



# ALLIED MARITIME COMMAND THREAT TO COMMERCIAL SHIPPING OPERATING IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

23 March 2020

## 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 areas such as Libya and Syria have the potential to spill over into the maritime domain and continues to pose a possible threat to commercial traffic.

This Allied Maritime Command assessment provides an update on the threat posed to commercial shipping while transiting the Mediterranean in international waters. However, the risk to vessels when operating in territorial waters, i.e. close to the coast or within confined areas, is clearly elevated due to the opportunity it provides a would be attacker. This assessment is not intended as a substitute for threat assessments conducted by Company Security Officers (CSOs).

## 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. Nonetheless, it is clearly impossible to monitor the entire coastline continuously, therefore a number of illegal activities continue to take place in the WMED.

Drug trafficking from the Moroccan coast to the south 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, with their main focus being the delivery of illegal cargo.

Illegal migration routes from Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia are used predominantly by migrants and refugees to enter the European Union. The usage of these routes by Violent Extremist Organisations is not confirmed but cannot be excluded.

Often migrants and refugees arrive in Spain by land, mainly to the two Spanish enclaves in North Africa (Ceuta and Melilla). Additionally, sea arrivals to the south of Spain have occurred. This represents a significant increase in arrivals to Spain. Due to the normal transit routes used by commercial shipping, the probability of encountering a migrant boat in the WMED, while possible, is assessed as LOW.

**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 is considerably different in the CMED, where the region remains subject to the ongoing conflict in Libya. The country's complex political and security situation has made diplomatic negotiations 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 sign of slowing down with a decrease in the number of illegal migrants held in unofficial detentions facilities in 2019.

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

Of note, the expanded Libyan Search and Rescue Region (SRR) remains in place since mid-2018, facilitating Libyan navy/coast guard units to counter illegal migration. This has resulted in human traffickers adapting tactics such as the use of fishing vessels as mother ships to escort small boats with migrants to the vicinity of non-governmental organisation (NGO) vessels (e.g. near oilfield Al Bouri) and or European shores (e.g. Lampedusa). NGO vessels, including sailing yachts, continue to operate in this area of the CMED but at decreasing levels.

While the ongoing turbulence and political vacuum in Libya does not directly impact transiting commercial ships, the potential for regional crisis to impact within the maritime domain is always possible, as the attack on the Port of Tripoli on 18 FEB 20 indicates.

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



DRUGS  
SMUGGLING



WEAPON  
SMUGGLING



FUEL  
SMUGGLING



SUSPICIOUS  
ACTIVITY



GPS  
JAMMING



MIGRANTS,  
REFUGEES

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Gulf of SIRTE TTW Claim: Since 1973, Libya claims TTWs in the area south of 32-30N, which are not internationally recognised.

NAVVARN 225/16 denotes an area bounded by the Libyan Coastline and 34-00N. Ships are advised to proceed with caution and liaise 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. To date, no incidents involving Libya and commercial shipping have been observed in the denoted area.

LIBYAN NATIONAL ARMY (LNA) SELF DECLARED "NO SAIL ZONE" (NSZ): The NSZ was declared by the LNA in December 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 to Benghazi. It is most likely aimed at deterring the transit/smuggling of weapons and other materials to Eastern Libya.

The NSZ remains active and a number of incidents throughout 2017-2018 were reported, with vessels being 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; however, she evaded and escaped by implementing best management practices (BMP). Additionally, on 11 MAR 18, MV SANTORINI was sailing close to the 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.

It is currently unknown whether ship owners/companies are being requested to pay a fine or other penalty for the release of vessels that have been detained for violating the NSZ. MARCOM would greatly appreciate engagement from industry partners in order to gain an understanding if this is occurring. All information received will be treated in the strictest of confidence.

GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL ACCORD (GNA) DECLARED "MILITARY OPERATIONS ZONE" (MOZ): Established in April 2019 as part of the GNA offensive to counter Field Marshal 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 MOZ to date, and the threat to commercial shipping operating in the region is considered LOW.

Despite the late demand from the LNA to prevent merchant vessels from docking in MISRATAH and AL KHOMS, the Ports and Maritime Transport Authority stated that the ports are "operating as normal" and have not issued any request for their closure. Merchant vessels 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 comprised predominantly of oil carriers and general cargo vessels.

Since the summer of 2019, frequent observations have been made of interference to and loss of Global Navigation Satellite Systems (GNSS) on board vessels and aircraft operating in the area roughly bounded by MALTA – ZUWARAH (West Libya) and MISARATAH (Libya). Commercial ships are advised to pay special attention when operating in this area and report observations to the NSC at [www.shipping.nato.int](http://www.shipping.nato.int).

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#### 4. THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN (EMED)

The EMED is an extremely busy region and, similar to the CMED and the internal conflict in Libya, suffers from the ongoing regional conflict in Syria. A wide range of military units from various countries are conducting operations in the EMED. A potential benefit of this is a large visible deterrent against any terrorist or criminal related activity that could take place. While the threat to commercial shipping in the EMED 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.

Commercial shipping continues to regularly report observations of GNSS interference when in or near Port Said, EGYPT, and when sailing in the Syrian channel. Commercial ships are advised to pay special attention when operating in this area and requested to report similar observations to the NSC at [www.shipping.nato.int](http://www.shipping.nato.int).

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#### 5. ELECTROMAGNETIC INTERFERENCE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

In addition to interference and possible jamming of GNSS in the EMED, similar observations have been reported in the CMED. For more information, see the NSC newsletter published November 2019.