



RiskIntelligence

Security Threat Update: Eastern Mediterranean

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Risk Intelligence A/S
Strandvejen 100
2900 Hellerup
Denmark

Tel: +45 7026 6230
info@riskintelligence.eu
www.riskintelligence.eu

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.

As stated at the launch of this report in October 2024, this week's version is the final regular update. Please refer to the Risk Intelligence System for current threat assessments for the eastern Mediterranean, Israel and Lebanon as well as many other countries, areas and ports worldwide.

Time of latest intelligence included in this report: 2 January 2025, 08:00 UTC.

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Summary of recent events

Regional developments

After the overthrow of the al-Assad regime in December, Syria is now led by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) group, supported by allied Turkish-backed factions. HTS had been ruling in the area of Idlib before the offensive. While prominent HTS figures have publicly stated that they want to focus on domestic politics, particularly on rebuilding Syria, further developments are impossible to predict.

The actual members of the new Syrian government are currently unknown. It is therefore hard to predict whether groups which have supported HTS in the fight against the al-Assad regime will remain aligned with the group. There are also concerns about foreign fighters who have reportedly been given senior roles in the military. Finally, various parts of Syria are not under the control of the new government, notably areas under control by Kurdish groups which have been supported by the US in the past.

Israeli military operations following the overthrow of the al-Assad regime were carried out quickly to use the power vacuum in the country. While these strikes seem to have been successful in degrading military capabilities, the annexation of additional parts of the occupied Golan Heights has been widely condemned by governments across the Middle East as well as by Turkey.

Israel and southern Lebanon

The ceasefire agreed between Israel and Hezbollah has largely held so far, despite various reports about violations of the agreement by both sides. Israel continues limited military operations in southern Lebanon but attention seems to have shifted towards Gaza and operations against Houthi forces in Yemen.

In recent days, however, several Israeli officials announced their intentions to continue operations against Hezbollah. The withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon could be drawn out past the 60-day ceasefire deadline. In response, Hezbollah forces have announced that they would return to action and that "day 61 will be different". It is unclear whether Hezbollah still has the capability to engage the Israeli military on a broad scale. Nevertheless, it is likely that the security situation in Lebanon – and particularly in the southern part of the country – will remain fragile in the coming weeks.

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. The conflict in Israel and Lebanon had a limited impact on the maritime area but port calls in those countries should be assessed separately. In Syria, the situation is precarious with the overthrow of the al-Assad government by opposition forces. These forces are expected to shortly occupy the ports of Tartus and Latakia, the last strongholds of the government. Israel recently conducted strikes against Syrian naval vessels in Latakia and the Russian fleet has reportedly moved offshore from its base in Tartus. The situation is changing on an ongoing basis and port calls should be assessed separately.

In November 2024, a ceasefire was announced between Israel and Hezbollah, but certain amount of caution must be maintained regarding this ceasefire, which remains fragile to date, as Israel's strategic objectives have not yet been fully achieved. The scenario of a resumption of hostilities at the beginning of 2025 remains a possibility. Although now limited, 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 remain a limited threat if the current conflict with Israel. 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 situation between Israel and Hezbollah means that the situation remains 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, a sudden outburst of maritime fighting is unlikely. The region is home to both land-based and maritime conflicts, new and old. Dormant disputes are being reignited by new oil and gas discoveries around contested maritime borders. Efforts at de-escalation have succeeded at decreasing tensions, but unresolved territorial disputes still pose a threat to commercial ships and offshore ventures, as they may be caught in jurisdictional wrangles between neighbouring countries. Several Mediterranean powers are deploying their navies in the area, thereby increasing the possibility of armed incidents between warships and civilian vessels. Seismic or drilling ships may be harassed, especially if operating in contested waters. It is very unlikely that warships in the area would directly target civilian ships.

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.

Israel is currently directly engaged on different 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 an agreement for a ceasefire in November. Israel is also engaged on indirect fronts, with Iran (airstrikes and targeted assassinations), Iraqi militias and currently the Houthis in Yemen. In addition, the situation in the West Bank could escalate at any point. All these areas are linked, and there is a constant risk of a general conflagration. The election of Donald Trump in November 2024 and the likely appointment of very pro-Israeli figures in his administration will probably encourage and legitimise Netanyahu's government to continue its operations in Middle East and the West Bank, and potentially increase the pressure on Iran.

On 27 November 2024, a ceasefire was announced between Israel and Hezbollah, including a 60-day truce period during which the IDF will gradually withdraw its troops. In the meantime, Hezbollah will have to withdraw from southern Lebanon as far as the Litani river. In a state of 'high defensive readiness', the IDF reserves the right to intervene militarily on Lebanese territory in the event of an identified Hezbollah threat. As a result, the ceasefire remains fragile and will depend above all on the IDF, and Hezbollah respecting the ceasefire. The scenario of a resumption of hostilities in early 2025 remains a possibility, once Donald Trump has taken office and the Israeli army has been able to recondition itself. Netanyahu also mentioned that the truce in Lebanon would allow him to focus on the Iranian threat and Hamas.

Israel carried out airstrikes against military targets in Iran on 26 October. The strikes were in retaliation for the missile attack by Iran on Israel on 1 October. The attack was similar to the one Iran launched in April, where Iran demonstrated resolve rather than a significant escalation in the conflict. There have been no additional strikes, despite strong rhetoric from both Israel and Iran, and both appear to be wary of further escalation for now.

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 and will remain so until the November 2024 ceasefire has been shown to be permanent.

On the southern flank, although Hamas has demonstrated its ability to strike maritime targets, ports do not appear to have been a priority target for the Hamas attack, but the threat cannot be ruled out either. However, 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.

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 before the current crisis. This has been further reinforced under the current blockade operations.

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 threats in Lebanon are currently insurgency/military operations. 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. 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 remain possible.

On 27 November 2024, a ceasefire came into force between Lebanon and Israel, putting an end, at least temporarily, to the special Israeli operation that began in September. The ceasefire, which requires the Israeli army and Hezbollah to withdraw gradually from southern Lebanon after 60 days, remains fragile, however. Hezbollah must withdraw beyond the Litani River, but the IDF reserves the right to intervene militarily in southern Lebanon in the event of an identified threat. The security situation in the coming weeks remains uncertain throughout the southern and coastal areas of Lebanon.

Before the ceasefire, numerous airstrikes were 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 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 common 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.

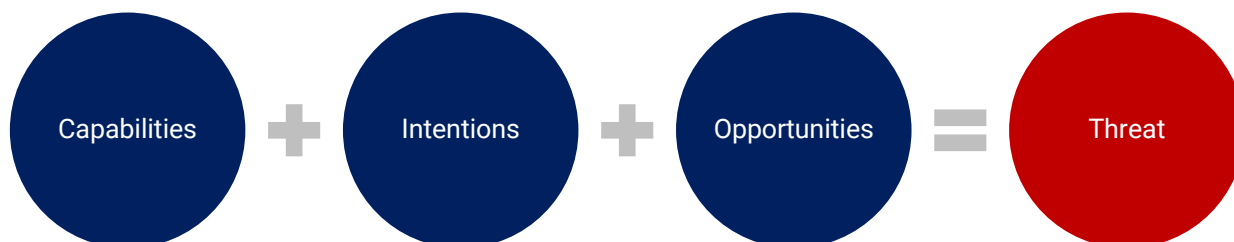
Threat levels – Lebanon

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	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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