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MSS InDepth

The Threat of Maritime Terrorism

By Mark William Lowe

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Meanwhile, the maritime community remains concerned as to the risks posed by terrorist attacks against international shipping and port infrastructure.



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Welcome to the inaugural edition of our monthly **MSS InDepth** series!

We've had the pleasure of asking [Martin Ewence](#), former Head of Coordination for NATO Counter-Piracy Operations in the Somali Basin, to introduce this first edition of the **MSS InDepth** series by highlighting his views on the potential for maritime terrorism in the Mediterranean.

Given recent events, we asked the former Royal Navy Commander to focus in particular on the potential for terrorist threats to ports and maritime transport posed by militant groups in Libya that have declared allegiance to Islamic State.

We're confident that you'll find Martin's well informed observations enlightening and we look forward to inviting other equally well informed subject matter experts to introduce future **MSS InDepths**.



MARITIME TERRORISM IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

Martin Ewence

Independent Maritime Risk Consultant

The shocking and unexpected event on 18th March in Tunis, where several tourists were gunned down by terrorists outside a museum, focused the world's attention, again, on the volatile Maghreb region. It followed on from the murder in mid-February, on a Libyan beach, of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians at the hands of Islamic State (IS) and signalled a shift towards the targeting of western tourists. That they were from a cruise ship may have been coincidental, but it followed on from a threat from IS to target shipping in the Mediterranean as well as its avowed intent to 'export terrorists across the Mediterranean to Southern Europe'.





Perhaps this is scaremongering, but the increasingly sophisticated and brutal IS cannot be ignored. Its murder of the Coptic Christians and the sickening burning to death in Syria of the Jordanian Air Force pilot are an indication of the group's thirst for headline-grabbing acts. But not since the *Achille Lauro* hijacking in 1985 by the Palestine Liberation Organisation and the murder on board of a US citizen has the Mediterranean felt threatened in any way. The incidents of piracy, maritime crime, drugs and people smuggling have focused attention on the Indian Ocean and other far off seas, but the Mediterranean, with its heavy European and NATO navy presence, has stayed out of the spotlight.

The threats indicated that that is likely to change. Large swathes of Libya are now ungoverned space and provide a fertile breeding ground for IS and its affiliates. And it appears to have good backing – from whom is difficult to tell – with the weapons at its disposal in Syria showing that it has good finance and logistics. Unsophisticated Somali fishermen have proved that it is not difficult to hijack a fishing boat, to turn it into a mother ship and to travel many hundreds of miles and wait in shipping lanes before hijacking a merchant vessel.

Determined terrorists could do just that and the many cruise ships plying Mediterranean waters unguarded make for easy targets. It would only take one such attack, with images of western tourists being murdered on board beamed around the globe, to provide the powerful publicity required.

Vessels and ports are at equal risk and the potential for publicity and financial gain, particularly from hijacking a cruise ship, is immense. Logic would suggest that the ungoverned coastal areas of Libya would make a good launch pad for the terrorists, but incidents off Egypt and Algeria, as well as Tunisia, show that much of the Maghreb could provide that origin.



[Click here to access Martin's LinkedIn profile](#)





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The Threat of Maritime Terrorism

Mark William Lowe

Editor-in-Chief, Maritime Security Review

The November 2014 hijacking of an Egyptian Navy patrol craft off Damietta led the country's former head of naval intelligence, Gen Yosri Kandil, to define the attack as a "quantum leap for terrorism".

According to the Egyptian military, the patrol craft was hijacked in Damietta port by members of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, an organization that had recently declared its allegiance to the self proclaimed 'Islamic State' (IS). This defection from al-Qaeda meant that the attack was the first conducted by an IS affiliate in Egypt.

While a number of Egyptian sources suggested that terrorist groups in the area were planning ambitious hijackings and attacks against shipping and offshore facilities, the Israeli television station Channel 2 went as far as to report that IS affiliates Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis had planned to use the hijacked naval craft to attack gas rigs in the





eastern Mediterranean. The broadcaster additionally suggested that other Egyptian craft would be hijacked and used in attacks against Israeli ships.

The Damietta incident came only two months after an earlier attempt to use a naval craft for terrorist ends; in September al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent had planned to hijack and use two Pakistani Navy vessels against Indian vessels and a US Navy supply ship.

While details of the Damietta incident remain confused and occasionally contradictory, what is very clear is that the threat of similar or repeat actions remains.

Already on high alert, the Egyptian authorities have further heightened security in all ports and sections of the Suez Canal.

No Recent Thing

While the increase in IS affiliates and the risk that they pose across the world is and should remain an issue of grave concern, the potential for maritime terrorism in the Mediterranean is nothing new at all, indeed NATO craft have been conducting a coordinated attempt to disrupt terrorist activity in the area for almost fourteen years.

Operation Active Endeavour sees NATO ships patrolling the Mediterranean with the objective of '*monitoring shipping to help deter, defend, disrupt and protect against terrorist activity.*' The operation was one of the series of initiatives launched in response to the terrorist attacks against the United States in 2001. In view of its success, Operation Active Endeavour will continue to coordinate the vessels involved in monitoring shipping and boarding suspect vessels in the attempt to deter terrorist activity in the Mediterranean Sea.

While NATO considers the operation a success, the actual powers conferred to participating vessels remain somewhat limited. The legislative frameworks that limit the operation's activities and the quantity of agencies involved in contrasting





maritime crime in the Mediterranean highlight the requirement to address some of the key obstacles to increasing international collaboration.

The Islamic State Threat

Over the past few months, the presence and activities of IS aligned groups in Libya has been both a legitimate cause for serious concern and a gift to newspaper editors desperate for yet another scare story.

We asked [George Readings](#), a senior analyst at the London-based corporate intelligence firm [Stirling Assynt](#), how much of a threat to the maritime world the IS affiliate groups in North Africa are: *"Most pro-Islamic State groups in North Africa are at an early stage in their development and are yet to demonstrate any real maritime capabilities, meaning they present little threat to shipping in the Mediterranean."*

Readings further explained that: *"In November 2014, shortly after aligning itself with IS, the Sinai-based group Ansar Jerusalem targeted an Egyptian Navy vessel. However, its overwhelming focus remains the Egyptian security forces and so the risk for commercial shipping is limited at present."*

IS are reportedly the wealthiest terrorist organization in the world, in Iraq and Syria it is calculated that the group earns million of dollars a day from oil sales alone. Running a caliphate is not a low cost operation; funds are required to control the territory as well as to supply the services that its citizens require.

Affiliates in northern Africa will presumably wish to emulate the IS model in Iraq and Syria and to this end will require ever greater revenue from the territory. According to Readings the risk of North African seaports being taken over by IS affiliates is a real one: *"IS needs sources of revenue to expand and so, where the security environment allows, militants aligned with the group are keen to take control of ports, but this is currently only a real risk in some parts of Libya."*





Despite a certain amount of scaremongering by the press and, unfortunately, a few members of the maritime community, there appears to be no hard evidence of an existing IS threat to shipping in the Mediterranean. The reality is that IS affiliates in Libya appear to be fully occupied with defending their position ashore. While complacency would be unwise, the facts indicate that threat and risk levels are relatively low.

In a recent interview with Seatrade Global, [Ian Millen](#), Chief Operating Officer at [Dryad Maritime Intelligence](#), commented that: *"With a strong foothold and logistic base in Libya, it would be theoretically feasible for Islamic State to target shipping in the Mediterranean. How likely this is and how capable they might be in open sea operations is another question."*

The former Royal Navy officer went on to further put the risk into the correct perspective by adding that: *"There is no current evidence in them being proficient in maritime attacks, but as we've seen with the USS Cole and a number of merchant ships, the level of sophistication need not be great."*

Millen concluded his interview by stating that in regards to the fear of IS affiliates in Libya representing a threat to shipping in the Mediterranean: *"In sum, more analysis would be needed to judge how likely this is and how capable they might be."*

The Danger of Not Reading

The sudden rise in interest of a perceived IS threat to shipping in the Mediterranean can in large part be ascribed to a document that precious few commentators have taken the time to read far less comprehend.

In February 2015 the London based counter-extremism think tank Quilliam translated and published an online IS recruitment essay titled '[Libya: The Strategic Gateway for the Islamic State](#).' In this propaganda document the author made a few references





to attacks on maritime interests and hiding terrorists amongst economic migrants travelling illegally to southern Europe.

According to [Charlie Winter](#), the [Quilliam](#) researcher who wrote the report, the essay should be considered as “*unofficial propaganda*” and should not be taken as fact or future strategy.

What is interesting is that while the small part of the essay that makes reference to maritime threats is confused and incoherent at best, the majority of the work's contents are of far greater concern. Written in Arabic at the beginning of the year the essay is intended to encourage support for IS in Libya rather than give western powers greater cause for concern.

Quilliam have been quite clear in stating that while the essay provides valuable insight to IS thinking, the author's objective was not to frighten western powers.

Where do the Risks Lie

While the potential for attacks and terrorist operations in the Mediterranean remains a threat, how does it compare to other regions?

With the Yemen on the verge of total collapse there are many legitimate fears as to how terrorist organizations in the country could take advantage of the vacuum and expand. Currently access to the Red Sea is assured, however, the only guarantee that a failed state delivers is a categorical absence of positive guarantees. Will a further collapse jeopardise maritime traffic in the Gulf of Aden?

On the other side of the Arabian Peninsula, the acceleration of work at the Omani port of Sohar demonstrates regional nervousness as to the risks posed by the Strait of Hormuz. Should access to The Gulf be compromised then a large part of regional trade could enter the Gulf States via Sohar which lies to the south of the Strait.





The construction of the ambitious Gulf Cooperation Council rail network which will link Muscat to Kuwait should be functional by 2017. The individual Gulf nations intend linking their various rail projects into one network to service both freight and passengers. Over 2,000km of rail infrastructure will unite Oman, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and allow for extensions and spurs to serve industrial centres.

The potential for terrorist attacks to rail infrastructure is an issue that the various Gulf partners are well aware of, however, the general consensus of opinion appears to be that Iran represents a far greater potential threat to transport routes.

The delicate nature of the current situation in the Middle East is a source of considerable concern to many observers. According to [Edward Luttwak](#), security expert and senior associate at the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#), Iran represents a particularly alarming threat.

As a former consultant to the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the National Security Council, the U.S. Department of State, as well as the U.S. Army, Navy, and Air Force, Luttwak is a recognised expert on military strategy and terrorism.

In Luttwak's opinion: *"The largest single risk to the stability of the world economy is the possibility of an overt or covert attack on the Ras Tanura tanker-loading terminal of Saudi Arabia."*

In the security expert's opinion the risk is that: *"Given that Iran's regime is drastically weakened by current oil prices that compound the effect of diminished production, and given that Iran is already in conflict with Saudi Arabia over its expansionism, most recently in the Yemen, an attack by Iranian naval units, or by Iran's followers among the Saudi Shi'a who are the majority population in that same part of the country, or by clandestine operatives masquerading as Islamic State followers for the sake of plausible deniability, must be considered a distinct possibility."*





The risk of a similar attack is well understood in Riyadh, according to Luttwak: *"The Saudi authorities must be of the same opinion because the already very elaborate security provisions for the Ras Tanura facilities have been stepped up."*

Indeed the vast refinery, tank farm and set of pipelines to loading jetties on artificial islands were significantly reinforced in March 2015.

"It must be presumed that one or more forms of attack are policy options that the usual suspects, one or more of the competing Revolutionary Guard factions, are proposing to the entourage of the Supreme Leader, given that for them any improvement of Iran's relations with its neighbours and the United States is disadvantageous."

"Even a nuclear agreement would not extinguish the risk of an Iranian attack on Ras Tanura, indeed it would make it even more advantageous for the usual suspects who naturally oppose any nuclear agreement."

Not Strictly Terrorism

While not strictly categorised as terrorism, and despite a huge improvement in the overall situation, piracy remains a threat to maritime transport in a number of geographical regions.

Due to the combination of naval powers, private security and improved stability in Somalia, the risk to shipping from Somali based piracy action groups has diminished to a point where it is almost irrelevant.

On the other side of the continent, the Gulf of Guinea remains a maritime crime hot spot with a gradual yearly increase in incidents which include the kidnapping of crews and their transport ashore while a ransom is negotiated.





South East Asia, a high maritime crime area, is oft ignored. We asked Dryad Maritime Intelligence's Ian Millen to explain just what makes the region such a haven for piracy: *"The problems with piracy and maritime crime have their roots in a complex and challenging environment; from weak and inconsistent law enforcement, border disputes and governmental suspicions to fuel rationing, thriving black markets, poverty and corruption, it is clear that Southeast Asia has the conditions in which both organised and petty criminality can thrive. Add to this the complex geography, vast coastlines and high volumes of merchant shipping and the mix and you can see why criminality is at such levels, albeit over a vast geographical area."*

According to Millen there are precise reasons as to why the various national authorities struggle to combat the threat: *"There is a lack of cooperation between governments who are often at loggerheads with their neighbours. Inter-departmental in fighting within government organisations results in an inefficient use of resources. Some nations have many layers of bureaucracy, complicated by internal corruption."*

Dryad's COO added that geography compounds these difficulties: *"Those forces attempting to tackle the problem face the challenge of long coastlines dotted with islands and hidden coves which allow criminal gangs easy escape routes and hiding places."*

In terms of what more is actually required to counter the threat Millen believes that: *"The threat is extremely wide ranging and needs be quantified. At one end, we have low-level, petty theft of ships' stores. This accounts for the vast majority of incidents reported in SEA and many of the reported incidents would be eliminated if vessel crews were more vigilant when at anchor or alongside. At the other end of the spectrum, the hijacking and subsequent theft of fuel oil is carried out by more serious and violent organised gangs. Countering this threat relies upon better operational security at shipping agencies, fuel depots and terminals."*





Millen remains firmly of the opinion that vessel operators also have a need to invest in vetting and due diligence: *“Greater scrutiny of crewmembers would also potentially reduce the flow of insider information being passed to criminal syndicates. However, high fuel prices, rationing and smuggling of subsidised fuel provides a healthy market for cargoes stolen from small product tankers transiting the Singapore Strait and South China Sea.”*

High incidents rates of low-level crime has led to new, and successful, patrols being set up by the Indonesian Maritime Police, but little appears to have been done to counter the threat of product tanker cargo theft. In Millen's opinion: *“We need more resources to be applied against both problems.”*

Cruise Ship Threats and Liabilities

Most readers will remember the Palestine Liberation Front's October 1985 hijacking of the Italian cruise ship the Achille Lauro, those that do not recall the event will most certainly have heard of it.

Under instructions from the Front's leader, Abu al-Abbas, four young armed Palestinians boarded the vessel as passengers. Their original plan was to attack Israeli soldiers once in port, however, their presence on board the vessel was discovered and, eventually, led to the murder of an elderly, wheelchair-bound American-Jewish pensioner named Leon Klinghoffer.

The unfortunate Klinghoffer was shot twice and the crew told to tip his body and wheelchair overboard. The incident was a terrorist crime conducted in the maritime environment where jurisdiction and responsibility was relatively clear.

What is not clear is the responsibility of a cruise operator in the case of a terrorist attack conducted while passengers are ashore.

As the recent attack on the Bardo Museum in Tunis demonstrates, cruise operators are exposed to the threat of such incidents.





In addition to mitigating against and preparing to manage similar incidents, operators have to deal with insurance considerations. After the Bardo attack marine insurers were quoted as saying that the question about which insurance policy will pay for the passengers who were killed or injured is far from clear.

The complex nature of the insurance cover required by cruise operators means there are several potential insurers involved. The operators involved will be in discussions with them to establish which policy will cover the attack itself.

Cruise operators are obliged to have liability cover for crew and passengers while on board the vessels in place and, in addition to this, will have protection and indemnity insurance. In all probability, the operators directly affected by the incident will have specific insurance cover for passengers while they are on land.

However, there may be some doubt as to this cover being valid given that responsibility for the attack was claimed by Islamic extremists.

To further complicate matters, individual passengers may have their own insurance policies.

The intricacies and complexities of insurance aside, who remains ultimately responsible for passenger security?

It can be assumed that the concept of due diligence is well understood and that no cruise operator would knowingly place passengers in harm's way. But how to define the requirements of the cruise operator's duty of care during onshore visits by cruise ship passengers?

An operator's liability is complex and it would seem unlikely that any would ask passengers to sign a waiver dispensing them of responsibility, and therefore liability, in the event of a terrorist attack during a visit ashore.





What is very clear is that operators, insurers and passenger rights associations will have to study this very carefully.

If one positive element emerged from the Bardo incident it was the well organized response on the part of the MSC Splendida and the Costa Fascinosa. Both vessels were in port in Tunis during the attack and had implemented a communications strategy that allowed passengers visiting the city to be recalled on board almost immediately.

Although both vessels exited the port of Tunis at the earliest possible opportunity, provisions had been made for those passengers who were unable to board. Teams were in place and able to deal with the complicated issues surrounding those who had been visiting the Bardo.

A Networked Response to Counter Maritime Crime

While many initiatives, such as NATO's Operation Active Endeavour, have already produced results, there remains a precise requirement to foster collaborative efforts to contrast maritime crime and terrorism.

In particular, attention and emphasis need to be put on improving laws and judicial processes, improving interagency coordination, improving interstate cooperation, improving intelligence gathering and dissemination, and building a common threat response capability through the creation of multinational training centres.

Despite increasingly complex maritime threats, all parties operating today can benefit from studying past experience. Today's threats may be of a vastly different nature compared to past events, however, the root causes of these threats have not changed.





Just as scaremongering is irresponsible, it would be naive to ignore the potential for a marked increase in maritime terrorism. While monitoring, patrolling and rapid response are, and will remain, necessary capabilities, it is the development of joint operational and information sharing capabilities that will make the difference between success and failure

A holistic, international, information-sharing approach that gathers multiple stakeholders at the table, is merely the first step in defeating the threat of maritime terrorism before it gains momentum.

About the Author:



[Mark William Lowe](#) is the co-founder and Editor-in-Chief of the [Maritime Security Review](#), a global publication for maritime security supported by a web-based multimedia platform. Mark is a qualified Port and Facility Security Officer (PFSO) and Ship Security Officer (SSO).



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