% below its pre-22 July blockade-announcement comparator** as of its 13 November report; no verified attacks had been reported since 24 August, although a 6 November surface explosion was recorded as unexplained. **JMIC Update 114** then measured roughly **22 cargo-vessel transits/day on 12-14 November**, down from about **25/day on 5-11 November**; its S&P series covers vessels over 1,000 dwt. The UKMTO percentage, Lloyd's monthly counts and JMIC short-window series use **different windows and denominators** and must not be combined into a single recovery rate. [1,8,22]

Capability / access	Established position	Important limit
Attack	MARAD documents historical strikes, vessel seizures and active declared selective targeting; ongoing missile/UAV capability. [3]	No confirmed fresh maritime strike since 24 Aug in UKMTO data.
Board / detain	Historically demonstrated capability; MARAD lists illegal boarding, detention and seizure among threat mechanisms. [3]	No verified new boarding capability resulting from November coastal changes.
Track and discriminate	Target affiliation may extend beyond flag to corporate fleet/port-call associations. [3]	AIS-dark operation shows risk management, not proof Houthi sensors are ineffective.
Secure passage	Some liner services have announced Suez returns after company risk assessments. [9]	Announced service changes are not a guarantee of voyage completion or stable protection.

TERRITORY, CAPABILITY AND INTENT

THE CLAIM TO TEST: CONSOLIDATION NOW, MARITIME LEVERAGE LATER

A rational Houthi command could seek time to harden newly acquired areas, replenish personnel and munitions and avoid a shipping attack that might trigger a renewed coalition response. That sequence is **plausible**. It is **not evidenced** by a confirmed pause order, a verified force-reconstitution programme or an independently established new coastal defensive network. Recent Saudi-facing strikes also weaken any claim of general operational inactivity. [5, 10-11, 15, 21]

Analytical test	Supported by current evidence	What would weaken the inference
Territorial value	Coastal approaches and Kahboub high ground matter to persistence, maritime observation and logistical access; ACLED identified both opportunities and exposed positions. [15]	Verified loss of positions, ineffective administration, continued local resistance or supply disruption.
Maritime strike ability	Existing long-range Houthi systems already threaten the corridor from locations not dependent on the November positions. [2-3]	Reliable evidence of sustained depletion, launch failures or inability to identify selected vessels.
Personnel replenishment	Historically substantial recruiting and mobilisation; intense recent fighting suggests potential attrition. [11,15]	No reliable current unit loss counts or November replacement-rate estimates; casualties cannot be assumed.
Defensive preparation	Potential incentive after repeated counterattacks and loss of territory in October. [6,15]	No independently verified present build-up or completed coastal fortification in this review.
Iranian agenda	Shared strategic interests and documented prior external assistance; Iran could benefit from Red Sea leverage while Hormuz remains pressured. [11,15]	Timing and target decisions cannot be attributed to Iranian instruction without direct evidence.

KEY DISTINCTION

More coastal territory can improve a coercive actor's **opportunity** without proving a new **capability**; a pause in attacks can reflect **target selection** or **commercial avoidance** rather than a temporary loss of capacity. The next demonstrated voyage interception or attack will be much more informative than a claim of territorial control alone.

MOST DEFENSIBLE MILITARY JUDGEMENT

The Houthis have gained leverage from changed terrain and opponent redeployment, but the extent to which that leverage has been translated into **persistent maritime sensing, interdiction or survivable launch capacity** is unknown. Their existing remote-strike capability is not dependent on a newly captured beachhead. [2-3,15]

RECONSTITUTION AND HORN OF AFRICA NETWORKS

ESTABLISHED NETWORKS - UNPROVEN NOVEMBER ACCELERATION

The UN Panel of Experts on Yemen documented intensified Houthi–Al-Shabaab cooperation involving arms smuggling, technical training and logistical exchange in its **2025** report; the reporting period ended in July 2025. It also described seizures, confidential-source evidence and Somalia-related smuggling patterns. This establishes an existing network, **not** that the 15 November coastal redeployment increased present throughput. [11]

A 24 August 2026 Century Foundation study described the Houthis' growing Horn of Africa relationships, trafficking and recruitment ecosystem. On 6 November 2026, Somalia's State Minister for Foreign Affairs publicly warned about military/technical cooperation with Al-Shabaab, as reported by Hiiraan Online. These are useful independent source families, but a current intercepted shipment, verified delivery tempo or fresh recruitment figure is absent from the reviewed material. [12-13]

Analytical proposition	Current judgement / confidence	Next evidence required
The Houthis could use reduced landward pressure to restore supply channels.	Plausible hypothesis / LOW. Prior network existence is well documented, but incremental post-withdrawal movement is not measured. [11-13]	Dated, independently corroborated seizure series; customs or maritime-authority reporting with comparable baselines.
Houthi manpower is being replenished after autumn combat.	Possible / LOW. No reliable formation-specific casualty totals or verified November intake.	Consistent recruitment announcements verified beyond reposts, training cycles and independently observed deployments.
Cooperation with Al-Shabaab could extend technical attack capacity.	Historical cooperation: MODERATE-HIGH. New capability transfer since September: LOW. [11-13]	Dated physical evidence of materiel/training plus independent attribution and chain-of-custody.
Iran sets the calendar for a renewed shipping campaign.	Unverified / LOW. Strategic alignment does not prove operational tasking.	Corroborated political/command signalling linked in time to verifiable operational change.

COMPLIANCE / SANCTIONS RELEVANCE

UN Security Council Resolution 2837 renewed Yemen sanctions and reinforced concern about illicit weapon components, maritime smuggling and vessel information-sharing. These are regulatory exposure and due-diligence factors for shipping, logistics, suppliers and service providers; the resolution does not establish a new November smuggling event. [14]

COMMERCIAL AND HUMANITARIAN EXPOSURE

SECOND- AND THIRD-ORDER CONSEQUENCES

Exposure	Risk mechanism	What is measurable / not yet established
Container networks	Shorter Suez cycles release ship-days and can increase effective capacity; a fresh incident could cause service-by-service reversal and schedule disorder.	October traffic rebound is observed; future route stability and net freight savings are not guaranteed. [8-9]
Crude / Saudi energy	Strikes on Saudi infrastructure and the declared Saudi-linked vessel profile can complicate the use of Red Sea export capacity as Gulf/Hormuz routes are stressed.	Official missile intercept reports show continued cross-border conflict; do not infer a specific future tanker strike. [3,10,21]
Insurance / chartering	War-risk lists, extra premiums, contractual guarantees, fleet-affiliation checks, exclusions and sanctions restrictions can affect effective rather than nominal vessel supply.	A listed area is not a universal premium; no market-wide price for November is verified in this collection.
Crew and operations	The physical risk, AIS decisions, voyage-information requests, naval protection capacity and crew welfare affect commercial acceptance.	MARAD's and JMIC's live warnings are material, but vessel-level decisions remain for companies/masters. [2-3,20]
Ports and overland relief	Aden port can still receive cargo while inland access to the western coast, Mocha and Taiz is constrained by conflict and road insecurity.	The 20 October Logistics Cluster position is dated and does not establish the 20 November logistics situation. [17-18]

IOM recorded approximately 347,321 people displaced by the western Yemen escalation between 1 August and 14 November 2026, and 348,377 since the escalation began in June. UNICEF separately reports constrained access to Taiz and disruption to essential services. [16,18]

DECISION-SUPPORT BOUNDARY

This Insight characterises exposure and observable thresholds. It is not a sailing direction, a war-risk insurance quotation or a recommendation to transit or divert. Company affiliation, cargo, port calls, vessels and crew conditions can produce materially different outcomes under the same regional threat rating.

COMPETING HYPOTHESES AND OUTLOOK

STRUCTURED ALTERNATIVE ANALYSIS | 30-90 DAY HORIZON

Hypothesis	Fit to available evidence	Evidence that could overturn it
H1: Consolidation / rebuilding is temporarily prioritised ahead of attacks on ships.	PLAUSIBLE, LOW-MODERATE. Terrain, counteroffensive experience and operational economy support motive; specific build-up not verified.	Sustained immediate maritime escalation without evidence of consolidation; loss of positions; no replenishment indicators.
H2: Houthi restraint is selective coercion, with Saudi infrastructure as the current pressure channel.	BEST SUPPORTED, MODERATE. Ongoing declared selective targeting, Saudi missile claims and limited ship strikes fit this mechanism. [1-3,10,15]	Verified cessation of cross-border coercion; Houthi rescission of selective blockade; broad indiscriminate ship attacks.
H3: Fewer available Saudi-associated targets and commercial adaptation explain the lull.	PLAUSIBLE, MODERATE. Selective target profile, AIS-dark voyages and changed trade patterns fit this explanation. [3,8,15]	High verified flow of selected vulnerable targets without any targeting attempt over a sustained period.
H4: Iranian timing determines any renewed Houthi maritime offensive.	UNPROVEN, LOW. Strategic interest is clear, but no reliable contemporaneous tasking chain.	Independent evidence of autonomous divergence, or direct evidence of command tasking in the opposite direction.

INDICATORS THAT SHOULD CHANGE THE ASSESSMENT

Escalation: verified new attack or detention of a merchant vessel; Houthi statement broadening targeting eligibility; attacks on vessels without identified Saudi/Israeli/Western association; repeated disruptions near the strait; corroborated movement of maritime-specific systems. [1-3]

De-escalation: withdrawal or narrowing of blockade statements; sustained verified safe voyages across multiple vessel/ownership types; longer-term absence of attacks despite substantial target exposure; transparent threat regrading by JMIC and durable ceasefire implementation. [1-3,8]

Ground and support: independently geolocated and dated change in coastal control; evidence of administration and resupply; verified recruitment, materiel transfer and unit-restoration patterns; documented interdiction outcomes with comparable baselines. [4-6,11-15]

BOTTOM LINE / CONFIDENCE

Moderate confidence that the November repositioning increased Houthi leverage and that Red Sea trade is recovering selectively under continuing threat. **High confidence** in the measured October boxship rebound and official 13 November threat/incident reports. **Low confidence** that the maritime lull is deliberately timed to permit defensive reconstruction, manpower recovery or Iran-directed sequencing. This assessment is readily reversible if fresh verified incidents or positional evidence emerge.

SOURCE EVALUATION AND ANALYTICAL LIMITS

TRIANGULATION AUDIT

Claim / judgement	Origination and cross-check	Residual uncertainty
15 Nov southern-force pullback	Direct announcement reproduced by Aden Times and Al-Ayyam [4]; Reuters independently reports withdrawal [6].	Objective and effect contested; Houthi-aligned accounts share a common originating claim [5].
Maritime attacks paused	UKMTO official verified incidents [1]; Lloyd's industry tracking [8].	Unreported/late-reported events possible; 6 Nov explosion unattributed.
Threat remains substantial	JMIC formal threat grade through 15 Nov [2,22]; MARAD active notice [3].	Regional rating is not vessel-specific incident probability.
Container return	Lloyd's List Intelligence measured October voyages [8]; Hapag-Lloyd announced specific carrier routing [9].	Different universes; AIS-dark movements may affect observation, and announced schedules can change.
Houthi–Al-Shabaab relationship	UN Panel of Experts (historical, primary) [11]; Century Foundation analysis [12]; Somalia minister statement [13].	No verified post-15 Nov acceleration or quantified current transfers.
Saudi-facing strike activity	Saudi-led coalition announcements [10,21]; wider corroborative reporting.	Official claims alone do not establish every projectile's origin, effects or target.

METHOD AND LIMITATIONS

Collection prioritised UKMTO/JMIC, MARAD, IMO/EUNAVFOR, UN expert and humanitarian material, operator notices and industry vessel data; then Arabic-language Yemeni and Saudi press, Houthi-aligned media, Somalia/Horn of Africa sources and specialist conflict analysis. Syndication and same-statement repetition were not treated as separate verification. Conflict-party claims were retained with explicit caveats. Social video was not accepted as battlefield confirmation. [1-21]

Geographic control cannot be finalised from the reviewed public material, and the 15 November shift post-dates JMIC Update 113; Update 114 confirms the maritime operating picture without resolving the land-control question. “AIS-dark” denotes transponder status in a tracking product, not necessarily an illicit act. Rates, casualties, precise force levels, recruitment tempo and transfer quantities are not sufficiently established to publish. The start.me OSINT portal supplied for collection did not expose a readable bookmark index in this research environment, so specific collection was conducted directly against accessible sources.

Assessment horizon: **20 November 2026 to mid-February 2027**, subject to incident-led revision. Geography: western Yemen coast, Bab el-Mandeb, Gulf of Aden and commercially related Saudi/Red Sea links. Significant geopolitical changes in Hormuz are considered only insofar as they affect Red Sea exposure.

IMAGERY AND AI TRANSPARENCY

The cover image is a generated illustration. The transit chart uses published source figures.

AI assisted collection and document production. Optarus reviewed the substantive judgements and wording.

SOURCE REGISTER AND LINKS

Numbered references correspond to the citations throughout this Insight. Clicking a blue source title opens the originating online item. Local-language claims are included to establish what actors said, not to confer independent truth on their accounts.

[01] **UKMTO Voluntary Reporting Area Weekly Overview No.15** (13 Nov 2026) | Primary maritime operational reporting.

[02] **JMIC Advisory Update 113** (12 Nov 2026) | Official joint threat assessment; contested control.

[03] **MARAD Maritime Advisory 2026-013** (23 Sep 2026 (active)) | Official US flag-state threat guidance.

[04] **Southern Armed Forces redeployment statement, via Aden Times** (15 Nov 2026) | Local party-origin announcement; intent not independent outcome.

[05] **Yemen Eco report of Saba / Al-Masirah military assertions** (15 Nov 2026) | Houthi-aligned claim; not independent geolocation.

[06] **Reuters: Yemeni government retreat from the strait** (15 Nov 2026) | Independent international reporting; military-source caveats.

[07] **Al Riyadh: southern-force redeployment / Aden priorities** (16 Nov 2026) | Saudi local perspective; repeats southern-force statement.

[08] **Lloyd's List Intelligence, Red Sea Brief** (12 Nov 2026) | Commercial AIS/tonnage observations, >10,000 dwt scope.

[09] **Hapag-Lloyd: Gemini Red Sea routing update** (28 Sep 2026) | Primary operator service decision; announced not guaranteed.

[10] **Saudi Press Agency: coalition missile intercept statement** (19 Nov 2026) | Official belligerent statement; attribution not independently tested.

[11] **UN Panel of Experts on Yemen, S/2025/650** (15 Oct 2025) | Primary expert findings; reporting period ended July 2025.

[12] **Century Foundation, From Spoke to Hub: The Houthis in Africa** (24 Aug 2026) | Specialist study; testimony and public documentation.

[13] **Hiiraan Online: Somalia minister on Houthi–Al-Shabaab links** (6 Nov 2026) | Local reporting of on-record official warning.

[14] **UN Security Council Resolution 2837 (2026)** (12 Nov 2026) | Primary sanctions and maritime-monitoring policy.

[15] **ACLED: Houthi gains and Red Sea shipping risk** (2026, Sep–Oct assessment) | Independent specialist conflict-data analysis; earlier period.

[16] **IOM Yemen DTM: Western Yemen displacement update** (15 Nov 2026 (as of 14 Nov)) | Primary displacement estimate; not battle loss data.

[17] **Yemen Logistics Cluster meeting minutes** (20 Oct 2026) | Primary humanitarian operations status, dated.

[18] **UNICEF Yemen, humanitarian situation update #2** (Nov 2026) | Primary humanitarian access/service reporting.

[19] **Misbar fact check: miscaptioned Bab el-Mandeb withdrawal video** (16 Nov 2026) | Independent provenance check; not blanket geolocation.

[20] **EU EUNAVFOR ASPIDES: mandate and maritime environment** (19 Nov 2026) | EU naval mission institutional information.

[21] **Saudi Press Agency: latest southern-region missile claim** (20 Nov 2026) | Official belligerent statement, not independent verification.

[22] **JMIC Advisory Update 114 (hosted by DBCE)** (15 Nov 2026) | Official joint threat assessment; S&P; Bab traffic 12-14 Nov.

PRIOR OPTARUS CONTEXT AND PUBLICATION NOTE

Internal comparison: *Optarus Maritime Insight - From High Ground to Chokepoint* (24 September 2026) and *Red Sea Recovery and Hormuz Pressure* (15 October 2026). This paper is a material update centred on the November southern-force redeployment and October commercial traffic, not a replication of the earlier Kahboub analysis.

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