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Created:	20240413			Status:	Live
Title	AMBREY THREAT CIRCULAR – 13/04/2024				



AMBREY THREAT CIRCULAR – ISRAELI VESSEL SEIZED BY IRAN

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A. Executive Summary

- On the 13th of April, Iran seized an Israeli-owned container ship in the Gulf of Oman.
- Iran threatened retaliation for the killing of an IRGC General in an Israeli airstrike on Damascus, Syria.
- The increased threat to Israeli-shipping is assessed to persist in the Gulf of Oman and Arabian Sea.
- Israel-affiliation is determined more strictly by Iran compared to the Houthi – risk of false targeting persists.
- Vessels transiting the Indian Ocean should conduct thorough affiliation checks.
- At-risk vessels are advised to reconsider transiting the Strait of Hormuz during this phase of heightened risk.
- All vessels and their onshore personnel are advised to prepare to respond to intelligence or security events by implementing pre-agreed mitigation measures.

B. Situation

On the 13th of April 2024, a Portuguese-flagged, Israeli-owned, container ship was seized by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGC-N) northeast of Fujairah, UAE, after having exited the Strait of Hormuz. The vessel’s group owner was listed as Zodiac Maritime. The company is owned by Israeli businessman Eyal Ofer. Video footage depicted the boarding of the vessel via fast-roping from a helicopter, a known IRGC-N *modus operandi*. This was the first Israel-affiliated vessel boarded by Iran since the attempted boarding of a tanker in August 2021. A significant build-up of regional tensions preceded the seizure. On the 1st of April, Israel conducted an airstrike on a building adjacent to the Iranian embassy in Damascus, Syria. The airstrike resulted in the death of seven IRGC members, of which one was Mohammad Reza Zahedi, commander of the IRGC’s Quds-force in Lebanon and Syria. The airstrike also killed Zahedi’s deputy, Mohammad Haj Rahimi. Iran accused Israel of having conducted the airstrike, while Israel has not claimed responsibility. Since the airstrike, Iranian officials including the Supreme Leader of Iran, Seyyed Ali Hosseini Khamenei, have continuously issued threats against Israel, indicating that Iran would retaliate. The week preceding the seizure in the Gulf of Oman, saw rising tensions between Iran, Israel, and the US. The international community attempted to dissuade Iran from conducting a direct, large-scale, attack on Israeli territory. US President, Joe Biden, had declared that the US’ “commitment to Israel’s security against these threats from Iran and its proxies is ironclad.” Iran threatened the US, that any US involvement in the Iranian retaliation would make US assets in the region a legitimate target for Iranian forces.

C. Threat Update

Ambrey assesses the threat to be aimed at Israel-affiliated shipping in the Arabian/Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, and Arabian Sea. In the past, Iran has considered Israeli-owned, -operated, and -managed shipping Israel-affiliated. These criteria for Israel-affiliation were assessed to persist and are in contrast to the Houthi targeting profile. The seizure was assessed to be part of the escalation between Israel and Iran. The commander of the IRGC-N, Alireza Tangsiri, threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz if Israel were to “disrupt” Iran, stating that Iran considered Israel’s presence in the UAE a threat. The incident was not preceded by an Israel seizure of an Iranian vessel. Further engagement of Israel-affiliated shipping is likely as the disruption of merchant shipping remains at Iran’s discretion. An escalation between Israel and Iran, with an airstrike directed toward Israeli territory may still occur, placing the region at risk of a war between nation

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states. This boarding transpired with the use of a helicopter. This is a common *modus operandi* for the IRGC-N, however, not its only capability. Iran has seized vessels by boarding via helicopter or from a boat; here swarm tactics are common. Iran has also been held responsible for the use of missile and limpet mines against merchant shipping. Since 2019, Iran has likely launched Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) attacks against Israeli shipping in the Gulf of Oman and Arabian Sea. The most recent incident occurred approximately 200NM west of Male, Maldives. The threat is assessed to not extend to other merchant shipping. However, a risk of false targeting and collateral damage exists. Iran may engage a vessel with a recent but no longer current Israel-affiliation. If Iran continues operations against Israel-affiliated shipping a broadening of the *modus operandi* is highly likely resulting in a collateral damage risk to shipping in an increased use of aerial projectiles in the narrow bodies of water off Iran’s coastline. Such a continuation would additionally increase the likelihood of US involvement. Iran’s threat against the US would place US-owned shipping at risk of Iranian hostility if the US were to engage Iran to defend shipping or Israeli assets ashore. In the past, Iran has also seized tankers in response to the enforcement of US sanctions against Iran. The US recently sanctioned 14 vessels. A detention of any of these vessels would result in an increased risk for US tankers in the Gulf region.

D. Mitigation

Ambrey recommends a thorough affiliation check as part of a transit risk assessment is performed for all Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman, Arabian/Persian Gulf, and Indian Ocean voyages. This is being performed as a matter of course for all Ambrey tasks.

Vessels assessed to be at high risk are advised to re-consider their voyage plans.

Note that the Iranian target profile could change during a voyage. This should be regularly checked and managed with an intelligence provider.

Prior to boarding distress calls should be issued to inform relevant authorities. During a boarding by Iranian forces, the crew are advised to comply with boarding forces’ commands.

AIS transmissions and other signal emissions ought to be immediately stopped if UAV activity is encountered. Irregular and frequent course and speed alterations also are assessed to reduce the likelihood of damage.

Companies should be prepared to make decisions quickly in the event of being targeted. They should practice Crisis Management responses to likely scenarios with all relevant stakeholders.

E. Contact Information

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- USCG NAVCEN: www.navcen.uscg.gov/contact/gps-problem-report or +1-703-313-5900.

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