

U.S. MARITIME ADVISORY 2022-003

Subject: Threats to Commercial Vessels

Geographic Areas: Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, Gulf of Oman, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden, Bab al Mandeb Strait, Red Sea, and Western Indian Ocean

This advisory cancels U.S. Maritime Advisory 2021-009

1. References: U.S. Maritime Alerts 2021-008A, 2021-001A, and U.S. Maritime Advisory 2021-010

2. **Issues and Specific Guidance:** Regional conflict, heightened military activity, and increased political tensions pose threats to merchant vessels operating in the above listed geographic areas. The U.S. government is continually assessing the maritime security situation in the region to safeguard freedom of navigation; ensure the free flow of commerce; and protect U.S. vessels, personnel, and interests. Additionally, the international community, including the U.S., continues maritime security operations within this region. While some recent incidents may have targeted specific merchant vessels due to their association with certain countries, individuals, or companies, not all did, and the potential remains for miscalculation or misidentification that could lead to aggressive actions against non-associated merchant vessels. The following are deemed to be the most pressing threats to U.S. flagged merchant vessels in these areas, in no particular order:

a) **UAVs:** Explosive unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) attacks on merchant vessels in the listed areas, other than the western Indian Ocean, remains a threat. In July 2021, a Liberian-flagged tanker was attacked by an explosive UAV while transiting through international waters in the Arabian Sea resulting in the death of two crewmembers. The explosive detonation following the UAV impact created an approximately 6-foot diameter hole in the topside of the pilot house and badly damaged the bridge interior. This attack followed two unsuccessful UAV attacks on the vessel the day prior, both of which impacted the sea near the vessel. (see Alert 2021-008A)

- If U.S. flagged merchant vessels observe or hear a potential UAV, they should immediately inform the U.S. Fifth Fleet Battle Watch. Crewmembers not needed for the safe navigation and operation of the vessel are advised to be restricted to a safe location on the vessel until the potential threat has passed.

b) **Iranian Boarding/Detention/Seizure:** Multiple commercial vessels transiting through the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, and Gulf of Oman have been boarded and detained or seized by Iranian forces over the past several years. Incidents include the Iranian seizure or detention of a South Korean-flagged tanker, in January 2021 in the Strait of Hormuz (see Alert 2021-001A), and a Vietnamese-flagged tanker in October 2021 in the Gulf of Oman. Iranian forces have utilized small boats and/or helicopters during boarding operations and have attempted to force merchant vessels into Iranian territorial waters.

- If hailed by Iranian forces, U.S. flagged merchant vessels should provide vessel name, flag state, and affirm that they are proceeding in accordance with international law as

reflected in the Law of the Sea Convention. The master should immediately inform the U.S. Fifth Fleet Battle Watch.

- If Iranian forces seek to board a U.S. flagged merchant vessel navigating these waters, the ship's Master should, if the safety of the ship and crew would not be compromised, decline permission to board, noting that the vessel is proceeding in accordance with international law, as reflected in the Law of the Sea Convention, and immediately inform the U.S. Fifth Fleet Battle Watch.
- If Iranian forces board a U.S. flagged merchant vessel, the vessel should immediately contact the U.S. Fifth Fleet Battle Watch. The crew should not forcibly resist the boarding party. Refraining from forcible resistance does not imply consent or agreement to that boarding.

c) **Limpet Mines:** Limpet mines have been used to damage merchant vessels on multiple occasions over the past several years, and are primarily a threat to merchant vessels in the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, and the Gulf of Oman. Limpet mines, or similar improvised explosive devices, can be attached to vessel hulls, above or below the waterline, via swimmers or small boats, while a vessel is berthed, at anchor, or underway.

- When operating in these areas, U.S. flagged merchant vessels should maintain a close lookout and remain vigilant for suspicious activity to include the approach of swimmers or small boats. Close attention should be given to the vessel's waterline, especially at slow speeds, at anchor, and when moored.
- If crewmembers believe a mine has been, or was attempted to have been, attached to their vessel, they should immediately inform the U.S. Fifth Fleet Battle Watch. Crewmembers not needed for the safe navigation and operation of the vessel are advised to be restricted to a safe location on the vessel until the threat has passed.

d) **Explosive Boats:** Explosive boat attacks are a known threat to merchant vessels operating in the Red Sea, Bab al Mandeb Strait, and the Gulf of Aden. Vessels in these areas have reported explosions believed to have been caused by explosive boats, both in port and underway.

- When operating in these areas, U.S. flagged merchant vessels should maintain a vigilant lookout at all times for small boats operating in a suspicious manner and additional precautions should be taken to ensure small boats are kept at a safe distance at all times.
- If crewmembers believe an attempted explosive boat attack is underway, or was attempted, they should immediately inform the U.S. Fifth Fleet Battle Watch. Crewmembers not needed for the safe navigation and operation of the vessel are advised to be restricted to a safe location on the vessel until the threat has passed.

e) **Yemen Conflict:** The conflict in Yemen continues to pose a risk to U.S. flagged merchant vessels in the Red Sea, Bab al Mandeb Strait, and Gulf of Aden. In addition to threats otherwise referenced in this advisory, additional threats include, but are not limited to, missiles, rockets,

projectiles, mines, and small arms. In January 2022, the Houthis seized a UAE-flagged merchant vessel off the coast of Hodeidah. These threats pose a direct or collateral risk to U.S. flagged merchant vessels transiting in international shipping lanes, or otherwise operating in these areas.

- U.S. flagged merchant vessels operating in these areas are advised to avoid entering or loitering near Yemen's ports, and exercise increased caution if operating in Yemen's territorial waters or Saudi territorial waters on the Red Sea. Crewmembers should be especially vigilant if at anchor, operating in restricted maneuvering environments, or proceeding at slow speeds

**f) Navigation or Communication Disruptions:** Vessels operating in these areas may encounter GPS interference (see Advisory 2021-010), AIS spoofing, bridge-to-bridge communications spoofing, and/or other communications jamming. Vessels have also reported bridge-to-bridge communications from unknown entities falsely claiming to be U.S. or coalition warships.

- In addition to risks to navigation, confusion from such disruptions could be leveraged by bad actors to facilitate additional kinetic actions. Additional precautions should be taken if your vessel experiences, or vessels in your vicinity report experiencing, such disruptions.
- If a U.S. flagged merchant vessel suspects it is being hailed from a source falsely claiming to be a U.S. or coalition naval vessel, or is being asked for positions or info on coalition military vessels or aircraft operating in the area, the U.S. Fifth Fleet Battle Watch should be immediately informed.
- Maritime GPS disruptions or anomalies should be reported immediately to the USCG NAVCEN at <https://go.usa.gov/xQBaw> or via phone at 703-313-5900, 24-hours a day.

**g) Piracy and Armed Robbery at Sea:** Piracy and armed robbery continue to pose a threat to commercial vessels operating in the Gulf of Aden, Western Arabian Sea, and Western Indian Ocean. Specific case details are available via the Office of Naval Intelligence's "Worldwide Threat to Shipping" product at <https://go.usa.gov/x7J7R>.

- The Best Management Practices to Deter Piracy and Enhance Maritime Security in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea (BMP5), and Maritime Global Security website at: <https://www.maritimeglobalsecurity.org> should be consulted prior to operating in the above listed geographic areas.

**3. General Guidance:** U.S. flagged merchant vessels operating in these areas are advised to exercise caution, review security measures, ensure AIS is transmitting at all times (except in extraordinary circumstances), consistent with provisions of the International Convention for Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS), and monitor VHF Channel 16. To afford best protection in the region, U.S. flagged merchant vessels are also advised to:

- Due to the risk of piracy, kidnapping, hijacking, and armed robbery while operating within High Risk Waters (HRW), U.S. flagged commercial vessels are required to

comply with the Guidelines for U.S. Vessels Operating in High Risk Waters contained in U.S. Coast Guard Maritime Security Directive 104-6 (Rev 8) and comply with their Coast Guard approved Vessel Security Plan annex on counter piracy.

- Conduct a pre-voyage risk assessment and incorporate appropriate protective measures into their vessel security plans.
- Review the Maritime Global Security website at <https://www.maritimeglobalsecurity.org/>, which offers industry issued best practices, including [BMP5](#), guidance to mariners by geographic region, and provides contact information for regional maritime security reporting centers.
- Coordinate vessel voyage planning for transits in the region with U.S. Naval Forces Central Command Naval Cooperation and Guidance for Shipping (NAVCENT NCAGS) and follow NCAGS's recommendations and guidance whenever possible. NAVCENT NCAGS has the latest information on the dynamic maritime security threats and operational environment in this region.
- Simultaneously register with both the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Office (UKMTO) and the NAVCENT NCAGS watch 24 hours prior to entering the Indian Ocean Voluntary Reporting Area by sending UKMTO and NCAGS, via a single e-mail, the Initial Report from Annex D of [\(BMP5\)](#). Include the estimated times of arrival at the Suez Canal, Bab el Mandeb Strait (BAM), and Strait of Hormuz (SoH) in line 10 of the report, and add a line 14 for comments as needed (e.g., speed restrictions or other constraints, anticipated time of entering/exiting the SoH Traffic Separation Scheme; an outline of the navigation plan for operating in the SoH and Persian Gulf, etc.). Utilize other reports included in Annex D of [BMP5](#) as necessary
- Answer all VHF calls from coalition navies. Vessels should be aware that U.S. and other coalition naval forces may conduct maritime awareness calls, queries, and approaches to ensure the safety of vessels transiting these listed areas.
- In the event of any incident or suspicious activity, immediately contact the U.S. Fifth Fleet Battle Watch, NCAGS and activate the Ship Security Alert System immediately.
- Vessels operating in this area are advised to establish contact with both UKMTO and the NAVCENT NCAGS watch, and to include both on all updates or incident report emails, as detailed above. By including both as addressees on each email, awareness will be enhanced without creating an additional reporting burden.
- Per 33 CFR 101.305, all suspicious activities, breaches of security, and transportation security incident events must be reported to the U.S. Coast Guard National Response Center. Additional U.S. Coast Guard port specific requirements may be found in [Port Security Advisory 2-20](#) at <https://go.usa.gov/xFVUU>.
- Mariners operating near this area are advised to consult Department of State Travel Advisories at: <https://go.usa.gov/xUa5F>. Further, transit by yachts and privately owned

sailing vessels through the region is extremely hazardous and may result in capture. The U.S. Government advises against all operation of yachts and pleasure craft in these areas. American citizens abroad should inform the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate of their plans to transit the area and/or update their information via the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) at: <https://go.usa.gov/xEYEE>. Yachting guidance can be found at: <https://on-shore.mschoa.org/reference-documents/advice-for-sailing-vessels>.

4. Contact Information:

- a) Fifth Fleet Battle Watch: + 973-1785-3879, and email details to: [cusnc.bwc@me.navy.mil](mailto:cusnc.bwc@me.navy.mil).
- b) NAVCENT NCAGS: [cusnc.ncags\\_bw@me.navy.mil](mailto:cusnc.ncags_bw@me.navy.mil) or +973-1785-2983 or +973-1785-0084.
- c) UKMTO: [watchkeepers@ukmto.org](mailto:watchkeepers@ukmto.org) or +44 (0) 2392 222060. UKMTO advisories and warnings are available at <http://www.ukmto.org/>.
- d) U.S. Coast Guard National Response Center: +1-800-424-8802.
- e) For maritime industry questions about this advisory, contact [GMCC@uscg.mil](mailto:GMCC@uscg.mil). Supplemental information may also be found on the MARAD Office of Maritime Security website at: <https://go.usa.gov/xUKsb>.

5. Cancellation of Prior Advisories: This message supersedes and cancels U.S. Maritime Advisory 2021-009.

6. This advisory will automatically expire on August 27, 2022.

For more information about U.S. Maritime Alerts and Advisories, including subscription details, please visit <https://go.usa.gov/x6pSZ>.