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## **Maritime terrorism**

**Dennis L. Bryant**

Just after midnight on July 28, 2010, the supertanker *M Star* was transiting the Strait of Hormuz carrying 270,204 tonnes of crude oil from the United Arab Emirates to Japan. The master reported an explosion off the tanker's starboard quarter that slightly injured one crewmember. The ship diverted to the Port of Fujairah for examination. Investigation revealed a large rectangular dent in the hull starting at the waterline and running up to the main deck. The lifeboat and its launching mechanism were blown away. Moderate damage was experienced in the machinery spaces and the living quarters on the starboard side. Initial speculation was that the damage was caused by a freak wave or a collision. Further investigation indicated that a more likely cause was an explosion exterior to the vessel. This was buttressed by the announcement on an Islamic website by the Abdullah Azzam Brigades that one of its members had died in a suicide attack against the tanker. The US Navy would only say that its investigation is ongoing, while the Government of Oman reported that residue of explosives was found on the hull and that radar analysis indicated that a small boat approached the tanker in the minutes before the explosion. The US Maritime Administration (MARAD) later issued an Advisory cautioning all vessels transiting the Strait of Hormuz, particularly at night, to exercise increased vigilance and caution, with increased monitoring of small boat activity. Finally, on November 19, 2010, MARAD issued a second advisory confirming that the claim of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades was valid and that the *M Star* had been unsuccessfully attacked by a suicide bomber in a small vessel.

The scenario with the *M Star* is strikingly similar to that surrounding the October 6, 2002 attack against the supertanker *Limburg* off Yemen. There, a speedboat packed with explosives was rammed into the side of the tanker as it approached the Port of Al Mukalla. In addition to the operators of the speedboat, a Bulgarian sailor on the tanker died in the attack, which set the tanker on fire and spilled approximately 50,000 barrels of crude oil. The Aden-Abyan Islamic Army, a terrorist group linked to Al Qaeda, claimed responsibility.

Recently, Islamic terrorists issued a press release stating that they are undertaking a series of low level, inexpensive attacks on their enemies. All these attacks are viewed by them as successful, not because they necessarily destroy the primary target, but because the attacks require their enemies to expend extraordinary resources in defensive measures.

It is only a matter of time before Islamic terrorists again strike a maritime target.

**E-mail**  
**Internet**

[dennis.l.bryant@gmail.com](mailto:dennis.l.bryant@gmail.com)  
<http://brymar-consulting.com/>

The question is whether the attack will be successful (like the 2002 attack on the *Limburg*) or unsuccessful (like the 2010 attack on the *M Star*). The difference in outcome will be partially dependent upon luck – the 2010 suicide bomber was particularly inexperienced. It will also be heavily dependent upon whether effective counter-measures have been taken. Like the situation with the Somali pirates, the counter-measures are a shared responsibility between governments and the owners and operators of ships.

Unlike the current problem presented by Somali pirates, which is largely confined geographically, the problem of maritime terrorism has no geographical limits.

Modern maritime terrorism appeared on the scene years prior to the *Limburg* attack off the coast of Yemen.

In 1961, a Portuguese rebel group captured the Portuguese cruise ship *Santa Maria* in the Caribbean Sea off the coast of Venezuela. The ship's third mate was killed in the assault. The goal of the rebels was to protest the brutal dictatorship of Portugal's Antonio Salazar. The rebels were eventually granted asylum in Brazil, but not before the US Navy tracked down and surrounded the ship.

The second significant act of maritime terrorism did not end peacefully either. On October 7, 1985, four individuals associated with the Palestine Liberation Front ("PLF") terrorist group seized control of the Italian cruise ship *Achille Lauro* as it sailed waters of the eastern Mediterranean Sea. When the Israeli government refused the terrorist's demands to release 50 Palestinian prisoners, the terrorists shot a disabled American passenger and threw him and his wheelchair overboard. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak persuaded the terrorists to surrender and allowed them to board an airplane bound for Tunisia, the location of the PLF headquarters. U.S. Navy fighter planes forced the aircraft to land in Italy, where the terrorists were arrested. Several terrorists, including the leader Mohammed "Abul" Abbas, managed to escape or otherwise avoid justice.

Suspected members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam ("LTTE") sank an inter-island ferry in Trincomalee harbor, Sri Lanka on July 25, 1999. LTTE divers planted a bomb under the vessel, killing one crew member and injuring another. The LTTE, designated as a terrorist group by the United States, utilizes guerilla warfare and terrorism in its attempt to establish a separate Tamil state in northern Sri Lanka.

On September 25, 1999, LTTE guerillas attacked a freighter as it passed 50 miles off the coast of Sri Lanka. They fired rocket-propelled grenades, injuring a crew member and holing the vessel, and briefly occupied the freighter before the Sri Lankan Navy intervened. Four LTTE boats were destroyed.

On February 25, 2000, suspected Moro Islamic Liberation Front guerillas placed bombs on buses that exploded while the buses were on a Philippine inter-island ferry. In the resulting fire, 39 people died and 41 were injured.

On October 12, 2000, guerillas affiliated with the Al Qaeda terrorist organization staged a suicide attack against the U.S. Navy destroyer *USS Cole* while it was in the port of Aden, Yemen. The attack resulted in the deaths of 17 U.S. sailors and the injury of 38 others. The destroyer was severely damaged and almost lost.

On May 26, 2001, suspected Abu Sayyaf guerillas hijacked an inter-island ferry in the Philippines after boarding it from several power-boats. After being robbed, the 38 passengers were released.

On February 27, 2004, the Philippine ferry *Superferry 14* suffered a large explosion while carrying approximately 800 passengers from Manila to Bacolod. More than 100 passengers died in the explosion and ensuing fire. The ferry burned and sank, but was subsequently salvaged. The terrorist group Abu Sayyaf claimed responsibility for the attack. Security on other Philippine ferries has since been increased.

At the Israeli port of Ashod on March 13, 2004, two young Palestinian terrorists set off explosives strapped to their bodies, killing themselves and 10 Israelis, most of whom were port employees. The terrorists were smuggled into the highly secure port area inside a shipping container. The militant Islamic group Hamas and an offshoot of the PLO claimed joint responsibility for the attack. The fuel tanks in the port may have been the planned target. Security at the port has been tightened since the attack.

On April 24, 2004, a dhow approached the Khawr al Amaya crude oil loading terminal in the Arabian Gulf off the Iraqi port of Basra. As a U.S. Navy small boat pulled up alongside to investigate, persons on the dhow set off a powerful bomb, destroying the dhow, damaging the Navy boat, and killing two U.S. Navy sailors and one U.S. Coast Guard sailor. A short time later, a speedboat approached the oil terminal, but rapidly departed when it was challenged. The oil terminal suffered minimal damage and the nearby terminal at al Basra was untouched, but both were closed for a short period as a precautionary measure. U.S. forces then established a two-nautical mile exclusion zone around the terminals.

On May 4, 2004, a car bomb attack in the Pakistani port city of Gwadar killed three Chinese engineers. The engineers were in Gwadar, located on the coast approximately 200 kilometers west of Karachi, to assist in the construction of a deepwater port facility. The terrorists who detonated the car bomb were apparently attempting to stop construction of the new port facility. Immediately after the incident, the Pakistani government significantly increased security at the port.

A powerful parcel bomb exploded at the Port of Karachi East Wharf on May 26, 2004. The bomb had been delivered to the Karachi port authority building just before it exploded. The attack killed one Pakistani laborer and injured three others. There has been no claim of responsibility, but Karachi is a center of activity for extremist groups.

The above list is representative, not all inclusive. It shows the continuing prevalence of maritime terrorism, the variety of its methods and targets, and (most importantly) its wide

geographic scope.

Piracy and armed robbery at sea are wide-spread problems, but in their most virulent form are limited to waters in the vicinity of Somalia.

From the perspective of the merchant mariner, the major difference between piracy and maritime terrorism is that the pirate wants very much to protect the ship, its crew, and its cargo so as to maximize the ransom. The terrorist, on the other hand, generally seeks to destroy the ship and its cargo and kill the crew so as to make a political statement, albeit twisted.

As with piracy, the approach to countering maritime terrorism requires a joint effort on the part of government and the maritime community. Governments must not only increase their usual security efforts – maritime patrols, etc. – they must also enhance their intel efforts – intercepting suspicious, clandestine communications and infiltrating terrorist groups. These are difficult tasks with no easy measure of success, but they are necessary. The maritime community must enhance efforts to protect itself. The Best Management Practices, developed to counter piracy, can be equally valuable in countering terrorists. The difference is that these practices must be utilized worldwide, not just in the Indian Ocean. Continual vigilance must be exercised. Lookouts must be alert for suspicious activity, not just in the Gulf of Aden, but in the Gulf of Mexico and the Port of Hamburg.

We live in a dangerous world – and must act accordingly!