

Middle East conflict

Houthi rebels to allow burning Red Sea oil tanker to be salvaged

Fire onboard the Greek-owned Sounion had sparked warning of an imminent 'ecological disaster'



The Sounion on fire on Sunday. The US had accused the Houthi rebels of threatening to attack two tugboats that had tried to salvage the tanker © EUNavfor Aspides/Reuters

Oliver Telling and **Robert Wright** in London YESTERDAY

Get ahead with daily markets updates. [**Join the FT's WhatsApp channel**](#)

Yemen's Houthi rebels said they would allow a burning tanker to be salvaged from the Red Sea, bowing to international pressure to avert a huge oil spill following an attack on the ship by the militant group.

The Houthis made their decision after being contacted by “several international parties”, particularly in Europe, said the group's spokesperson Mohammed Abdel Salam in a statement.

The announcement marked an apparent change of tack by the Yemeni group, which was accused by the US of [**threatening to attack**](#) two tugboats that had tried to salvage the Sounion.

It comes as a relief to officials globally, who had grown increasingly concerned about the risk of a spill since the [**Houthis**](#) disabled the ship in a missile assault last week, before starting a fire by setting off explosives on decks.

The EU task force to combat the threat has warned that any deterioration of the

situation on board the Greek-owned vessel, which is carrying 1mn barrels of crude, “could lead to a severe ecological disaster with potentially devastating effects on the region’s biodiversity”.



The incident marked the latest attack in the Houthis’ campaign to target commercial ships transiting the maritime passage, a move they have said is in support of Gaza’s Palestinians during Israel’s war with Hamas.

The Sounion fire threatens the first ecological disaster caused by attacks that since November have claimed the lives of four seafarers and severely [disrupted trade globally](#).

The EU task force said on Thursday that it was “assessing the situation and the feasibility of protective measures”, including towing the vessel. But it also warned that its operation lacked “the specialised equipment or assets for such a task”, adding that it would “do its utmost to facilitate this effort”.

Dimitris Maniatis, chief executive of private maritime security group Marisks, said military vessels built for high speeds would struggle to tow such a large ship, adding that arranging this would be the responsibility of the owner and its insurer.

The Sounion, whose cargo is equivalent to 150,000 tonnes, is owned by Delta Tankers. It is the third ship belonging to the Greek group that has been targeted in the Red Sea this month, according to security analysts, despite [criticism of shipowners](#) and their customers who choose to continue crossing the high-risk area.

A leak from the ship would be likely to produce the most serious hydrocarbon spill

since the Sanchi tanker disaster, which in 2018 led to 113,000 tonnes of natural-gas condensate spilling into the South China Sea after a collision.

Arsenio Dominguez, secretary-general of the International Maritime Organization, the UN body where national delegations co-ordinate on shipping matters, said on Wednesday that he was “[extremely concerned](#)” about the situation regarding the tanker Sounion”.

“The risk of an oil spill, posing an extremely serious environmental hazard, remains high and there is widespread concern about the damage such a spill would cause within the region.”

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2024. All rights reserved.
