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Middle East



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About the report

This report provides an overview of the current maritime security situation in different parts of the Middle East, notably the southern Red Sea/Gulf of Aden and the Persian Gulf/Gulf of Oman areas. It is primarily aimed at assessing the threat of attacks against different types of merchant ships operating in these areas.

Comprehensive descriptions for individual incidents as well as statistics about attacks against merchant ships are available on the Risk Intelligence System.

Time of latest intelligence included in this report:
19 August 2026, 00:00 UTC.

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Current situation

Summary

- Reciprocal attacks by US and Iran against each shipping interests continue
- Trump threatens to bomb Oman and states that no talks with Iran are ongoing, likely in frustration at stalemate.
- US peace plan for Gaza is rejected by Israeli PM Netanyahu, as campaigning for the Israeli October election heats up.

The US and Iran are still attacking each other's maritime interests as the status quo remains, prompting US President Trump to lash out at allies. Houthis have continued their attacks on Southern Yemen.

The latest American plan for Gaza is dead on arrival as the Netanyahu government continues prevaricating.

The situation remains stalemated, with attacks by Iran or the Houthis occurring around the Arabian Peninsula. The US is still struggling to disentangle itself from the conundrum it created for itself, with US President lashing out in frustration at his allies. President Trump stated that there were no talks with Iran ongoing, and none scheduling, contradicting himself from a few hours prior. President Trump also threatened to bomb Oman, which while unlikely to happen, is the second such threat since the start of the war and is most likely an unpleasant experience for Omani leadership.

Oman is in the precarious position of being forced to negotiate with Iran and threatened by the US for doing so. Oman has no true say as to the "talks" outcome, as it has no leverage or military standing to influence their iter against Iran's wishes. These exchanges will predictably end with Iran levying some kind of toll. US threats are highly unlikely to change that. Simultaneously, Omani leaders will be wary of appearing cowed by US threats: as a sovereign nation, Oman is entitled to conduct talks with whomever it chooses.

Meanwhile, the US plan for Gaza is dead on arrival as the Netanyahu government very publicly rejected it. The US likely sought to impose the plan by fiat, and Prime Minister Netanyahu likely felt compelled to reject it vocally given the incoming October elections in Israel. The visit of Trump's son in law and White House envoy Jared Kushner was highly unlikely to change that equation.

Red Sea situation and 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 in the early phase of their campaign were likely carried out based on outdated information in publicly available databases, underlining the threat level for collateral damage. Current threat levels reflect both the enduring status quo and the Houthis' ability to maintain pressure on the shipping industry.

Overall, US-linked merchant ships are exposed to a higher threat level than vessels from other countries as a result of the Iran war. The threat level for ships linked to Western European ownership is also somewhat higher than for other vessels, a consequence of the perceived alignment of European foreign policy with the US and continued European support for Israel. In case of renewed attacks, the Houthis are expected to once again target vessels owned by companies that are trading with Israel, resulting in a severe threat level.

Potential targets	Threat type	Threat level
Merchant ships linked to Israel through ownership, port calls, trade with and/or commercial relationship	Kinetic attack (missile, aerial/waterborne drone), possibly seizure and detention	Severe
Merchant ships linked to the US through ownership or registration	Kinetic attack (missile, aerial/waterborne drone), possibly seizure and detention	High
Merchant ships linked to Saudi Arabia through ownership or port calls	Kinetic attack (missile, aerial/waterborne drone), possibly seizure and detention	High
Merchant ships linked to countries participating in or supporting defensive naval operations	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')	Moderate

Military operations against the Houthis have not lowered the threat level for merchant ships. 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.

Vessels not related to countries taking part in naval operations 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. Moreover, 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

Risk Intelligence has identified dozens of attacks by Houthi forces in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden since November 2023. The number of attacks against merchant ships has been limited since September 2024, due to the limited number of potential targets and the fact that the Houthis have firmly established the threat.

Overall, the decision to return of commercial shipping to the Red Sea will very likely be determined by economic factors, e.g. insurance premiums or pressure from charterers. Overall, the shipping industry is still adopting a "wait-and-see" attitude regarding a return to Red Sea transits, particularly in the currently volatile environment across the Middle East.

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 verifiable figures. There is no evidence to suggest that switching off AIS lowers the chances of vessels being targeted. It may in some cases 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. Less than 10% of merchant ships transiting through the Bab el Mandeb are conducting their voyages without AIS.

Red Sea: Threat assessment (summary)

There is at least an elevated threat of attacks by Houthi forces in the southern Red Sea as part of their campaign to control maritime traffic. The Houthis' maritime campaign started in November 2023 in reaction to Israel's behaviour in Gaza has not formally been ended. The Houthis announced an embargo on trade with Saudi ports in mid July 2026, and hit at least 4 vessels following the announcement, with some other attacks potentially taking place.

Threat levels are determined by Houthis' assessment of potential targets' commercial links to their adversaries. Threat levels are higher for entities linked to the US or Israel, including for companies having made Israeli port calls. Houthis retain the intentions and capabilities to continue their campaign as needed to meet their domestic and regional political goals.

The Houthis have used airborne and waterborne drones, missiles, and small boat operations to threaten vessel traffic. Attacks are typically clustered off Yemen but have included areas farther north off the Saudi coast and in the western Gulf of Aden. Vessels have also been targeted as far north up as Yanbu, but such attacks are likely to remain rare. Targets are typically selected based on their commercial links but there is the potential for misidentification or for collateral damage in proximity to attacks.

Overall, maritime traffic in the Red Sea has been at a level of 40-50 percent compared to the pre-campaign level since February 2024, with a further decrease since the attacks on Saudi vessels. No significant increase has been recorded since then. Notably, political considerations in Yemen favour a cessation of Houthi strikes at sea. The Houthis have expressed opposition to the US and Israeli attacks on Iran but have only responded directly against Israel rather than shipping in the Red Sea. The Houthis are assessed to be either deterred, undecided or unconvinced internally as to whether to resume attacks against shipping, though the discussion is highly likely ongoing within their leadership.

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 Saudi Arabia continues. The maritime dimension to this conflict is limited as diplomacy is ongoing behind the scenes. The threat level for direct attacks against port and oil facilities in Saudi Arabia is moderate while talks are ongoing.

There is a dispute between Yemen and Eritrea in the Hanish Islands area, primarily due to fishing. 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, though increased and indiscriminate jamming in the waters between Port Sudan and Jeddah pose a threat to navigation.

Threat levels (Red Sea)

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

Persian Gulf: Threat assessment (summary)

Merchant ships wanting to transit the Strait of Hormuz are currently affected by Iran's de facto control of the Strait and its aggressive enforcement of its transit conditions.

The US and Iran signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on 18 June 2026 that declares the "immediate and permanent termination of military operations on all fronts", though it was suspended in mid-July as the US resumed attacks against Iran in frustration at continued Iranian attempts to control of the Strait of Hormuz and attacks against maritime traffic. There is currently a standoff in the Strait of Hormuz over transits, and the diplomatic and military situation is tense. As such, threat levels in the Persian Gulf are still high. Possible incidents include drone and missile strikes on vessels, aggressive enforcement of transit restrictions, and collateral damage in some port areas as the US and Iran carry out retaliatory military actions.

There is conflicting guidance for operators transiting through the Strait of Hormuz. The JMIC has said in an advisory note that: "Mariners are advised that they may transit the southern route day or night with their AIS on, radars radiating, running lights on, and normal use of VHF." But it has also said to expect "VHF hailing from naval forces and be cognisant of the mine danger area." The IMO is currently seeking a compromise and supported by UKMTO has announced that it is "working with industry organisations, coastal states and regional partners to develop a prioritised approach to the safe and orderly movement of vessels."

Iran, however, is aggressively enforcing the terms it has imposed through its Persian Gulf Strait Authority (PGSA). It has recently carried out drone strikes against merchant vessels in the Strait and issued warnings that vessels must use its northern route and meet the terms and conditions set by the PGSA. It is likely that Iran will carry out similar actions. In response, the US has responded militarily with air strikes against targets in Iran but no additional measures have been announced for securing transits using the southern route.

Iran strategy is to support the formalisation of its control over the Strait. The Iranian PGSA released terms and conditions that include: "No vessel is permitted to pass through the Strait of Hormuz without a valid passage permit issued by the PGSA." Additional conditions are noted, including insurance requirements and use of the new self-declared northward route outside the

pre-existing TSS. Non-compliance will result in full liability resting with the vessel owner and master, according to the PGSA.

Overall, there is still the possibility that vessel crews may have to be prepared to deal with possible missile or drone strikes by taking actions to limit the risk of collateral damage and increase operational resilience. Vessels might also need to be prepared to respond to aggressive enforcement by Iran of any transit rules it wants to implement. This guidance will be revisited with the ongoing implementation of the MoU.

There are significant points of difference between the US and Iran despite the MoU. There are no guarantees that the 60-day period will result in a full agreement and a permanent end to hostilities. There is still the possibility that Iran will use demonstrations of its intentions and capabilities in the Strait area to seek further concessions, and that the US will respond with limited military action. For transits to increase and normalise, there are a number of considerations of interest to the shipping industry as well: progress on demining, command and control for traffic management, and other security and practical issues. Pakistani forces confirmed the sighting of a mine in the Strait of Hormuz on 18 June. It is unknown how many mines have been laid in the Strait.

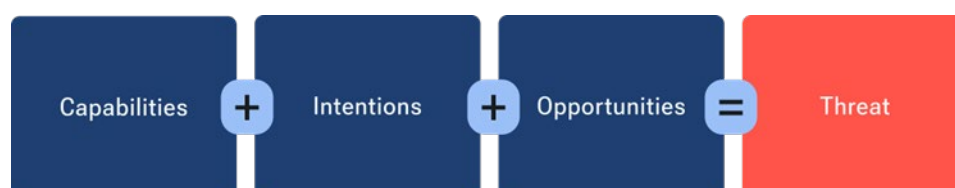
Threat levels (Persian Gulf)

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	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.

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.



Knowing Risk



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