

Maritime Terrorism in the Eyes of Al-Qaeda

General

Recently, Jihadi online forums have been focusing attention on the western marine forces' presence in the high seas and marking them as a target for terrorist attacks. This trend stems, in all probability, from the media resonance surrounding the success of Somali pirates in taking over western ships, looting their cargo and sometimes receiving high ransoms for the release of their crews.

In 2008, there were 115 piracy attacks along the Somali coast where in 46 of these cases, Somali pirates seized commercial vessels. The ransom, which was paid to them in 2008, was over 30 million dollars.¹ On September 25th 2008, for example, Somali pirates succeeded in abducting a Ukrainian arms ship, which was transporting a shipment of weapons to Kenya, with no less than 33 advanced T-72 tanks, ammunition and grenade launchers. The Somali pirates released the ship and its crew five months later, only after receiving a ransom in the sum of 3.2 million dollars.² At the end of March 2009, Somali pirates abducted a Greek vessel with 24 crew members on board at the Aden Bay,³ and on April 4th 2009, Somali pirates attempted to attack a "Zim" vessel.⁴ There are many more such examples.

¹ Lauren Ploch and others, "Piracy off the Horn of Africa", *Congressional Research Service*, April 24, 2009: www.fas.org/sqp/crs/row/R40528.pdf; Patrick Lennox, "Contemporary Piracy off the Horn of Africa", *CDFAI*, December 2008:

http://www.bosasomedia.com/images/right_side_ads/Contemporary%20Piracy%20off%20the%20Horn%20of%20Africa.pdf

² Katharine Houreld, "Somali Pirates Free Ukraine Arms Ship After Receiving \$3.2 Mil Ransom", *The Huffington Post*, February 5, 2009:

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/02/05/somali-pirates-free-ukrainian-arms-ship-164175.html>

³ "Pirates seize Greek ship in waters near Somalia", *CNN*, March 20, 2009:

<http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/africa/03/20/pirates.greece.somalia/index.html>,
<http://www.shmo5alislam.net/vb/showthread.php?t=33181>.

⁴ Avi Bar-Eli, "Somali pirates try to take over Israeli-owned ship", *Haaretz*, April 4, 2009:
<http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasen/spages/1076377.html>

The abduction or attack of a sea vessel is not a new trend characterizing global Jihad. Already, in the early days of Al-Qaeda's operations, the organization's activists carried out terrorist attacks against vessels docked in marine ports. On October 12th 2000, Al-Qaeda succeeded, for the first time, in attacking a western sea vessel off the coast of Yemen. It was the famous American "Cole" battleship where, as a result of the explosion of a dinghy docking nearby, 17 American sailors were killed and 32 others were injured.⁵ On October 6th 2002, Al-Qaeda activists succeeded in sinking the French "Limburg" oil tanker, also off the coast of Yemen, using a ship bomb.⁶

Abu Musab Al-Suri⁷ (born 1958), one of the most prominent Al-Qaeda ideologists, noted in his book "Global Islamic Resistance Call", the need to target western sea vessels in the Mediterranean, in light of their strategic and economic importance, and also due to the West's extreme sensitivity to the security of the marine cruise and commercial routes. According to Al-Suri, there are four main marine passages used by western vessels, and therefore these should be marked as targets for a terrorist attack, which are: the Hormuz Straits in the Persian Gulf, the Suez Canal in Egypt, Bab Al-Mandeb between Yemen and the Africa Horn and the Jabl Tariq Straits in Morocco, and in his own words:

"Most of the world's commercial and oil economy passes through these marine passages. Furthermore, fleets of ships pass through them, aircraft carriers and missiles of death destined for our children and wives. These

⁵ "Yemen frees convict in Cole attack", *Gulf Times*, October 27, 2007:

http://www.gulf-times.com/site/topics/article.asp?cu_no=2&item_no=180985&version=1&template_id=37&parent_id=17

⁶ Peter Raes, "L'attaque terroriste sur le VLCC Limburg et le code ISP", *Gazette de la Chambre*, No.7, 2005:

http://www.arbitrage-maritime.org/cpt_download_art.php?file=G7PR.pdf

⁷ For more information on him and his ideology, see:

Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of al-Qaida Strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri*, London: HURST Publishers, 2007.

passages must be closed down, so that these invasive voyages will disappear. This will be done by attacking the Americans' ships and those of its allies, by planting mines and sinking the ships, or through threats to perpetrate suicide attacks and acts of piracy against them and by the use of weapons whenever possible."⁸

It should be noted, that the connection between Somali piracy and Al-Qaeda, if such a connection exists, is not sufficiently clear. Various research projects point to other reasons being behind the Somali piracy phenomenon, such as a lack of supervision and security in the area and a difficult socio-economic background and the abject poverty of the pirates.⁹

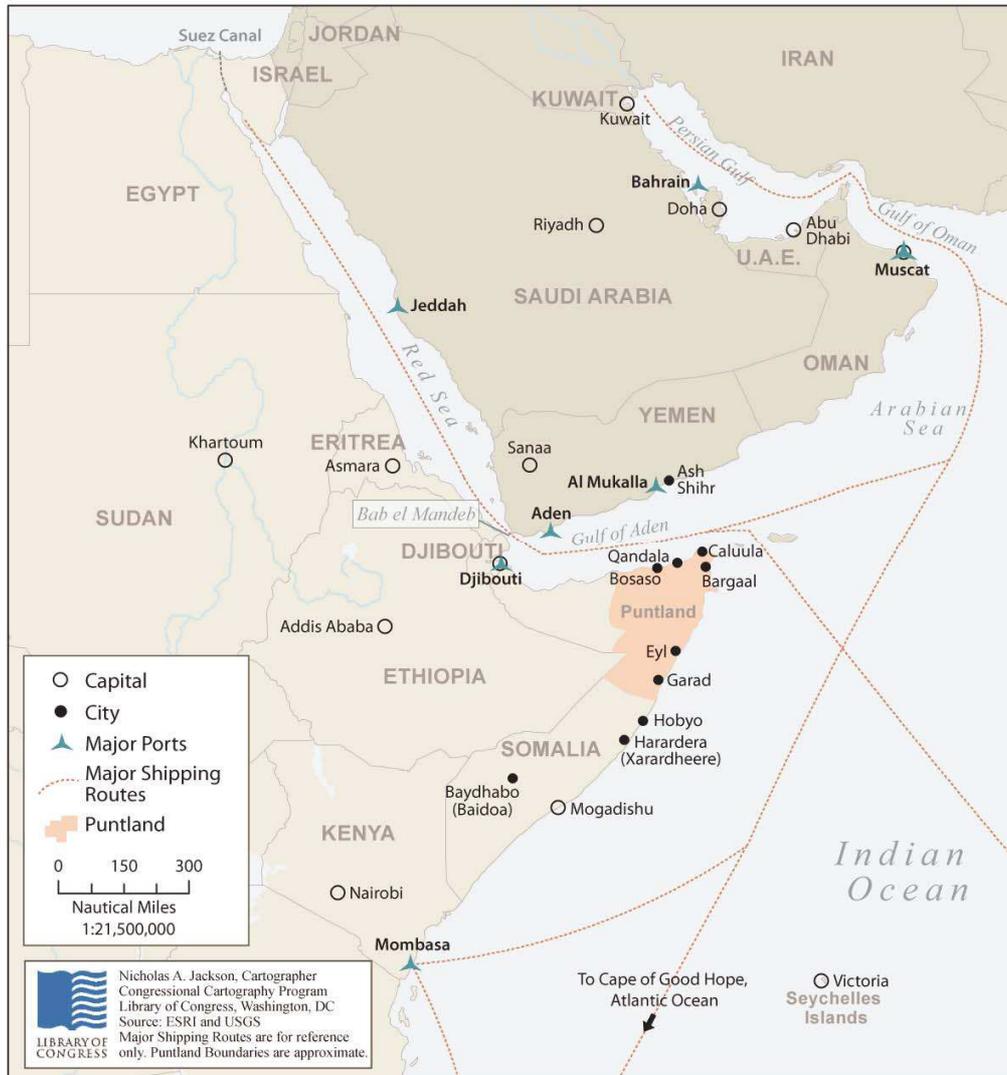
However, there is a great deal of evidence pointing to a connection between some of the Somali pirates and the armed militias in Somalia, especially with the Jihadi Somali "Al-Shabab Al-Mujahideen" organization, which has ties to Al-Qaeda.¹⁰ For example, a former U.N. inspector in Somalia named Bruno, stated in an interview to the British "Jane's" magazine that "the 'Shabab' allow the pirates to operate undisturbed and receive a variety of services in return – smuggling of guns and foreign fighters via the sea, training of Islamic marine forces, and mostly a nice piece of the profits."¹¹

⁸ Abu Musab Al-Suri, *Da'wat Al-Muqawama Al-Islamiyya Al-Alamiyya*, page 1384.

⁹ Shani Ross and Joshua Ben-David, "Somali Piracy: An Escalating Security Dilemma", *Harvard Africa Policy Journal*, Vol. 5, spring 2009, pp. 55-70.

¹⁰ For more information on the organization, see: Abdisaid M. Ali, "The Al-Shabab Al-Mujahideen – A Profile of the First Somali Terrorist Organization", *International Relations and Security Network (ISN)*, Center for Security Studies (CSS), June 2, 2008, ETH Zurich: http://kms1.isn.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ISN/55851/ipublicationdocument_singledocument/1DD66BC5-B0C9-488C-B7E9-D16EEAC91018/en/AlShabaab.pdf

¹¹ Bruno Schiemsy, "Piracy's rising tide – Somali piracy develops and diversifies", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, January 20, 2009.



Source: Congressional Cartography Program, Library of Congress

However, in recent years, vessels were not attacked by global Jihad organizations, inter alia because of the exposure of several terrorist cells, as recently occurred in Egypt.¹² At the same time, as stated above, the success of the marine piracy, intended to obtain funds, has once again raised the subject of the marine medium in the discussions on various global Jihadi online forums.

¹² See page 7 of this document.

Concrete threats

On June 3rd 2009, a report was posted on the "Al-Faloja" Jihadi online forum, regarding the presence of American fighter planes and surveillance aircrafts in North Africa, which the author claimed were destined for the African deserts, in order to eliminate activists identified with Al-Qaeda. The author focused mainly on the city of Tobruk,¹³ where an American battleship has been docked since June 2nd 2009.

According to the surfer, this presence constitutes further proof of American intent and planning to initiate a military campaign against Al-Qaeda forces in Morocco. The surfer addresses the members of the "Al-Faloja" forum and wishes to make clear that the information he presents is very reliable. He brings as proof photographs of the ship, taken after a lengthy surveillance of its movements. At the end of the correspondence, the surfer states that next time he wishes to post photographs of that same battleship on the forum, this time they will be photographs commemorating its destruction and explosion.¹⁴



¹³ A port town in northern Libyan, near the Egyptian border.

¹⁴ <http://al-faloja.info/vb/showthread.php?t=66416>



It should be pointed out, that the photographs posted on the website point to the accessibility of Al-Qaeda members to the port and to the routine collection of operational intelligence on potential targets. It should be made clear, that in the past months, the Libyan authorities have tried to eradicate Al-Qaeda's infrastructure in Libya, including placing its leaders under arrest, forcing them to denounce any connection with Al-Qaeda and eliminating the infrastructure of the operational activists. It is possible that this activity will increase the organization's motivation to operate in this arena.

The Egyptian network as an expression of Al-Qaeda's effort to attack ships

As stated above, one of the most important marine routes in which Al-Qaeda has shown interest, is the Suez Canal, which is one of two vital passages to the Mediterranean, where vessels passing through can be attacked with relative ease, compared to other places. For example, Jihadi websites recently posted photographs of American aircraft carriers and battleships, routinely crossing through the Suez Canal, since the arrival of American forces in Iraq.¹⁵

In the past year, the Suez Canal was an attractive target for more than one Al-Qaeda terrorist attack. On May 23rd 2009, Egyptian authorities exposed an operational terrorist group identified with Al-Qaeda, comprising 10 members: two Palestinians, five Egyptians, a Belgian citizen of Tunisian origin, a British citizen and a female French citizen of Albanian origin. The group was headed by a man named Khalid Muhammad Ahmad, commander of the "World Islamic Front" – an organization identified with Al-Qaeda – which escaped from Egypt three years ago into the Gaza Strip. The terrorist group's members underwent training in the Gaza Strip and upon completion of their training, were smuggled back into Egypt via the tunnels. The group's objective was to attack the gas lines between Israel and Egypt, as well as to attack Israeli ships passing through the Suez Canal. This group was also responsible for the terrorist attack at the Khan Al-Khalil market in Cairo in February 2009, which was crowded with Egyptian citizens and tourists. In the attack, a French citizen was killed and 21 others were injured. Interrogation of the group's members resulted in the exposure of a hiding place

¹⁵ <http://al-faloja.info/vb/showthread.php?t=67916>

in the Abu Faqim village in northern Sinai, where many weapons were found: anti-tank missiles, car bombs, explosive devices and explosive belts.¹⁶

At the beginning of July 2009, another terrorist network was exposed, when the Egyptian security forces arrested 25 armed men, most of them engineers and technicians, belonging to Al-Qaeda. The network members were suspected of planning to blow up oil pipes and freight ships passing through the Suez Canal.¹⁷

For example, they planned on activating explosive charges on the ships using cell phones. During the interrogation, the suspects revealed that they financed their activities with funds received from Islamic charity organizations outside Egypt, and in one case, they had robbed a jewelry store and murdered its owner.¹⁸

Furthermore, they received training for the preparation of car bombs from Al-Qaeda activists on Jihadi websites.¹⁹ Jihadi websites and online forums identified with Al-Qaeda post manuals, text books and encyclopedias on a regular basis, serving as some kind of virtual training camp, as a cheaper, safer and maybe more efficient alternative, in terms of the scope of its distribution, compared to the actual field training camps.

Al-Qaeda leaders were not the only ones to pay operational attention to the Suez Canal. In April 2009, a Hezbollah network was exposed in Egypt, whose tasks included, inter alia, the gathering of intelligence information on Israeli ships

¹⁶ Ahmed Al-Qatib, "The Investigation of the Al-Hussein Bombings: the accused received training from the Palestinian militias in Gaza", Al-Masry Al-Youm, July 5, 2009:

<http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=217803>

¹⁷ See in this context: "Oil Installations as an Attractive Target for Terrorism", *ICT's Jihadi Websites Monitoring Group*, November 2009:

http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/0/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWVG_Oil_Installations_as_a_Target.pdf

¹⁸ "Egypt: we have arrested an Al-Qaeda group planning on blowing up ships", Nana10, July 9, 2009: <http://news.nana10.co.il/Article/?ArticleID=649228>

¹⁹ "Egypt arrests militants plotting Suez attacks", Ynet, July 9, 2009: <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3744165,00.html>

passing through the Suez Canal, as a basis for a terrorist attack against one of them.²⁰

On June 15th 2009, following the postings of the presence of American vessels in the Mediterranean, one of the forum members posted a series of photographs and links to American vessels crossing the Suez Canal. It seems that this pattern is part of a wider effort to strengthen Global Jihad knowledge on major issues of interest, as well as providing reasonable infrastructural intelligence to Al-Qaeda cells or independent networks, and maybe even to be a trigger for forum members to take the initiative and carry out terrorist attacks against sea vessels.

The existing situation of the shipping routes along the coast of the African Horn and the Eden Bay, characterized by a lack of security or effective sea patrolling, constitutes a convenient ground for piracy and smuggling of weapons for Al-Qaeda or even for terrorist attacks. The principles of this approach are also expressed in Al-Qaeda's message published in May 2009, in the electronic newspaper "Jihad Press", identified with Al-Qaeda, entitled "Maritime Terrorism – A Strategic Need:"²¹

"For more than a year, forefront armed forces operating off the Yemen coast have been capturing commercial, tourist and oil vessels, one after the other. At present, the Mujahideen, who are conducting an international campaign for the return of the Islamic Caliphate and their domination of the

²⁰ For a detailed report on the matter, see: "Exposure of a Hezbollah Terrorist Network in Egypt", *ICT's Jihadi Websites Monitoring Group*, August 2009:
http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/0/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWVG_Hezbollah_Egypt.pdf

²¹ The message was published in its entirety as well as partially in various Jihadi forums, such as the "Al-Ekhlaas" Jihadi forum in May 2008.
Adel Amin, "Foreign security companies and Al-Qaeda: Piracy – a conspiracy against the countries in the region or against its people", *Al-Mujtamaa*, February 28, 2009:
<http://www.almujtamaa-mag.com/detail.asp?InNewsItemID=306915&InTemplateKey=print>

world, are committed to moving to the next phase – which is, taking over the seas and the marine passageways, starting with those in the Arab Peninsula [...]. The coast of Yemen is considered to be a crossroads between the Arab Sea (i.e. the Red Sea – translator) and the Eden Bay, commanding Bab Al-Mandeb – the Red Sea Straits and the Indian Ocean. This region constitutes a strategic point, in order to banish the enemy from the bases most important for their campaign. If the enemy does not understand that they must guard themselves in this strategic region, then they will not be able to guard themselves on land either, and their marine bases will be a target for the Mujahideen attacks.”²²



The cover page of the "Jihad Press" (front page article: "Maritime Terrorism: A Strategic Need")

²² "Marine Terrorism: A Strategic Need", *Jihad Press*, May 2009, pages 1, 4,

Following is a series of photographs published in the "Al-Falaja" online forum:



Another entry posted on June 3rd 2009, on the "Al-Faloja" online forum, refers to the great importance the Americans attribute to their marine military forces in the region. To that end, the surfers are referred to video segments focusing on the activity and the training of these marine forces.²³

Links focusing on US Navy Seal Training (30 segments):

1. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRLqXSMzlgw&feature=PlayList&p=F05B535F8EC%204377D&playnext=1&playnext_from=PL&index=1
2. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=34QYkTHhfwk&feature=PlayList&p=F05B535F8EC%204377D&playnext=1&playnext_from=PL&index=3

Links directing surfers to BUD/S Training Class 232 Hell Week (3 segments):

1. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZW4yEMjIUe0&feature=PlayList&p=1E102CD296B6EB82&playnext=1&playnext_from=PL&index=29
2. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ljjPIb6MyE>
3. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xdz4Vt4o9Bc&feature=PlayList&p=1E102CD296B%206EB82&playnext=1&playnext_from=PL&index=31

Link to the Navy Seal Training homepage:

1. <http://www.extremesealexperience.com>

The posting of photographs of an American AH-64 Apache Helicopter that has been hit, on the "Al-Faloja" forum on July 4th 2009, should also be noted, apparently with the purpose of pointing to successful interceptions and hits of aerial and marine vessels, as a means of encouraging further attacks.²⁴

Hereunder are the photographs:

²³ <http://al-faloja.info/vb/showthread.php?t=66308>

²⁴ <http://al-faloja.info/vb/showthread.php?t=70487>



Recently, Jihadi forums have also made veiled threats against French targets in the Middle East. On October 3rd 2009 the "Al-Falaja" forum posted correspondence, in cooperation with Al-Qaeda's Media Institution, "The Global Islamic Media Front" (GIMF) and with one of the Jihadi propaganda representatives called "Asad Al-Jihad2".²⁵

The correspondence mainly refers to the cooperation in the security field between the United States and France in the Middle East in the fight against terrorism. At the beginning of the correspondence, Asad Al-Jihad praises the successful

²⁵ The identity of Asad Al-Jihad2 is unknown, but he is considered to be a veteran activist in the field of Jihadi propaganda and as someone with certain ties to Al-Qaeda. Recently he was "upgraded" in Jihadi online forums to "Military expert and political commentator".

abduction of a senior French security advisor from the capital Mogadishu on July 14th 2009, by the Somali "Al-Shabab Al-Mujahideen" organization.²⁶ Later on, he lists a series of French bases scattered across the Middle East near marine straits, such as the one in Djibouti "considered to be the largest French base in Africa", in the Mimon Island in Yemen and in Abu Dhabi. According to him, these bases are departure points for spies and armed forces for the elimination of terrorists, as recently occurred with the elimination of Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, an Al-Qaeda senior member, on Somali soil on September 14th 2009.²⁷ Asad particularly stresses the French base in Djibouti, as a place where intensive security activity is carried out against the Mujahideen, due to its being leased to American Intelligence forces.

Later on in the correspondence, a list of demands and threats made by the "Shabab" organization to the French government is quoted. For instance, France is asked to immediately stop its security activity in Somalia, remove the French forces from Somalia and Burundi, including the battleships, and to release security prisoners. If it does not comply with these demands, it will be responsible for the removal of the campaign from Somalia to France itself. In other words, the "Shabab" organization threatens to attack tourist sites in France, such as the Louvre Museum and the Versailles Palaces, airports such as Charles De-Gaulle Airport and sea ports such as Marseilles "constituting the main

²⁶ On July 14th 2009 two French security advisors were kidnapped from a hotel in Mogadishu by the armed militias. One was kidnapped by a group called "Hizab Al-Islam" and the other by the "Al-Shabab Al-Mujahideen". Late August of 2009 the first one succeeded in escaping his captors and return to France. The other is still held captive: http://www.khaleejtimes.com/displayarticle.asp?xfile=data/middleeast/2009/August/middleeast_August646.xml§ion=middleeast&col

²⁷ This refers to a senior Al-Qaeda member, aged 28, who was wanted by the FBI for planning and involvement in a number of terror attacks, including those on the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, as well as the combined attack in 2002, which included the bombing of the Israeli owned hotel in Mombasa, the capital of Kenya, and the missile attack against an Arkia aircraft, which took off from the local airport.

commerce and export port in France, and in the regions of Elzas-Lorraine and its surrounding areas!!”.

At the end of the correspondence, the “Shabab” organization directs another specific threat to attack western sea vessels, mainly American ones, in the area. According to the organization, the Crusaders believe their ships and airplane carriers are safe from any harm from Al-Qaeda’s hands and that they cannot be reached, but they are wrong. “If the United States wishes to prevent its ships and airplane carriers being attacked, then they have no choice but to retreat and return to America’s shores, in order to protect them from crumbling and from the civil war that is at its doorstep!!”.

Summary

The marine sphere is one of the arenas where global Jihad operates. This activity is expressed on several matching levels, starting from a general declaration of intent to carry out attacks against marine targets, up to the actual perpetration of the terrorist attacks against these targets.

Terrorist attacks on international commerce in this context, occur mainly where there are crucial passages (ports, marine straits, narrow water passages such as the Suez Canal) and is perceived by global Jihad as an additional element in the strategy intended to weaken the west by harming its economy. For example, Jihad activists carried out terrorist attacks against western oil tankers in marine ports (2000, 2002) and have also attempted to attack passenger and commercial ships in the Suez Canal (2009).

Another component of the marine activity is piracy. the increasing phenomenon of the abduction of sea vessels along the Somali coast, harms the international commerce routes and causes direct and indirect financial harm to the western

economies. Even though this phenomenon cannot be clearly linked to global Jihad organizations, the media resonance given to this activity and the fact that large parts of Somalia are under the control of Jihad organizations, suggests it is possible that part of the money finds its way to finance global Jihad organizations. It should be added, that the dire financial straits of global Jihad organizations may push them to expand their activity in the sea by including acts of marine piracy as a means for obtaining funds.

Without a doubt, these postings portray a wish and intent to turn western sea vessels in the waters of the Middle East into a legitimate target for attack. The elimination of Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, an Al-Qaeda senior member in Somalia, is only a catalyst for fulfilling this intention. It is probable that this is a manifestation of an internalization and promotion of a strategic master plan, suggested by Abu Musab Al-Suri, in the fight against the West. In other words, in this type of activity, the wish to remove the West's presence, as well as the desire to end the imperialist ambitions are intertwined with a wish to hurt the western economy, a process that will eventually bring about its demise.