



RiskIntelligence

# Client briefing

## Eastern Mediterranean

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Eastern Mediterranean:  
Understanding potential threats for  
commercial shipping operations

May 2024

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## Introduction: Houthi threats

On 3 May, a Houthi announcement led to many concerned headlines. Following on from dozens of attacks against merchant ships in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden since November, the group threatened to extend their area of operations to the Eastern Mediterranean.

A Houthi spokesman said the escalation would take effect "immediately". He also specified the threats, stating that the Houthis will target ships within their range when they are heading to ports in Israel. In a separate statement, the spokesman underlined that this phase of the Houthi operation would involve "the targeting of all ships that violate the ban (on) Israeli navigation and that head to the ports of occupied Palestine from the Mediterranean Sea in any reachable area within our ample zone."



*Houthi weapons on display during a parade in Sana'a (Photo: Social media)*

Considering the impact of Houthi attacks on maritime traffic in the Red Sea, the concerns caused by the new Houthi threats are understandable. At the same time, these statements should not be taken at face value. While it is important for the Houthi's propagandist purposes to demonstrate new resolve, there will be additional challenges to their capabilities for targeting outside of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden area.

The eastern part of the Mediterranean is theoretically within range of some weapons used by the Houthis. Attacking moving targets at sea at such a distance, however, would be highly complex. Moreover, missiles or drones would need to avoid capable defence systems en route.

Taking the less-than-accurate Houthi attacks against southern Israel in recent months into account, attacks against merchant ships even further away in the eastern Mediterranean are very unlikely to be successful – unless the Houthis receive additional assistance or coordination in launching attacks.

At the same time, the situation must be closely monitored. Hezbollah in Lebanon possesses a huge arsenal of missiles and drones which could be used to target merchant ships. While the group has been careful to avoid a large-scale escalation in its conflict with Israel, launches could also be conducted from southern Syria rather than from Lebanon.

Even a relatively limited campaign against merchant ships in the eastern Mediterranean could put significant pressure on the Israeli economy which is heavily dependent on maritime trade.

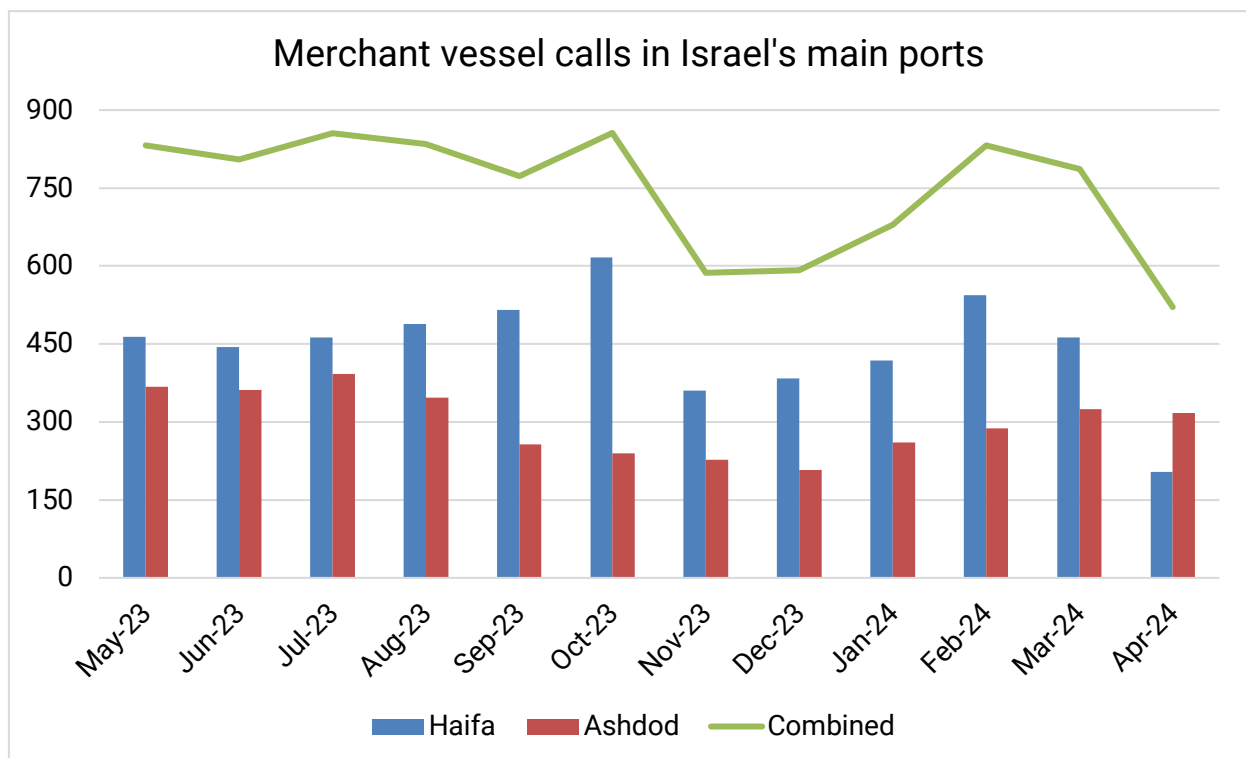
Iran also wants to avoid a large-scale escalation of the current conflict. Nevertheless, its direct missile and drone attack against Israel in April shows that Iran's government is looking for additional means to pressure Israel. Supporting proxy forces in targeting commercial ships trading with Israel could be one option.

## Israel's maritime dependence

The vast majority of Israel's international trade is conducted by sea. According to the Israeli Ministry of Transport, more than 95% of the country's import and export volume is handled in the main commercial ports Haifa, Ashdod and Eilat.

Eilat on the Red Sea has been heavily affected by the Houthi campaign already. In March, port officials therefore announced that half of all port employees would be laid off.

The number of port calls in Haifa – which is Israel's largest port – and Ashdod on the Mediterranean has also been affected by the current situation, even though the extent has been much more limited than in Eilat (see Figure 1).



Overall number of monthly port calls in Haifa and Ashdod transits by merchant ships larger than 5,000 dwt (Source: Lloyd's List Intelligence / Seasearcher)

After the outbreak of the war in Gaza, the number of port calls dropped significantly in November and December. In February and March this year, the number of vessels calling at both ports was once again on the same level as during the same month in previous years. In April, however, the number of port calls dropped once again, very likely due to the volatile situation after the Iranian attack on Israel in mid-April.



## Eastern Mediterranean – threat assessment (summary)

Currently, there are significant clashes between Israeli and Hamas forces in the Gaza Strip. The Israeli ports Ashdod and Ashkelon have been impacted to a limited degree, with Ashkelon temporarily closing given its proximity to Gaza. The clashes have been largely land-based. Hamas has reportedly sought to infiltrate commandos through the sea into Israel, but these have been neutralised by the Israeli Navy. The impact on the eastern Mediterranean is assessed as limited and not expected to impact traffic in the region (unless calling Israel) or through the Suez Canal. On 3 May 2024, Yemen's Houthis threatened to strike vessels in the Mediterranean bound for Israel. There are significant doubts, however, about the Houthis' ability to conduct such operations autonomously.

The most significant threat to commercial shipping in the eastern Mediterranean is human trafficking that facilitates illegal migration. Other threats are moderate. There are reports of sporadic GPS spoofing close to sensitive areas, such as the Suez Canal and off Syria, but no significant impact on commercial traffic has been reported. Rising tensions in the area have not had a significant impact on ships transiting the area to date. However, the region's volatile politics can flare up at short notice, which would require a reassessment.

The sudden escalation of violence between Israel and Hamas in mid-May 2021 had an impact on Israel's coastal infrastructure. A storage tank in Ashkelon was hit by a rocket, likely burning a shipment of imported gasoil. Reports of rockets landing in the sea, as well as the Hamas' declaration that it would target offshore Israeli installations, caused Chevron to temporarily shut down its Tamar offshore gas platform. This disrupted port operations for some days during the shelling, and commercial traffic had to be redirected. The area's overall threat picture was not impacted by this event. Lebanon and Israel later reached an agreement that allows the exploitation of offshore resources off their coasts.

Libya and Turkey are assembly areas for migrants whose passage is facilitated by human traffickers. Migrants who depart from Turkey's west coast and from Libya to reach Europe are often picked up by military patrols, coastguards or commercial vessels passing through the area, especially when close to the North African and Turkish coasts. This can create significant delays for commercial maritime operations. Added migratory pressure also means a heightened chance of finding stowaways when leaving ports in the area.

The political situation in the eastern Mediterranean is precarious. However, a sudden outburst of maritime fighting is unexpected. The region is home to both land-based and maritime conflicts, new and old. Dormant disputes are being reignited by new oil and gas finds around contested maritime borders. Efforts at de-escalation have succeeded at decreasing tensions, but unresolved territorial disputes still pose a threat to commercial ships and offshore ventures, as they may be caught in jurisdictional wrangles between neighbouring countries. Several Mediterranean powers are deploying their navies in the area, thereby increasing the possibility of armed incidents between warships and civilian vessels. Seismic or drilling ships may be harassed by rival ships, especially if operating in contested waters. It is unlikely that warships in the area would target a civilian vessel.

Fraud and corruption are a moderate threat to commercial shipping when sailing in the area, but are known to affect port operations throughout the Eastern Mediterranean, although there are significant variations from country to country. Port personnel may demand bribes to load or unload cargo or to speed up administrative procedures. This practice is regularly reported in the Suez Canal. In more severe cases, port authorities may be infiltrated by criminal organisations and facilitate cargo theft and smuggling.

### Threat levels

Refer to the Risk Intelligence System for an explanation of the methodology and definitions of the threat levels. A concise assessment of all threats listed in the table below can also be found on the Risk Intelligence System.

Threat type	Threat level
Terrorism	Moderate
Piracy	Low
Insurgency and Military Operations	Moderate
Cargo Theft	Moderate
Smuggling	Elevated
Stowaways and human trafficking	Elevated
Fraud and corruption	Moderate
Activism	Moderate

## Summary

The situation across the Middle East is likely to remain volatile in the coming weeks. In this environment, threats such as those issued by the Houthis several days ago are likely to generate additional concerns. Any such announcement, however, should be understood in the context of broader and longer-term developments – particularly with ongoing ceasefire talks and apparent Israeli preparations for further military action in Gaza targeting Rafah.

The fact that a Houthi spokesman announced the group's willingness to target ships even in the Mediterranean was a good example. The group has caused commercial traffic in the Red Sea to decline by more than 50% compared with the previous year. Moreover, other Iranian proxies – notably Hezbollah in Lebanon – also have the capability to target merchant ships in the Mediterranean. At the same time, these capabilities have existed for a long time. Actual attacks, however, would represent a significant escalation which may have unintended consequences for Iran's network of proxy groups as well as for Iran itself.

For commercial maritime operations in general, it is therefore strongly recommended to closely monitor the broader political and security situation and to carefully assess individual incidents on an ongoing basis. That is the required foundation for comprehensive threat and risk assessments, both for day-to-day operations as well as for longer-term decisions about any types of commercial engagements across the region.

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