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The Shia maritime escalation in the Bab el-Mandeb

For the first time since its beginning, the consequences of the war in Yemen threaten freedom of navigation along the shipping route between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Since the Yemeni conflict remains unsolved, the security of the Bab el-Mandeb strait is likely to become a long-term source of concern for the international community.

In October 2016, two United States' Navy vessels (as the *USS Mason* and the *USS Ponce*) were targetted by missile attacks in at least four different episodes occurring in international waters, off the Yemeni coast still controlled by Shia insurgents (the Houthis of the Ansarullah movement, allied with former president Ali Abdullah Saleh's loyalists). In some cases, the warships activated counter-measures: the attacks did not produce casualties.

The Bab el-Mandeb strait is a vital choke-point for international trade: the trade in crude oil and petroleum products through the strait has increased from 2,7 mln bpd (2010) to 4,7 mln bpd (2014). Previously, a United Arab Emirates' catamaran, the Emirati HSV-2 *Swift*, was severely damaged after a missile strike carried out in the same area on October 1.

The Houthis, who denied any involvement in the attacks against the American Navy, but rapidly claimed responsibility for the strike against the Emirati one, control Yemen's Western coast (the Tihama); the ports of Hodeida and al-Mokha are still seized by the insurgents, as well as the inner city of Ibb.

In response to these incidents, the United States destroyed three radar sites in Ras Isa (north of Hodeida), as a self-defense measure to protect American ships and assure freedom of navigation in the Bab el-Mandeb strait.

Despite attacks' details being still unknown, the Yemeni Shia faction led by Ansarullah has no apparent interest to further involve Washington in the conflict, since the USA already stand by the Saudi-led military coalition, which is striking since March 2015 the insurgents to restore Yemeni legitimate institutions. As a matter of fact, the Houthi militias receive military and training support - and probably missiles too - by the Iranian al-Quds and the Lebanese Hezbollah, even though Yemen's Shia rebels would not have sufficient technical expertise to use them.

However, the amount of Teheran's military and financial support to the Houthis has not to be overstated so far: the Saudi Arabia-Iran rivalry is only the regional level of Yemen's multilayered conflict.

The maritime escalation in the Bab el-Mandeb strait has at least two political implications: the gradual internationalization of the war in Yemen, after Washington's military intervention against the radar sites, and Egypt's probable increased engagement in maritime security, since Red sea security and viability represent a national interest for Cairo too.

Eleonora Ardemagni