



RiskIntelligence

Security Threat Update: Eastern Mediterranean

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Table of contents

- Summary of recent events 4**
 - Regional developments..... 4
 - Israel and southern Lebanon 4
- Eastern Mediterranean – threat assessment (summary) 5**
 - Threat levels – Eastern Mediterranean.....6
- Israel – threat assessment (summary)..... 7**
 - Threat levels – Israel.....8
- Lebanon – threat assessment (summary) 9**
 - Threat levels – Lebanon..... 10
- Methodology / Definitions..... 11**

Security Threat Update: Eastern Mediterranean

This report provides a concise overview of recent events related to the current security situation in the Middle East – including the conflict between Israeli forces and Hezbollah in Lebanon – with a potential impact on commercial maritime operations in the eastern Mediterranean. It also includes a summary of threat levels for maritime operations in this area overall as well as in Israeli and Lebanese ports in particular. The report will be regularly updated and published (usually every two weeks) until December 2024.

Time of latest intelligence included in this report: 27 November 2024, 08:00 UTC.

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Summary of recent events

Regional developments

There have been no further events of significance between Israel and Iran following Israeli strikes on 26 October. Israel has shifted some of its regional focus to militias operating in Iraq, that might lead to the Iraqi government moving to restrict militia activity so as not to invite an Israeli strike. Israel has shown little hesitation in striking regional countries, underlined by the recent targeting of a meeting of militia forces in Palmyra, Syria.

Other regional developments have been primarily political. Reporting has suggested that the leadership of Hamas might move from Qatar to Turkey, although this remains speculative at present. There have also been reports about meetings between Turkish and Israeli officials to discuss a ceasefire in Gaza and an apparent increased role for Turkey as a mediator and security guarantor. However, there has been little progress on actual ceasefire negotiations.

Israel and southern Lebanon

Israel's government considered a proposed truce with Hezbollah on 26 November. Its military forces carried out a series of strikes against targets in Lebanon prior to the decision, claiming that 180 Hezbollah targets were hit. Air raid sirens were also heard in northern Israel. Prime minister Netanyahu subsequently announced that the ceasefire agreement was approved but that Israel would "respond severely" to violations by Hezbollah. He also said that Israel's focus would be on the security of northern residents returning to their homes close to the border.

US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken mentioned the role of the US in securing the ceasefire agreement and said that de-escalating tensions in the region could also lead to an end to the conflict in Gaza as " Hamas will know that it can't count on other fronts opening up into the war".

Attention has shifted to domestic politics in Israel and the increasing pressure on Prime minister Netanyahu. The International Criminal Court (ICC) has issued arrest warrants for Netanyahu, former defence minister Yoav Gallant and Hamas leader Mohammed Deif (who Israel claims was killed in July). The warrants cite "criminal responsibility" and are expected to restrict international travel for Netanyahu and Gallant, depending on the countries that will enforce the ICC warrants. The US has rejected the ICC's jurisdiction. The EU's foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, said the arrest warrants are binding for all EU member states. Tensions have also continued in Netanyahu's government over alleged document leaks from the prime minister's office, and the drafting of ultra-orthodox men into the armed forces.

Israel continued military operations in northern Gaza as well as in Lebanon in recent days, including against targets in southern Beirut, one of which was Hezbollah's media chief. Hezbollah also continued its rocket attacks on northern Israel against mainly military targets – including the naval base – with approximately 15 rockets per day. Drones have also been used, including some reportedly fired from Iraq. It is expected that the ceasefire will result in an immediate cessation of hostilities, even though the situation will remain volatile.

Eastern Mediterranean – threat assessment (summary)

This assessment covers the offshore maritime area in the eastern Mediterranean, primarily for merchant ships in transit. Threats are typically low to elevated. Ongoing conflict in Israel and Lebanon is having a limited impact on the maritime area and the situation in these two countries is noted below. The assessment will be revised as the new Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire agreement comes into force and is implemented.

Clashes between Israeli and Hamas forces in the Gaza Strip continue. The Israeli ports Ashdod and Ashkelon have been impacted to a limited degree due to their proximity to Gaza, even though the fighting has been almost exclusively land based.

The direct impact of the situation in the Gaza Strip on the eastern Mediterranean is limited and is not expected to impact merchant ship traffic in the region with the potential exception of vessels calling Israeli ports. Houthi forces in Yemen have threatened to strike vessels in the Mediterranean which are bound for Israel. There are significant doubts, however, about the Houthis' ability to conduct such operations autonomously.

Hezbollah in Lebanon is likely to pose a much greater threat if the current conflict with Israel continues. Direct threats are likely to be limited to Israeli assets such as the port of Haifa and to ships arriving at or departing from Israeli ports. It should be noted, however, that fighting is also primarily land based. Hezbollah has shown few intentions of attacking maritime targets so far, although the group has conducted drone overflights of offshore gas facilities and published a reconnaissance video of the port of Haifa to underline the potential threat. However, the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hezbollah means that the situation remains highly volatile, potential impacts on the eastern Mediterranean should therefore be closely monitored.

The threat posed by smuggling is assessed to be elevated, with significant variations throughout the region. The eastern Mediterranean is a transit way for smuggled goods to and from Europe and the Middle East. Smugglers use a wide variety of vessels, ranging from fishing ships to larger container carriers. They are also known to smuggle goods through vehicles or passenger ferries. Smuggled goods regularly pass through major trading ports. However, authorities in the region have the capacity to disrupt criminal networks and do so regularly.

Another significant threat to commercial shipping in the eastern Mediterranean is human trafficking that facilitates illegal migration. Libya and Turkey are assembly areas for migrants whose passage is facilitated by human traffickers. Migrants who depart from Turkey's west coast and from Libya to reach Europe are often picked up by military patrols, coastguards or commercial vessels passing through the area, especially close to the North African and Turkish coasts. This can create significant delays for commercial maritime operations. Added migratory pressure also means a heightened chance of finding stowaways when leaving ports in the area.

The political situation in the eastern Mediterranean is precarious. However, maritime conflict is unlikely. Political disputes are focused on oil and gas discoveries around contested maritime borders. Efforts at de-escalation have decreased tensions, but unresolved territorial disputes still pose a threat to commercial ships and offshore ventures as they may be caught in jurisdictional wrangles. Several Mediterranean powers are deploying their navies in the area, thereby increasing

the possibility of armed incidents between warships and civilian vessels, such as seismic or drilling ships being harassed, especially if operating in contested waters.

Threat levels – Eastern Mediterranean

Refer to the section "Methodology / Definitions" for a definition of threat levels. A concise assessment of all threats listed in the table can be found on the Risk Intelligence System.

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

Israel – threat assessment (summary)

This assessment covers Israel and its immediate maritime area. Threats from insurgency/military operations are high, given the ongoing and evolving situation in the country and the probability of incidents occurring. Specific threats in different locations and ports will vary, with northern areas more exposed to actions in proximity to Lebanon. The main threat is from collateral damage due to missile/drone strikes carried out by Israel's opponents, even if these are not directly targeted at ports and maritime areas. The assessment will be revised as the new Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire agreement comes into force and is implemented.

Israel is currently directly engaged on two fronts, in the context of its military operation in Gaza in the south and in the north with Hezbollah in Lebanon, where the situation remains volatile despite a ceasefire deal in late November. Israel is also engaged on indirect fronts, with Iran (airstrikes and targeted assassinations), Iraqi militias, the Houthis in the Red Sea and more recently in the Mediterranean with a drone attack on Tel Aviv. In addition, the situation in the West Bank is highly volatile. All these areas are linked, and there is a constant risk of a general conflagration.

Israel carried out airstrikes against military targets in Iran on 26 October. Reporting said that the strikes targeted Iranian missile manufacturing sites and aerial defence systems in the area to the west of Tehran. The strikes were in retaliation for the missile attack by Iran on Israel on 1 October. Immediately following the airstrikes, both parties made official comments about avoiding further escalation. Iran's future moves are unclear but there is no immediate effect on the wider maritime security situation and the current threat levels are unchanged.

The launch of Israel's Operation "Northern Arrow" on 1 October took a further step in Israel focusing more on the threat from Hezbollah and involved a "limited, localised and targeted" ground operation against Hezbollah targets in southern Lebanon, supported by the air force and artillery. To date, the scale and details of the operation remain unclear, but it is part of the strategy to create a buffer zone in southern Lebanon. Further military operations may be carried out, despite a ceasefire deal with Hezbollah.

Despite heavy attrition in its ranks, Hezbollah remains a serious adversary in ground combat. However, the group's arsenal has diminished and the effectiveness of Israeli air strikes on Hezbollah launchpads and their difficulty in reaching military installations in northern Israel without being intercepted mitigate this threat. In addition, Hezbollah's anti-ship capabilities were partially destroyed in an Israeli strike on 28 September. Hezbollah retains some capabilities, illustrated by the rocket and drone attack on the Binyamina base south of Haifa on 13 October.

The northern part of Israel remains exposed to Hezbollah drone/rocket attacks, including Haifa and its port. However, while Haifa appears to be a potential target, the threat would be concentrated on military and energy installations and would be mitigated by the deployment in the area of the Israeli Iron Dome system. Nonetheless, the threat in this location is high.

On the southern flank, although Hamas has demonstrated its ability to strike maritime targets, ports have not been a priority target for Hamas. Moreover, the Israeli offensive has considerably

reduced Hamas's operational capabilities. A new large-scale operation is unlikely at present. The Israeli military has also limited the ability of Hamas to target Israel with rockets.

A call for a general strike was made on 1 September 2024 by one of Israel's main trade union organisations, which promised to block the economy after the army discovered the bodies of six hostages held by Hamas. Tens of thousands of Israelis demonstrated in several towns across the country, in particular Tel Aviv, to demand an agreement allowing the hostages to be released. These demonstrations are indicative of a rise in protests against the current government. Protests continued at the end of October with the opening of the winter session of the Knesset, Israel's parliament, and the domestic political situation remains volatile with protesters also focusing on Prime Minister Netanyahu and his ongoing handling of the current conflict.

In general, most threats to maritime trade off Israel are assessed as low. The few offshore incidents that have taken place have been largely confined to targeting of IDF units, and other organised events designed to challenge the Israeli blockade of Gaza. The Gaza-Israel maritime border had been considerably strengthened even before the current crisis.

Threat levels – Israel

Refer to the section "Methodology / Definitions" for a definition of threat levels. A concise assessment of all threats listed in the table can be found on the Risk Intelligence System.

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

Lebanon – threat assessment (summary)

The most significant security threat in Lebanon are currently insurgency/military operations. Maritime areas including ports might not be directly affected, particularly in the north of the country, but collateral damage from air strikes and other activity is assessed as likely. The assessment will be revised as the new Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire agreement comes into force and is implemented.

The tactical situation in Lebanon remains sensitive and has deteriorated considerably. This process began with Hezbollah's involvement in the war against Israel after the 7 October 2023 attacks. It has accelerated since September 2024 with the attrition of Hezbollah's cadres and strategic sites by Israeli air strikes, followed by an Israeli ground operation. Maritime repercussions remain limited, but the entire coastal zone and port towns between the border and the Awali river are exposed and subject to evacuation. It is therefore essential to avoid these maritime areas, and to check the condition of major Lebanese ports, particularly Beirut.

Following Israel's ground operation against Hezbollah positions in southern Lebanon, the situation is in flux and is likely to remain volatile despite a ceasefire deal between Israel and Hezbollah. Israeli actions are likely part of the strategy to create a buffer zone in southern Lebanon, with the aim of eliminating any Hezbollah presence as far as the Awali river. Numerous airstrikes have been carried out in southern Lebanon, in Beirut and its suburbs, the city of Tyre, Ain Deleb and Baalbek-Hermel. Water stations, roads and energy installations were also hit, and nearly one million people – almost 20% of the population – have been displaced in Lebanon.

From mid-October, coastal areas have been affected, with the Israeli military calling for the entire coastal area between the border and the Awali river to be evacuated and maritime activities to be interrupted. However, maritime activities in the area are mainly limited to small-scale fishing and relatively few ship movements. The impact on commercial shipping therefore remains limited.

The overall security situation in Lebanon is going through a period of rapid evolution, driven by Hezbollah activities in southern Lebanon and Israel's targeting of the group. A sophisticated operation by Israel to detonate pagers carried by Hezbollah personnel on 17 September was followed by the reported killing of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah by Israeli forces on 28 September, posing a substantial challenge to Hezbollah's continued control of southern Lebanon.

It is likewise a threat to the credibility of the Axis of Resistance and to its strategy of relative restraint in the current phase of escalation. This may have implications for the continuation of the conflict and whether either party chooses to escalate in the maritime environment. However, by the end of October 2024, Israel had achieved most of its military objectives in Lebanon, calling into question the tactical and political relevance of continuing the operation.

The Lebanese government is reluctant to become involved in the conflict and has repeatedly sought to distance itself from Hezbollah. Lebanon faces a number of complex security threats generated by a political environment fragmented along religious lines and exacerbated by the collapse of its national economy. The absence of a government and elections since November 2022 and the collapse of the banking system and the Lebanese pound contribute to the worsening of the social and security situation in the country. The fragmented political situation allows Hezbollah to operate as a 'state within a state', as a Shiite Muslim political party (with its

own political network and social services) as well as a militant group supported by Iran and not constrained by the Lebanese government.

In October 2022 it was announced that a "historic agreement" was concluded between Israel and Lebanon, regarding the distribution of offshore deposits in the eastern Mediterranean. The agreement divided the exploitation areas between the two countries. The Karish field belongs entirely to Israel, most of the Qana field reverted to Lebanon. This agreement would not have been possible without tacit agreement of Hezbollah, which has likely secured a portion of the profits and will not want to jeopardise this arrangement. Israel's plans to further fortify the border, and Lebanon's intentions to progress offshore oil and gas exploration in a zone which is disputed between the two countries, is a main feature of the region's difficult political situation.

Maritime trade has until now been isolated from some of the worst effects of the current economic crisis. As the situation deteriorates, the threat to commercial operations being exposed to theft and smuggling is likely to increase. According to the IMF, Lebanon is going through one of the worst economic crises of the century. Protests have erupted on a sporadic basis and civil unrest, characterised by protests against high unemployment, raging inflation, corruption and a lack of infrastructure, is expected to continue.

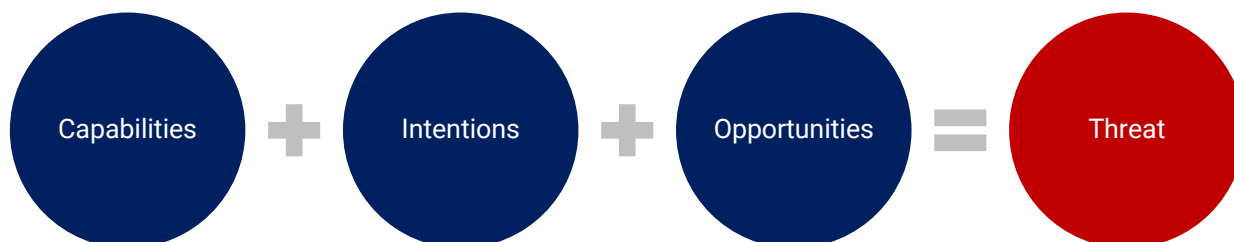
Threat levels – Lebanon

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

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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