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 taming politically-motivated attacks at sea.

The reaction follows the renewed attack in the Gulf by Iranian Revolutionary Guards and sear 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 shipping.

Security analysts contacted by Lloyd's List agreed that an al-Qaeda risk at sea is still a real possibility, but the international effort to reduce the threat of maritime piracy has reduced the threat of coordinated, large-scale threats from Islamic extremist groups.

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Control Risks, global analyst Hamid Maarouf said: "It's not a matter of how many hundreds of attacks we have against shipping; it's about the capability to execute an attack that will have a big impact on the shipping industry."

Mr Maarouf said that the threat had been reduced significantly by international efforts in the Gulf.

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"This was significantly less than the bid from Hutchison, who could not meet the time frame that we had," he added.

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 Excessive Analysis told Lloyd's list that the website posting indicated that shipping is still an acceptable target for Islamic extremists.

"Sometimes in such statements you do get relatively detailed discussions of targets, but such statements do not constitute or even require thorough planning of an imminent attack," he said.

"The implication is therefore a general 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 maritime cycle begins, according to Stephen Flynn, senior fellow in national security studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, a New York think-tank.

"In the third quarter of this year, we will be seeing increased attention to maritime security concerns, and that will be especially true in the Gulf region, where the risk of terrorism is relatively higher," he said.

"In general, however, we expect that the threat will remain relatively stable in the near term, although there will be some fluctuations depending on geopolitical events."

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Charles Brown said: "The terrorist threat to shipping remains a significant concern, especially in the Gulf, where there is a high concentration of shipping activity."

Lloyd's List, the insurance industry's leading trade publication, reported that the threat posed by al-Qaeda to shipping in the Gulf had been reduced significantly by international efforts to reduce the threat of maritime piracy.

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