Maritime terrorism
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There are two main forms in which terrorist groups benefit from the vastness and lawlessness of the sea: by conducting attacks against sea-based targets and by using the sea to transport weapons, militants and other support means from one place to the other. In both cases, the low level of control and law enforcement provides a beneficial environment for preparation and conduction of terrorist operations in the maritime domain, unthinkable on the ground.

Along with this, offshore assets and critical infrastructure on the coast are seen as high-value targets for terrorist groups. Operations against the USS Cole (2000) and the tanker Limburg (2002), attributed to Al-Qaeda, are good examples of maritime terrorism in the Arabian Peninsula, where small crafts laden with explosives have proven successful in causing serious damage, including numerous human losses, to sizable floating vessels. The fears raised by such operations led to the formulation of catastrophic scenarios featuring large-scale seaborne attacks, including the use of waterborne improvised explosive devices (WBIEDs) against floating vessels transporting hazardous cargo, of the kind of liquefied natural gas (LNG), in order to harm coastal populations, naval bases, offshore oil and gas facilities, other critical infrastructure, or the maritime trade itself. Operations of this kind are reportedly part of Al-Qaeda's maritime strategy. Past attacks against oil facilities and tankers in Saudi Arabia and Yemen demonstrate that terrorist networks in the region have ambitions to severely disrupt energy supplies from the Arabian Peninsula. A successful series of large-scale attacks against the oil industry would have tremendous impacts on international energy markets and the global economy. It is from this perspective that Al-Qaeda poses a serious threat against maritime trade.

Yet, the fact that these fears have not materialized can be attributed to a variety of factors: greater vigilance and measures adopted by sea-users and maritime security providers, lack of confidence by terrorist groups in the success of major attacks against sea-based targets due to insufficient expertise and experienced militants for conducting such operations. Most probably, Al-Qaeda is unwilling to carry out attacks that could lead to higher levels of law enforcement, therefore compromising its current freedom of movement in the maritime space. While it is difficult to estimate which factor has played a greater role in preventing the threat of maritime terrorism from evolving into a palpable reality in the Arabian Gulf, there is agreement that the absence of
large-scale attacks results from a combination of all of the factors mentioned above.

Given the familiarity of terrorist groups with operations on the ground, the threat of attacks against critical infrastructure ashore, such as port facilities, oil storage sites, and refinery plants, appears to be higher and more immediate than for sea-based assets. A successful attack against this kind of facility would cause suspension of the traffic, severe economic losses, and a rise in the price of oil and other commodities. Therefore, the security of port facilities in the UAE, through which most of the maritime traffic is channeled and regulated, remains a significant challenge for the protection of the country's maritime trade.

According to information retrieved from the International Maritime Organization (IMO), all of the UAE seaports seem to have complied with the security regulations stipulated by the International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code, including the conduction of Port Facility Security Assessments and the appointment of Port Facility Security Officers. However, the ISPS Code and other legal instruments which constitute the current maritime security regime, present some shortcomings, to the extent that their full implementation does not ensure the safety and security of seaports in the UAE and leaves some serious vulnerabilities unattended. For example, the Code does not cover all categories of vessels, as no certification and monitoring regulations apply to fishing boats, which in many cases are bigger in size and handle greater crews than commercial vessels under ISPS regulations. Port facilities not serving international destinations also fall outside the ISPS regulations, increasing security concerns in small and largely unguarded seaports for their potential use for malicious purposes. Overcoming these challenges implies filling the gaps of the international maritime security regime with robust national regulations. Additionally, the implementation of security measures stipulated by 2003 amendments to the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) convention are not required on domestic trade vessels and on any ship under 500 gross tonnage. Yet, it is an uncontested fact that small vessels are the most likely to be used for terrorist operations because of their reduced size, wide availability and easy maneuverability. Furthermore, small vessels offer the advantage of being widely used and therefore more difficult for authorities to track.

Underwater threats to harbor security should not be underestimated either. Indeed, there is potential for underwater terrorist activities in port facilities, as sub-surface activities cannot be easily detected by ground surveillance systems and surface patrolling in and around harbors. These operations could include, for instance, the
use of underwater improvised devices (UWIEDs) against ship hulls below the surface. The threat of UWIEDs can be lowered by equipping main and post vulnerable UAE ports with underwater maritime security systems that detect eventual intruders in areas where air and surface radar cannot.

Oil refineries, water desalination plants and power plants, often located in port areas, in their proximity or elsewhere on the shoreline, also represent likely targets for terrorist attacks. Assessment of their vulnerabilities should be conducted within the frame of a comprehensive strategy to protect critical infrastructure from maritime terrorism. In particular, as the UAE embarks on a civilian nuclear program, nuclear power plants and other nuclear facilities will be located along the coast and are expected to integrate the list of potential targets. The preparation of Design Basis Threat (DBT) assessments for nuclear facilities should therefore encompass seaborne vulnerabilities and threats.

The use of the maritime space for transportation has been critical for conducting terrorist operations. The Mumbai attacks in November 2008 are a clear evidence of this. Militants from a Pakistan-based cell reached Mumbai from Karachi by sea. Similarly, terrorists and insurgents in Yemen are thought to be receiving weapons from African illicit arms markets through maritime shipments across the Gulf of Aden.

The threat of maritime terrorism in the surrounding waters of the UAE will exist as long as Al-Qaeda and its affiliated outfits continue to be based and operate from countries such as Yemen, Somalia and Saudi Arabia. The use of the sea as supply line will be privileged, although sporadic attacks causing brief maritime trade disruptions, material damage, human casualties and environmental disaster cannot be ruled out considering past records in this regard. Lasting interruption of maritime shipping lines is not anticipated. Improvised explosive devices and vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices are the tools most likely to be used in future scenarios of maritime terrorism. Should attacks of this nature occur, the commercial interests of the UAE could be significantly undermined. Targets would probably include merchant or naval vessels, offshore oil facilities, port facilities, and naval outposts on the shoreline. The impacts on UAE trade would also be notorious following attacks of similar magnitude conducted in the UAE’s surrounding waters against the commercial or strategic interests of third countries.

It is unlikely that the threat of maritime terrorism will be eliminated or neutralized, as the magnitude of sea shipping activities render total protection of the maritime supply chain literally
impossible. On the other hand, comprehensive measures for prevention and interdiction by all stakeholders can significantly complicate plans of attacks and compromise supply routes. The best defense against this threat remains profound vigilance by maritime users, capacity building of maritime security providers, as well as inter-state and inter-agency intelligence sharing on terrorism and maritime-related issues.

The adoption by the UAE of multilateral, bilateral and government-to-private safety and control regimes for enhanced security across the maritime shipping sector is believed to be of considerable help in reducing vulnerabilities. On this point, we shall mention the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) for WMD interdiction, the Megaports Initiative for radiation detection, and the Container Security Initiative (CSI) for the screening of containerized shipping to or from the United States. Amendments to the SOLAS adopted in 2003, especially the ISPS Code, stipulate key security-related requirements and guidelines for public and private maritime users. These instruments play an important role in meeting the threat of maritime terrorism and WMD proliferation alike.\textsuperscript{i}

\textit{Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International}


\textsuperscript{iii} "The sea is the next strategic step towards controlling the world and restoring the Islamic caliphate", Al-Qaeda e-journal, in Islamist Website Monitor, Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), 1 May 2008, \url{http://www.menriwmp.org}.


\textsuperscript{v} "UAE ports certified ISPS Code compliant", Asia Africa Intelligence Wire, 7 July 2004.

Additional information on UAE compliance to ISPS is available from the IMO's Global Integrated Shipping Information System (GISIS), \url{http://gisis.imo.org/Public} (user registration required).


\textsuperscript{ix} "Export Control and Combating Terror Finance", Embassy of the United Arab Emirates in the United States, Factsheet April 2009, \url{http://uae-embassy.org}.