



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: 12 January 2024, 09:00 UTC.

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Current situation

Following the large number of attacks and attempted attacks against civilian and naval vessels in the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden since mid-November, US military forces – together with the United Kingdom and supported by Australia, Bahrain, Canada and the Netherlands – conducted strikes against targets in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen during the night from 11 to 12 January (local time). These strikes are a significant escalation for the US-led Operation Prosperity Guardian and come after a joint statement on 3 January that had been widely regarded as a final ultimatum to Houthi forces. This statement included eight additional countries: Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea and Singapore. Operation Prosperity Guardian had been launched in December with the aim to deter and defend against further attacks against commercial shipping.

While the US and other countries have stated that the attacks against merchant ships have been 'indiscriminate', this conclusion is not supported by available evidence.

Considering a thorough analysis of all incidents since November – and taking into account the military strikes against Houthi forces – Risk Intelligence therefore assesses that the threat to merchant ships is based on individual characteristics. Houthi forces are very likely to continue selecting specific targets rather than engage in indiscriminate attacks against civilian shipping.

Vessel type	Threat type	Threat level
Vessels specifically linked to Israel through ownership, port calls, trade with and/or commercial relationship between Israeli companies and owners/operators	Kinetic attack (missile, aerial/waterborne drone), possibly seizure and detention	Severe
Vessels linked to the United States, United Kingdom and other countries involved in direct military strikes against Houthi forces	Kinetic attack (missile, aerial/waterborne drone), possibly seizure and detention	Severe
Vessels linked to other countries participating or supporting Operation Prosperity Guardian	Kinetic attack (missile, aerial/waterborne drone), possibly seizure and detention	Elevated
Other merchant ships in transit through the Red Sea/Bab el Mandeb	Kinetic attack due to misidentification, potential proximity to the above threats ('collateral damage')	Elevated

Overall, the threat level to vessels directly owned by Israeli companies had been assessed as severe since the beginning of the Houthi campaign. However, such vessels largely stopped transiting the Red Sea. Houthi forces therefore expanded their potential targets and have justified them in some cases with only remote links to Israel.

The current level of escalation has led to an expansion of potential Houthi targets, considering their recent threats particularly against the US. This results in a severe threat level for vessels linked to the US and UK in particular as well as the four other countries which have directly supported military strikes. While retaliatory attacks against merchant ships from these countries are the easiest option for Houthi forces, it is unlikely that they will shy away from attacks against naval vessels which have been targeted already.

For merchant ships linked to other countries taking part in or supporting Operation Prosperity Guardian – as well as for all other commercial vessels – the threat level is assessed as lower but still Elevated.

For vessels related to countries taking part in Operation Prosperity Guardian, this is largely due to the potential for kinetic attacks in lieu of other potential targets for Houthi forces. Considering their relatively careful selection of targets – which is in line with their broader political ambitions – this is currently assessed as unlikely. For vessels not related to countries taking part in Operation Prosperity Guardian, this is largely due to the increased potential for merchant ships passing through the Red Sea suffering from collateral damage due to misidentification or proximity to kinetic attacks.

Several shipping industry organisations have distributed notices based on a US military statement which has warned that the southern part of the Red Sea (from 16N to 12N) is now designated as high risk and that the threat period to shipping is expected to last for at least 48 to 72 hours. It should be noted that this comes in the context of previous statements describing attacks against commercial shipping as 'indiscriminate' which – as mentioned above – is not supported by available evidence from attacks since November.

Finally, it is vital to consider that this is a highly dynamic situation. Risk Intelligence strongly recommends that all ship operators should closely monitor the situation. Updates regarding incidents as well as an assessment of current threat levels is also available through the Risk Intelligence System.

Background

Starting with the seizure of the GALAXY LEADER on 14 November, Risk Intelligence has identified 20 targeted attacks by Houthi forces against individual vessels in the Red Sea and the Bab el Mandeb area. This is slightly lower than the number of attacks published by the US military which has not provided an overview over which incidents have been classified as 'attacks on commercial vessels'. Interceptions of drones and missiles may be counted as additional attacks but no such information is available. It should be noted that drones and missiles may have been merely used as a "show of force" in at least some of these cases, including on 9 January when 21 drones and missiles were intercepted by naval forces during the evening.

Looking at all 20 attacks in detail, no preference for attacks against southbound or northbound vessels can be identified (see Figure 1).

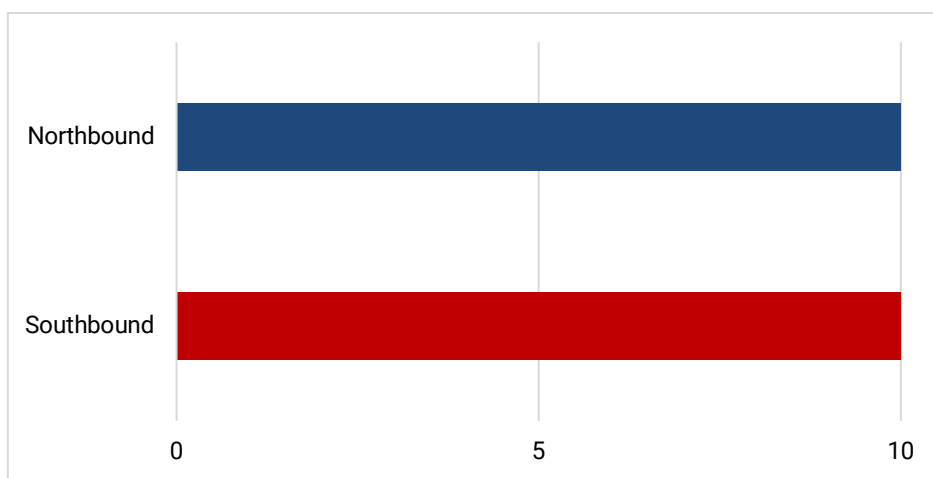


Figure 1: Number of attacks against merchant ships passing through the Red Sea/Bab el Mandeb area since November 2023 by direction of travel (Source: Risk Intelligence).

While it is possible to identify a slight preference for attacks during daylight hours (see Figure 2), it is far from impossible for Houthi forces to identify targets during hours of darkness and carry out missile or drone strikes against them.

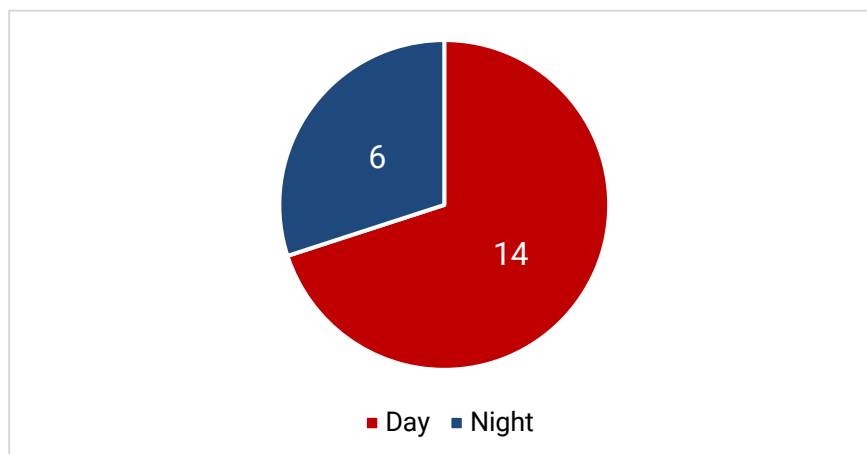


Figure 2: Number of attacks against merchant ships passing through the Red Sea/Bab el Mandeb area since November 2023 by time of day (Source: Risk Intelligence).

Moreover, this should not lead to the conclusion that transits at night are significantly safer (see Figure 3). Of the six ships targeted during hours of darkness, three were actually struck. For daytime attacks, only six of 14 ships were actually hit by a drone or a missile. In one case, it is unclear whether the ship was actually struck but the vessel was very likely not targeted directly. It is possible that the ship was struck by debris from an intercepted missile or drone; no significant damages were reported after the incident.

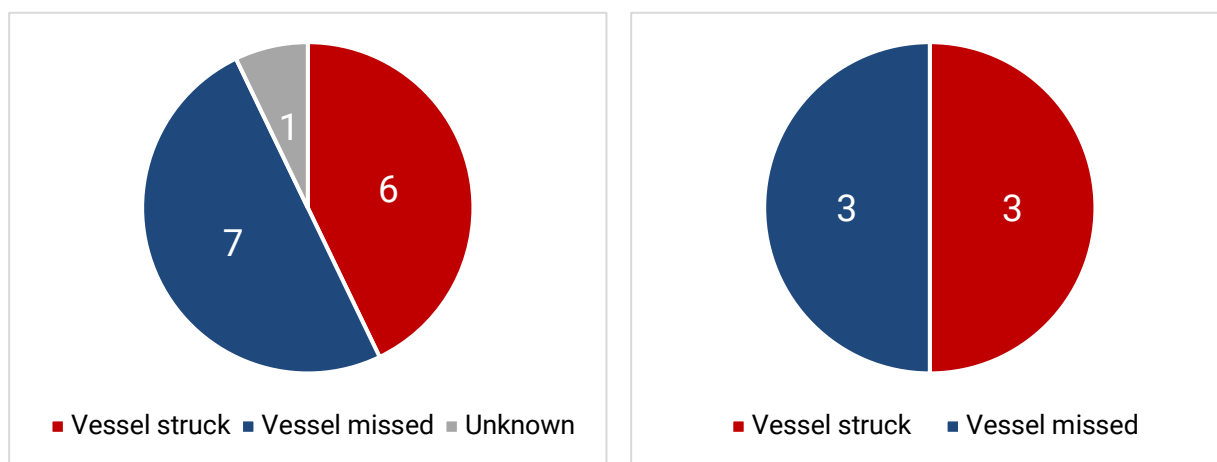


Figure 3: Number of attacks against merchant ships passing through the Red Sea/Bab el Mandeb area since November 2023 by time of day (Source: Risk Intelligence).

Overall, maritime traffic in the southern Red Sea remains dense, despite various announcements from shipping companies to avoid passages through this area. While some media articles have identified a significant drop in traffic, such statistics are generally based on ships broadcasting AIS. Considering that naval forces have advised shipping companies to transit the area off Yemen without AIS, it is complicated to see a comprehensive picture of maritime traffic.

It is important to note that the highly dynamic threats in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden have also led to a noticeable increase in incidents that are perceived as suspicious by seafarers. Reports about such incidents should be strongly encouraged. At the same time, 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 peace 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 do not appear to have led to an interruption of Houthi-Saudi negotiations although it is impossible to assess when a final agreement will be signed.

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.

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

Phone: +44 2393 222060

Website: www.ukmto.org

Contact details MSCHOA

Email: postmaster@mschoa.org

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

Website: 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:

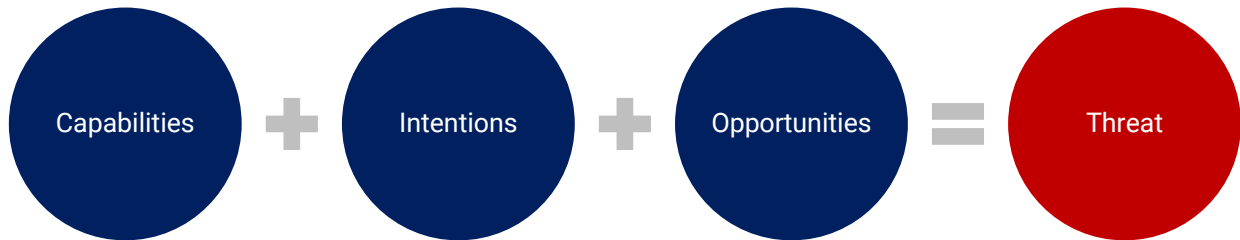
- Constant monitoring of the security situation, enabling vessels to avoid locations with recent or ongoing incidents.
- Introduction/update of contingency plans on the company level to address the possibility of seafarers being injured, killed or kidnapped during a security incident. The plan should 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.

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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