



**RiskIntelligence**

# Security Threat Update: Red Sea

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## Security Threat Update: Red Sea

This report provides an overview of recent incidents in the Red Sea as well as an assessments of threat levels for additional attacks against different types of merchant vessels.

Time of latest intelligence included in this report: 3 January 2024, 06:00 UTC.

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## Recent incidents (Red Sea / Bab el Mandeb area)

Below is a list of incidents in the Red Sea and the vicinity of the Bab el Mandeb which have been recorded on the Risk Intelligence System during the past 30 days. Information includes date, time and a short description of the respective incident. Comprehensive descriptions for all incidents (as well as for older incidents) can be found on the Risk Intelligence System.

|  |                  |   |
|--|------------------|---|
| <b>3 December</b>  | <b>06:10 UTC</b> | <b>Explosion reported in southern Red Sea</b>                     |
| An explosion, possibly in relation to drone activity, was reported in the vicinity of the UNITY EXPLORER which was targeted again on the same day.   |                  |   |
| <b>3 December</b>  | <b>09:00 UTC</b> | <b>USS CARNEY intercepts drone</b>                                |
| The US naval vessel shot down one drone which had been launched from a Houthi-controlled area in Yemen.  |                  |   |
| <b>3 December</b>  | <b>09:28 UTC</b> | <b>Bulk carrier UNITY EXPLORER struck by missile</b>              |
| The ship was hit while steaming southbound in the Red Sea.   |                  |   |
| <b>3 December</b>  | <b>12:30 UTC</b> | <b>Container ship NUMBER 9 struck by projectile</b>               |
| The ship was hit while steaming northbound in the Red Sea. Another incident about 'Yemeni authorities' ordering a merchant vessel altering its course was reported at the same time, likely targeted at the NUMBER 9 as well.                  |                  |   |
| <b>3 December</b>  | <b>13:30 UTC</b> | <b>Bulk carrier AOM SOPHIE II struck by projectile</b>            |
| The ship was hit while steaming southbound in the Red Sea. A US naval vessel then intercepted another drone in the vicinity of the AOM SOPHIE II. It is likely that this vessel was not targeted directly but suffered from collateral damage. |                  |   |
| <b>6 December</b>  | <b>08:18 UTC</b> | <b>USS MASON intercepts drone</b>                                 |
| The US naval vessel shot down one drone which had been launched from a Houthi-controlled area in Yemen.  |                  |   |
| <b>7 December</b>  | <b>22:45 UTC</b> | <b>'Yemeni authorities' order merchant ships to change course</b> |
| A small craft, claiming to be deployed by 'Yemeni authorities', ordered several merchant ships to alter course and avoid a specific position south-west of Hudaydah.   |                  |   |
| <b>9 December</b>  | <b>19:30 UTC</b> | <b>FS LANGUEDOC intercepts two drones</b>                         |
| The French naval vessel shot down two drones which had been launched from a Houthi-controlled area in Yemen.   |                  |   |
| <b>10 December</b>   | <b>Evening</b>   | <b>Vehicle carrier CENTAURUS LEADER targeted by drone</b>         |
| The ship was targeted twice by drones while steaming northbound in the Red Sea.  |                  |   |

|  |                  |   |
|--|------------------|---|
| <b>11 December</b>   | <b>09:28 UTC</b> | <b>Product tanker STRINDA struck by missile</b>           |
| The ship was hit while steaming northbound in the Red Sea, causing a fire and damages to the ship but no injuries to the crew.   |                  |   |
| <b>13 December</b>   | <b>03:45 UTC</b> | <b>Houthi forces fire at merchant ship</b>                |
| Three persons in a small craft engaged in a short exchange of fire with armed guards on a merchant ship before departing the area.   |                  |   |
| <b>13 December</b>   | <b>07:10 UTC</b> | <b>Product tanker ARDMORE ENCOUNTER targeted</b>          |
| The ship was initially targeted by an attempted boarding while steaming northbound in the Red Sea. After the failed boarding attempt, two missiles were fired at the ship but missed their target. |                  |   |
| <b>13 December</b>   | <b>Morning</b>   | <b>USS MASON intercepts drone</b>                         |
| The US naval vessel shot down one drone which had been launched from a Houthi-controlled area in Yemen. The incident occurred as the warship provided assistance to the ARDMORE ENCOUNTER.         |                  |   |
| <b>13 December</b>   | <b>12:30 UTC</b> | <b>Container ship MAERSK GIBRALTAR targeted</b>           |
| The ship was targeted by a missile while steaming northbound in the Red Sea; the missile missed its target.  |                  |   |
| <b>15 December</b>   | <b>04:20 UTC</b> | <b>Container ship MSC ALANYA ordered to change course</b> |
| The ship was approached by a small boat and ordered to alter course while steaming northbound in the Red Sea   |                  |   |
| <b>15 December</b>   | <b>06:18 UTC</b> | <b>Container ship AL JASRAH struck</b>                    |
| The ship was hit by a missile or drone while steaming southbound in the Red Sea, causing a fire and damages to the ship but no injuries to the crew.   |                  |   |
| <b>15 December</b>   | <b>10:15 UTC</b> | <b>Container ship MSC PALATIUM III struck</b>             |
| The ship was hit by a missile or drone while steaming northbound in the Red Sea, causing a fire and damages to the ship but no injuries to the crew.   |                  |   |
| <b>16 December</b>   | <b>Morning</b>   | <b>USS CARNEY intercepts drones</b>                       |
| The US naval vessel shot down a wave of 14 drones which had been launched from Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen.   |                  |   |
| <b>16 December</b>   | <b>Morning</b>   | <b>HMS DIAMOND intercepts drone</b>                       |
| The Royal Navy vessel shot down one drone which had been launched from a Houthi-controlled area in Yemen.  |                  |   |
| <b>18 December</b>   | <b>04:53 UTC</b> | <b>Container ship MSC CLARA targeted</b>                  |
| The ship was targeted by a missile or drone while steaming southbound in the Red Sea; the projectile missed its target.  |                  |   |

|   |                  |  |
|---|------------------|--|
| <b>18 December</b>  | <b>06:00 UTC</b> | <b>Product tanker SWAN ATLANTIC struck</b>                     |
| The ship was hit by a missile or drone while steaming southbound in the Red Sea.  |                  |  |
| <b>18 December</b>  | <b>08:58 UTC</b> | <b>Bulk carrier MAGIC VELA reports suspicious approach</b>     |
| The ship was approached by a small boat with several armed men. The boat departed after armed guards fired warning shots.   |                  |  |
| <b>18 December</b>  | <b>10:28 UTC</b> | <b>Product tanker GREEN TRADER reports suspicious approach</b> |
| The ship was approached by five small boats with several armed men. The boats departed when a naval vessel moved towards the area.  |                  |  |
| <b>18 December</b>  | <b>16:50 UTC</b> | <b>Merchant vessel reports drone activity</b>                  |
| The ship was circled by two drones at a distance of around 50 metres while it was en route just south of the Bab el Mandeb.   |                  |  |
| <b>19 December</b>  | <b>05:30 UTC</b> | <b>Merchant vessel reports suspicious approach</b>             |
| The ship was approached by four small boats with four to five men in each boat while passing the Bab el Mandeb. There were no attempts to contact or board the ship; this approach was very likely not a security incident. |                  |  |
| <b>23 December</b>  | <b>Unknown</b>   | <b>Anti-ship missiles fired in southern Red Sea</b>            |
| Two missiles were reportedly fired from Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen. No ship reported an impact and it is not clear whether any particular vessel was targeted in this case.   |                  |  |
| <b>23 December</b>  | <b>12:00 UTC</b> | <b>USS LABOON intercepts drones</b>                            |
| The US naval vessel shot down 4 drones within five hours which had been launched from Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen.   |                  |  |
| <b>23 December</b>  | <b>16:05 UTC</b> | <b>Merchant vessel reports drone activity</b>                  |
| The crew on the ship reported that a drone or missile crossed from starboard to port before falling into the sea several hundred metres from the vessel.  |                  |  |
| <b>23 December</b>  | <b>16:08 UTC</b> | <b>Crude oil tanker SAI BABA struck</b>                        |
| The ship was hit by a drone while steaming southbound in the Red Sea.   |                  |  |
| <b>23 December</b>  | <b>17:00 UTC</b> | <b>Product tanker BLAAMANEN targeted</b>                       |
| The ship was targeted by a drone while steaming southbound in the Red Sea; the drone missed its target.   |                  |  |
| <b>25 December</b>  | <b>18:00 UTC</b> | <b>'Yemeni navy' orders merchant ship to change course</b>     |
| An entity claiming to be the 'Yemeni navy' ordered a merchant ship to alter course to a Yemeni port.  |                  |  |
| <b>26 December</b>  | <b>Unknown</b>   | <b>Drone activity reported</b>                                 |
| At least two drones which were allegedly aimed at the Israeli city of Eilat were intercepted over and off the Sinai Peninsula by Egyptian air defences and an Israeli fighter jet respectively.                             |                  |  |

|  |                  |   |
|--|------------------|---|
| <b>26 December</b>   | <b>Unknown</b>   | <b>US military intercepts drones and missiles</b>       |
| The US naval vessel USS LABOON and F-18 fighter jets from the aircraft carrier USS EISENHOWER shot down 12 drones, three anti-ship ballistic missiles and two land-attack cruise missiles in the southern Red Sea. |                  |   |
| <b>26 December</b>   | <b>03:00 UTC</b> | <b>Merchant vessel reports drone activity</b>           |
| The crew on at least one ship reported drone sightings and then two separate explosions around 5 nautical miles from the ship.   |                  |   |
| <b>26 December</b>   | <b>09:40 UTC</b> | <b>Container ship MSC UNITED VIII targeted</b>          |
| The crew on the ship reported at least two explosions at distances of four and 0.5 nautical miles respectively.  |                  |   |
| <b>28 December</b>   | <b>15:10 UTC</b> | <b>USS MASON intercepts drone and missile</b>           |
| The US naval vessel USS MASON shot down a drone and an anti-ship ballistic missile in the southern Red Sea.  |                  |   |
| <b>30 December</b>   | <b>17:30 UTC</b> | <b>Container ship MAERSK HANGZHOU struck</b>            |
| The ship was hit by a missile while steaming northbound in the Red Sea.  |                  |   |
| <b>30 December</b>   | <b>20:17 UTC</b> | <b>Merchant vessel reports drone activity</b>           |
| The crew on a ship reported a sighting of two drones flying at low altitude. The drones could not be detected on radar.  |                  |   |
| <b>31 December</b>   | <b>02:47 UTC</b> | <b>Merchant vessel attacked by boats</b>                |
| Three boats approached the ship on the port side and shots were exchanged.   |                  |   |
| <b>31 December</b>   | <b>03:30 UTC</b> | <b>Container ship MAERSK HANGZHOU attacked by boats</b> |
| Four boats approached the ship but a boarding attempt was deterred by armed guards on the container ship. US helicopters then engaged the boats and sunk three, killing ten armed men.                             |                  |   |
| <b>2 January</b>   | <b>18:50 UTC</b> | <b>Container ship targeted</b>                          |
| The crew on the ship reported up to three explosions at distances of 1 to 5 nautical miles respectively.   |                  |   |

## Background and summary

Following the large number of incidents in the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden since mid-November, there is a significant threat to merchant ships which are in some form linked to Israel. Houthi forces in Yemen have made several statements to this effect in recent weeks as they are trying to put pressure on Israel during the ongoing war in Gaza.

| Vessel type   | Threat type   | Threat level    |
|---|---|-----------------|
| Vessels specifically linked to Israel through ownership   | Seizure and detention; kinetic attack (missile, aerial/waterborne drone)                                | <b>Severe</b>   |
| Vessels linked to Israel through port calls, trade with and/or commercial relationship between Israeli companies and owners/operators | Seizure and detention; kinetic attack (missile, aerial/waterborne drone)                                | <b>High</b>     |
| Vessels in transit without any involvement in Israeli trading   | Kinetic attack due to misidentification, potential proximity to the above threats ('collateral damage') | <b>Elevated</b> |

It is difficult to assess how the Houthis may establish a link to Israel. While port calls by the respective ships are an obvious factor, owners/operators conducting trade with Israel in general or owners/operators being in commercial relationships with Israeli companies have also led to merchant vessels being targeted.

While the threat level to vessels which are directly owned by Israeli companies is assessed as even higher, virtually no such vessels are currently transiting the Red Sea. Houthi forces therefore had to expand their potential targets significantly.

This has also led to an increased threat of collateral damage for merchant ships. It is very likely that Houthi forces have missed their intended targets on several occasions in recent weeks, increasing the potential for unintended strikes against other merchant ships.

Despite various announcements from shipping companies to avoid Red Sea passages, maritime traffic in this area remains dense. In December, the average number of merchant ships passing the Bab el Mandeb was only marginally below December 2022. Also considering that an unknown number of merchant ships passed the Bab el Mandeb without broadcasting on AIS, no unusual drop in traffic can be identified at any point throughout the month (see Figures 1 and 2).



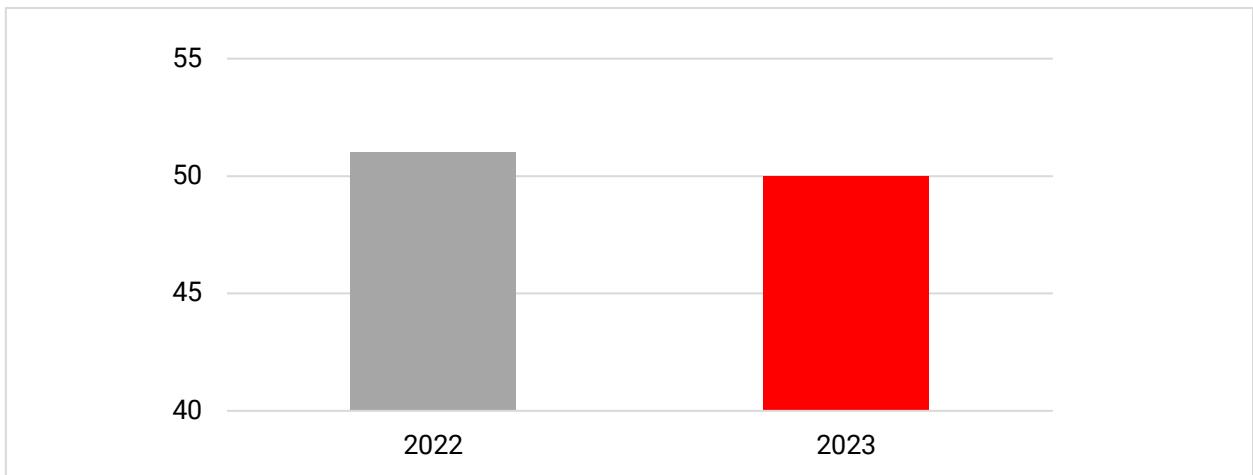


Figure 1: Average number of merchant ships passing through the Bab el Mandeb per day in December 2022 and December 2023 (only includes vessels broadcasting AIS).

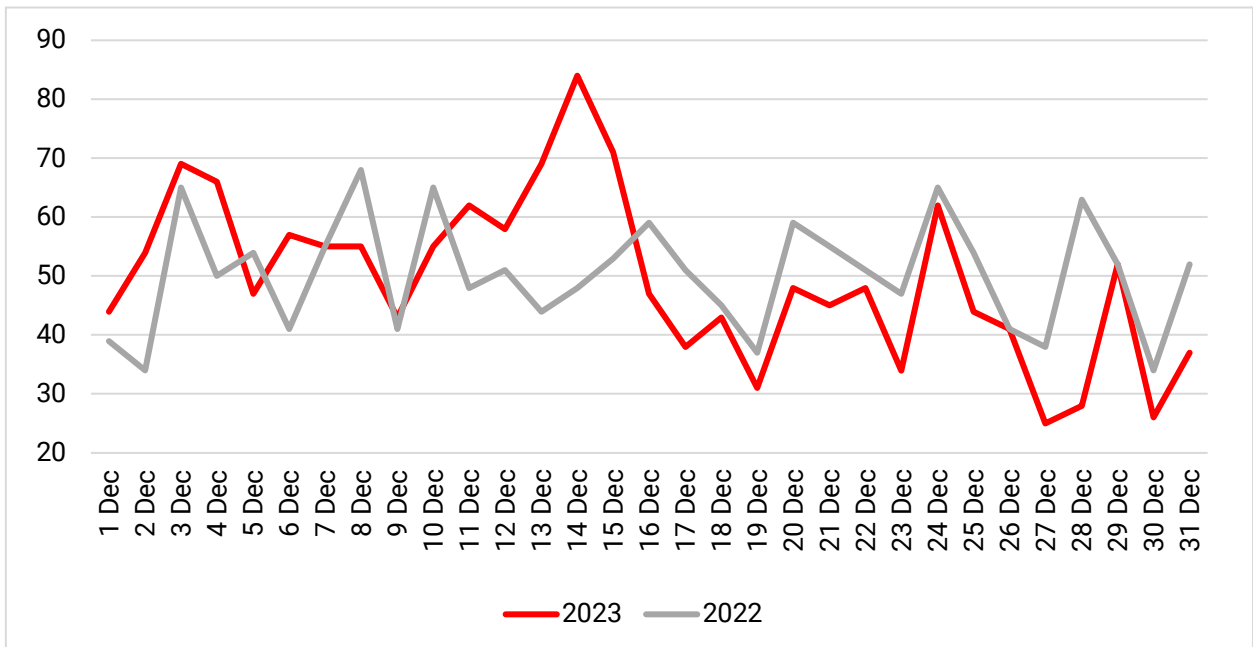


Figure 2: Daily number of merchant ships passing through the Bab el Mandeb in December 2022 and December 2023 (only includes vessels broadcasting AIS).

It is important to note that the highly dynamic threats in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden have already led to a noticeable increase in incidents that were perceived as suspicious by seafarers. Reports about such incidents should be strongly encouraged yet it is vital to thoroughly assess all reports to identify particular areas of concern.

The background to the current situation is the ongoing civil war in Yemen. Since 2015, the Houthis in the northern part of the country have fought against the Saudi and UAE-backed government in southern Yemen. Iran has supported the Houthis during the conflict. Houthi forces have previously targeted Saudi and UAE vessels in the Red Sea with anti-ship missiles and drones (aerial and waterborne). They have also attacked Saudi ports and naval vessels in the Red Sea as well as oil industry targets in southern Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

In September, both sides were assessed to be close to a ceasefire agreement that would involve financial and economic concessions to the Houthis. Neither side wants to jeopardise a potential deal. The threat level for direct attacks against facilities in Saudi Arabia and the UAE is therefore low. In addition, Saudi Arabia has so far refrained from criticising the Houthis for attacks against merchant ships which is a noticeable difference from Saudi rhetoric in the past. Moreover, these attacks have not affected the negotiations. On 26 December, UN Special Envoy Hans Grundberg announced further progress and said that both sides had made a commitment to “a set of measures to implement a nation-wide ceasefire.”

On 18 December, the US military announced the establishment of Operation Prosperity Guardian as a response to Houthi attacks. While several countries have pledged contributions to join US naval assets in the area, only France and the United Kingdom already have one naval vessel respectively deployed in the Red Sea. Nevertheless, merchant ship operators with vessels passing the Red Sea have observed a significant military presence with naval vessels frequently announcing their presence on VHF.

Following two attacks against the MAERSK HANGZHOU in the southern Red Sea on 30 and 31 December respectively, there have been several media reports about the US and the UK considering strikes against Houthi forces in Yemen. Such actions would be a significant expansion of the operation which currently only has a defensive posture.

It is currently impossible to assess to what extent actual strikes would lead to an escalation of the situation, either in the Red Sea or in other areas across the Middle East. If Houthi forces expand their potential targets due to strikes against their assets and positions, the threat level for many – though not all – ships passing the Red Sea is very likely to increase. Risk Intelligence therefore strongly recommends to closely monitor the situation.

# Guidance on commercial operations

## Ship transits

Several shipping industry organisations have published the "Interim Industry Transit Advice, Southern Red Sea, and Gulf of Aden – 15 December 2023". Among other information, the document includes considerations about routing and vessel hardening. Combined Maritime Forces have also issued a guidance document on 23 December 2023.

Both documents are available via [www.maritimeglobalsecurity.org](http://www.maritimeglobalsecurity.org).

## Vessel registration and incident reporting

It is strongly recommended for all merchant ships transiting the Western Indian Ocean, the Somali Basin, the Gulf of Aden, Gulf of Oman and the Red Sea to register with UKMTO and the Maritime Security Centre - Horn of Africa (MSCHOA). Any incidents or suspicious activities should also be reported to UKMTO and MSCHOA.

### Contact details UKMTO

Email: [watchkeepers@ukmto.org](mailto:watchkeepers@ukmto.org)

Phone: +44 2393 222060

Website: [www.ukmto.org](http://www.ukmto.org)

### Contact details MSCHOA

Email: [postmaster@mschoa.org](mailto:postmaster@mschoa.org)

Phone: +33 298 220 220 or +33 298 220 170

Website: [www.mschoa.org](http://www.mschoa.org)

If a vessel is under attack, **US naval forces in Bahrain** are able to coordinate assistance.

Phone: +973 1785 3879

Combined Maritime Forces also recommend ignoring VHF calls by "Yemeni navy" with instructions to alter course to Hudaydah or other locations in Yemen. When merchant ships are contacted, masters are advised to continue the voyage and call for a coalition warship on VHF Channel 16, stating current location, situation and intentions.

In addition, vessel operators are advised to contact the respective flag state for additional guidance or requirements regarding incident reporting procedures.

## Mitigation measures

Risk Intelligence strongly recommends merchant ship operators to assess whether the respective vessel has been owned or managed by Israel-affiliated companies in the past. Such information may not have been updated in publicly available databases and could lead to misidentification of current commercial links with Israel.

Prior to voyages through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, ship operators should conduct a thorough ship and voyage-specific threat and risk assessment in line with shipping industry best practices. In addition, the following measures should be considered:

- Constant monitoring of the security situation, enabling vessels to avoid locations with recent or ongoing incidents.
- Introduction/update of contingency plans on the company level to address the possibility of seafarers being injured, killed or kidnapped during a security incident. The plan should include contingency and emergency plans; appropriate drills should be completed.
- Crew briefings and scenario drills based on a valid and relevant anti-attack plan to ensure that incidents are reported and alarm is raised without delay when required. Drills should include scenarios with major damage and casualties.
- Enhancement of firefighting, evacuation and damage control procedures, taking into account the possibility of significant damage as a result of direct targeting or collateral damage.
- Enhancement of medical equipment to deal with multiple casualties.
- Emergency contacts placed readily available on the bridge.
- Bridge team briefing regarding hailing/harassment via VHF, prepared responses and immediate contact with naval forces in the respective area. (Local authorities' calls on VHF may be an act of spoofing or even targeting, underlined by several incidents in recent days which involved self-proclaimed 'Yemeni authorities' or the 'Yemeni navy' ordering merchant ships to alter course.)
- Preparation of citadel with emergency provisions and functioning satellite phone.

In general, existing BMP5 recommendations have been developed to deter piracy. While the guidance included in BMP5 is relevant to deter illegal boardings, it offers virtually no mitigation against current threats such as attacks by missiles, drones or – potentially – waterborne IEDs ('drone boats').

Ship operators should also consider to issue specific voyage guidance for transits through the Red Sea and/or the Gulf of Aden. This guidance should consider specific scenarios (e.g. aerial or waterborne threats, hailing on VHF) and include actions for the crew to minimise the impact of any security incident.

## Red Sea – threat assessment

Following the recent incidents in the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden related primarily to Houthi forces, there is now a significant threat to merchant ships linked to Israel through a variety of commercial relationships. Although threats will vary on a case-by-case basis, the overall threat level for these vessels is now assessed as severe for vessels linked to Israel through ownership, high for vessels linked through other commercial relationships including port calls, and elevated for all other vessels.

The increased threat is a result of the Israel/Gaza conflict and Houthi actions against Israel-linked vessels. Naval vessels have intercepted a number of drones and missiles intended for Israeli targets, or against the naval ships themselves. “Our eyes are open to constantly monitor and search for any Israeli ship in the Red Sea, especially in Bab al-Mandab, and near Yemeni regional waters,” Houthi leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi was reported saying in November 2023. On 9 December, a Houthi statement on social media said: “We warn all ships and companies against dealing with Israeli ports.”

The situation is evolving as the list of possible targets is expanding. Links to Israel may now be port calls by the respective vessel, owners/operators conducting trade with Israel in general or owners/operators being in commercial relationships with Israeli companies. While the threat level to vessels which are directly owned by Israeli companies is assessed as even higher, it should be noted that virtually no such vessels are currently transiting the Red Sea. Houthi forces have therefore significantly expanded their potential targets, including the categories mentioned above.

At the same time, it is important to highlight the increased threat of collateral damage, particularly in the southern Red Sea with dense maritime traffic. It is very likely that Houthi forces have missed their intended targets on several occasions in recent days, increasing the potential for unintended strikes against other merchant ships. Moreover, this is a highly dynamic and evolving threat which must be monitored closely in light of ongoing incidents.

Maritime security in the southern Red Sea is also affected by the conflict in Yemen as some fighting between the Houthis and the rival government supported by the Saudi-led coalition continues. The maritime dimension to this conflict is limited. Ceasefire talks in 2022 saw a substantial fall in cross-border attacks in Saudi Arabia, as well as an improved threat environment during transits through the Bab el Mandeb. Attacks have not taken place in 2023, likely due to progress in negotiations between the Houthis and the Saudi-led coalition. Both sides are unlikely to jeopardise a potential deal. The threat level for direct attacks against port and oil facilities in Saudi Arabia and the UAE is therefore lower while talks are ongoing. In addition, Saudi Arabia has so far refrained from criticising the Houthis for the recent wave of attacks against merchant ships which is a significant difference from Saudi announcements about alleged interceptions of waterborne drones off Saudi port facilities in the past.

There is a dispute between Yemen and Eritrea in the Hanish Islands area, primarily due to fishing. In an incident in June 2021, there was a clash between coastguard/naval forces. In August 2021, several fishing vessels and three Yemeni crew were detained by the Eritrean coastguard near the Hanish Islands. Due to the irregular nature of Yemeni coastguard forces, or the difficulty in

identifying Eritrean craft (which are small speedboats), there are problems with merchant vessels misidentifying small patrol craft from Yemen and Eritrea as pirate vessels. Aggressive enforcement by coastguard vessels, or local craft attempting to warn away merchant vessels, are possible threats in the area. The piracy threat is minimal, even in southern areas, as this area is now considered to be outside the operational range of Somali pirates. The fighting in Sudan is not expected to affect threat levels in the Red Sea.

## Threat levels

Refer to the section "Methodology / Definitions" for a detailed definition of the threat level. A concise assessment of all threats listed in the table can be found below.

| Threat type                        | Threat level |
|------------------------------------|--------------|
| Terrorism                          | Moderate     |
| Piracy                             | Low          |
| Insurgency and Military Operations | Elevated     |
| Cargo Theft                        | Moderate     |
| Smuggling                          | Moderate     |
| Stowaways and human trafficking    | Low          |
| Fraud and corruption               | Low          |
| Activism                           | Low          |

## Terrorism

The terrorist threat in the Red Sea is moderate. Terrorist groups in Yemen are active in inland areas and on the Gulf of Aden coast. There are no other significant terrorist actors in other countries bordering the Red Sea. As such, a terrorist attack is unlikely but could take place in proximity such as coastal areas. There is a higher threat of possible insurgency operations against military and other vessel targets by Houthi forces, which could affect merchant vessels in ports or possible transit, and this threat is covered under the Insurgency assessment.

Terrorist operations, whether by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) or the Islamic State (IS) in Yemen, are possible. Operations by other groups – proxies for other regional states or militia/terrorist groups – are less likely but cannot be ruled out. Their modus operandi would be similar to other cases in the area with the use of explosive-laden boats or projectiles launched from small boats. The Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) guidance on transits reflects current concern over the threat. That there have been no recent attempted attacks suggests some constraints on the intentions and/or capabilities of the terrorist groups. It is likely that the perpetrators were operating out of the southern area of Yemen, where AQAP and IS have access

to the coast, and that any attacks north of Bab el Mandeb are less likely. It is likely that the three incidents noted below were the outcome of specific circumstances rather than an emerging and consistent threat. Recent intelligence suggests that AQAP and IS operations are predominantly based onshore in Yemen; the two groups are rivals in Yemen in particular areas and there have been clashes between them, ruling out joint efforts. The two groups' leaderships are also assessed as severely weakened following a series of strikes by regional and US forces during the last years. There have however been a number of recent clashes between southern militias and remnant AQAP forces, which have chosen to retaliate against provincial forces.

There have been three notable incidents of maritime terrorism in recent years. On 25 October 2016, the LNG carrier GALICIA SPIRIT was apparently attacked just south of Bab el Mandeb, which raised concerns about possible terrorist attacks against merchant ships. Subsequent analysis has suggested that the attack was likely a failed terrorist attack from Yemen. There was a similar attack on the tanker MUSKIE on 31 May 2017. There have been no claims of responsibility for these attacks, and they were denied by the Houthi high command in Yemen. These denials have been assessed as credible. It is unlikely the attacks were carried out by Houthi forces.

Given the modus operandi of the attacks, it is assessed as likely that the attacks were carried out by a small group linked with AQAP or IS forces in Yemen, although other scenarios cannot be ruled out. As well, the product tanker STOLT APAL was apparently attacked by an explosives-laden skiff in May 2020 in the Gulf of Aden (refer to the Indian Ocean area threat assessment), suggesting a threat originating from Yemen. However, an encounter with arms smugglers is a plausible explanation and merchant vessels should be aware of the presence of such skiffs and dhows in this region, where the crew will most certainly be armed. Overall, if any terrorist attacks do take place, they will most likely be directed against tanker vessels and the threat might be higher for these vessel types in some circumstances.

## Piracy

The threat of piracy in the Red Sea is low. Somali pirate activities are now largely restricted to the Gulf of Aden and Somali Basin area. Refer to the Indian Ocean piracy assessment for coverage of the threat situation south of Bab el Mandeb. Other reports of suspicious vessels are also likely to be local traffic (particularly armed smugglers who might 'shadow' larger vessels so that they provide cover from detection) rather than pirates, and there have been no confirmed pirate incidents north of the Bab el Mandeb in some time. There have also been other incidents involving armed skiffs, such as attacks in 2018 on coalition warships and convoys in the area west of Hudaydah, which are noted in the Insurgency assessment. Yemeni waters and entry to Red Sea ports are controlled by Saudi and UAE vessels.

The attempted hijack of the CENTRAL PARK on 26 November 2023 has been classified as Piracy by the US government. It is Risk Intelligence's assessment that this attack was not a piracy incident but an incident organised by a political actor in an attempt to disrupt maritime traffic.

There are reports that Eritrean and Yemeni fishermen conduct low-level armed robbery raids against each other. Navigating in waters where there are high concentrations of fishing vessels, typically carrying guns on board, makes it difficult to judge when a small boat's behaviour indicates a developing attack. This has led to a number of reports where ships have believed

themselves under attack or subjected to a suspicious approach. Many of these will have been based on a misinterpretation of normal activity. Eritrea and Yemen have ongoing disputes over maritime boundaries, particularly about fishing rights in the Hanish and Zuqar islands area. It is worth noting that the Yemeni coastguard makes use of irregular forces and that coastguard personnel might not always be in full uniforms or vessels easily identified. Similarly, Eritrean naval/coastguard forces use small speedboats that might be mistaken as other threats. All these craft might manoeuvre in close proximity to vessels in transit. A Russian sailing yacht was detained by armed forces in September 2019 near Harmil Island in what was most likely enforcement action by the Eritrean coastguard.

## Insurgency and military operations

The increased threat in this area is a result of the Israel/Gaza conflict and Houthi actions against Israel-linked vessels. "Our eyes are open to constantly monitor and search for any Israeli ship in the Red Sea, especially in Bab al-Mandab, and near Yemeni regional waters," Houthi leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi was reported saying in early November 2023. On 9 December, a Houthi statement on social media said, "we warn all ships and companies against dealing with Israeli ports." The overall threat level is elevated for most vessels in transit, but high or severe for vessels with indirect or direct links to Israel.

The situation is evolving as the list of possible targets is expanding. Links to Israel may now be port calls by the respective vessel, owners/operators conducting trade with Israel in general or owners/operators being in commercial relationships with Israeli companies. While the threat level to vessels which are directly owned by Israeli companies is assessed as even higher, it should be noted that virtually no such vessels are currently transiting the Red Sea. Houthi forces have therefore significantly expanded their potential targets, including the categories mentioned above. The Houthi authorities have made statements on social media claiming responsibility for the attacks and highlighting the connection to trading patterns with Israel.

At the same time, it is important to highlight the increased threat of collateral damage, particularly in the southern Red Sea with dense maritime traffic. It is very likely that Houthi forces have missed their intended targets on several occasions in recent days, increasing the potential for unintended strikes against other merchant ships. Moreover, this is a highly dynamic and evolving threat which must be monitored closely in light of ongoing incidents. This might have been the case with the bulk carrier AOM SOPHIE II that also reported an 'attack' on 3 December.

Houthi attacks started on 19 November when the Bahamas-flagged vehicle carrier GALAXY LEADER was detained by Houthi forces off Hudaydah. The vessel was boarded via helicopter – the first time that Houthi forces have demonstrated this capability – and escorted using patrol craft. A video of the operation posted on social media highlights the 'propaganda' importance of the seizure, with the vessel shown flying Yemeni and Palestinian flags.

This action was followed by a series of missile/drone attacks against two ships directly in the southern Red Sea on 3 December, the bulk carrier UNITY EXPLORER and the container vessel NUMBER 9. While there was a 'strong' link between the UNITY EXPLORER in ownership, the link to Israel for the NUMBER 9 was less clear and may have been based on a previous chartering arrangement. It was expected that strong ownership links would be the primary criteria ongoing,



but this has changed – as noted above – as many directly Israel-linked vessels avoided the area. It is assessed that the Houthis (and their Iranian backers) have substantial targeting capabilities and can identify previous links to Israel. Efforts to obfuscate these links may therefore also be identified by the Houthis and the exact criteria being used cannot be known.

It is expected that such attacks will continue, subject to any deterrent response from the US, whose warships might also have been targeted with drones, and pressure applied on the Houthis behind the scenes, either through Saudi Arabia or other intermediaries, or a deal involving Iran, or a change in the situation in Gaza so that the Houthis can claim a propaganda victory. Of note, Saudi Arabia has not been publicly active in condemning these attacks and is likely giving the Houthis some leeway in terms of political cover as well as the lack of disruption of Houthi activities.

There have been heightened military tensions in the southern Red Sea area due to the conflict in Yemen for some time. Previous operations were directed against Saudi-led coalition (SLC) vessels and Saudi port areas and oil facilities. The April 2022 ceasefire between the Houthis and SLC ceased maritime attacks against these targets, even after its expiry in October 2022. Current negotiations between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis may result in a political resolution to the conflict. The recent Houthi attacks against Israel are taking place outside of this framework.

The ongoing fighting in Sudan has not had an impact on overall threat levels for the Red Sea. Operations in Port Sudan have continued unabated since the conflict started in April 2023, with the Sudanese armed forces in control of the port city. The war does not emanate threats from the coast and is not expected to take on a maritime dimension in the medium term.

Eritrea and Yemen have ongoing disputes over maritime boundaries, particularly about fishing rights in the Hanish and Zuqar islands area. There was a clash between coastguard/naval forces in the area in early June 2020, although political efforts are underway to prevent this from escalating again. Merchant vessels in transit are unlikely to be affected by any similar incidents. However, it is worth noting that the Yemeni coastguard makes use of irregular forces and that coastguard personnel might not always be in full uniforms or vessels easily identified. Similarly, Eritrean naval/coastguard forces use small speedboats that might be mistaken as other threats. All these craft might manoeuvre in close proximity to vessels in transit.

## Cargo theft

Cargo theft does not affect vessels in transit but might take place in proximity in the region and the threat level is moderate. Cargo theft and theft of unsecured ship's stores is likely in many of the ports in the region where threat levels might be elevated. The larger ports such as Jeddah and Djibouti are less likely to be affected. For local conditions in individual locations, refer to the specific port or country assessment.

In Yemen, Red Sea ports are under blockade by coalition forces and subject to strict cargo movement controls under the UNVIM inspection regime. In general terms, nominal standards for ISPS-mandated security protocols and measures are not always in place in ports in this region.

## Smuggling

The threat of smuggling is moderate. Vessels in transit are unlikely to be directly affected but smuggling activities might be encountered. Smuggling of narcotics and weapons within and via the Red Sea is widespread and persistent, relying both on local vessels ("dhows") rather than commercial trading vessels. In particular, routes are used into Yemen to supply Houthis and other actors with arms, throughout Sudan to deliver arms to Hamas and drugs into Saudi Arabia. All vessels should be aware of the volume of small boat traffic and that smugglers are typically armed. Smuggler vessels can be mistaken for pirate skiffs or other threats, particularly as they may shadow merchant vessels to use them as cover for their activities. Encounters with smuggling craft are possible, but with only minimal implications - such as having to engage in manoeuvres to avoid their positions. Some skiffs might be carrying explosives or potentially unstable munitions, and all encounters should be regarded with caution.

The threat situation will vary depending on port calls in the region. For example, Saudi has forbidden fruit imports from Lebanon in early 2021, after numerous drug seizures were made from cargoes hiding the drugs in fruit shipments. Overall, there is an increasing prevalence of south-south flow of illicit goods. This may be the traffic of drugs from Lebanon to Saudi Arabia as mentioned, or the smuggling of consumer goods to Egypt which transit aboard regular container vessels but are not destined to European or North-American ports. Djibouti is known to play a major role in smuggling networks throughout the region, given its geography and internal political structure.

In addition, Saudi-led coalition forces will target small craft they believe are involved in smuggling, although are unlikely to do so in proximity to merchant vessels. This is why short transit distances in the southern Red Sea are favoured, such as in the Bab el Mandeb area, and why smuggling craft might use proximity to merchant vessels to avoid being targeted by coalition naval vessels and aircraft. Military assets from other regional powers such as the US regularly interdict smuggling attempts, notably by deploying onboard inspection teams. Local dhows and vessels found carrying illicit goods may sometimes be released with their crew once their cargo has been confiscated. In 2023, the Yemeni Coast Guard has seized vessels smuggling drugs and weapons into Yemen, although there is evidence to suggest that state sponsored smuggling of weapons into Houthi territory through sea has ceased following the Saudi Iran deal in 2023.

## Stowaways and human trafficking

Human trafficking poses a limited business continuity threat to vessels in transit. Traffickers are likely to be armed and, as in the case of smugglers, merchant vessels might be 'warned away' or trafficking craft be mistaken for pirate vessels. There have been few reported cases of safety-at-sea situations in the area and in most cases encounters with local craft involved in trafficking have negligible implications. The overall threat level is assessed as low.

It is possible that safety-at-sea situations might arise involving human traffickers when going to the assistance of small boats that appear overloaded and in difficulty. This is especially the case in poor weather conditions when the duty of assisting in the preservation of life at sea can create binding circumstances. There have been some instances of small, overloaded vessels carrying trafficked persons capsizing in the Red Sea. Human trafficking across the Red Sea is most often

conducted using dhows, fishing vessels and occasionally small general cargo vessels. Most trafficking takes place in southern areas, especially between Yemen and the Horn of Africa, although there are other local routes. The relatively small distances between either sides of the Red Sea decreases the likelihood that a passing vessel would be forced to provide assistance during a crossing. However, vessels carrying migrants have already sunk, drowning the passengers.

Until the Yemen civil war, the general flow of trafficking was from west to east with well-organised routes in place from Sudan (Port Sudan and Suakin) and Eritrea to Yemen. This route is still being used, with reports of crossings continuing, in the perspective of reaching Saudi Arabia. An estimated 5,000 Eritreans are believed to attempt leaving the country each month for destinations in the Middle East and Europe. Most follow overland routes to the north through Egypt and Libya and thence into southern Europe. Currently there is no real threat to merchant traffic transiting the Red Sea.

Stowaways are less of a threat, particularly as most ship traffic is in transit. For local conditions in individual locations, refer to the specific port or country assessment.

## **Fraud and corruption**

Corruption, bribery and fraudulent practices are significant in this region, although do not affect transiting merchant traffic. Overall, the threat has been assessed as low and should only be a concern for specific port calls or Suez transits. Given poor governance and low income levels, corruption should be expected at several of the ports along the Red Sea. Refer to specific country assessments for local conditions.

## **Activism**

Activism is not a threat to vessels operating in the Red Sea and the threat level is low. Activism is harshly repressed in countries around the Red Sea, limiting the threat it poses to operations in the medium term. Refer to country assessments for coverage of activism in specific countries or ports.

## Indian Ocean – threat assessment (summary)

This area covers the western Indian Ocean north of Madagascar and east towards India, including the Somali Basin, Gulf of Aden, and western Arabian Sea. Primary threats are piracy off Somalia, and the conflict in Yemen which has some implications close to the Yemeni coast. Broader regional conflicts might also affect certain vessels in the Arabian Sea or off Oman.

In general, vessels in transit should be aware of the potential to encounter small armed craft in this area, particularly in the Gulf of Aden. These might be fishermen, traders, smugglers, militia or irregular military forces, or military or coastguard patrol craft operating out of southern Yemen or northern Somalia. The boarding of the product tanker CENTRAL PARK in the Gulf of Aden on 26 November 2023 has been assessed as related to Houthi-led actions against Israel-linked vessels.

There is still potential for opportunistic pirate operations in the Somali Basin and the Gulf of Aden. The Malta-flagged bulk carrier RUEN was reportedly boarded about 400 nautical miles off the coast on 14 December 2023 and is believed to have been hijacked. At the time of assessment, this incident is unresolved: it is not clear if this is an isolated incident and if it represents an increased threat for merchant vessels in transit. Two Iranian fishing dhows were reportedly hijacked on 22 November off Eyl and on 29 November east of Bosaso in Somalia in the first reported incidents since 2019 (which also involved fishing vessels). These cases are likely linked to illegal fishing activity in the area, which is an ongoing issue and has been a major focus for Somalia in expanding its maritime enforcement capabilities. Iranian vessels have been seized in the past and their crews held, with captives released as recently as 2022 and 2020.

Naval patrols are operational in the area, such as EUNAVFOR's Operation Atalanta. Their mandates include maritime crimes (such as drugs and arms smuggling) as well as countering piracy. The group transit scheme for the Gulf of Aden is also still operational.

Suspicious approaches in the Gulf of Aden over the last 24 months suggest that activity is ongoing and there have been other reports of armed small craft that might have been pirates monitoring merchant traffic for vulnerabilities. The Bab el Mandeb area has also seen a number of small boat sightings recently that are unlikely to have represented a direct threat to vessels. These might indicate pirate or other illegal activity, but this area is also frequented by fishing fleets out of Aden. The Yemeni coastguard has also been more active in this area recently and might be misidentified as a potential threat, particularly as they will approach and hail vessels in transit close to the coast.

The situation in southern Yemen remains unstable and there are multiple political factions with their own militia forces, as well as security forces from Saudi Arabia and the UAE in operation. The trend is for some improvement as peace talks are ongoing and there is some optimism that a permanent settlement might be reached in Yemen after eight years of conflict. Terrorist groups have a limited presence. In general, merchant ships might be caught up in either political disputes or terrorist attacks, which are less likely but still possible, and there is some blurring between the two. A likely Houthi drone attack took place against the Ash Shihr offshore terminal in October 2022 and against Qena port in November 2022, but there have been no incidents since then, reflecting progress in peace talks.

Current transit advice for the western Gulf of Aden and approaches to the Bab el Mandeb and the southern Red Sea is provided by UKMTO. Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) have recommended the use of the Maritime Security Transit Corridor (MSTC) linking the Red Sea TSS through the Bab el Mandeb and into the Gulf of Aden. The MSTC is the Internationally Recommended Transit Corridor (IRTC) plus the Bab el Mandeb Traffic Separation Scheme and the TSS west of the Hanish Islands, which connects the IRTC and the Bab el Mandeb TSS. Full guidance has been published on the CMF website.

UKMTO operates the Voluntary Reporting Area for the Indian Ocean, specifically the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Arabian Sea, administered by the Maritime Trade Information Centre (MTIC)/UKMTO (Dubai). UKMTO acts as the primary point of contact for merchant vessels and liaison with military forces in the region. Vessels are encouraged to report their positions while operating in the area. MSCHOA manages the EU NAVFOR (EU Naval Forces Somalia and Operation Atalanta) voluntary registration scheme for vessels transiting the area and administers an interactive website that enables EUNAVFOR to communicate the latest counter-piracy guidance to the maritime industry, and for shipping companies and operators to register vessel movements through the region. The shipping industry has removed its high-risk area (HRA) designation for the Indian Ocean, effective 1 January 2023, although notes that: "Threat and risk assessments should still be carried out, and best management practices followed to continue to mitigate the risks presented in a changeable and often complex and potentially threatening environment."

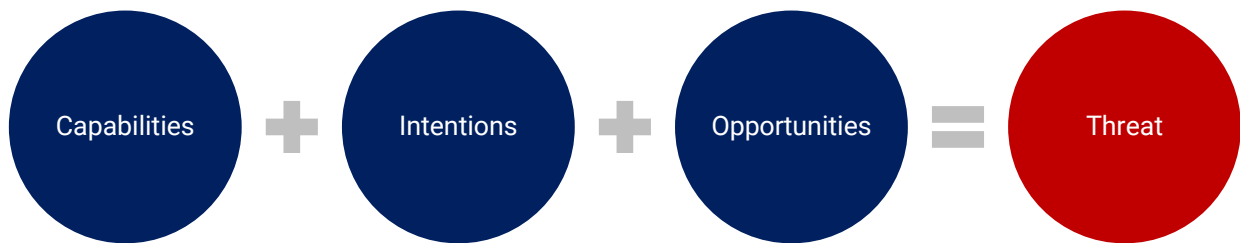
## Threat levels

Refer to the section "Methodology / Definitions" for a detailed definition of the threat level. Concise assessments of all types of threats listed in the table below can be found on the Risk Intelligence System.

| Threat type                        | Threat level |
|------------------------------------|--------------|
| Terrorism                          | Moderate     |
| Piracy                             | Moderate     |
| Insurgency and Military Operations | Moderate     |
| Cargo Theft                        | Low          |
| Smuggling                          | Moderate     |
| Stowaways and human trafficking    | Low          |
| Fraud and corruption               | Low          |
| Activism                           | Low          |

## Methodology / Definitions

All threat levels are based on the likelihood of a threat type occurring, with generic consequences described in the relevant sections. All threat levels are based on an assessment of capabilities, intentions and opportunities of potential perpetrators, separated into different categories.



Maritime operators are typically unable to lower the threat level by influencing the underlying variables. However, all variables are subject to change over time, e.g. changes in the intentions or capabilities of potential perpetrators. They should therefore be re-assessed as required.

In an additional step, the threat levels assessed here can be used to identify the risk level for a particular type of operations. Determining the risk level also requires an assessment of the vulnerability and the potential consequence of a particular incident. Appropriate mitigation measures can then be implemented to lower the risk level.

### Threat levels

All threat levels mentioned above are assessed based on the likelihood and consequence of a particular threat type occurring. The levels are:

- Low: Not expected in the operational area or in proximity.
- Moderate: Not expected in the operational area but possible in proximity.
- Elevated: Possible in the operational area or in proximity.
- High: Expected in the operational area or in proximity.
- Severe: Commonplace in the operational area or in proximity.

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