



RiskIntelligence

# Monthly Intelligence Report

## September 2023

Risk Intelligence A/S  
Strandvejen 100  
2900 Hellerup  
Denmark

Tel: +45 7026 6230  
[info@riskintelligence.eu](mailto:info@riskintelligence.eu)  
[www.riskintelligence.eu](http://www.riskintelligence.eu)

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## Monthly Intelligence Report

This report includes an overview of attacks against merchant vessels over the past month in three focus regions (West Africa, the western part of the Indian Ocean and South East Asia) as well as assessments of different types of threats in these regions. These areas are currently considered to be the global regions where the threat of such attacks is most significant.

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# Monthly focus: Increasing tensions in the Persian Gulf?

## Introduction

Despite the absence of significant incidents in recent weeks, there are still unresolved disputes in the Persian Gulf and its approaches that are dominating the regional maritime security situation. The main dispute over Iran's oil exports has led to the continued detention of two tanker vessels by Iran. Further seizures and detentions cannot be ruled out.

At the same time, the United States has floated the proposal of US Marines acting as armed guards on merchant ships – a proposal with several limitations that would have to be overcome.

## Vessel seizures and detentions

Iran has continued to use its naval capabilities in a role that blurs their constabulary role in territorial waters and their role as a tool for Iran's foreign policy. This tool has been sharpened over the past five years as Iran has seized various merchant ships to resolve political disputes over its sanctioned oil exports, as well as commercial disputes arising out of those exports.

The most recent seizures – the ADVANTAGE SWEET in April and the NIOVI in May – are examples of both uses of the seizure policy. Both are related to US sanctions and initiatives by the US to penalise companies trading Iranian oil and to seize specific cargoes as 'proceeds of terrorism'. Both vessels are still being held off Bandar Abbas, Iran's main naval base for the Gulf of Oman/Strait of Hormuz area.



*Crude oil tanker ADVANTAGE SWEET is seized by Iranian forces (Photo: Iran Navy)*

The NIOVI situation is very likely related to a previous commercial dispute involving the owners, charter parties and the consignee as part of a shipment of Iranian oil to China. The owners took the case to the High Court in London in 2021. The NIOVI allegedly received this cargo via STS from the OMAN PRIDE, a tanker that was specifically sanctioned by the US in 2021, linking it to sanctioned oil exports.

It seems likely that Iran is still looking for restitution over this situation, or to settle old scores. There are other factors to consider, however, particularly given the timing around other disputes involving Iran and Greece, so there might have been multiple motivations and it was the perfect opportunity for a seizure. In May this year, NIOVI managers Smart Tankers were reported saying that they were still waiting for an explanation.

There are several unclear details that make this case difficult to analyse – and also to speculate on how it might be resolved. Ultimately, any entity trading Iranian oil to China faces an increased risk of running afoul of US sanctions, of disputes with other entities that will be difficult to resolve, or of unilateral – commercial or political – action by Iran.

The seizure of the ADVANTAGE SWEET is linked to the US seizure of the SUEZ RAJAN, a case which has gained domestic political interest in in the US. As reported by the Wall Street Journal: “People familiar with the case say the SUEZ RAJAN came under US government scrutiny only after a non-profit organisation that has advocated for comprehensive sanctions against Tehran—the New York based United Against Nuclear Iran, or UANI—accused the ship of carrying the sanctioned oil, citing satellite photos and ship-tracking data. Lawyers representing 9/11 victims and their families, whom US courts have given the right to claim compensation from Iran’s government, also filed suit against one of the ship’s former owners.”



*Damage from Iranian fire on the RICHMOND VOYAGER (Source: USCENTCOM)*

UANI is highly influential in domestic politics over Iran issues. The US government is reportedly trying to sell the cargo from the SUEZ RAJAN but Iran has made public threats to any companies involved. It is likely that the approach by Iranian naval forces of the US-managed and operated RICHMOND VOYAGER on 5 July was another attempt to affect the situation. On 16 August, the US-flagged container vessel APL EAGLE was then shadowed by Iranian forces off Bahrain. Similar incidents are likely, another vessel seizure cannot be ruled out until the situation is resolved.

## The US response

The US and its allies already have naval forces deployed in the region. The USS McFAUL responded to the RICHMOND VOYAGER incident which involved the Iranian corvette BAYANDOR.

In addition, the US has floated the idea of US Marines being deployed as armed guards on merchant vessels in transit to protect against boardings by Iranian forces. Some 100 Marines have reportedly received additional training and are ready to be deployed if required. However, several issues would have to be solved first.

Coastal state jurisdictions are an important consideration in the Gulf of Oman and Persian Gulf area. For vessels in transit, particularly close to territorial waters of potentially hostile countries, there are few – if any – precedents for using military forces. For merchant shipping, the focus in recent years has been on piracy by non-state actors, leading to designated high-risk areas such as off Somalia. IMO guidelines and flag state regulations are focused on such scenarios. The latest circular from the Panama Maritime Authority, for example, does not include the Gulf of Oman or the Persian Gulf as a high-risk area for piracy.

In typical flag state regulations, the focus is on private maritime security companies (PMSCs) providing armed guards for vessels rather than on military forces. Regulations for armed guards can be extensive, situating them in a broader set of BMPs. For example, the Marshall Islands regulations state that armed guards “shall not be used as a replacement for the highly effective self-protection measures of BMP Guidelines.” Dedicated BMPs, however, have only been published for the Indian Ocean and West Africa, not for the Gulf of Oman and Persian Gulf area.

By and large, extensive flag state regulations and related IMO recommendations show how cautious many shipping companies are in relation to armed guards and weapons on board. Marshall Islands flag state regulations, for example, require a detailed ship security plan which includes the potential use of force in a piracy situation. Further reflecting this cautiousness, the Marshall Islands regulations also limit the types of weapons for armed guards (no handguns, fully automatic weapons, or RPGs) and the number of weapons and ammunition quantities – all kept locked under the master’s control until “deemed absolutely necessary”.

An additional concern would be that decisions on the escalating use of force might be taken by US Marines based on military motivations rather than commercial decisions that prioritise vessel and crew safety. Any merchant ship could also face an increased threat of escalating Iranian action for having US Marines on board, turning it into a tempting target for diversion into nearby Iranian waters where the Marines themselves become potential hostages.

## Outlook

The US proposal for military guards shows increased concerns over Iranian actions. Iran itself has been cautious, framing its naval harassments and seizures in legal terms – such as anti-pollution or safety at sea violations (the ADVANTAGE SWEET was accused of colliding with an Iranian vessel) to provide a veneer of constabulary enforcement rather than geo-political tension building. However, Iran's actions are clearly linked to higher-level political and commercial disputes over its oil exports.

Vessel seizures and detentions have been a successful tool for Iranian foreign policy. In previous cases, Iran has secured concessions in exchange for the release of vessels. Its naval presence in the region, as well as the proximity of its own territorial waters – which other naval forces will

be reluctant to enter – increases its chances of success in seizing vessels. Until the broader issue of sanctions is resolved, some level of threat will remain to merchant vessels in transit.



*Naval exercise in the Persian Gulf in June 2023 (Source: USCENTCOM)*

The US and its allies will likely continue to increase naval deployments and patrolling as a deterrent, which could lower the threat somewhat. Embarking military personnel as armed guards on merchant ships, however, is unlikely to be a viable solution. While it is possible that the issues mentioned above – as well as additional concerns – could be resolved between the US military and the merchant shipping community, it would likely require a significant amount of time and may not lead to a satisfying conclusion.

### **Additional services**

The Risk Intelligence System provides clients with real-time intelligence and situational awareness that will assist in avoidance of threats for operations around the globe. Moreover, Risk Intelligence offers ship operators the possibility to purchase security intelligence for individual ports and terminals. Bespoke services such as vessel-specific or voyage-specific risk assessments can also help to determine and to mitigate persistent or emerging security threats and risks.

In addition, frequent webinars provide in-depth updates, mini masterclasses in situational awareness methodology, and analysis of current events. Schedules and registration forms can be found at [riskintelligence.eu/webinars](https://riskintelligence.eu/webinars).

# Update: Maritime dimensions of the war in Ukraine

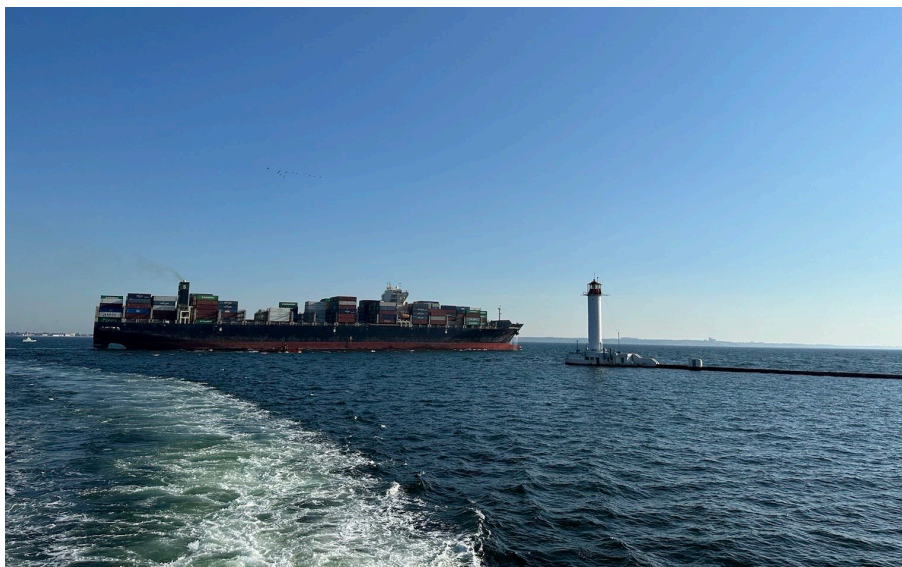
## Situation on land

The war in Ukraine continues to influence the overall security environment in the Black Sea region, with Russia continuing to target Ukrainian civilian infrastructure across the country. During the past month, Russian military has also intensified the shelling of port facilities along the Ukrainian Black Sea coast and Ukrainian Danube ports. The degree to which future port operations will be affected remains to be seen.

Ukrainian offensive operations are underway. Though verified details are sparse, fighting appears to be concentrated mainly in the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine. The overall threat picture remains volatile and is assessed to vary greatly depending on locality.

## Black Sea

In August, further Russian military operations targeting Ukrainian port infrastructure were reported, including Odessa and the Ukrainian Danube ports of Reni and Izmail. Similar attacks are likely in the near term, which points towards a strategy of deliberately targeting port infrastructure relating to Ukrainian grain exports through the Black Sea. As the Black Sea Grain Initiative (BSGI) remains suspended for further operations, following the Russian withdrawal in July, it is currently unlikely that any new incarnation of the BSGI could be implemented.



*Container ship JOSEPH SCHULTE leaving the port of Odessa (Photo: Social Media / Oleksandr Kubrakov)*

Ukraine has announced a proposed corridor, initially for the departure of vessels in the ports of Odessa, Chornomorsk and Pivdenny (formaly Yuzhny) which have been stranded since the outbreak of the war. Although two vessels have departed and appear to have used the announced corridor to depart from Odessa, the circumstances surrounding both voyages are unique. It is therefore too early to proclaim any certain proof of concept for universal safe passages through the announced corridor.



Russia – and subsequently Ukraine – have also announced warnings to merchant ships against transiting to Ukrainian and Russian Black Sea ports, as vessels would be seen as parties to the war and potential military targets. It is unclear whether such warnings will be acted upon. However, the boarding of the SUKRU OKAN by Russian military personnel and other incidents indicate a degree of intention. Furthermore, the continued targeting of Ukrainian Black Sea, Crimea and Kerch Strait infrastructure raises the likelihood of collateral damage.

The ongoing presence of military assets in the north-western Black Sea underlines the threat from military operations. The north-western part of the Black Sea near the Ukrainian and Crimean coasts, including the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait, are still assessed as prohibited areas of navigation by the Russian Navy, as announced by Russian officials. Ukraine has also announced that vessels operating at the Russia Black Sea ports Novorossiysk, Anapa, Gelendzhik, Tuapse, Sochi and Taman would be seen as aiding the Russian war effort.

Vessels transiting the Kerch Strait and Sea of Azov are assumed to have Russian permission. The operational status of the Ukrainian ports of Berdyansk and Mariupol remains disputed with Russian officials claiming both ports are open and operating. Ukrainian authorities have stated that they would remain closed until again under Ukrainian control. Nevertheless, the ports have seen some traffic which allegedly includes Russian-coordinated transports of stolen Ukrainian grain as well as metals and metallurgical products seized from Ukrainian territory. However, it is impossible to verify such reports.

Ukraine has intensified its military focus on the Kerch Strait to isolate the Sea of Azov for maritime traffic. This means that the immediate threat towards Russian Black Sea ports has increased. While direct targeting of civilian vessels must be taken into account, the recent escalations of attacks against Ukrainian maritime and port infrastructure following the termination of the BSGI are likely to drive more Ukrainian like-for-like targeting of Russian ports and maritime infrastructure. It is therefore assessed that the general threat picture has become increasingly volatile, particularly regarding collateral damage or mistaken targeting.

For the rest of the Black Sea, continuing reports of drifting sea mines indicate that the threat persists and is not confined to the Ukrainian coastline or the north-western part of the Black Sea. Threats from drifting mines and wider concerns of collateral damage are likely to continue for the duration of the war, if not longer.

## **Port operations / deal on grain exports**

Aside from Ukrainian Black Sea ports, Ukrainian Danube ports are operating. However, delays and operational disruptions have been reported following the Russian attacks and other operational disruptions such as weather and pilot shortages. Russian missile and drone attacks continue to target Ukrainian civilian infrastructure and future delays and disruptions cannot be ruled out. Local weather conditions also increased the possibility of drifting sea mines in the Black Sea.

The BSGI remains suspended, following the Russian withdrawal from the initiative in July. Prior to this, regular operations under the BSGI had already been heavily disrupted, leading to limited cargo throughput since May.

## Summary

In August, both Russian shelling along the Ukrainian Black Sea coast and Ukrainian efforts to target Russian Black Sea port infrastructure and some vessels increased. These operations are likely to continue as part of a wider strategy by both Ukrainian and Russian forces. The continued targeting of Ukrainian port infrastructure also complicates any future incarnation of the previously agreed BSGI.

The Ukrainian offensive appears to be making progress in the south while also continuing long-range strikes against Russian logistics infrastructure to disrupt supply lines and operations. This includes attacks around the Sea of Azov and Crimea, and future attacks against maritime infrastructure – similar to previous attacks on the Kerch Strait bridge – are possible. It is unclear to what degree Russia would enforce its threat of seeing vessels transiting to Ukrainian Black Sea ports as potential military targets. The boarding of the SUKRU OKAN underlines that some degree of enforcement is possible.

Diplomatic breakthroughs, ceasefire agreements or any return to the previous regional security situation in the Black Sea are unlikely in the near term. The volatile nature of the war means that the security situation can change on short notice. Any major successful offensive operations by both Ukrainian and Russian forces are likely to have a wider impact on the general security situation, including the maritime environment.

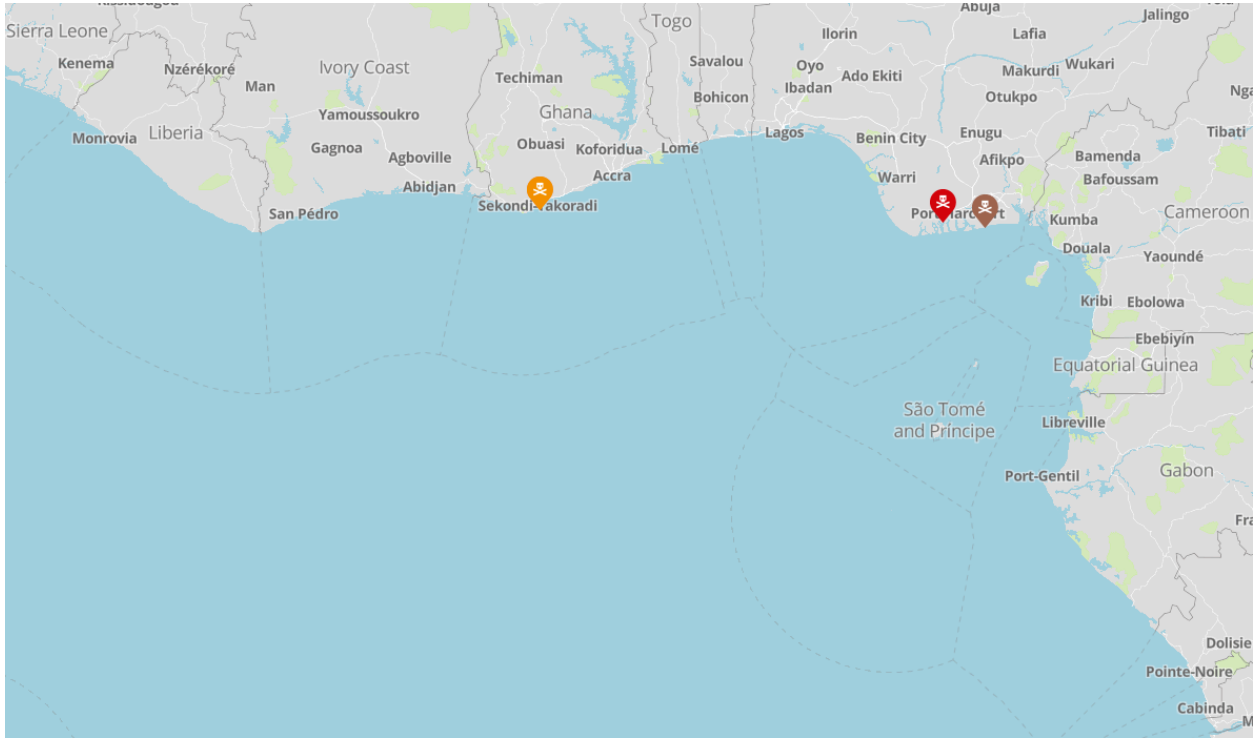
Merchant ship operations have to take the possibility of collateral damage into account. Potential hazards caused by sea mines and other forms of collateral damage should also be considered. The impact of future Ukrainian and Russian operations is uncertain and should be monitored closely. Risk Intelligence strongly recommends conducting thorough threat and risk assessments prior to any transit and to update contingency plans according to the current situation.

### Further information

Risk Intelligence provides a weekly threat assessment for ports in the northern part of the Black Sea, covering both the operational and security situation. In addition, the report provides a concise overview of the current situation in Ukraine and the northern Black Sea, including constantly updated information regarding the status of the Black Sea Grain Initiative.

## West Africa

Events included in this report occurred between 1 and 31 August 2023, shown on the map below (Source: Risk Intelligence System).



## Incidents

### **01 August – Local passenger craft attacked**

Armed robbery Rivers state Nigeria

### **05 August – Fishing vessel attacked**

Kidnap/ransom Opobo River Rivers state Nigeria

### **05 August – Supply vessel ANGGUN boarded**

Failed theft Takoradi anchorage Ghana 23:52 LT/UTC

### **07 August – Supply vessel ANGGUN boarded**

Failed theft Takoradi anchorage Ghana 03:20 LT/UTC

# Assessment

## Nigeria / Niger Delta

Attackers operating off the southern and eastern Niger Delta remain the most significant threat in the Gulf of Guinea. Relatively few security incidents have been reported over the past 24 months but the threat level has been underlined since March by several high-profile incidents. Attacks against local vessels in or near the Niger Delta also remain frequent, highlighting the fragile security situation.

Crude oil theft and sales of illegally refined petroleum products reached record levels in 2022 and have remained in a similar range in 2023 to date. Such operations have provided constant revenues to organised criminal groups for years yet profit margins started to increase significantly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Nigerian oil production and export levels even fell to historic lows in April 2023 and remain depressed. Subsequent revenue shortfalls are a strategic challenge for Nigeria's government under President Bola Tinubu, in office since May.

In a bid to improve the security situation, Tinubu and several high-ranking government officials have shown an increasing interest in ongoing operations across the Niger Delta. At the same time, the potential renewal of a contract with a security company which is ultimately controlled by a former Niger Delta militant leader has become a highly controversial issue. It remains to be seen whether the government wants to achieve mainly short-term success or focus on sustainable and long-term efforts to improve the security situation across the region.



*Personnel from a private security company which has been contracted to combat crude oil theft (Photo: Nigerian Tribune)*

The situation in the Niger Delta is closely linked to oil and gas revenues which are crucial for the federal and state-level budgets. Short-term improvements may be useful to boost crude oil production and to finance additional expenditures, especially on the federal level. However, "paying off" criminal groups in the Niger Delta through security contracts has not been a successful tactic in the past. Maritime operators should therefore monitor developments which may include an uptick in attacks against merchant ships at sea in the coming months.

Successful boardings of merchant ships remain most likely on "low and slow" types such as small bulk carriers or product tankers, offshore supply ships or fishing vessels. However, other vessels

may also be targeted. Weather conditions during the upcoming dry season – which normally starts in September or October – make it possible to operate small boats even deep offshore. Attacks may therefore take place at significant distances from the coastline.

For ongoing operations, crew vigilance and measures recommended in *BMP West Africa* remain important to mitigate risks. This may include the use of security escort vessels off Nigeria. These can be offered by several dozens of companies which have signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Nigerian Navy; the most recent version of this document was officially published in June 2021. The MoU remains the legal basis for additional security measures employed in the Nigerian maritime domain (territorial waters and EEZ). MoU signatories are authorised to provide escort vessels partly manned by naval personnel which cannot operate outside of Nigeria's EEZ.

In addition, it is vital to analyse security-related incidents. Several cases over the past 24 months involved vessels which are solely trading within the region. Such incidents are unlikely to be genuine pirate involving random targets. Overall, it is important to recognise piracy as merely one symptom of insecurity at sea which is closely linked to other organised criminal activities.

In Nigeria, attacks against local shipping or military patrols highlight that kidnappings and other criminal activities remain a security threat which may affect merchant ships again in the coming months. Two incidents in August highlighted the threat for local shipping. Main hotspots for organised crime are Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers and Akwa Ibom states.

## Forecast

The threat level in the coming month remains severe off the Niger Delta, despite limited numbers of incidents in recent months. Attacks are possible at distances of up to 250 nm from the coastline, particularly under favourable weather conditions during the dry season which is set to start in the coming weeks and last until about March. All ship types may be targeted.

Inshore attacks against local passenger and cargo vessels or against military detachments remain a threat across the Niger Delta, underlined by various incidents in recent months. Such attacks are not a direct concern for merchant ships in international trade, but crews must be vigilant during river transits in the Niger Delta.

## Gulf of Guinea (Côte d'Ivoire to Gabon) / West Africa (Senegal to Angola)

Maritime incidents in August were limited to two attempted thefts off Takoradi in Ghana, both targeting the same supply vessel at the anchorage. Similar to most other similar cases at anchorages across the region, the perpetrators escaped when they were discovered by the crew. Violence against crew members is rare during such thefts or attempted thefts which are usually aimed at stealing easily accessible items on deck.

In addition, the military coup in Gabon made a lot of headlines. Senior military officers deposed long-standing president Ali Bongo Ondimba after the results of the controversial presidential election had been announced. Bongo Ondimba had been in power since 2009, following on from his father who had previously ruled the country for around four decades. While there were some short-term implications for maritime operations as the country's borders were closed and ships were therefore not allowed to enter or leave port, no significant longer-term impacts on day-to-day operations should be expected.

Overall, the low number of maritime security incidents in recent months remains low compared with previous years. Despite this improvement, limited naval and law enforcement capabilities as well as a lack of cooperation between different agencies on the national and regional level remain issues which have a negative impact on maritime security.

Limited financial and human resources will remain a concern for navies across the region in the coming years. Maritime operators should therefore not interpret a low number of incidents as a significant reduction of the threat level. Criminal activities at sea remain closely linked. Illegal fishing, smuggling as well as other illicit operations have even increased in the recent past. Alleged pirate attacks may also be a cover for other types of illicit activities.

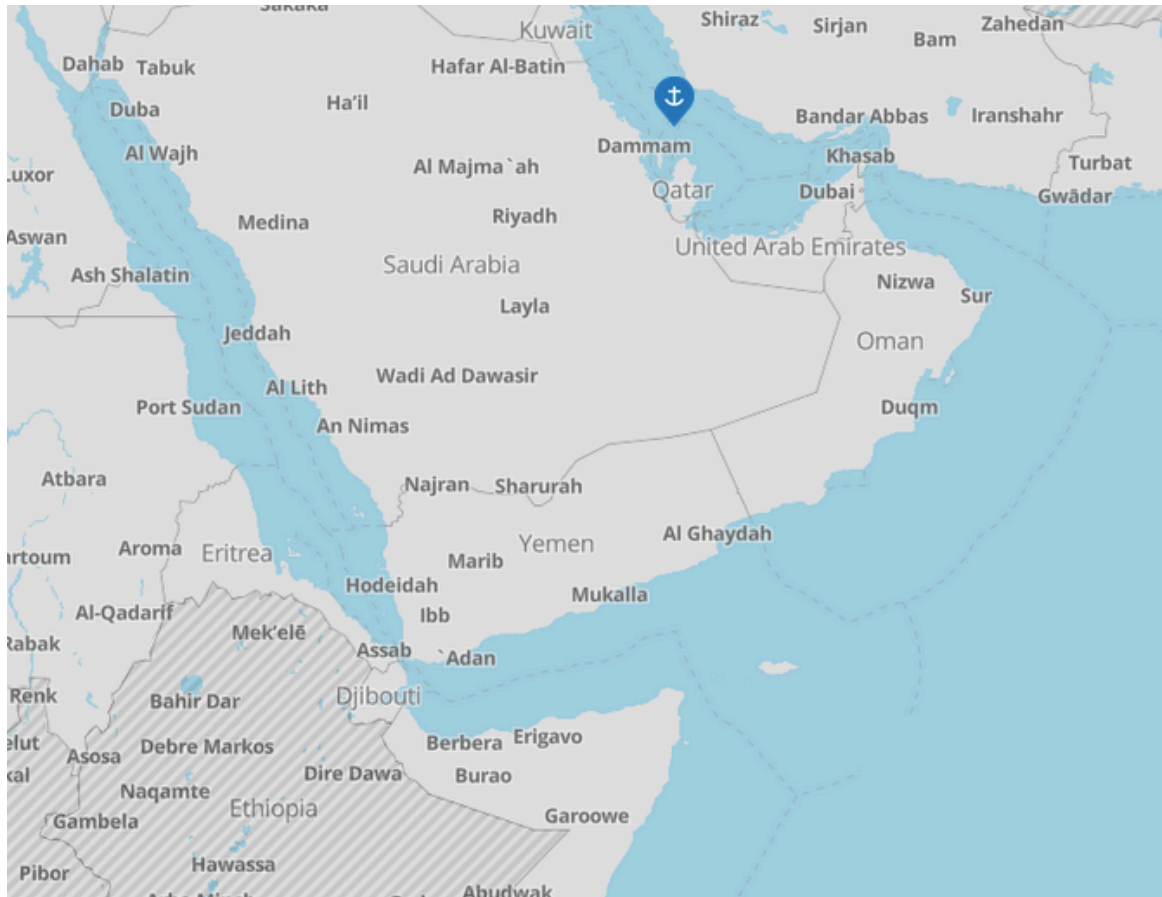
## Forecast

Throughout the Gulf of Guinea, the threat of kidnap-for-ransom attacks is assessed as moderate to high for the coming month, depending on the distance from the Niger Delta coastline where perpetrators can protect hostages from security forces and rival gangs during ransom negotiations. The threat level for vessel hijackings is assessed as low.

In West and Central Africa as a whole, perpetrators may try to board berthed or anchored vessels. Around most anchorages, the amount of small boat traffic is virtually impossible to control for security agencies. Threat levels vary between different ports, but perpetrators will generally escape upon discovery.

## Western Indian Ocean

Events included in this report occurred between 1 and 31 August 2023, shown on the map below (Source: Risk Intelligence System).



## Incidents

**16 August – Container vessel APL EAGLE approached Naval operation Persian Gulf**

## Assessment

### Southern Red Sea – Gulf of Aden

This area covers shipping routes which are potentially affected by the conflict and political dynamics in Yemen. Threats for vessels in transit are generally low; piracy is highly unlikely in the southern Red Sea and unlikely in the Gulf of Aden. Vessels should expect encounters with local traffic, which might be fishermen, traders, or smugglers (or all three). Skiffs will often pass close to merchant ships and the crew are likely to be armed.

Yemeni and Eritrean coastguard forces are active in this area, particularly around the Hanish Islands where the maritime borders of Yemen and Eritrea meet. These forces might not be immediately recognisable. There have been previous incidents involving private craft where Yemeni and Eritrean forces intercepted such craft which had not been immediately recognisable and were not following typical transit routes. Coastguard craft might shadow merchant vessels as part of their regular operations.

Salvage operations are continuing on the FSO SAFER – including the removal of the crude oil on board – as part of a UN-led operation. It is likely that this has led to an increase in patrolling in the area between Saleef and Hudaydah.

There have been no further Houthi drone attacks after oil facilities in southern Yemen were targeted in October and November 2022. Peace talks are ongoing between the factions in Yemen. Progress has been typically slow, but talks are ongoing with UN support. Maritime security in this area has somewhat improved yet any breakdown in the talks would likely lead to some escalation.

Due to recent tensions in the wider Middle East, the US has increased its naval deployments, including in the Red Sea. This has prompted a warning from Houthi command, cautioning US forces against entering Yemeni territorial waters. This is unlikely to take place but underscores that there is an ongoing conflict in Yemen – with wider implications – that remains unresolved.



*The US Navy amphibious assault ship BATAAN transiting south through the Suez Canal in August (Source: USCENTCOM)*

The political and security situation in Sudan remains precarious with various ceasefires being announced but no permanent resolution between the warring parties. The army is in control of coastal areas, including Port Sudan where port operations are still underway. There are potential security implications for port calls and the situation should be assessed ongoing. Fighting is unlikely to affect vessel transits in the Red Sea.



## Forecast

The likelihood of Houthi attacks on ports or shipping is still limited due to ongoing peace talks. The absence of attacks since November 2022 is indicative of the improving situation. For most vessels in transit, the threat level is low. Attacks against transiting vessels are currently not expected, particularly for ships that are using established transit corridors.

For transiting vessels, encounters with local traffic – that have armed crew on board – are likely to continue; such encounters are not a significant threat but can lead to cases of mistaken identity. Proximity to the Yemeni coast increases the possibility of such encounters. Pirate attacks are unlikely in this area.

## Gulf of Oman – Persian Gulf

There was one incident in this area on 16 August. The US-flagged container vessel APL EAGLE was transiting south to her next port of call in Bahrain when she was approached by four boats, two from the port quarter and two from the starboard quarter. The boats were flying Iranian flags and each had a machine gun mounted on the bow. There were no communications on VHF radio or other means of communication to or from the boats during the incident. The master sounded the emergency signal, crew mustered and locked down the accommodations. The boats then broke off their contact. Sources indicate they were taking pictures of the vessel.

This latest operation by Iran is likely linked to its ongoing dispute with the US over the seized crude oil cargo on the SUEZ RAJAN, currently offshore Texas. Iran continues to detain the crude oil tanker ADVANTAGE SWEET, seized in April with a cargo bound for Houston. It is likely that there will be further operations by Iran linked to this dispute. Vessels with US connections, through flag, ownership/management, or cargo, currently face a higher threat. The approach on the APL EAGLE is unlikely to have been an attempt to seize the vessel – as tankers are currently the preferred target – but likely an operation by Iran to signal its naval capabilities and presence.

The incident this month follows incidents in July where the Marshall Islands-flagged product tanker TRF MOSS was approached by an Iranian naval vessel in the Gulf of Oman. Around three hours later, the vessel approached the nearby Bahamas-flagged crude oil tanker RICHMOND VOYAGER, attempting to interdict the tanker and firing warning shots which caused minor damage to the superstructure of the tanker.

Seizing vessels has been a successful strategy for Iran as it is typically able to secure concessions in return for the vessel's release. Civilian agencies are also involved in the detentions and crew are typically well-treated. The release of seafarers is secured before that of the vessel, although the timing can vary. It is not unusual for vessels to be held for several months before a political compromise is reached and the vessels can be released as well.

## Forecast

There are various permutations that might increase (or decrease) the threat to certain vessel profiles, such as port calls, cargo, flag, or ownership/management. The current threat remains higher for vessels linked to Israel. Limited operations against vessels are a tactic that Iran can use in response to actions taken by Israel or other states in the region. Operations linked to Iran have included the use of limpet mines and drones/missiles to target vessels.

There is also a threat of potential vessel boardings and seizures as Iran has an extended record of such operations to resolve political and commercial disputes. The frequency of these incidents is difficult to predict but further cases are expected ongoing, particularly targeting US-linked vessels.

## Somali Basin and wider Indian Ocean

Merchant ships in transit should expect encounters with local traffic, which might be fishermen, traders, or smugglers (or all three). Skiffs will often pass close to merchant ships and the crew are likely to be armed, even if they are not showing weapons to avoid attracting attention from armed guards that might provoke an incident.

There have been no confirmed pirate attacks since 2019 and any piracy incidents are unlikely. Opportunistic approaches are possible, in an area out to around 300 nm from the Somali coast, but the overall threat continues to decline. Naval forces remain operational in the area, focusing on a range of maritime threats – including piracy and smuggling – which is an important deterrent to attacks on merchant ships. Somalia is continuing to develop its maritime policies to improve further the security situation in the Somali Basin.

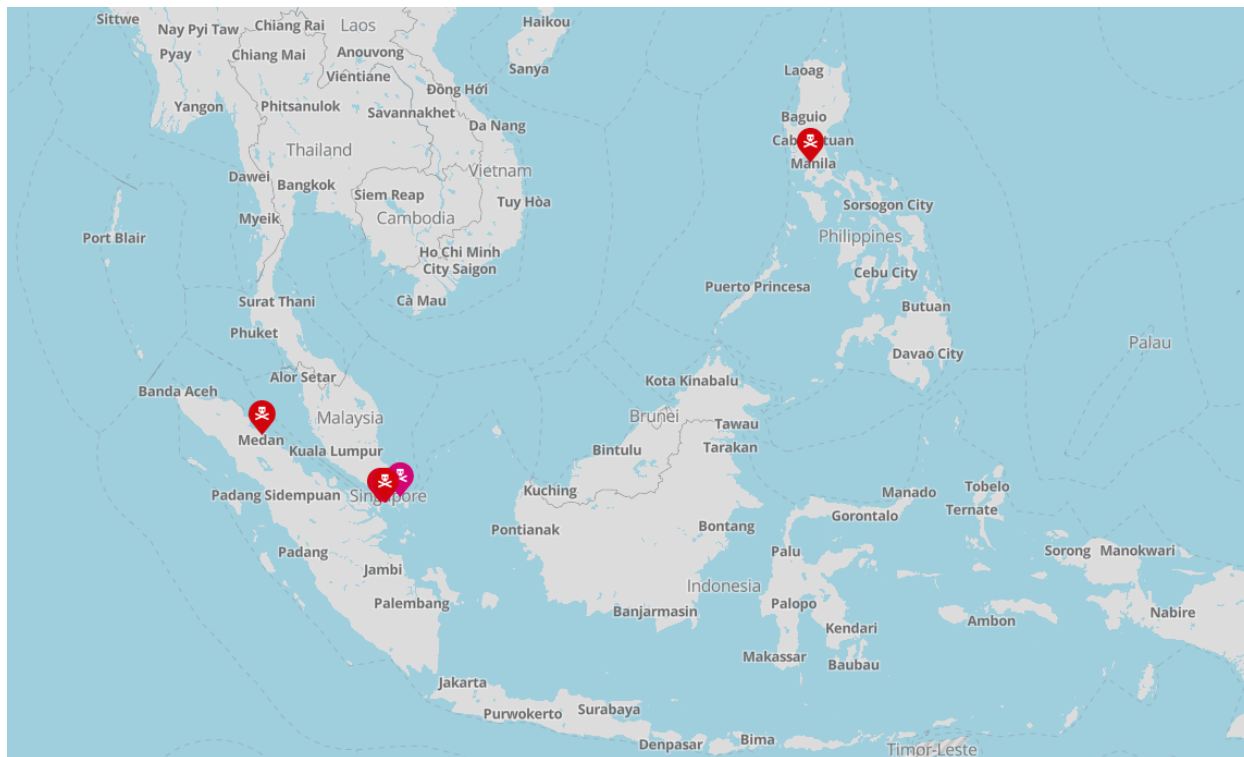
## Forecast

Local craft of various kinds are very likely to be encountered in this area and are potentially difficult to identify in some cases. Most vessels in transit are unlikely to be affected. Pirate attacks are unlikely.

Proximity to the Somali coast can also lead to encounters with local militias or criminal operations but the threat level is low. Military operations continue in Somalia but there is only a limited maritime dimension to these operations which are not expected to affect merchant ships in transit.

## South East Asia

Events included in this report occurred between 1 and 31 August 2023, shown on the map below (Source: Risk Intelligence System).



## Incidents

### **7 August – Bulk carrier JAL KAMAL boarded**

Theft Singapore Strait TSS 00:58 LT (16:58 UTC on 6 August)

### **8 August – Bulk carrier boarded**

Armed robbery Phillip Channel Indonesia 21:35 LT (14:35 UTC)

### **8 August – Bulk carrier OSAKA STAR boarded**

Theft Singapore Strait TSS 21:50 LT (13:50 UTC)

### **8 August – Bulk carrier DORIC WARRIOR boarded**

Armed robbery Singapore Strait TSS 22:30 LT (14:30 UTC)

### **9 August – Bulk carrier SOPHOCLES GRAECIA boarded**

Theft Singapore Strait TSS 03:35 LT (19:35 UTC on 8 August)

### **11 August – Container ship CNC PLUTO boarded**

Armed robbery Manila anchorage Philippines 00:02 LT (16:02 UTC on 10 August)

### **29 August – Bulk carrier SLNC SEVERN boarded**

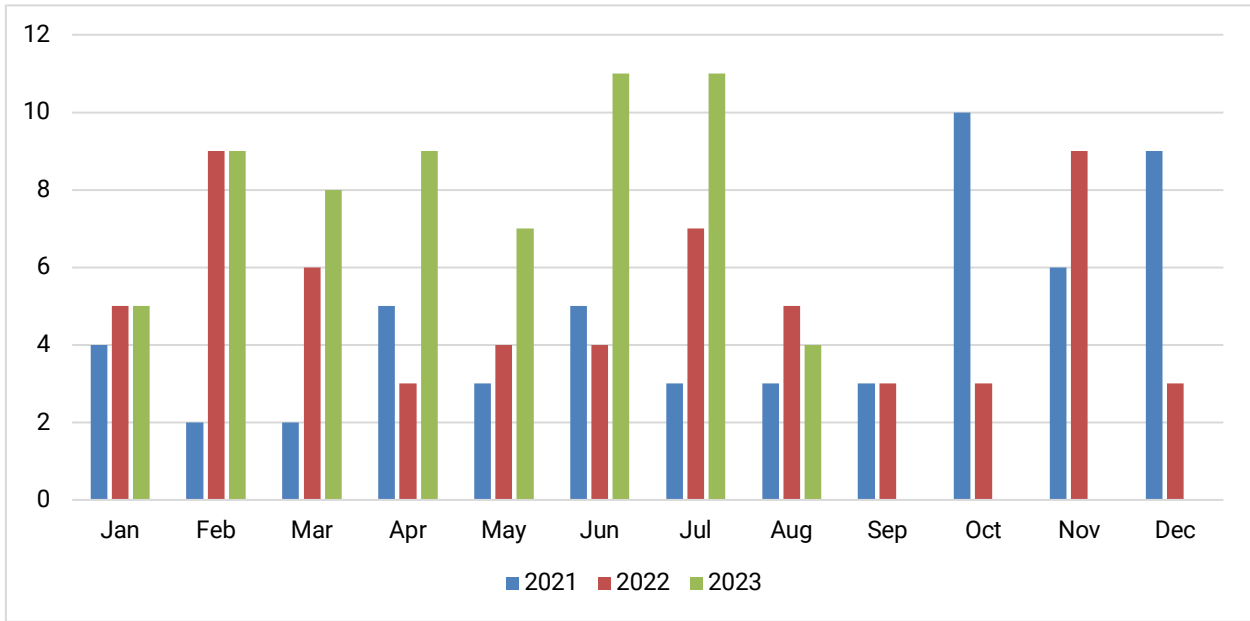
Armed robbery Port of Belawan Indonesia 16:00 LT (09:00 UTC)

# Assessment

## Singapore and Malacca Straits, South China Sea, Indonesian archipelago, Sulu / Celebes Seas

Thieves and armed robbers operating in the Singapore Strait remain the most significant threat for merchant vessels within these areas. Seven incidents were recorded in South East Asia during August, of which four took place in the Singapore Strait. A notable absence of failed attacks was seen in August with four recorded armed robberies and three thefts. The armed robbery at Manila raises concerns as it represents the rare use of guns, however, this did not result in injuries to the crew.

Over the past 12 months around 70% percent of all reported incidents in the region have taken place in the Singapore Strait. Of the four boardings recorded in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore (SOMS) in August, one involved perpetrators armed with weapons. As the borders of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore intersect in the Singapore Strait, perpetrators appear to take advantage of jurisdictional challenges there, improving their ability to escape.



*Number of maritime security incidents in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore per month in 2021, 2022 and 2023 to date (Source: Risk Intelligence System)*

Since September 2022, there have been 82 SOMS incidents. Of these, 75 occurred in the Singapore Strait and seven in the Malacca Strait. Of the total, 48 involved bulk carriers, 11 involved tankers, while 19 involved barges and other craft in tow. The outliers involved OSVs, a rig and a pipe-laying barge. No incidents in the straits have involved container ships.

Overall, around 90% of all SOMS incidents targeted vessels underway, all but three in the Singapore Strait. The remaining incidents took place at the Batu Ampar, Belawan and Dumai anchorages and on the rig. During the past twelve months, 65% of the Singapore Strait incidents have taken place in the western part of the strait between Karimun and Batam. As coastal authorities have increased patrols, response times are generally quick when incidents are

reported. While most perpetrators are armed with knives or machetes, they will rarely attack the crew unless provoked.

For the wider region, incidents typically encountered are non-violent boardings at anchorages as illustrated by boardings at Manila, Belawan, Tanjung Priok, Samarinda, Vung Tau and Batangas.

A notable incident in 2022 was the hijacking of a bunker barge and the theft of its fuel cargo off south-east Sulawesi in January. That incident, together with the unsolved theft of cargo from the OCEAN PRIDE in October 2021, illustrates that locally-trading tankers remain vulnerable to hijackings, whilst larger tankers in international trade have not been targeted by hijackers in recent years. These tanker incidents, together with the illegal sale of fuel from a tug in the Johor Strait in March and regular law enforcement interventions in the region, further show that the black market trading of fuel at sea continues.

Armed robbers and thieves usually board vessels at night and target supplies and engine spares while avoiding crew. Areas with the highest frequency of criminal activity during the past twelve months include the Singapore Strait, the ports of Batangas, Belawan, Manila, Sandakan and Tanjung Priok. Boardings of vessels alongside are less frequent.

Aside from the Singapore Strait, boardings of vessels underway have also occurred in the Natuna Sea and the southern South China Sea, although at a lower frequency. Most incidents in the region involve bulk carriers and tankers, with very few involving container vessels. Boardings of oil rigs are infrequent and generally involve the theft of equipment and supplies.

Moreover, some incidents during the past 12 months illustrate that crew members may be injured during attacks. In addition to the most recent incident in June in which a seafarer suffered a head injury, in July 2022 perpetrators tied up and threatened a seafarer at gunpoint while stealing engine spares during an incident in the Singapore Strait. Crew alertness is an important deterrent.

The March 2023 hijacking of a tug during which palm seed batches were stolen from the barge in tow and a similar bunker barge incident off Sulawesi in January are the only confirmed hijackings for cargo theft in the region since 2017. In 2018, there was one failed incident which had the markings of a product theft attempt involving the LEE BO off Mersing, Malaysia in the South China Sea.

The arrests of gang leaders behind hijackings had effectively suppressed such crimes, despite occasional incidents involving small tankers and barges which are locally owned, managed and trading solely in the region. As prices remain relatively high, it is possible that illegal fuel sales in the South China Sea, Sulu/Celebes Seas and the Singapore Strait will increase. This increases the vulnerability of smaller tankers to potential hijackings, similar to the period from 2011 to 2017.

As a result of intensified military operations in the southern Philippines and eastern Malaysia, kidnap for ransom activity of the Abu Sayyaf Group and its affiliates has been significantly suppressed. No cargo vessels have been targeted in the Sulu/Celebes Seas since February 2017. Tugs and fishing trawlers have also not been attacked since January 2020.

## Forecast

In the coming month, the threat of boardings of vessels that are underway or anchored for the purposes of theft or armed robbery is moderate. Higher threat locations include the Singapore Strait and anchorages at Batangas, Belawan, Manila, Sandakan and Tanjung Priok. Lower threat levels are present in the southern South China Sea off the Malaysian peninsula, and the Natuna Sea off Pulau Mapur, Indonesia.

The threat of hijacking for product theft is assessed as moderate for locally trading small tankers. These operations are infrequent due to effective law enforcement. The threat that internationally-trading tankers will be hijacked for cargo theft is assessed as low.

The threat of kidnappings of crew from cargo vessels on international trading routes in the Sulu and Celebes Seas is assessed as low, particularly while navigating within the designated transit corridors. Fishing trawlers remain the most vulnerable craft with respect to ASG-related kidnap for ransom operations, although other small craft, tugs, ferries and small locally-trading merchant cargo vessels may also be vulnerable.

## Definitions

### Threat levels

The threat levels used in this report are as per the Risk Intelligence System and are assessed based on the likelihood and consequence of a particular threat type occurring. The threat levels are as follows:

- Low: Negligible impact on operations in the coming month due to the unlikely occurrence of threat-related activity.
- Moderate: Some potential for minimal impact on operations in the coming month due to occurrence of low- level threat-related activity.
- Elevated: Moderate impact on operations in the coming month is possible with some threat-related activity expected to occur.
- High: Potential for major impact on operations in the coming month due to the occurrence of significant threat- related activity.
- Severe: Potential for severe impact on operations in the coming month as significant threat-related activity is ongoing or expected to occur.

### Incident types

The report covers the threats of piracy and armed robbery at sea in various forms but does not include other threats to merchant vessel operations such as stowaways or smuggling. All possible contingencies cannot be covered by any assessment and this report only includes an assessment of the threat for merchant vessels in general and not specific vessel types.

## RiskIntelligence

Risk Intelligence A/S  
Strandvejen 100  
2900 Hellerup  
Denmark

+45 7026 6230  
riskintelligence.eu