EXCLUSIVE

Yemen's Houthis considering fees for ships sailing through Red Sea, sources say

By **Jonathan Saul**, **Parisa Hafezi** and **Timour Azhari**

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An aerial view shows the coast of the Red Sea, through the window of a plane before landing, in Marsa Alam, Egypt March 23, 2025. REUTERS/Stringer Purchase Licensing Rights

Summary

- Chinese vessels seen exempt from proposed charges
- Iran discussed Bab el-Mandeb fees with Houthis
- Red Sea route disruption raises energy shortage fears

LONDON/DUBAI, July 29 (Reuters) - Yemen's Houthi group is considering imposing fees on commercial ships sailing through the southern Red Sea, a week after declaring a naval blockade on Saudi Arabia, regional sources with knowledge of the matter told Reuters.

The Iran-aligned Houthis on July 20 declared a maritime embargo against Saudi Arabia, opening a new front against the U.S. and its allies in the Iran war and expanding attacks on tankers carrying global energy and other supplies to waters beyond the Gulf.

The Houthis were looking into imposing fees on most traffic through the narrow Bab el-Mandeb gateway, which links the southern Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden, the sources said. No timeframe was given at this stage for implementation, they added.

The Houthis' media office did not respond to a request for comment.

Houthi officials travelled to Iran in July for the funeral ceremony of late Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, where Iranian counterparts discussed with them the issue of imposing fees on Bab el-Mandeb transits, two regional officials briefed by Tehran told Reuters.

The objectives of such a move would be to normalise the practice of imposing fees on international waterways and increase pressure on the United States, the sources said. Chinese ships would be exempted from such fees and the Houthis were supportive of the arrangement, they added.

China has held direct talks with the Houthis to enable its tankers to sail through the southern Red Sea without being attacked, sources have told Reuters. China is the world's biggest buyer of Saudi Arabian oil.

IRANIAN ADVISERS GUIDE FEE PLAN

Houthi officials who returned by plane from Tehran were accompanied by Iranian advisers who were on the ground to guide them on setting up a potential authority that will regulate fees through the Bab el-Mandeb, an Arab official in the region said."The Houthis will try to gain access over the Red Sea and they will try to charge ships if they do," Afrah al-Zouba, foreign minister-designate with Yemen's internationally recognised government, told Reuters.

Such a move would face strong opposition from Gulf and European countries, although overstretched international naval forces are currently unable to provide sufficient protection for merchant shipping and there is little political appetite to change that, two Western diplomats said.

Tehran has ruled out Oman's proposal for regional joint management of the Strait of Hormuz that would include voluntary fees from ships, a senior Iranian official told Reuters on Wednesday, scuppering hopes for a resolution to the impasse that has choked off Gulf trade in that chokepoint for months.

SAUDI ARABIA FACES SUPPLY THREAT

Closure of the Bab el-Mandeb would deprive Saudi Arabia of a critical alternative to the Strait of Hormuz and heighten fears of oil supply shortages.

Red Sea traffic has not fully recovered since Houthi attacks off Yemen's coast began in November 2023 in what the group said was an act of solidarity with Palestinians in the Gaza war. The group's attacks on merchant ships only ended with the Gaza ceasefire last October.

At least one Saudi tanker has been attacked in the past week off the southern Saudi port of Jizan, near Yemen, and the Houthis claimed responsibility.

The Houthis were previously alleged to have collected fees from some shipping agencies transiting the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden during the height of their maritime campaign in 2024 in exchange for safe passage, according to a 2024 U.N. Panel of Experts report, which said it was unable to independently verify the information.

Those fees were estimated to have reached $180 million a month, although those details were not verified.

Sailing through the Bab el-Mandeb to Asia takes on average 16 days, versus 50 days if cargoes are rerouted through the northern Red Sea, through the Suez Canal and then via southern Africa.

Reporting by Jonathan Saul, Parisa Hafezi, Timour Azhari and Mohammed Ghobari; Editing by Ros Russell