
INDICATOR BRIEF: TURKISH OWNED VESSEL THREATENED

Event

On the 9th of November 2024, the Houthis warned a Turkish-owned bulk carrier to not transit the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. This was the first confirmed engagement of a Turkish-owned vessel by the Houthis. The vessel was southwest of Aden at the time transiting from Tianjin, China, toward Egypt. The crew were told they would be “targeted” if they continued their voyage. The bulker subsequently changed course toward Djibouti and ceased transmitting an AIS signal. Ambrey assessed the bulk carrier to have a strong affiliation with the Houthi target profile due to the listed group owner’s trade with Israel. Though the affected vessel had not called Israel in this period, several vessels in the owner’s fleet have appeared to call Israel since the Houthis declared a “ban” on companies trading with Israel on the 3rd of May 2024.

Context

Turkey has steadily increased its maritime capabilities in recent years, enabling its Navy to deploy in the region to protect its interests. The Turkish Navy has already deployed to the Gulf of Aden under the command of the counter-piracy task force CTF 151 and has signed deals with Somalia covering security and oil and gas exploration. Turkey has been looking to assert its influence as a regional player in the Middle East with Turkish Armed Forces operating in Syria and Iraq, a clear pro-Hamas stance, and long-standing aid packages for the Gaza Strip. A Turkish response to the Houthi threat could alter the security construct in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and the Indian Ocean region.

The Turkish government has faced internal criticism toward its response to the Israel-Gaza conflict. The political party of Turkey’s President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, AKP lost significant support among conservative religious voters in the local elections on the 31st of March 2024. Following the elections, Turkey began limiting its exports to Israel. The Turkish Ministry of Trade announced the cessation of trade with Israel on the 2nd of May 2024 until Israel allowed “uninterrupted and sufficient flow” of humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip. Initially only a limited range of exports to Israel were restricted and trade continued via intermediaries. In the past month, Ambrey observed increased activism in Turkish ports. Protestors blocked access roads, attempted to breach port perimeters, hindered the movements of containers in the hinterland, and boarded berthed vessels. The protests occurred in response to Israel-affiliated vessels calling the port or Israel-bound/-affiliated goods moving through the port. On the 13th of November, Erdoğan stated that the country was severing all diplomatic ties to Israel. The President had repeatedly condemned Israel’s actions in the Gaza Strip as a “genocide”.

Analysis

The public Turkish commentary on the Gulf of Aden incident has been muted. Almost 6% of traffic transiting the Bab el-Mandeb with AIS on over the past 6 months has been Turkish-owned. Erdoğan is likely working toward two goals. Internally, he is attempting to regain popular support by taking a harder stance against Israel. Externally, the Turkish President sees the opportunity to enforce Turkey’s ambitions to be the regional power. It is likely the Turkish Government does not want to be seen to stand behind a company that has traded with Israel, but repeated threats toward Turkish shipping would likely not go unanswered.

Implications

The Houthi have shown their willingness to target a Turkish-owned vessel. The Turkish ownership is not assessed to be a mitigating factor. Further threats toward Turkish companies could coalesce a Turkish Navy presence in the Red Sea in a defensive posture not dissimilar to existing operations.

Shipping is assessed to remain at risk of targeting based on the present Houthi target profile, including Israel-ties, US/UK-ownership, and Israel trade. The threat of collateral damage and mistaken targeting persists.