

## Al Qaeda's Maritime Campaign

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With only rare dramatic bursts, the maritime environment has remained relatively calm in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) but a sustained, destructive storm churns over the horizon. Despite the inherent challenges, Al Qaeda can attack, has attacked, and will again attack maritime targets. Indications point to an acceleration of the pace of maritime terrorism, heralding a coming campaign. As this campaign unfolds, however, the U.S. Navy is foundering in defining its role within the overall war. Under increasing fire from the Department of Defense for not

doing its share compared to the Army and Marine Corps, the Navy has been forced to assume shore support duties typically assigned to other services to free up personnel to prosecute the war -- a clear diminution of the Navy's stature. Yet, as in World Wars I and II, the Navy has definite, significant, and traditional roles, with missions on the front lines, in fighting and defeating a global threat.

The August 2005 terrorist attack aimed against the USS *Kearsarge* (LHD-3) and USS *Ashland* (LSD-48) while berthed in Aqaba, Jordan, represents an anomaly in the war on terrorism. Compared to attacks ashore, occurrences of maritime terrorism are rare. Examining the challenge of maritime attacks may explain why they have been an anomalous feature of the war on terrorism. Conversely, given the intent of al Qaeda and associated terrorist organizations to attack U.S. and Western economic and military assets and the large, lucrative targets maritime vessels present, the activity observed of late may actually portend a coming and expansive maritime terrorist campaign.

The propensity of al Qaeda for patient and intricate preparation augurs a future sustained maritime terrorism campaign, rather than a continued irregular pattern of attacks. For a U.S. Navy under fire for its limited contributions to the GWOT, maintaining open and free sea lanes of communication and expanding capabilities for maritime interception operations promise not only redemption for the Navy in the current war but preemption of the coming maritime terrorist campaign.

### Challenges of the Maritime Environment

Of 651 terrorist attacks in 2004 documented by the National Counterterrorism Center, none was technically maritime. Two attacks qualifying under the definition for maritime terrorism in this article (use of violence at sea, in territorial waters, or against maritime targets by supranational organizations or non-state actors for ideological, religious, or political purposes) did occur last year: the suicide attacks against the USS *Firebolt* (PC-10) boarding team and the oil terminals in the Arabian Gulf and the bombing of the *Superferry 14* in Manila Bay, Philippines. Behind the relative paucity of maritime attacks and the historical disparity between total occurrences of terrorism on land and at sea is the recondite nature of the sea compared to the familiarity of land, and how it complicates terrorist operations.

The U.S. Navy plans maritime evolutions in great detail. Tides, currents, wind, sea state, visibility, and proximity to land all factor into the planning and conduct of naval operations. These factors are no less vital to the efficacy of a prospective maritime terrorist plot, and certainly considerations are more intricate than for the terrorist driving a suicide truck down a familiar road. Ignorance of both the operating environment and the vessel involved was displayed in January 2000 during al Qaeda's attempt to attack the USS *The Sullivans* (DDG-68) in Aden harbor when the overloaded suicide boat sank on launching. Ten months later, against the *Cole*, al Qaeda lethally demonstrated that it had learned its lesson.

The relative scarcity of targets at sea also hinders planning efforts for terrorists accustomed to a target-rich land environment. Ships at sea follow predictable routes and often exhibit operating patterns easily discerned by terrorist preoperational surveillance, permitting identification of a prospective target. But surveillance at sea offers less cover and concealment than on land and entails the same environmental challenges as any maritime evolution. Planning for a maritime operation close to land eliminates many of the difficulties related to surveillance at sea but also compresses a theater of operations covering more than three-fourths of the world into the littoral regions.

In addition, operating at sea requires skills neither easily nor quickly acquired. Developing the expertise to conduct a single maritime terrorism operation takes time, and no campaign is sustainable if the expertise developed explodes along with the delivery vehicle and target in suicide attacks. Contrary to the view of one Office of Naval Intelligence analyst, it does take special training in navigation, coastal piloting, and ship handling to "drive a ship into a bridge, a port facility, or another ship." (1)

Notable al Qaeda maritime terrorist successes to date occurred against more vulnerable targets, specifically slow-moving or stationary vessels susceptible to attack from less proficient maritime terrorists. The 2002 attack against the French supertanker *Limburg*, for example, was conducted not on the high seas but as the ship proceeded slowly in the Gulf of Aden, awaiting the embarkation of a harbor pilot to guide the ship to her mooring. Thus, similar to the *Cole*, the supertanker presented an easy target for suicide attackers who drove their explosive-laden Zodiac speedboat perpendicularly into the side of the *Limburg*.

The relative motion calculus involved in hitting a ship moving faster, whether on inland waters or the open ocean, becomes more abstruse for even a seasoned mariner and likely beyond the capability of a terrorist untrained and unfamiliar with the sea. Therefore, al Qaeda's preference for targets with a high probability of success -- in other words, easy marks -- may have coincided with the unavailability of maritime expertise within terrorist ranks, dictating the target selection and mission planning for the *Limburg* and *Cole*.

The maritime environment creates a whole new set of considerations for designing and employing the improvised explosive device (IED), the terrorist's favorite weapon. Along with some of the boat loading problems experienced in the abortive attempt to attack *The Sullivans* and possible sensitivities of explosives to salt water, familiar roadside IED tactics, while not impossible at sea, certainly pose different challenges. Testing weapons and practicing attack techniques, hallmarks of al Qaeda's typically meticulous preparation, are simply harder at sea

than on land and more difficult to conceal than tests occurring at hidden laboratories in secret terrorist compounds.

Boat-borne IED decoy tactics that lure a target close either through false distress or ostensibly compliant invitation, though less developed than land decoy tactics, are not unprecedented. The Israeli Navy has experienced deception both in the form of lure tactics and non-threatening approaches by fishing boats packed with explosives trying to draw a warship close enough to conduct a terrorist attack. The attack on the *Cole* resulted after an apparently friendly approach alongside. In a seemingly permissive environment, the *Firebolt's* rigid inflatable boat and boarding team closed with a dhow; the subsequent surprise attack left two sailors and one Coast Guardsman dead. In each case, the attackers executed a suicide mission.

For all the difficulties inherent in a maritime attack, speedboats are emerging as the weapon of choice, providing superior maneuverability and reduced radar detection, and capable of executing multiple attacks from several vectors, hiding in crowds such as fishing fleets, creating diversions, luring a target with distress calls or false emergencies, and conducting lethal assaults -- initial or follow on -- using various forms of arms.

Even with weapon refinement and continued tactical development, the generally singular nature of maritime targets, the low probability of secondary damage outside of the intended target, the limits of casualties to only those embarked in the target, and perhaps most critical to the perverse but media savvy al Qaeda planners, the problems associated with filming an attack at sea from another vessel or location for later use to publicize terrorist triumphs, all likely reduce the desirability of maritime targets.

### **Interminable Intent**

Rather than develop a false sense of security based on the belief that inherent difficulties will limit maritime terrorism to sporadic incidents rather than an extensive campaign, caution is warranted in light of al Qaeda's adaptability, ingenuity, tenacity, and audacity. Successful development and application of maritime tactics, techniques, and procedures has already occurred within the terrorist community.

Although fighting a national war of liberation, the long established and formidably skilled, organized, and equipped maritime arm of the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Elam (LTTE) presents al Qaeda with a source to plagiarize for maritime terrorism knowledge. Prior to a 2002 ceasefire, the maritime branch of the LTTE, the Sea Tigers, employed 3,000 personnel and between 100-200 vessels in a concerted campaign against commercial shipping and the Sri Lankan navy. Moreover, the LTTE perpetuated its expertise in a maritime school and academy, formally packaging and publishing a body of knowledge applicable to maritime terrorism. (2)

Debate endures regarding a possible linkage between piracy and terrorism but irrespective of any direct connection, pirates such as those who commandeered the merchant ship *Dewi Madrim* in the Strait of Malacca in March 2003, display sophisticated assault and ship control capabilities invaluable to like-minded maritime terrorists. In fact, rather than an act of piracy, Singapore's

deputy prime minister and national security advisor Tony Tan characterized the hour long hijacking of the *Dewi Madrim* as a trial run related to future terrorism.

The International Chamber of Commerce Maritime Bureau reported on repeated attempts by multiple speedboats with armed crewmembers to board a tanker underway in the Gulf of Aden in August 2005; only evasive maneuvers by the ship and crew actions prevented the boarding. This failed attempt, the August 2005 Aqaba attacks and, in the same month, the arrest of a Syrian terrorist with ties to al Qaeda charged with planning to attack Israeli cruise ships using explosive laden speedboats may signal more than just ongoing interest in maritime terrorism. Instead, recent indications point to intentions within al Qaeda toward intensifying operations against maritime targets. Former CIA Director George Tenet warned as early as February 2003 that al Qaeda was developing and refining maritime attack capabilities.

Two target sets, commercial ships, transporting 80% of world trade commodities, and naval vessels, the ubiquitous military symbols of Western power, present too tempting a mark for al Qaeda to relegate to a merely minor role in their crusade against the West. They have already demonstrated ample intent against these two highly attractive maritime targets.

With oil prices straining the global economy, a disruption of the sea routes for or attacks against the tankers that carry about two-thirds of the world's oil would precipitate a debilitating economic crisis. Not only do oil tankers follow fixed, predictable, and therefore vulnerable routes, they routinely traverse several geographic choke points, including the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, the Suez Canal, and the Strait of Malacca, each of which has suffered from maritime terrorism in the past and is likely to figure prominently in terrorist's future plans. A disruption of any of these choke points would add days and weeks to tanker transits, drain national oil reserves, and add untold millions of dollars to freight, insurance, and transit costs. The same vulnerabilities and the dire economic consequences of a maritime attack or campaign are similar for any other global commodities traveling by sea.

The al Qaeda network maintains strong interest in attacking commercial maritime targets. In October 2002, al Qaeda planner Adb al Rahim Al Nashiri oversaw the attack on the French oil tanker *Limburg* off Yemen, a strike Osama Bin Laden intended as part of a campaign against U.S. interests in the region. (3) In August 2004, the British Royal Navy First Sea Lord Admiral Alan West warned of al Qaeda planning against international shipping. (4) Bush administration officials and various government agencies have frequently cited al Qaeda's intent to continue attacks on American targets, specifically mentioning maritime attacks using boats and scuba divers as explosive delivery vehicles. (5)

Nearly five years separated the Aqaba attack from the last direct, planned attack against a U.S. warship, the USS *Cole* in 2000. Despite the time gap between attacks, warships represent classic and therefore enticing symbols of Western power, especially the aircraft carrier -- the epitome of American hegemonic power. Perhaps otherwise uninformed terrorists in Aqaba thought they fired at an aircraft carrier when they timed their rockets to launch against the *Kearsarge* in Aqaba.

The attack on the *Cole*, not 9/11, has been described by at least one Global War on Terrorism detainee as the ideal terrorist operation. In late 2001, local authorities disrupted a plot by the al Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah to attack U.S. warships anchored off Singapore. As many as 15 people comprised an al Qaeda cell arrested by Moroccan police in May 2002 for plotting to use Zodiac speedboats loaded with explosives for suicide attacks against U.S., British, and possibly other NATO warships transiting the Strait of Gibraltar. (6) The attack in Aqaba and other recent indications demonstrate ongoing if not increased planning against Western navies. Moreover, although likely an attack of opportunity originally aimed at the oil platforms, the 2004 *Firebolt* incident perpetrated by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's Iraqi al Qaeda network exposed the vulnerabilities of U.S. Navy boarding teams, despite operating in a seemingly compliant environment.

### **The Navy's Role in the War on Terrorism**

As listed by the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Mike Mullen, the Navy's roles in the Global War on Terrorism include keeping sea lanes of communication open and protecting Americans from sea borne threats. The Navy must clearly expound in battles on Capitol Hill and within the Pentagon its critical, primary, and unique worth in these roles lest the Navy's development as a subordinate supporting branch to the other services continue. Combating threats to the sea lines of communication and protecting Americans from sea borne threat -- essentially denying terrorists the use of sea -- requires costly but necessary developments in two areas: shipbuilding and boarding teams.

On the former, the Navy needs not just more ships but smaller, faster, more agile vessels to compete with maritime terrorists plotting to disrupt the global economy from the sea. The DD(X) and littoral combat ship programs fill only a partial requirement and are more suited toward operations against a future nation-state threat; for the war on terrorism, however, the numbers are insufficient and the costs per unit too high. More appropriate against the maritime terrorist threat would be a less expensive hybrid ship between the size of a frigate and a patrol craft, a ship deployed in the numbers required to comb the seas and thwart the coming terrorist maritime campaign.

On the latter, significant improvements have occurred in the past year, bolstering the ability of Navy visit, board, search, and seizure teams to execute more complex and dangerous missions in search of terrorists and terror-related cargo at sea. To stay ahead of ever-evolving terrorist transport methods and to defend against worst-case scenarios, the Navy must complete the paradigm shift from post-Cold War sanction-related boardings performed by organic shipboard teams to terrorism-related boardings. These will be conducted by specialized detachments manned, trained, and equipped to board any vessel under the most difficult circumstances, to effect thorough searches and intelligence gathering and, in a worst-case scenario, to successfully fight their way to safety. Although entailing considerable start-up costs, developing, maintaining, and deploying skilled and specialized VBSS detachments enables the Navy to more effectively fight on the front lines of the war and, in the longer term, promises to save lives as well as money.

These recommendations are bound to invite criticism and debate. In addition to maintaining a robust and formidable force protection posture to deter and defeat terrorist attacks, the Navy already plays an important and active role in the Global War on Terrorism in the Persian Gulf, Mediterranean Sea, Arabian Sea and other forward waters but *not nearly enough of a role* as the only service capable of disrupting maritime terrorism overseas and denying terrorists the use of the sea. Claiming its complete and crucial role in the GWOT will allow the Navy to preempt al Qaeda from conducting a concentrated maritime terrorism campaign; otherwise the Navy can look forward to more support tasks ashore for the services conducting combat operations.

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