

## Maritime Advisory – Arabian Gulf (18 April 2024)

### Summary

As of 18 April 2024, tensions remain **HIGH** in the Arabian/Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman. Ongoing regional tensions continue and have increased in recent weeks in the wake of the 1 April suspected Israeli strike on an Iranian consulate in Damascus and the subsequent launch on 13 April of missiles and explosive drones by Iran in what is its first direct attack on Israeli territory. Maritime shipping in the wider region has also continued to be impacted and any further escalation of the conflict could have potential implications for maritime shipping in the region, including in the Arabian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz. The seizure of a vessel in the Strait of Hormuz on 13 April has highlighted the elevated risks to maritime shipping in this area.



### Background

In recent weeks, tensions between Israel and Iran have escalated in the wake of the suspected Israeli strike on Iran's consulate in Damascus, Syria on 1 April. In response, Iran launched hundreds of missiles and explosive drones at Israel on 13 April. As of 18 April, Israeli officials have warned of a potential response to these strikes, with Western allies attempting to diffuse the situation.

The escalation of the conflict in the Middle East has further expanded into the Arabian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz. In the wake of the 1 April strike on the Iranian consulate in Syria, Iran warned of the possibility of closing the Strait of Hormuz, though Iranian officials have said that for now the strait will remain open. Additionally, the boarding and seizure of the Portuguese-flagged container ship *MSC ARIES* on 13 April has increased risks for vessels transiting these waters. According to UKMTO, the vessel was boarded 50 nautical miles north-east of Fujairah, United Arab Emirates (UAE), in position 26.0122N – 057.0158E. Iran's foreign ministry has confirmed that the vessel was seized for "violating maritime laws" and that it is "affiliated" with Israel. The *MSC ARIES* was boarded by Iran's Revolutionary Guards in the Gulf of Oman and was taken into Iranian waters. As of 18 April, one crewmember, an Indian woman, has returned to India, according to the country's foreign ministry, with 16 other Indian crewmembers still aboard the vessel. In total, 25 crewmembers were onboard the vessel at the time of its seizure. While this is not the first time that the IRGC has boarded and seized a commercial vessel transiting international waters off Iran, the latest incident comes amidst heightened regional maritime tensions, notably in the Gulf of Aden and the southern Red Sea, where Iran-aligned Houthi rebels continue to launch strikes at vessels transiting these waters.

## Advisory

Tensions are likely to remain **HIGH** in the Arabian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, Gulf of Oman as well as in the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea region in the coming weeks. Potential threats to maritime shipping in this region stem from the ongoing regional conflict, including continuing attacks by Houthi militants, the recent rise in Somali piracy activity, and the threat of further vessel seizures by Iranian authorities.

**Commercial vessels transiting the Arabian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea are at a risk of being illegally boarded and detained/seized by Iranian forces.** A number of incidents have occurred in recent year, including the seizure by Iranian forces of a Marshall Islands-flagged vessel in the Gulf of Oman in April 2023; the seizure of a Panama-flagged vessel in the Strait of Hormuz in May 2023; and the seizure of a Marshall Islands-flagged vessel in the Arabian Sea in January 2024. Additionally, Iranian forces attempted to seize a Marshall Islands-flagged vessel and a Bahamas-flagged vessel in July 2023 in the Gulf of Oman, though these boardings were prevented by US Naval Forces.

In such seizures, Iranian forces have utilized small boats and/or helicopters during boarding operations and have also attempted to force commercial vessels into Iranian territorial waters. Due to the recent escalation of tensions between Israel and Iran, the threat to vessels transiting near this area remains significant.

**Vessels transiting the Arabian/Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea are advised to remain on high alert at all times.** Vessels operating in these waters are advised to exercise caution and should review security measures, including being abreast of the current situation in the area, prior to entering this region. Vessels in the Arabian Gulf are advised to remain as far as possible from Iran's territorial sea without compromising navigational safety. When transiting eastbound in the Strait of Hormuz, it is advised that vessels transit close to Oman's territorial sea. Crewmembers should maintain a close lookout and remain vigilant for suspicious activity. This includes small boats and vessels that may be approaching. In the event that a commercial vessel is hailed by Iranian forces, vessels should provide their vessel name, flag state, and should affirm that they are proceeding in accordance with international law as reflected in the Law of the Sea Convention. In the event that Iranian forces seek to board a commercial vessel navigating through this region, the ship Master should decline permission to board, noting that the vessel is proceeding in accordance with international law as reflected in the Law of the Sea Convention. This should only be done if the safety of the vessel and crewmembers on board will not be compromised. In the event that Iranian forces do board a commercial vessel, crewmembers should not forcibly resist the boarding. It should be noted that refraining from forcible resistance does not imply consent or agreement to that boarding.

As of 18 April 2024, the Indian government has put the country's Navy on high alert to respond quickly to calls of distress from vessels, both Indian and foreign flag carriers, transiting through the Arabian Gulf region. Additionally as of 18 March 2024, the US is advising all US-flagged vessels to turn off their Automatic Identification System (AIS) transponders to reduce the risk of being targeted.