



RiskIntelligence

Security Threat Update: Red Sea / Gulf of Aden

19 March 2025

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Security Threat Update: Red Sea / Gulf of Aden

This report provides an overview of the situation in the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden including an assessments of threat levels for attacks against different types of merchant ships operating in these areas.

Time of latest intelligence included in this report: 19 March 2025, 08:00 UTC.

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Recent incidents (Red Sea / Gulf of Aden)

No incidents which have directly affected merchant ships in the southern Red Sea, the Bab el Mandeb or the Gulf of Aden have been recorded on the Risk Intelligence System during the past 30 days.

Comprehensive descriptions for previous incidents can be found on the Risk Intelligence System. Detailed statistics of attacks against commercial shipping which have been carried out by Houthi forces since November 2023 are also available on the Risk Intelligence System.

Current situation

On Sunday 15 March 2025, the US conducted several military strikes against Houthi positions, notably around Sana'a. The Houthis' forces, which were not struck. The US conducted strikes again on the night of the 18 March. It is not certain that the Houthis will relaunch their maritime campaign.

A missile landed in Sinai on the night of the 15 March, if correctly attributed to the Houthis, indicates that the Houthis will likely target Israeli territory, rather than shipping, as anticipated in this report. A second missile was launched towards Israel on the night of the 18 March. The Ceasefire in Gaza has likewise been formally upended, with Israeli strikes in Gaza likely intended to coerce Hamas into accepting new Israeli terms.

US forces have carried out military strikes against targets in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen between January 2024 and January 2025, with a potential renewal as of March 2025. The strikes were conducted both unilaterally and as joint strikes with the UK military, supported by several other countries. The overall rate of these strikes has been limited with spikes caused by retaliatory cycles of violence between the Houthis and Israel. These attacks have ceased since the announcement of the Houthi ceasefire on 19 January 2025.

US-coordinated offensive military actions have been conducted under Operation Poseidon Archer. For political reasons, these had to be separate from the US-led Operation Prosperity Guardian which is merely aimed at protecting commercial shipping.

Since the beginning of the Houthi campaign in November 2023, Houthi forces have largely stuck to publicly announced targeting criteria. Some attacks during the early stages of the campaign apparently relied on outdated information about individual ships. No such incidents have been reported since Q2/2024. Overall, Houthi attacks against merchant ships have not been indiscriminate, often claimed by the US and other Western governments.

Red Sea campaign's status

On 12 March 2025, the Houthis announced "threats" to transiting in the Red Sea. They did not define what new criteria they would use to define Israeli vessels. Indeed, upon suspending their campaign on 19 January 2025, the Houthis had announced that their "ban" on Israeli vessels is uncertain, which new vessels continue to be encompassed by this renewed threat.

The Houthis have repeatedly signalled that they did not intend to relaunch the campaign, notably by not seizing the political opportunities to do so during the past three months.

The latest US strikes, conducted for no obvious reason, may change the equation, though that is yet uncertain. Following the US strikes, the Houthis launched ordnance towards US Navy assets off Yemen, none of which were reported struck. Tellingly, so far, no new threats have been made to commercial shipping in any Houthi statements.

Given the very recent nature of events, it is difficult to anticipate future Houthi reactions. Analysis of the limited information currently available suggests that the Houthis will likely focus on targeting US Naval assets in the short term, as well as occasionally attempt to strike Israeli territory. The Houthis are likely to calculate that exchanging ordnance with the US Navy will have the same deterrent effect on commercial shipping as launching ordnance directly against commercial shipping.

The balance of power in favour of the US Navy is likely to push the Houthis to adopt a retaliatory approach. The Houthis are likely to only retaliate against US strikes, mostly for domestic political purposes, and are likely to show this by playing a wait-and-see game.

US reasoning vs. Houthi logic

Taken at face value, the 15 March US attacks suggests substantial data had been collected and that valuable targets were struck in Yemen. However, for the Houthis, there is significant political benefit in trading blows with the US Navy. Concurring Risk Intelligence sources in Yemen indicate that while the bombings did indeed occur, they have not yet been of a nature to rattle the Houthi polity, which is inured to Western ammunition.

Opposition to the US is a legitimising factor in Yemeni & Middle East politics, and will likely be exploited further by the Houthis, particularly given the current situation. It remains unproven whether it is assessed that the Houthis currently do not have an incentive to resume their maritime campaign against shipping, at least not on the scale seen previously. The lack of viable targets is also a likely factor at play.

Similarly for the Houthis, the US does not appear to have a strong incentive to continue with the attacks, particularly given the current situation with the US referring to the US departure from Afghanistan, decided by the current US President. Likewise, the amount of "overwhelmed" Houthi forces from the "near" threatening maritime shipping in the Bab el Mandeb is unlikely to be mustered by the US under its current leadership. Claims by the US that the recent strikes were meant to stop maritime attacks are undermined by the fact that attacks had already stopped several months ago. While possible that a resumption of strikes was imminent, the US has put forward no evidence to back that up.

The reasons for the US attacks remain unknown. There has been some speculation that the attacks are a message to Iran, which has recently rebuffed US openings for nuclear negotiations, and that the US seeks to position itself in that regard. The US overture was rebuffed by Iranian leadership, which has no reason to trust US President Trump given his antecedents with Iran, including leaving the JCPOA. What the US thereby hopes to achieve with Iran by striking Houthi assets is uncertain. This suggests an explanation for the strikes is to be found within US domestic politics, and not on a strategic level.

Regardless of the reason, an escalation of tit-for-tat strikes between the US Navy and the Houthis bears risks to the shipping industry. Even if vessels are not directly targeted by the Houthis, there is a substantial risk of collateral damage to passing vessels.

Threat levels

In the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, Houthi forces have expanded their list of potential targets several times since November 2023. Some attacks were likely carried out based on outdated information in publicly available databases, underlining the threat level for collateral damage.

The threat level towards vessels linked to Operation Poseidon Archer – shown in the table below – reflects the uncertainty about the peace process, ceasefire agreements, as well as restraint shown by all belligerents during the past weeks.

Though there have been no attacks in over two months by the Houthis, this is not indicative of a continued commitment to stop the attacks. The cessation in strikes is first and foremost dependent on the progress of the situation in Gaza, and the Houthis' political

The US attacks on the Houthis on 15 March 2025 have not increased the threat level to severe yet, as it is uncertain that the Houthis will resume strikes against maritime shipping. The threat level for US/UK vessels or others linked to these strikes remains high, meaning an attack is expected should they seek to travel the area.

Potential targets	Threat type	Threat level
Merchant ships 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
Merchant ships linked to the United States, United Kingdom and other countries involved in Operation Poseidon Archer	Kinetic attack (missile, aerial/waterborne drone), possibly seizure and detention	High
Merchant ships linked to countries participating in or supporting Operation Prosperity Guardian or Operation Aspides	Kinetic attack (missile, aerial/waterborne drone), possibly seizure and detention	Elevated
Other merchant ships in transit through the Red Sea/Gulf of Aden	Kinetic attack due to misidentification, potential proximity to the above threats ('collateral damage')	Elevated

Military operations against the Houthis have resulted in a high threat level for merchant ships linked to the US and the UK through ownership. Based on Houthi announcements, the group will

continue targeting vessels which are owned by companies that are trading with Israel, meaning a continued severe threat level for these ships.

Despite ongoing military operations, Houthi forces remain capable of conducting attacks. These are not limited to the southern Red Sea where they control a large portion of coastline. Several ships have also been struck in the Gulf of Aden. Attacks by drone boats, however, are very likely limited to the southern Red Sea.

While the Houthis' ability to launch missiles have been likely degraded by military strikes, the strikes' actual impact cannot be assessed. Moreover, reports about military actions are solely based on military sources and not independently verified. Any meaningful and sustainable reduction of the threat posed by the Houthis would require a longer-term mission.

For merchant ships linked to countries solely supporting Operation Prosperity Guardian or the EU-led Operation Aspides which both have a defensive mandate, the threat level is assessed as lower compared to countries participating in offensive military actions. For all other commercial ships, the same threat level applies.

For vessels related to countries taking part in Operation Prosperity Guardian or Operation Aspides, this is largely due to the potential for kinetic attacks in lieu of other potential targets for Houthi forces. However, considering their selection of targets, this is currently unlikely.

Vessels not related to countries taking part in Operation Prosperity Guardian or Operation Aspides may be targeted due to misidentification. Proximity to kinetic attacks or to interceptions of drones and missiles by military forces could also lead to collateral damage.

Finally, it is vital to consider that the situation remains dynamic and requires close monitoring. Updates regarding incidents as well as constantly updated assessments of current threat levels are available through the Risk Intelligence System.

Background

Starting with the seizure of the GALAXY LEADER on 19 November 2023, Risk Intelligence has identified dozens of attacks by Houthi forces in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The frequency of attacks against merchant ships has decreased in recent months, although this is very likely due to the limited number of potential targets and to the fact that the Houthis have firmly established the threat.

This analysis is supported by traffic figures which suggest that the shipping industry has adapted to the situation. Even when no attacks had been conducted by the Houthis for several weeks, maritime traffic did not increase. At the same time, clusters of attacks have not caused a further decrease in traffic either (see Figure 1). This week has seen a slight increase in traffic through the Bab el Mandeb, though it still is within the

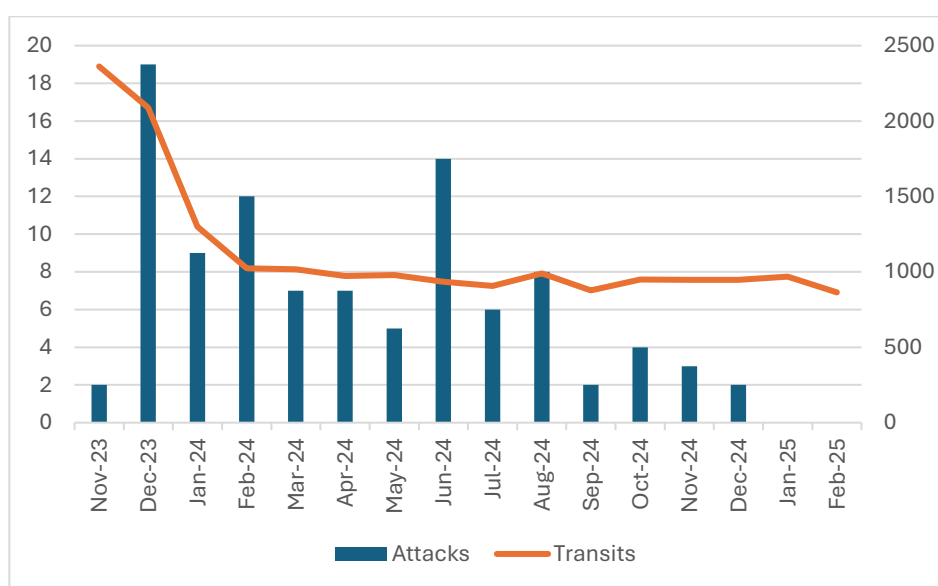


Figure 1: Attacks against merchant ships per month (blue columns) and number of monthly Bab el Mandeb transits by merchant ships >10,000 dwt (red line) (Source: Risk Intelligence System / Lloyd's List Intelligence/Seasearcher)

Note: Detailed statistics about Houthi attacks against commercial ships in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden since November 2023 are also available on the Risk Intelligence System.

Figure 1 also indicates that the Houthis have reached their goal and are more likely to be reacting to political events than to maritime activity in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The amount of maritime traffic in this area has remained steady since February 2024, regardless of attack levels.

It is unlikely that maritime traffic will decrease further. The decision to return to the Red Sea will very likely be determined by economic factors, e.g. insurance premiums or pressure from charterers, possibly supported by political declarations that would placate the Houthis.

Figure 2 below indicates that the industry is still adopting it wait and see attitude, as uncertainty about the

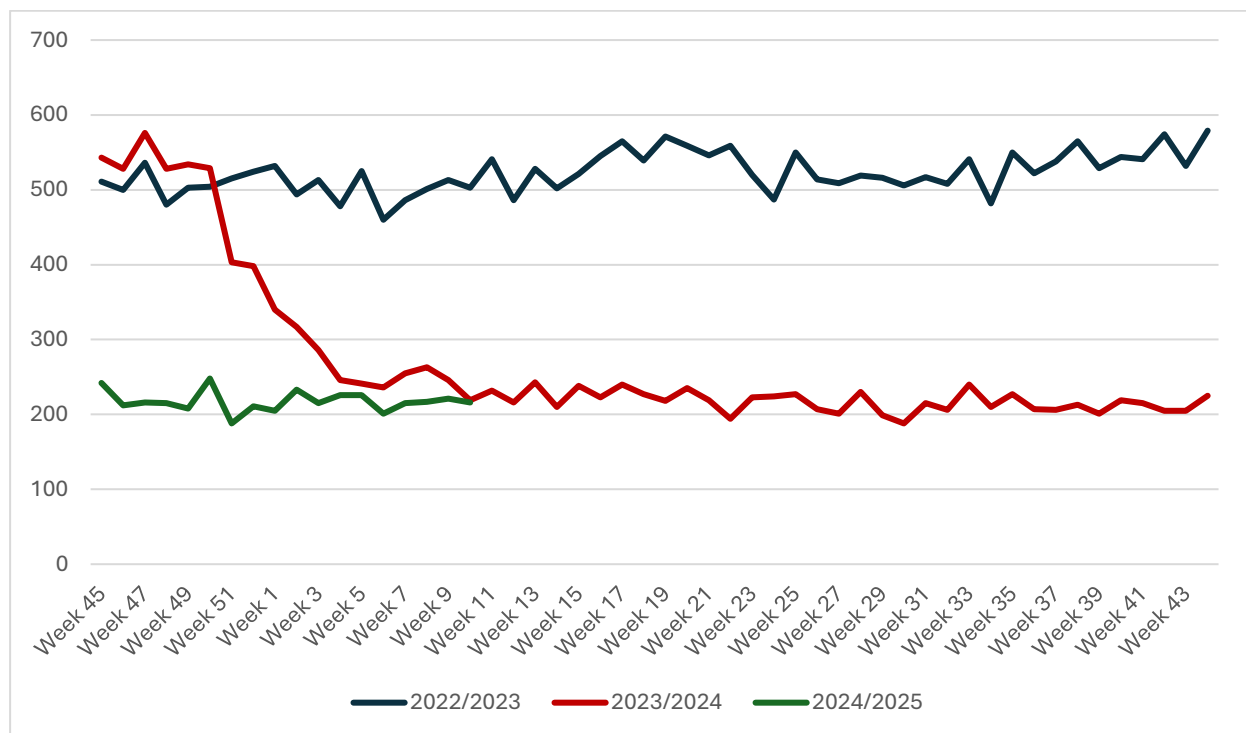


Figure 2: Suez Transits Year on Year comparison, indicating a sustained decrease to the new normal, even with several months without attacks by Intelligence/Seasearcher)

Ongoing military missions have not lowered the threat level for commercial shipping substantively. For transits through the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, it should be noted that naval recommendations to switch off AIS are not based on credible figures. Both the EU-led and the US-led military operations have published data about the targeting of merchant ships transiting the area with or without AIS on.

These statistics, however, do not align with each other. Raw data used for the analysis has not been made public. The results are therefore at least questionable, underlined by misleading public statements from Operation Aspides officials which have claimed that no ship with AIS off has been successfully targeted by the Houthis.

Overall, there is no evidence to suggest that switching off AIS lowers the chances of vessels being targeted. It may limit the success rate for missile attacks in particular but this does not necessarily apply to attacks conducted by aerial or naval drones. Moreover, not broadcasting AIS may complicate efforts to support a ship after an attack.

It is noteworthy that less than 10% of merchant ships transiting through the Bab el Mandeb are conducting their voyages without AIS. This figure has not changed significantly during the Houthis campaign.

Guidance on commercial operations

Ship transits

Several shipping industry organisations have published the "Interim Industry Transit Advice, Southern Red Sea and Gulf of Aden – September 2024". Among other information, the document includes considerations about routing and vessel hardening. The Joint Maritime Information Centre has also issued bridge emergency reference cards in October 2024.

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 Indian Ocean (MSCIO). Any incidents or suspicious activities should also be reported to UKMTO and MSCIO.

Contact details UKMTO

Email: watchkeepers@ukmto.org

Phone: +44 2393 222060

Website: www.ukmto.org

Contact details MSCIO

Email: postmaster@mscio.eu

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

Website: www.mscio.eu

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

Phone: +973 1785 3879

Email: m-ba-navcent-ncags@us.navy.mil

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.
- Depending on individual circumstances, embarkation of armed guards may be useful to mitigate specific risks, specifically in relation to the threat of boardings from small boats (e.g. Houthi forces, Somali piracy). However, the threat of direct targeting by missiles, aerial or naval drones used by Houthi forces in Yemen (southern Red Sea / Gulf of Aden) cannot be mitigated by embarkation of armed guards.

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 developing adapted procedures 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 by the crew to minimise the impact of any security incidents.

Red Sea – threat assessment (summary)

On 15 March 2025, the US conducted strikes against Houthi positions in Sana'a and Northern Yemen, whereas Israel renewed strikes on Gaza on 18 March, formally ending the ceasefire. On 15 March the Houthis retaliated by launching ordnance at US naval assets in the Red Sea and potentially one missile against Israeli territory. Threat levels are not immediately impacted by the US and Israeli strikes and Houthi retaliation. It is not certain that the Houthis will resume their maritime campaign against shipping. It is uncertain what motivated the US strikes.

On 12 March 2025, the Houthis threatened to resume attacks in the Red Sea, whereas these were already "banned" under the ceasefire. New vessels are encompassed by the threat, and the Houthis have rhetorically allowed themselves the space not to attack. It is uncertain that the Houthis will strike vessels in the short to medium term under the current circumstances. It is possible that a Houthi strike, if it should materialise, take place against Israeli soil.

On 19 January 2025 the Houthis announced a pause in their Red Sea campaign, positively acknowledging the ceasefire deal in Gaza. In their announcement, the Houthis stated that trade through the Red Sea would re-open for all categories except Israeli-flagged vessels or vessels directly owned by Israeli entities. The campaign's pause is largely contingent on the Houthis' perception of Israel's behaviour in the upcoming days and weeks, as well as the political benefit Houthis expect to gain from exploiting the Gaza crisis. There have been no maritime attacks since before the cessation of the campaign was announced. This has been the case despite numerous allegations of ceasefire violations by Israel, indicating that the Houthis currently have little intention of resuming maritime strikes.

Overall, while the conditions for a return of shipping have begun to appear, there is still some way to go before a return to the pre-campaign normal. The shipping industry must be convinced that the current lull in attacks is not just temporary. The Houthis, Israel and Hamas must exercise restraint long enough for this to happen, and political considerations in Yemen must favour a continued cessation of Houthi strikes at sea. None of these conditions will be easily met, and the latest progress may easily be inverted, particularly given political pressure in Israel to resume the fighting in Gaza.

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 since, likely due to ongoing 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 continue. In addition, Saudi Arabia has so far refrained from criticising the Houthis during their current campaign which is a significant departure 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 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	Moderate
Smuggling	Elevated
Stowaways and human trafficking	Low
Fraud and corruption	Low
Activism	Low

Indian Ocean – threat assessment (summary)

This area covers the western Indian Ocean (north of Madagascar, east towards India), including the Somali Basin, Gulf of Aden, and western Arabian Sea. Houthi operations targeting merchant ships in transit can take place in the western Gulf of Aden where threat levels are similar to the southern Red Sea. In the Indian Ocean, there is an elevated threat of piracy off Somalia and a moderate drone threat to merchant ships in the Somali Basin, Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea.

The drone threat is now reduced to moderate following the Houthi announcement on 19 January that trade through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden would re-open for all categories except Israeli-flagged vessels or vessels directly owned by Israeli entities. This pause in the wider Houthi campaign is largely contingent on the Houthis' perception of Israel's behaviour in the upcoming days and weeks, however, so there is potential for the threat to be revised upwards should there be a change in that perception.

The threat of pirate operations in the Somali Basin and the Gulf of Aden is elevated. Recent cases show that pirates retain boarding capabilities at significant distances offshore, as far as 800 nautical miles from Somalia. The hijacked bulk carrier ABDULLAH was released on 14 April 2024 after a claimed \$5 million ransom was paid. The successful ransom has demonstrated that the piracy model still functions and that pirates can hold ships off the Somali coast to receive ransom payments. A second ransom, reportedly \$2 million, was secured following the hijacking of the Chinese fishing trawler LIAO DONG YU 578 in November 2024.

Pirate activity declined in mid-2024, with monsoon weather likely a contributing factor as it made operations far offshore more difficult. Nevertheless, since then, pirate activity has been reported infrequently in recent months. This might be due to a perception by the pirates that the risk vs reward calculation for targeting merchant vessels has changed. As such, the threat trend is downward.

There have been several reported boardings of fishing dhows off Somalia since November 2023, which continued through 2024. These boardings were likely linked to illegal fishing activity in the area, which is an ongoing issue and has been a focus for Somalia in expanding its maritime enforcement capabilities. The LIAO DONG YU 578 hijacking suggests that illegal fishing is more of a motivating factor for piracy actions than targeting merchant vessels. The successful ransom for the LIAO DONG YU 578 will likely motivate similar operations.

Merchant ships in transit should be aware of the potential to encounter small armed craft in this area, particularly the Gulf of Aden. These might be fishermen, traders, smugglers, militia or irregular military forces, or military or coastguard patrols operating out of southern Yemen or northern Somalia. Such craft might manoeuvre close to merchant ships while not presenting a threat.

In Yemen, multiple political factions operate their own militias in addition to security forces from Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Terrorist groups have a limited presence. There have been no recent incidents, aside from those linked to Houthi operations. The operation of such forces in Yemen is primarily a consideration for operations close to the Yemeni coast or for port calls in the country where local political disputes might include limited actions against merchant ships.

Naval patrols operate in the area, such as EUNAVFOR's Operation Atalanta. Naval 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 still operational. National deployments are also ongoing, such as the Indian naval presence which has been effective in recent actions.

Shipping industry associations have published transit guidance for the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, emphasising the importance of thorough ship and voyage-specific threat and risk assessments before passing through the area. 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 primary point of contact for merchant vessels and liaison with military forces in the region. Merchant vessels are encouraged to report positions while operating in the area.

MSCHOA (now renamed as Maritime Security Centre Indian Ocean, MSCIO) manages the EUNAVFOR (EU Naval Forces Somalia and Operation Atalanta) voluntary registration scheme for ships transiting the area and communicates EUNAVFOR counter-piracy guidance to the maritime industry.

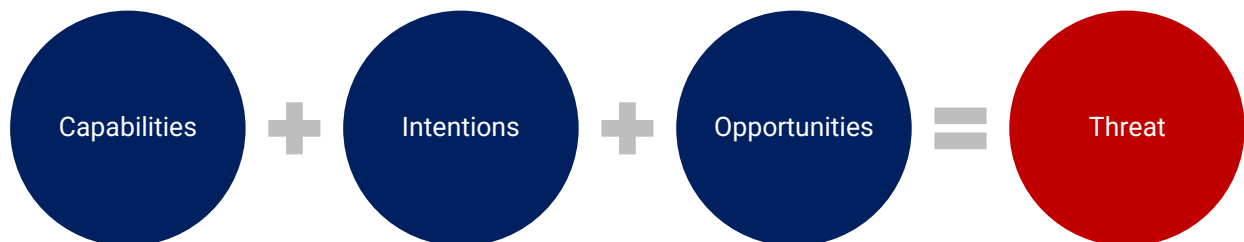
Threat levels

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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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