



# HQ MARCOM

## Threat to commercial shipping operating in the Mediterranean



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(NU) This product includes data compiled from Open-Source and NATO Unclassified material. The report includes data drawn from operational as well as intelligence sources with additional analyst comment added for context and clarity. The information contained herein remains the property HQ MARCOM.

### 1. Introduction

The Mediterranean Sea is one of the world's busiest waterbodies; from the Strait of Gibraltar to the Levant coast, it covers approximately 2,500 miles and occupies an area of nearly 970,000 square miles. While the region offers safe transit to commercial traffic and entry to the Middle East and beyond via the Suez Canal, regional instability in certain areas such as Libya and Syria have the potential to spill over into the maritime, posing a possible threat to commercial traffic.

The purpose of this report is to provide a general assessment on the threat posed to commercial shipping while transiting the Mediterranean in open waters. This risk to vessels when operating close to the coast or within confined areas and port exit/entry is clearly elevated due to the opportunistic nature it provides to a would be attacker. However, it is assumed Company Security Officers (CSOs) will have conducted their own threat assessments and advised ships accordingly in these instances.

### 2. The Western Mediterranean (WMED)

The threat to commercial shipping in the WMED is currently assessed as low. It is well known that military forces along the Moroccan, Algerian, and Tunisian coastline regularly patrol along their territorial waters (TTW) to ensure integrity and security is maintained. However, it is clearly impossible to monitor the entire coastline continuously, and therefore a number of illegal activities continue to take place in the WMED.

Drug trafficking from the Moroccan coast to the southern Spanish coast using small, modern high speed vessels is still observed. Law enforcement agencies in the region continue to fight these activities. Other than a navigational consideration, these fast craft pose no direct threat to commercial traffic as their main focus is on delivery of illicit cargo.

Illegal migration routes from Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia are used predominantly by economic migrants to get into the European Union. Use of routes by Violent Extremists is not confirmed but also cannot be excluded.

Often migrants and refugees arrive in Spain by land, mainly to the two Spanish enclaves in North Africa, Ceuta and Melilla. There have also been sea arrivals to southern Spain, mainly in Tarifa, Almeria, Motril, Valencia, and Málaga. This represents a significant increase in arrivals to Spain. Due to the normal transit routes used by merchant vessels,

the probability of encountering a migrant boat in the WMED, while possible, is assessed as low.

As a result of the situation in Libya and the tougher control of Libyan and Italian authorities on migrant activities, the number of migrants heading for Europe in this region decreased again when compared to previous years. Also, a shift to use departure points in Tunisia instead of Libya has been observed.

Of note, the enlarged Libyan Search and Rescue Region (SRR) since mid-2018 has resulted in human traffickers adapting tactics to use fishing vessels as mother ships escorting small boats with migrants up to the vicinity of NGO vessels (e.g. near oilfield Al Bouri) and/or European shores (e.g. Lampedusa).

**OVERALL THE SECURITY AND TERRORISM THREAT TO SHIPPING TRANSITING IN THIS REGION IN OPEN WATERS IS ASSESSED AS LOW.**

### **3. The Central Mediterranean (CMED)**

The dynamic changes considerably in the CMED with the region dominated by the ongoing internal conflict within Libya. The country's complex political and security situation has made reaching political settlement between rivals extremely difficult. Key figures in the East and West continue to wrestle for the upper hand, with recent clashes over the Libyan oil crescent further setting back progress. In western Libya, the migrant crisis shows signs of slowing down with a decrease in numbers of illegal migrants being held in unofficial detentions facilities in 2019.

While the ongoing turbulence and political vacuum in Libya do not directly impact transiting merchant vessels, as stated previously, the potential for a regional crisis to impact the maritime domain is always possible, but perhaps even more so in this region.

There are a number of warning areas, TTW claims, and areas of potential miscalculation that all CSOs should be aware of – these are outlined below.

**Gulf of SIRTE TTW Claim:** Since 1973, Libya claims excessive TTWs in the area south of 32-30N.

**NAVWARN 225/16** denotes an area bounded by the Libyan Coastline and 34-00N. Ships are advised to proceed with caution and get in touch with the nearest coastal station to receive a safe track line. This NAVWARN serves to advise the Maritime Community of ongoing military activity in the region.

**LNA SELF-DECLARED “NO SAIL ZONE” (NSZ):** The so called “No Sail Zone” was declared by the LNA in DEC 2015. The area is undefined in time and space; however, some references indicate the area stretches from Derna to Al Bayda on the Eastern Libyan coast and may also extend along the coast to Benghazi. It is most likely aimed at deterring the transit/smuggling of weapons and other materials to Eastern Libya.

The so called NSZ remains active and there have been a number of incidents throughout 2017-2018 with vessels stopped and detained by the LNA CG. In the case of MV LINTAN on SEP 17, shots were fired in an attempt to stop the MV, but she evaded and escaped by implementing best management practices (BMP).

Historic events in the NSZ 2017 – 2018 include:

- 17 FEB 17: MV MORNING COMPASS (Suez - Misurata) detained IVO Ras Al Hilal, which is to the west of Derna.
- 12 MAR 17: MV EQUALITY (Misratah – Beirut) detained at Ras Al Hilal and later released.
- MAY 17: 2 ITA fishing vessels were detained in vicinity of Ras Al Hilal, but were released hours later.
- As mentioned, 24 SEP 17: MV LINTAN sailing approximately 24NMs from DERNA was approached by a Libyan fast boat and ordered to stop for ‘inspection.’
- 11 MAR 18: MV SANTORINI was sailing close to the so called NSZ near DERNA when she was ordered to stop for an inspection. Warning shots were fired before the MV was taken to RAS AL HILAL for further questioning prior to release.
- 15 MAY 18: Sailing Yacht BLISS was detained at RAS AL HILAL. The Yacht was avoiding poor weather when arrested by the LNA CG. She was released a number of days later, but not before an LNA social media campaign circulated with some reports stating they were possible terrorists. The Yacht was eventually released.

It is currently unknown whether ship owners/companies are being requested to pay a fine or other penalty for release of vessels when detained for crossing the so called NSZ, even though the establishment and enforcement of the zone would be considered unlawful in accordance with international maritime law (UNCLOS/Customary International Law). MARCOM N2 would greatly appreciate engagement from industry in order to better understand if this is occurring. Any information received will be treated in the strictest of confidence.

**GNA DECLARED “MILITARY OPERATIONS ZONE”:** The zone was established in APR 19 as part of the GNA offensive to counter FM HAFTAR’s advances in Western Libya. GNA vessels are reportedly conducting surveillance and reconnaissance from Ras Jedir to Sirte, stating they will target the movement of aggressive forces in the area. No major incidents have occurred in this zone to date, and the threat to NATO units operating in the region is considered low.

Commercial shipping can still be observed arriving at the main Libyan ports to the East and West; however, traffic in these areas has been assessed as light and predominantly weighted towards oil carriers and general cargo vessels.

In late 2018 and more recently in 2019, a number of commercial vessels have been reported entering the western Libyan ports of TRIPOLI, AL KHOMS, and MISRATAH allegedly containing weapons to support the conflict in Libya. Future shipments are potentially likely in these areas. Since 2011, 4 UNSCR have dealt with the strict implementation of arms embargo on the high seas off the coast of Libya. Latest resolution 2473 (10/06/2019) extended it for one year.

In the same period, there have been numerous attempts to smuggle drugs into Libya. Maltese authorities seized over 10 tonnes of cannabis in SEP 18, their biggest haul to date; while MV NOKA bound for Libya was apprehended by GRC authorities with over 100M Euros worth of cannabis. The vessel had reportedly sailed from LATAKIA in SYRIA enroute to BENGHAZI. Other seizures by Libyan authorities in TOBRUK and MISRATAH were quantities of cannabis and Tramadol pills.

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#### **4. The Eastern Mediterranean (EMED)**

The EMED is an extremely busy region and, similar to the Central Mediterranean and Libya, suffers from the ongoing regional conflict in Syria. A wide range of military units from various countries are also conducting operations. The benefit of this means a large visible deterrent against any terrorist or criminal related activity that could take place. While the threat to commercial shipping is currently assessed as low, CSOs should take appropriate consideration/risk assessment when entering certain EMED ports or transiting close to the far EMED coastline.

**Suez Canal.** The attack on MV COSCO ASIA during her northbound transit in AUG 13 had a huge impact at the time. In the aftermath, Egypt responded robustly.

Current canal security measures are a reflection of the Egyptian government's understanding of its domestic and world-wide importance, with security achieved close to the canal zones 160km length, and in depth in the Sinai area. Security of the canal is helped by a buffer zone in selected locations. Ground transportation and access through the Canal Zone is strictly controlled. Security cameras and improved radar allow the Canal Authority to monitor all waterway traffic from its Ismailia Headquarters. Patrols are frequent with interlocking watchtowers providing over watch. Security vehicles and/or boats may shadow transiting ships and military aircraft to complete the layered defence.

Based on heightened security arrangements in the canal and surrounding area, the assessment of a similar attack on a merchant vessel is currently low. However, as with all restricted manoeuvrability transits, the risk is always greater in these areas, particularly from an opportunistic attack similar to MV COSCO ASIA.

Merchant vessels still report on regular basis observations of GPS interference when in or near Port Said, Egypt. The latest observation from 13 JUL states periods of NO GPS information lasting up to 2 minutes, showing speeds up to 90 kts and even positions over land. The Suez Canal Pilot mentioned that GPS interference/jamming was practically a daily experience. Merchant vessels are advised to pay special attention when operating in this area and report similar observation to NSC.

**Maritime Terrorist Activity.** The last maritime terrorist attack took place in JUL 15 with the land-based missile attack on an Egyptian Navy vessel moored off Rafah. Prior to that, an attack on an Egyptian Navy vessel occurred in 2014. In Sinai, terrorist related attacks continue to focus on the mainland against Egyptian forces and also to incite sectarian violence and radicalise the Muslim majority through sectarian attacks.

There is currently no reporting to suggest Violent Extremists in the Sinai or other related actors have the intention to target merchant vessels in open waters. However, certain areas do pose a slightly more elevated risk than others, as demonstrated with the attack on MV COSCO ASIA. A target of opportunity attack can never be discounted.

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## 5. GPS Interference Eastern Mediterranean

GPS interference and possible jamming is reportedly occurring in the EMED between Cyprus and Suez, with potentially dangerous consequences.

Between MAR 18 and JUL 19, GPS Jamming or interference was reported in the EMED region. Vessels reported a loss of GPS/ GLONASS signal, incorrect locations, or no location at all.

The US MARITIME ADMINISTRATION issued several maritime alerts. The latest one, dating 05/02/2019 on GPS interference is [2019-005](#)<sup>1</sup>, is due to be updated by 27/10/2019. The reports were concentrated in the vicinity of Port Said, the Suez Canal, and South of Cyprus. Reported interference altered GPS signals affecting bridge navigation and GPS timing and communication equipment. The alerts reaffirm the need for redundant navigation practices when experiencing disruption and also a platform to promote other disruption mitigation practices and procedures.

The civil aviation authorities in the region also issued NOTAM 0356/18 that reported signal termination and incorrect location of aircraft between Cyprus and Syria.

The impact of this interference is still under investigation, but it is likely vessels will and should adopt reversionary modes such as Radar, Chart, and Visual data to account for loss of GPS / GLONASS or inaccuracies encountered. While less effect in open waters, the impact may be felt more during confined navigational movement, or while entering port due to the increased workload on bridge teams.

MARCOM would appreciate if companies/Masters would report all instances of GPS interference, reactions taken, and the overall impact (if any) to vessel transit. A reporting signal is available on the NATO Shipping Centre (NSC) website ([www.shipping.nato.int](http://www.shipping.nato.int)).

We have also noted reports that ships are suppressing their static AIS data (name, next port of call, etc.) and switching to “receive only.” Whilst there may be valid reasons for masters doing this, overall it means a loss of situational awareness in the area. Commercial vessels operating in the Mediterranean are likely to receive special attention by warships in the region if adopting this practice. Ships should expect to be queried to ascertain why AIS is off or switched to inhibit. AIS suppression is a ploy often used by vessels to hide suspicious movement, therefore we advise against this practice.

## 6. Operation Sea Guardian

Operation Sea Guardian, NATO’s standing maritime security operation in the Mediterranean Sea, will be in progress until further notice as promulgated in NAVAREA III 0514/2019. Merchant ships transiting in the Mediterranean Sea are requested to participate in the Voluntary Reporting Scheme defined in Maritime Security Chart Q6110 and review the NATO Shipping Centre webpage ([www.shipping.nato.int](http://www.shipping.nato.int)) for additional guidance on reporting suspicious incidents, including electronic interference.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.maritime.dot.gov/content/2019-005-eastern-mediterranean-and-red-seas-gps-interference>