

Insurers raise terrorism alarm

Gulf traffic at risk says Hiscox but analysts play down danger to shipping

Jerry Frank

SECURITY analysts are warning of renewed calls by terrorists for attacks on shipping, particularly in the Middle East Gulf, but believe that international efforts to fight both piracy and terrorism are frustrating politically-motivated attacks at sea.

Analysis carried out for Lloyd's marine and war insurers Hiscox has raised the alarm that Islamist extremists are again looking at their capability to execute attacks on maritime targets.

But in an analysis for the US Air Force on the combined risk of terrorism and piracy, global risk think-tank Rand has concluded that there is little evidence that the two could unite to threaten global seatriade.

Security analysts contacted by Lloyd's List agreed that an al-Qaeda risk at sea is still a real possibility, but the international clampdown on piracy would make marine operations difficult for terrorists.

Control Risks global analyst Jaime Burnell said: "If anything, the security environment is improving for shipping with the fight against piracy."

London-based political risk consultancy Exclusive Analysis' head of current intelligence, David Hunt added that there is very little traffic between piracy and terrorism, with both viewing the other as hindering their differing criminal and political aims.

However, al-Qaeda-affiliated groups are active in the the southern Arabian peninsula, with rocket attacks on a refinery in Aden reported at the end of last month.

The jihadist call for terror attacks at sea was published by al-Qaeda source the Al Yaqqin Media Center on 26 April and urged its online community to put more emphasis on carrying out acts of maritime terrorism worldwide.



Change of command: Bahrain hands over control of the regional multinational maritime security force to Britain in Bahrain yesterday. AP

Control Risks, in its briefing for Hiscox, said that the calls for more efficient selection of targets could reflect that terror groups' abilities to launch attacks at sea remain limited.

With the future of maritime attacks likely to be dictated by accessibility to targets, Ms Burnell said the Jihadist call raised the probability of attacks against

static assets, such as oil platforms or shipping at dock. "This portal is a constant source of intelligence on al-Qaeda strategic thinking," Ms Burnell added. "This should be taken seriously by shipping as an expression of intent."

However, offshore attacks on shipping and installations account for less than 2% of overall terrorist activity worldwide, and

are largely carried out by groups with established maritime capacity such as Sri Lanka's Tigers of Tamil Eelam and its Sea Tigers offshoot.

Elsewhere, Nigerian security services were placed on high alert on 10 May after the inspector-general of police, Mike Okiro, disclosed to senior officers that al-Qaeda was planning attacks in the country.

Control Risks said that there remains a lack of effective intelligence monitoring of potential terrorist threats in Nigeria and a general insufficient emergency response capabilities.

A specialist consultant for Exclusive Analysis told Lloyd's List that the website posting indicated that shipping is still an acceptable target for Islamist extremists.

"Sometimes in such statements you do get relatively detailed discussion of targets, but such documents do not constitute or indicate concrete and thorough planning of an imminent attack," he said.

"We do not recommend basing any assessment of increased risk on website discussion alone. The most you can reasonably conclude is that some sympathetic people, who may or may not be mainstream and may or may not be actually thinking about carrying out an attack, are willing to entertain the idea."

In the United States, a higher risk is likely to be seen in maritime security matters as the election cycle begins, according to Stephen Flynn, senior fellow in national security studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, a New York think-tank.

He stressed that this did not necessarily imply specific intelligence pointing to increased terrorism activity, but just the realities of campaign season.

Referring to the global picture, Mr Flynn highlighted the matter of "business continuity risk" emanating from maritime-related incidents, and its potential to throw trade and commerce into chaos.

With additional reporting by Rajesh Joshi.