Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: TA | AP Insight

The Houthis opened a new front in the Iran war

Yemen's Iranian-backed Houthi rebels captured a strategic island at the southern entrance to the Red Sea, two officials said Friday, opening a new front in the Iran war and further threatening Saudi oil exports through one of the world's key shipping lanes.

The Houthis' biggest territorial gains in years, along the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, could boost Iran's strategy of driving up world oil and gas prices to pressure the United States.

Saudi Arabia struck the airport in the nearby port city of Mokha that the Houthis seized Thursday, a Houthi broadcaster said. There were no reports of damage or deaths.

The capture of Mayun, a tiny, barren volcanic island inside the strait also known as Perim, was confirmed by a senior military official with Yemen's internationally recognized government and by a Houthi official. Both spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to journalists.

Saudi Arabia, the world's largest oil exporter, has increasingly relied on the Red Sea to get its crude to market as an alternative to the Strait of Hormuz, where Iran has been striking ships.

Houthi moves to close the 28-kilometer-wide (17-mile) Bab el-Mandeb channel have made that route more complicated. Saudi officials declined a request by The Associated Press for comment on the developments.

In a statement Friday, the Houthi armed forces boasted of gains along the coast without mentioning the island, Mokha or the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

They vowed "escalation for escalation" in the confrontation with Saudi Arabia, while declaring that "maritime navigation is safe for all companies except for Saudi vessels."

Still, markets are nervous, and experts have described the Houthis as highly unpredictable. Crude prices this week soared once again above $100 a barrel, giving Tehran more leverage in any talks.

Yemen's government shocked by slow Saudi response

The Houthis have been attacking Saudi shipping on the Red Sea since declaring a blockade in July, as well as oil infrastructure inside Saudi Arabia.

The rebels said they acted in response to the kingdom's yearslong blockade of Houthi-held parts of Yemen.

A senior military official with Yemen's internationally recognized government told the AP they were stunned that the Saudi air force did not try to prevent the capture of Mokha, which is within 50 miles (80 kilometers) of the strait, by striking the Houthis as they advanced.

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He assessed that Saudi Arabia didn't get a green light from the U.S. to embark on a large-scale air campaign.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he wasn't allowed to speak to the media, also blamed "lack of coordination" between Yemen's army and multiple allied militias, saying it gave the Houthis "a priceless opportunity."

Shipping through the Bab al-Mandeb Strait had fallen by about 60% since the Houthis began attacking some ships there in late 2023 and expressing solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza.

Shipping increased this year as Saudi Arabia sought alternatives to the Strait of Hormuz, but renewed Houthi threats have "curtailed" that activity, according to Lloyd's List Intelligence.

That has forced Saudi Arabia to find yet another alternative, sending its oil north out of the Red Sea to the Mediterranean, either via

the Suez Canal or a pipeline through Egypt, a far longer route for its clients in Asia.

The Houthis have threatened that route as well, striking a Saudi vessel in the north of the Red Sea in late August.

Iran calls for a return to Saudi-Houthi talks

Earlier Friday, Iran's government called for an end to Saudi Arabia's blockade of Houthi-held areas in a show of support for its ally. The Iranian Foreign Ministry also called for a return to negotiations between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis.

In a sign of how important the Houthis have become for Tehran, the spokesperson for Iran's powerful Revolutionary Guard on Wednesday called for any negotiated settlement with the U.S. to include Yemen, the first explicit reference to that front.

> The foreign ministers of Iran and Saudi Arabia spoke Thursday about diplomatic efforts to "restore stability" to the region

The call mirrored Iran's past stance that a truce in Lebanon between its ally Hezbollah and Israel must be a part of any deal with the U.S.

Saudi Arabia, which earlier this week said it had always offered "opportunities for negotiation," also has said it has the right to defend itself in response to the Houthis' blockade.

The foreign ministers of Iran and Saudi Arabia spoke Thursday about diplomatic efforts to "restore stability" to the region, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said on social media.

The fighting risks a return to Yemen's civil war

As the Houthis swept along the Red Sea coast toward the Bab el-Mandeb channel, Yemen's Saudi-backed government called for international support.

In a statement Friday from a meeting the previous day, its National Defense Council said it was on the front line of defending freedom of navigation and condemned the Houthis' renewed attacks on Saudi Arabia.

The surge in fighting in the past week has sent over 46,000 people fleeing

The escalating fighting threatens to end a fragile truce that had largely halted Yemen's civil war since 2022. At stake are the 40 million people in the Arab world's poorest country who fear a return to the conflict that killed 150,000 and brought many others to the brink of famine.

The surge in fighting in the past week has sent over 46,000 people fleeing, the U.N. migration agency said Friday.

People seeking safety from the fighting are carrying few belongings, "whatever they can grab," Abdusattor Esoev, chief of mission in Yemen for the International Organization for Migration, said in an interview Friday.

He said the number of people displaced more than doubled this week and could still rise sharply.

"You see the fears in their eyes, and people are scared," Esoev said.

The Houthis have been at war with Yemen's government since 2014, when the rebels swept from their mountainous heartland and seized much of northern and central Yemen, and the capital of Sanaa. Saudi Arabia entered the war the following year on behalf of the government.