



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on December 22, 2023

Malaysia Closes Its Ports to Israeli Ships

Malaysia will not permit Israeli-flagged ships or vessels headed for Israel to dock or load cargo at its ports, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim announced on December 20. The ban was enforced to protest against Israeli “atrocities and massacres” in Gaza, he added.

The Southeast Asian country had opened its ports to Israel-based ZIM Integrated Shipping Solutions in 2002, but has decided to reverse that decision.

“These sanctions are a response to Israel’s actions ignoring the basic principles of humanity and breaking international law through continued massacres and atrocities against Palestinians,” Anwar declared in a [statement](#).



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Port Klang, Selangor, Malaysia

Sunni Islam is Malaysia’s state religion, observed by almost two-thirds of its citizens. Kuala Lumpur has been a vocal advocate for the Palestinians and has decided to keep ties with Hamas, a group that has been classified as a terrorist organization by Israel, the United States, and the EU due to its actions. Israel declared war on Hamas after the group’s October 7 brutal attacks, in which an estimated 1,200 Israelis were killed. Since then, Israel’s offensive has led to the deaths of nearly 20,000 Palestinians in Gaza, based on figures from the local health ministry.

According to Bloomberg, Malaysia’s sanctions are largely symbolic. A more pressing problem for Israel has been the de facto blockade of its shipping via the Red Sea by the Houthis of Yemen, who have openly backed the Palestinians in the Israeli-Hamas conflict.

Earlier, the United States declared that a multinational naval armada would be mobilized to keep the sea route open, but the Houthis responded on December 19 that nothing would prevent them from “legitimate operations in support of Gaza.”

Drone and missile [attacks](#) on international shipping in the Red Sea have already escalated insurance rates and caused several major carriers to reroute traffic around Africa at the expense of millions of dollars. The Houthi rebels have attacked vessels they allege are linked to Israel as a display of support for Palestinians in Gaza.

“Even if America succeeds in mobilizing the entire world, our military operations will not stop unless the genocidal crimes in Gaza stop ... no matter the sacrifices it costs us,” Houthi spokesman Mohammed al-Bukhaiti [said](#) on X (formerly Twitter).

“Whoever seeks to expand the conflict must bear the consequences of his actions,” al-Bukhaiti elaborated. “The American-formed coalition is to protect Israel and militarize the sea without any justification, and will not stop Yemen from continuing its legitimate operations in support of Gaza.”

The group, which de facto runs Yemen, declared its support for the Palestinian cause at the end of



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October.

“Our Armed Forces launched a large batch of ballistic and cruise missiles and a large number of drones at various targets of the Israeli enemy in the occupied territories,” said Brigadier General Yahya Saree, the spokesman for the Yemeni Armed Forces at that time.

On December 18, the United States [said](#) that it would prepare a naval task force to ensure “freedom of navigation” via the Red Sea in an operation dubbed “Prosperity Guardian.”

Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles, Spain, and the U.K. will also join the operation, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said.

In an English-language [post](#) on December 19, al-Bukhaiti castigated the U.S.-led force as “the Coalition of Shame” and its support for Israel “a stain on its history” that will result in “expanding the scope of the conflict and increasing the risks to shipping lines.”

A top Houthi official and negotiator, Mohammed Abdulsalam, told Reuters that the U.S.-led mission was “essentially unnecessary” as the waters off Yemen were safe except for ships associated with or headed for Israel.

In response to missile and drone attacks by the Houthis, various major international shipping companies have already rerouted their vessels around Africa.

On December 19, Danish shipping group Maersk announced that its vessels scheduled to transit the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden will be rerouted around Africa via the Cape of Good Hope owing to the risk of attacks by Houthi militants.

Maersk, together with other major freight companies, had previously halted travel via the southern entrance to the Red Sea, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, due to security concerns.

The Bab el-Mandeb Strait links the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden, and then on to the Indian Ocean on one side and the Mediterranean Sea via the Suez Canal on the other. The waterway is a major route connecting Asia to Europe, and facilitates around 12 percent of global trade, including 30 percent of all global container shipments.

“The attacks we have seen on commercial vessels in the area are alarming and pose a significant threat to the safety and security of seafarers,” Maersk said in a statement, as cited by CNBC.

The company elaborated that it was keeping close tabs on the situation and had decided that all vessels currently on hold and previously poised to travel via the Red Sea would take the much-longer Cape of Good Hope route. The route reduces an Asia-Europe trip’s effective capacity by 25 percent, analysts at UBS have contended.

Maersk said its vessels would continue on diverted routes “as soon as operationally feasible,” adding that decisions on future journeys would be made on a case-by-case basis.

Evergreen Cargo also said it would no longer carry Israeli goods through the Red Sea. Similarly, the U.K. oil giant BP has rerouted its tankers around the Cape of Good Hope instead.

In its statement, BP lamented the “deteriorating security situation” as Yemen-based Houthi rebels have targeted ships traversing the area that they think are headed for Israel.

“The safety and security of our people and those working on our behalf is BP’s priority,” the company said. “We will keep this precautionary pause under ongoing review, subject to circumstances as they



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evolve in the region.”

Meanwhile, industry observers have been voicing worries that the situation could further disrupt supply chains, pushing up crude prices in Europe and the Mediterranean.



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