

FROM HIGH GROUND TO CHOKEPOINT RISK

Why the battle for Kahboub matters to shipping

The risk question is whether Houthi coastal gains can be converted into persistent sensing, protected infrastructure and coercive leverage over Bab el-Mandeb.


**KAHBOUB
CONTESTED**

High ground remains the key battlefield.

**TRANSIT
26 VESSELS**

Kpler/Reuters, Monday 21 Sep.

**TARGET PROFILE
SELECTIVE**

MARAD: linked vessels and Saudi-port fleets at higher risk.

**CONFIDENCE
MODERATE**

Strong geography; capability conversion remains uncertain.

KEY JUDGEMENT

The battle for Kahboub is not yet a shipping-disruption event, but it sits above a maritime threat environment that is already active and selective. Official maritime guidance records renewed attacks on commercial vessels and a higher-risk profile for vessels associated with Saudi Arabia and other specified links. Kahboub remains contested, traffic continues through Bab el-Mandeb, and no reliable evidence yet establishes a functioning new radar-to-strike architecture. The decision-relevant issue is whether new coastal depth and high-ground control can make an existing maritime threat more persistent, survivable and coercive.

26
CONTESTED
REPORTED
MODERATE
BAB EL-MANDEB CROSSINGS
KAHBOUB HIGH GROUND
RADAR / TUNNEL WORK
ASSESSMENT CONFIDENCE

Kpler / Reuters, 21 Sep

Reuters / CTP-ISW

AFP-sourced; operational status
unverified

Optarus

Analyst-led | AI-assisted OSINT | Evidence refresh completed 24 September 2026

EXECUTIVE ASSESSMENT

What the evidence now supports

The evidence supports a clear geographic and operational problem: Houthi gains along Yemen's western coast have shifted the next contest toward the high ground above Bab el-Mandeb. Reuters reported that Houthi forces are seeking the Kahboub Mountains after taking Red Sea coastal positions, while CTP-ISW reporting records repeated fighting over Jabal Kahboub and defensive works near the strait. The range remains strategically important and contested. [1][7]

The evidence is weaker on capability conversion. Two Houthi military sources told AFP that Iranian Revolutionary Guard experts visited Mocha and the Bab el-Mandeb area, oversaw tunnel excavation and discussed radar installation near Mocha and on Zuqar Island. Neither Iran nor the Houthis publicly confirmed those visits, and open sources do not establish that a new radar network is operational or integrated with missile, UAV or USV targeting. [6]

Commercial traffic has not stopped. Kpler data reported by Reuters recorded 26 commodity-vessel crossings through Bab el-Mandeb on Monday 21 September, unchanged from the previous day. At the same time, MARAD says Houthi attacks on commercial shipping have resumed and identifies Israeli-, U.S.-, UK- and Saudi-associated vessels, and fleets with Saudi port calls, as at higher risk. The present-tense picture is therefore continued transit inside a selective and evolving threat environment, not closure of the strait. [2][3]

Issue	Evidence status	Current judgement
Houthi control of key Red Sea coastal positions	CONFIRMED	Major western-coast gains include Mocha and positions near the strait.
Kahboub high-ground control	CONTESTED	Fighting continues; decisive durable control is not established.
Selective Houthi vessel-targeting profile	CONFIRMED	MARAD identifies linked vessels and fleets with Saudi port calls as higher risk; JWC records a Saudi-port embargo and Saudi-linked targeting intent.
Renewed commercial-vessel attacks	REPORTED / OFFICIAL ADVISORY	MARAD records M/T AMZAN and DAISY as reportedly struck off Yanbu on 24 August.
IRGC expert visits / radar discussions	ATTRIBUTED	AFP reporting cites two Houthi military sources; no independent operational confirmation.
Integrated new sensing / strike architecture	NOT ESTABLISHED	Public evidence does not show a functioning new network linking reported sensors to maritime weapons.

PUBLICATION THRESHOLD

The insight is publishable because an established selective maritime threat now intersects with changed coastal geography, contested high ground and reported fortification activity. Publication does not require asserting that the Houthis can presently control all shipping through the strait.

CURRENT MARITIME THREAT PROFILE

Selective targeting is already part of the operating picture

Kahboub should not be assessed as the origin of a new maritime threat. The Houthis already possess a demonstrated maritime attack capability and have resumed attacks on commercial shipping. MARAD records M/T AMZAN and DAISY as reportedly struck by Houthi missiles off Yanbu on 24 August 2026 and says the group declared a blockade on Saudi-affiliated shipping transiting Bab el-Mandeb in July. [3]

The threat is selective rather than uniformly distributed. MARAD assesses vessels with Israeli, U.S., UK or Saudi association, and vessels within fleets whose companies have made Saudi port calls, as at higher risk in the southern Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb and Gulf of Aden. The Joint War Committee separately states that the Houthis announced an embargo of Saudi ports and an intention to target Saudi-linked vessels, with two vessels attacked shortly after the announcement. [3][4]

WHY THIS CHANGES THE KAHBOUB QUESTION

The commercial issue is no longer whether the Houthis can threaten ships. They can. The question is whether new positions around the strait improve persistence, surveillance, warning time, survivability and the range of options available for selective coercion.

Demonstrated capability versus changed engagement geometry

CTP-ISW assesses that positions closer to Bab el-Mandeb may allow the Houthis to use a broader range of systems than when operating from farther north, including shorter-range unmanned systems and other tactical options. Optarus treats this as an assessment of potential engagement geometry, not evidence that such systems are presently deployed at the newly captured sites. [5]

Insurance posture has already moved

The London market is already treating the Red Sea as an enhanced war-risk environment. The Joint War Committee states that it adjusted the Red Sea notification line northwards after the Saudi-port embargo and attacks. It also makes clear that Listed Areas identify enhanced risk and that pricing is negotiated between underwriters and brokers; the JWC does not set a premium. [4]

P&I and hull war risk should not be conflated. P&I primarily addresses third-party liabilities, while hull war cover is normally a separate placement. Both, however, can be affected by casualty exposure, sanctions complexity, vessel association and changes in route security.

THE MARITIME LEVERAGE PATHWAY

Confirmed geography is separated from prospective capability effects.



Assessment: coastline control matters most if it can be converted into durable capability. That conversion is not yet established.

MARITIME OPERATING PICTURE

Why Kahboub matters more than another coastal town

Kahboub matters because elevation changes what can be sustained around the chokepoint. High ground can provide observation, defensive depth and protected approaches to coastal sites. In an environment where missiles, UAVs, uncrewed surface vessels and other maritime attack methods already form part of the Houthi toolkit, geography that improves persistence can matter even without creating a new weapon capability. [1][3][5][7]

The distinction is important. A coast can be occupied but remain militarily exposed. A defended coastal system supported by high ground, tunnels, dispersed logistics, better sensing and shorter engagement geometry could be harder to disrupt and could preserve selective attack options for longer. That is the mechanism Optarus is monitoring; the full conversion is not yet established.

What is not yet demonstrated

- No reliable open-source evidence establishes that newly reported radar systems near Mocha or Zuqar are operational.
- No reliable evidence establishes a continuous sensor-to-shooter chain covering the entire strait or linking newly reported sensors to maritime weapons.
- No evidence establishes that Kahboub is securely under Houthi control at the publication cut-off.
- Continued commercial crossings mean current conditions should not be described as a physical closure of Bab el-Mandeb, even though selective targeting risk is established.

COMMERCIAL EXPOSURE

Transit is continuing - but the strategic value of the route is rising

The current transit picture is not one of universal avoidance. Reuters reported 26 commodity-vessel crossings through Bab el-Mandeb on Monday 21 September, while visible Hormuz traffic was far lower. The figures are not directly comparable to all-vessel traffic and AIS-dark movements may be missed, but they illustrate that Bab el-Mandeb remains an active commercial route despite the worsening security environment. [2]

At the same time, Saudi Arabia has restarted the East-West oil pipeline after damage from the 11 September drone attack. Reuters reported that the line had been rerouting roughly 4 million barrels per day toward the Red Sea and that Aramco was preparing to resume crude shipments from Yanbu. For Asian-bound cargoes, the security of the southern Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb therefore becomes increasingly relevant to the credibility of the Red Sea as an alternative export route. [8]

DECISION-SUPPORT IMPLICATION

The operational question is not simply whether Bab el-Mandeb is open today. It is whether the combination of Houthi territorial depth, sensing, survivable infrastructure, closer engagement geometry and demonstrated maritime weapons can raise the probability, duration or selectivity of future disruption enough to change routing, insurance and security posture.

Who is exposed

The most directly exposed stakeholders include shipowners and operators transiting the southern Red Sea; tanker and dry-bulk operators serving Saudi Red Sea ports; charterers and commodity traders relying on Yanbu-linked export flows; hull war-risk underwriters and brokers; P&I clubs managing casualty and liability implications; naval and maritime-security providers; and logistics customers whose contingency plans assume one chokepoint can substitute for another. Vessel association and fleet port-call history now matter alongside route geography. [3][4]

Insurance and notification posture

The Joint War Committee states that the Red Sea notification line has been moved northwards in response to the Saudi-port embargo and attacks. This is direct evidence that the London war-risk market has changed its geographic notification posture. It is not evidence of a single market-wide premium: rating remains a matter for individual negotiation between underwriters and brokers. [4]

What would constitute a material deterioration?

- Independent confirmation that Houthi forces have secured the Kahboub ridge or equivalent high ground overlooking the strait.
- Confirmation that new radar or electro-optical systems around Mocha, Zuqar or other southern Red Sea sites are operational and linked to maritime surveillance.
- Renewed confirmed attacks or attempted attacks on commercial vessels in or near the Bab el-Mandeb transit corridor.
- A sustained fall in commodity-vessel crossings relative to the recent roughly mid-20s daily level that cannot be explained by routine variation.
- New war-risk pricing, notification changes, routing restrictions or operator advisories explicitly tied to the changed coastal/high-ground position.

INDICATORS & WARNINGS

Indicators for the next 72 hours

These are collection thresholds rather than predictions. They identify the observable developments that would raise or lower the current judgement.

Indicator	Observable threshold	Effect on assessment
Kahboub control	Multi-source confirmation of durable control of the ridge and access routes.	RAISE
Sensing infrastructure	Independent confirmation of operational maritime radar/surveillance sites.	RAISE
Maritime attack activity	Confirmed attack or attempt against a commercial vessel in or near the southern Red Sea / Bab el-Mandeb.	RAISE SHARPLY
Target-profile expansion	Houthi statements or attacks broaden the current Saudi-linked profile to additional categories.	RAISE SHARPLY
Transit behaviour	Material multi-day decline in crossings, diversions or AIS-dark behaviour tied to threat reporting.	RAISE
Passage-control behaviour	Credible evidence of vessel instructions, passage permissions or coast-guard-type surveillance.	RAISE
Insurance posture	Further notification changes, explicit insurer restrictions or material market response tied to Bab el-Mandeb.	RAISE
De-escalation evidence	Kahboub fighting recedes, key heights remain outside Houthi control and no new sensing architecture is verified.	LOWER

INDICATOR UNDER WATCH - FISHERMEN

Sheba Intelligence reported early on 24 September that fishermen along parts of Yemen's Red Sea coast had been told to remain ashore for two to three days. The source did not establish the geographic extent or reason. Optarus is retaining this as an unresolved indicator only; it is not treated as evidence of an imminent attack, weapons test or naval operation. [9]

Current judgement

MODERATE confidence that the Kahboub contest has direct maritime relevance because it concerns high ground over the Bab el-Mandeb approaches and follows major Houthi gains along the Red Sea coast. HIGH confidence that the current threat profile is selective rather than universal, based on official maritime guidance and Houthi-declared Saudi-linked targeting. LOW-to-MODERATE confidence on the scale and maturity of any new sensing/fortification architecture because the most specific reporting remains attributed and operational status is not independently verified. [3][4]

OUTLOOK

Bottom line

BOTTOM LINE

Bab el-Mandeb remains open to commercial traffic, but the threat environment is not benign: selective Houthi targeting and renewed attacks are already established. Kahboub matters because control of the surrounding high ground could help convert recent coastal gains into a more persistent, survivable and flexible maritime-pressure position. That additional conversion remains incomplete and contested. The next decisive evidence will be durable control of the heights, operational sensing, changes in the targeting profile, passage-control behaviour, further maritime engagements and observable changes in commercial or insurance behaviour.

METHODOLOGY & LEGAL-RISK REVIEW

Analytical and editorial safeguards

- Attribution: claims regarding Iranian Revolutionary Guard visits, radar discussions and tunnelling are attributed to the AFP reporting chain and are not adopted as independently verified fact.
- Current-vs-historical check: prior Houthi maritime attack capability is treated as established background; the document does not assume that past capability proves a new 2026 integrated architecture.
- Defamation and source-risk review: named individuals are avoided unless necessary for public attribution; allegations about operational support are framed according to source strength.
- Data minimisation / UK data protection: no private-person dataset or special-category personal information is used.
- Sanctions status: the UK Yemen sanctions regime remains in force and designated Houthi leaders remain subject to UK measures. This public assessment makes no transactional or counterparty-clearance conclusion; users must conduct case-specific screening against the current UK Sanctions List.
- Export-control / ECJU: this is strategic open-source decision support. It contains no targeting package, weapons-employment instruction, controlled technical assistance or procurement facilitation.
- Decision-support doctrine: the assessment identifies exposure, uncertainty and observable thresholds; it does not instruct operators whether to sail, insure or trade.
- Insurance terminology: Joint War Committee Listed Areas and notification posture are not equivalent to a prescribed premium; P&I and hull war cover are treated as distinct forms of insurance exposure.

AI transparency

Optarus uses analyst-directed AI tools to support source retrieval, comparison, drafting, visualisation and quality control. Analytical judgements, attribution decisions and publication thresholds are reviewed against the cited open sources before release. AI assistance does not replace source verification or analyst accountability.

SOURCE APPENDIX

Selected source base

- [1] **Reuters, 21 Sep 2026** - Houthis push for control of Yemen highlands as Trump is said to have called off strikes. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/houthis-push-control-yemen-highlands-trump-reported-have-called-off-airstrikes-2026-09-21/>
- [2] **Reuters, 22 Sep 2026** - Hormuz vessel traffic falls to two, data shows - includes Bab el-Mandeb transit count. <https://www.investing.com/news/commodities-news/hormuz-vessel-traffic-falls-to-two-data-shows-4910409>
- [3] **U.S. MARAD, current advisory** - MSCI 2026-013 - Houthi Attacks on Commercial Vessels. <https://www.maritime.dot.gov/msci/2026-013-red-sea-bab-el-mandeb-strait-gulf-aden-arabian-sea-and-somali-basin-houthi-attacks>
- [4] **Lloyd's Market Association / Joint War Committee, 2026** - Joint War Committee - Red Sea and Listed Areas guidance. <https://lmalloyds.com/committee/joint-war-committee/>
- [5] **Critical Threats / ISW, 23 Sep 2026** - Iran Update, September 23, 2026. <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-september-23-2026>
- [6] **AFP reporting via Asharq Al-Awsat, 19 Sep 2026** - Report: Iranian Revolutionary Guards Experts Visit Bab al-Mandeb to Install Radars. <https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/5320265-report-iranian-revolutionary-guards-experts-visit-bab-al-mandeb-install-radars>
- [7] **Critical Threats / ISW, 17 Sep 2026** - Iran Update, September 17, 2026 - fortification and Jabal Kahboub reporting. <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-september-17-2026>
- [8] **Reuters, 22 Sep 2026** - Saudi Arabia restarts East-West oil pipeline, sources say. <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/saudi-arabia-restarts-east-west-oil-pipeline-resume-exports-yanbu-sources-say-2026-09-22/>
- [9] **Sheba Intelligence, 24 Sep 2026** - Houthis Order Fishermen Out of Red Sea for Up to Three Days. <https://shebaintelligence.uk/houthis-order-fishermen-out-of-red-sea-for-up-to-three-days-raising-questions-over-possible-military-activity>
- [10] **UK Government, updated 1 May 2026** - Yemen sanctions: statutory guidance. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/yemen-sanctions-guidance/yemen-sanctions-guidance>

COLLECTION CUT-OFF

Evidence refresh completed 24 September 2026. The source appendix is selective rather than exhaustive and records the principal public sources supporting decision-relevant judgements in this issue.