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Created:	20240202			Status:	Live
Title	AMBREY THREAT UPDATE – 02/02/2024				



AMBREY THREAT UPDATE – Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman and Indian Ocean

A. Executive Summary

- Threats in the region have grown significantly, they are complex, and they are now over a wider area of operations.
- The situation poses a significant risk to life and the safety of vessels in the area.
- The Houthis have widened their targets and area of operations. An unprecedented international naval response has degraded their capabilities, but the Houthis have continued to attack shipping. As affiliated vessels reroute around the Cape of Good Hope, risk levels on other routes increase as weapon capability also improves.
- The international military presence, though significant, cannot ensure safe passage of the region. All available mitigation measures should be evaluated and considered.
- Iran has become more assertive in its response to US sanctions, widened its area of operations, and acted in support of the Houthis. Reach into the wider region must be considered.
- Over the past decade, the suppression of piracy has led to the reduction of designated threat areas in the region. Somali pirates have now acted in international waters beyond the Indian Ocean Listed Area, where security provision has been limited, up until now.
- Security Risk Management companies must adapt their service levels to provide a comprehensive suite of services to support international shipping.

B. Situation

Security has deteriorated in the region. Since November, Iran, the Houthis, and Somali pirates have attacked civilian merchant shipping. Though not as well-publicised as the Houthi threat, Iran has attacked Israel-owned shipping for years with explosive Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and, in recent weeks, has targeted such merchant vessels offshore India and the Maldives. Their proxies have also continued to attack American military targets in the Middle East, and at the time of writing, the US was preparing a military response. The Houthis have used anti-ship ballistic missiles and UAVs to attack shipping they have affiliated with Israel, and they have targeted American and British-affiliated merchant shipping in retaliation for the US and UK military response. Somali pirates have hijacked a bulk carrier and are assessed to have attacked three other merchant vessels in the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden. Their attacks have utilised hijacked dhows to act as motherships to reach international waters over 750M from the Somali coast.

C. Threat update

Iran has targeted Israel-affiliated merchant shipping since at least February 2021. This is part of an ongoing 'grey zone' conflict. In July 2021 a Master and an Ambrey Private Armed Security Team member lost their lives after an explosive UAV hit a tanker's pilot cabin. At the time of writing, the Iranians were assessed to threaten Israel-owned shipping. Several incidents have not been reported by regional organisations but have been verified with military sources. Iran has also responded increasingly assertively to US sanctions enforcement. Previously, responses were aimed at those who had cooperated with the US. In 2023 Iran seized a US-chartered tanker and the Iranian Navy fired on another tanker that refused to stop, causing damage to the ship.

The Houthi threat to Israeli merchant shipping has expanded in scope and geography. The group began by targeting Israeli territory. Then, they started to target Israel-owned, operated, and managed shipping. The scope widened further when they targeted companies by Israeli trade. On the 11th of January, the US and UK launched airstrikes on Houthi military positions, and the Houthi targeting widened further still, to include

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merchant shipping with American and British ownership. As merchant shipping has been re-routed, the pool of available targets with these specific kinds of affiliations in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden will likely contract, and they could well expand the scope of operations as evidenced by their attacks on Israeli shipping. Recent attacks have expanded beyond the southern Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden. Longer-range attacks in Saudi Arabia and the UAE in recent years indicate the Houthis can widen this further. They did not stop their attacks during the November 2023 Israel-Hamas ceasefire. Even if the Israel-Gaza conflict were to de-escalate, there is no guarantee that the Houthis would completely stop the targeting of certain affiliations. The subsequent mobilisation of international navies has been unprecedented, but they have been unable to suppress all threats, and the Houthi capability to attack merchant shipping, aided by Iran, remains largely in place. So far, the attacks have not caused any injuries, but several vessels have been structurally damaged, and the strikes have caused serious fires.

The Somali piracy threat has re-emerged. From the beginning, it is now assessed that the criminals were intent on piracy: the hijackings began with a fishing dhow operating offshore the Puntland region, which was taken 400M offshore Somalia before she lost her two skiffs in adverse weather conditions and turned back. The subsequent hijacking of the bulk carrier RUEN took place almost 600M offshore Somalia and her subsequent movements to territorial waters in the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean indicated they were acting from a wide area. This successful hijacking may incentivise other groups. At the time of writing, the furthest attack on a merchant vessel offshore Somalia since November was 750M. The cause is political instability in Puntland. The President of Puntland sought re-election, instead of rotating the Presidency to another sub-clan. Control of the state was important for sub-clan revenue, particularly fishing licensing, which is why this political crisis has also resulted in the hijacking and ransoming of licensed fishing dhows. An Indian Navy response to a boarding likely prevented another hijacking but given the large distances in the Indian Ocean, the warship took more than 19 hours to get alongside. It was a credit to the crew's preparedness and vessel's hardening that this bulker did not suffer the same fate as the RUEN.

D. Next steps

- In order to provide appropriate and proportionate levels of armed security support in the region, armed guard embarkation locations should be reconsidered. Armed personnel on board is considered essential to mitigate current risk levels.
- All vessels considering transiting or trading in the region, should undertake a Voyage Risk Assessment (including an affiliation check) prior to any final route decision being made.
- All vessels supported by Ambrey's armed personnel will require the Ambrey Guardian service as a minimum level of digital risk management support throughout the voyage in the region. This will include a Voyage Risk Assessment (including affiliation checks), digital watchkeeping services, and crisis management support should it be required.
- Ambrey is committed to providing the highest levels of support to its clients. Please contact your Account Manager for further updates and support.

E. Contact Information

- Contact your Ambrey Account Manager or call +44 203 503 0320 if you have any questions.

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