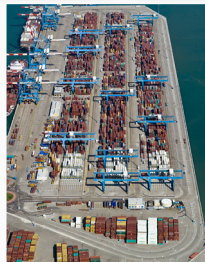


# MARITIME STRATEGIC EVALUATION FOR ISRAEL 2019/20

Chief editor: **Prof. Shaul Chorev**

Edited and produced by: **Ehud Gonen**



---

## Maritime Terror in Israel

### *Shakked Dabran*

This chapter describes Israel's efforts to deal with maritime terror and presents a historical review of maritime terror against Israel. It includes a discussion of events that Israel has had to deal with during its history as well the more recent trends. The latter part of the article presents the challenges currently facing Israel in the context of maritime terror. According to the conclusions reached in the article, the war against maritime terror requires first-quality intelligence, a preventative approach, an up-to-date and appropriate doctrine and creativity and innovation in the research and development of weapons systems.

The term "terror" relates to the "systematic and intentional use or threat of violence to achieve political ends." In general, it can be claimed that terror is a political tool.<sup>1</sup> Maritime terror includes attacks or the threat of attacks on vessels (cruise ships, tankers and other cargo ships, tugboats and bulk carriers, etc.), ports and land/shore targets in the vicinity of ports (such as oil refineries and undersea cables). There are additional types of maritime terror, such as the hijacking of cargo or passenger ships in the open sea. The definition of maritime terror also includes attacks or the threat of attacks against the civilian population from the sea, since the home front is a terrorist group's main target. Another type is the threat of maritime cyber terror. The efforts to stop terror include preventative, defensive and offensive measures that are meant to reduce terrorist attacks and respond to them.<sup>2</sup>

Israel is an interesting and important case in the discussion of maritime terror. The situation in Israel is complex and the maritime space is one facet in which this complexity is manifested. Throughout Israel's history, it has experienced numerous conflicts of different types and one of those has taken place—and continues to take place—in the maritime domain.

- 
- 1 Ganor, B. (2009), "Terrorism in the twenty-first century". In *Essentials of terror medicine*. Springer, New York, NY: 13-26; Michel, K. (2006), "War, piracy and terror: the high seas in the 21st century". *The Journal of International Maritime Law* 12: 313-324; Sakhujia, V. (2007), "Sea Piracy in South Asia". In P. Lehr (Ed.), *Violence at Sea: Piracy in the age of Global Terrorism*. New York: Taylor & Francis Group: 23-36; Kanev, D. (Ed.). (2005), *Seaborne trade effects of international terrorism and effectiveness of the anti-terrorist policy*. UK: WIT Press, Ashurst Lodge, Ashurst, Southampton; Valencia, M. J. (Ed.). (2006), *The Politics of Anti-Piracy and Anti-Terrorism Responses in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
  - 2 Bueger, C.& Edmunds, T. (2017), "Beyond sea blindness: a new agenda for maritime security studies", *International Affairs* 93 (6); Power, J. (2008), "Maritime Terrorism: A New Challenge for National and International security", *Barry law Review* 10; NATO, web: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_77646.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_77646.htm) [28.4.2019].

The State of Israel is in a unique position. It can be compared to an island nation in that the sea is the exclusive route (apart from the aerial route) for the import and export of goods. Therefore, the sea is highly important to Israel. The length of Israel's Mediterranean coast is 196 km, to which is added the 14 km length of the Gulf of Eilat coast. Similarly, most of Israel's population and industry is located within close proximity to the coast. Israel has six ports: two for energy (Hadera and Ashkelon) and four for loading and unloading of ships (two in Haifa Bay – the Port of Haifa and the shipyards port, Ashdod and Eilat). To these will be added two new additional ports that are under construction: the Hamifratz port and the Hadarom port. Israel's territorial waters include a territorial sea out to 12 km, a contiguous zone out to 24 km and an EEZ of 70-100 km from the coast. Maritime trade and cargo account for 98 percent (in terms of volume) of Israel's total trade and it is of high strategic importance.

Until the late 1960s and early 1970s, Israel did not attribute a great deal of importance to maritime terror. Prior to the Six Day War, terror originated primarily from Gaza, with the encouragement of Egypt. The Israeli navy maintained routine patrols, but these were not directed against enemy activity but rather to maintain a presence. The most serious maritime threat to Israel was from the navies of the Arab countries. This threat reached a peak in the Yom Kippur War in 1973. During the war, the Israeli navy emerged as a dominant player in the maritime domain. At the same time, the Palestinian terror organizations were becoming stronger and the threat of terror from the sea also began to develop.

Following the Six Day War (1967), Israel's coast doubled in length, which meant defending a much larger territory. Another significant event that led to increased terror from the sea during that period was the Black September events (1970), which led to the transfer of Fatah headquarters to South Lebanon, from which it carried out numerous terror attacks against Israel, both by land and by sea. As a result of this new phenomenon, the Israeli navy began a buildup of strength and the preparation of its vessels and manpower for fighting terror. The threat of terror increased in parallel to the diminishing threat from the Arab navies, particularly after the peace treaty with Egypt (1978). The threat of terror forced the IDF, and the Israeli navy in particular, to develop new abilities and doctrines, which include the ability to defend the coast using advanced detection systems and newer and faster ships for patrolling and maintaining security.<sup>3</sup>

---

3 Gour Lavie, O. (2017), "Building the Israeli Power in the Face of Terror Threats and Other Threats," *Strategic Maritime Assessment for Israel – 2016*, Haifa Research Centre for Maritime Policy Studies & Strategy, University of Haifa: 126-133.

In 1969, the first infiltration occurred and it became clear that terrorists in Lebanon were bringing explosives into Israel. On November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1969, a torpedo boat near Rosh Hanikra identified a target that had crossed the border. The captured boat belonged to Fatah and it carried four terrorists and explosives. Between 1971 and 1979, the frequency of terror attacks from the sea reached its peak and the IDF was unable to prevent them or to properly respond to them.

On June 11<sup>th</sup>, 1971, terrorists set alight the Coral Sea, an Israeli ship on its way to Eilat. Thanks to the quick and effective response of the crew, the ship did not explode. During the 1970s, the most prominent characteristic of maritime terror was arrival from the sea in order to attack the population on the coast. The terror attack in Nahariya on the night of the 24-25<sup>th</sup> of June 1974 was carried out by terrorists belonging to Fatah in Lebanon. In this incident, one Israeli soldier and three civilians were killed and six civilians were injured. The terrorist was finally killed by Golani soldiers. During that same decade, there was a terror attack on the Savoy Hotel on the Tel Aviv coast, which occurred in March 1975. The two teams of terrorists arrived by boat and made their way to the Savoy. The terrorists took hostages and threatened to kill them if Israel did not release 20 terrorists within four hours. The next day, soldiers of the special operations unit stormed the hotel, killing seven terrorists and capturing one. Five of the hostages were rescued and eight were killed in the operation; two soldiers in the assault force were also killed.



Figure 1: The rubber boat with which the terrorists landed on Nahariya Beach (Clandestine Immigration and Naval Museum)

Another attack during this period and which originated from the sea took place on the Coastal Road. The attack occurred in March 1978 when a group of 11 Fatah terrorists landed on the Maagan Michael beach in rubber boats. They killed 35 Israelis and wounded 71. In response to the attack and the many previous ones, Israel initiated the Litani Operation in South Lebanon. Nonetheless, the attacks did not halt and included an additional attack in Nahariya in 1979, in which a father, two daughters and a policeman were killed.<sup>4</sup>

In October 1985, four Palestinian terrorists from the Palestinian Liberation Front hijacked the Achille Lauro, an Italian passenger ship that was located between the Egyptian cities of Alexandria and Port Said. The kidnappers held the 400 passengers hostage and threatened to kill them if 50 Palestinian prisoners held in Israel were not released. The kidnappers shot one Jewish American passenger. The ship sailed back to Egypt and after two days of negotiations, the kidnappers left the ship and were transported to Tunisia. In September 1985, three terrorists—two Palestinians and one British national—murdered Ester and Reuven Paltsur and their friend Avraham Avneri on a yacht in the Larnaka marina.

The maritime terror attacks during the 1970s and early 1980s had a direct effect on Israel's security doctrine, which called for an even stronger response against the terrorist infrastructure. Furthermore, these attacks demonstrated the need to increase the navy's budget in order to improve Israel's coastal defenses and establish new regulations for maritime safety.<sup>5</sup>

Operation Peace for Galilee, which lasted from June to August 1982, resulted in the expulsion of Fatah from South Lebanon and from Beirut. The organization found a new home in Tunisia but had lost its geographic proximity to Israel. This meant that any further maritime attacks by Fatah and its related organizations would have to deal with much greater distances which would significantly increase the time that the Israeli defense forces would have to respond.

During 1980s and 1990s, there were “only” six large maritime attacks. For example, in 1990 terrorist boats landed on the Niztanim beach. Terrorists in a number of speedboats had set out from a mother ship that had sailed from Libya, intending to land on the Tel Aviv shore and carry out a mass terror attack. Some of the boats were detected and one was halted at sea; however, one of them reached Niztanim beach. A light plane,

---

4 Almog, Z. (2014), *Commander of Shayetet 13 – The voyages of my life*, 2, Kinneret, Zamoura-Bitan Dvir. [Hebrew]

5 Lorenz, A. (2007), “The Threat of Maritime Terrorism to Israel”, IDC Herzliya Navy Association <http://www.amutayam.org.il>

---

infantry soldiers and helicopters chased the terrorists; four of them were killed, 12 were captured and one escaped in the refueling boat, apparently to Egypt. No Israelis were harmed during the operation (Navy Association).<sup>6</sup> In addition to these attacks, many others were prevented over the years.

The 2000s were characterized by new waves of maritime terror. During this period, attacks were carried out on Israeli naval vessels. In November 2000, a suicide bomber blew himself up near an Israeli naval vessel although there were no casualties. In 2002, four IDF navy personnel were wounded when a bomb went off near a patrol boat of the Israeli navy near the settlement of Dugit in the northern Gaza Strip, an operation for which the Islamic Jihad took responsibility. Another example is the explosive raft that went off near an IDF patrol boat in 2003, an attack that caused no casualties (Navy Association). In addition, a new type of activity appeared – the smuggling of weapons into the Gaza Strip by way of the sea.

In 2001, the Israeli navy captured the ship *San Torino* which was carrying weapons to the Palestinian Authority. The weapons had been sent by the Fatah organization. On December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 a ship called *Karin A* arrived at the port of Kish in Iran. Israel received intelligence that the Palestinian Authority had purchased the ship. Based on this information, Israeli intelligence began monitoring the ship. After the Iranians had loaded it with weapons, the ship set out for the coast of Gaza. When it became clear that there was a large quantity of weapons on the ship, a counter operation was decided on that would be carried out by Israel's naval commandos. Once Israeli intelligence had enough information on the ship, Chief of Staff Shaul Mofaz decided that this is the right timing to carry out the operation in order to prevent the ship from reaching Gaza.<sup>7</sup>

Other examples include the capture of the ship *Victoria* in 2011, which carried Iranian weapons destined for the Gaza Strip. The operation was a success as a result of the intelligence efforts and the ongoing activity of the navy to prevent smuggling. Another example is Operation Full Disclosure in 2014 whose goal was to capture the ship *Klos C* which flew a Panamanian flag and was attempting to smuggle weapons into the Gaza Strip. The operation took place in the Red Sea, about 1500 km from Israel and was directed by the commander of the navy. The cargo ship carried containers filled with weapons sent from Iran which were destined for terror organizations in the Gaza Strip (Navy Association).

---

6 Navy Association <http://www.amutayam.org.il/?CategoryID=278> [Hebrew]

7 Zeitun, Y. & M. Margalit (2014) "Laughing and Drifting. This is the Navy's Commander," *Ynet News*, web: <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4496052,00.html> [July 11, 2019] [Hebrew]

The Gaza Strip is of particular concern to the Israeli defense forces and this situation there had a major influence on activity during the 2000s. During the past two decades, the execution of terror attacks has shifted from mainly secular organizations like Fatah to Islamic organizations such as Hamas, Hezbollah and others. Another important factor in the development of maritime terror is the fact that Hamas is currently using hybrid warfare, such as the use of fishermen in Gaza in order to smuggle weapons by way of the sea.

After the closing of the underground smuggling tunnels between Gaza and Egypt, the sea became particularly important in the eyes of the Palestinians. The threat to Israeli ships is growing, including the fear of explosives. There is a day-to-day war at sea between terrorists, smugglers and fisherman on the one hand and the Israeli navy on the other. Hamas is building up its naval strength, with Israel's natural gas facilities, power plants and oil pipelines as its major targets.

In 2018, an attack tunnel was completed in the Gaza Strip which allowed divers to set out undetected from a Hamas naval base towards Israel. The IDF spokesman reported that this is a special terrorist tunnel that allows divers to leave their base undetected in order to carry out an amphibious attack on Israel.

- In 2018, the Israeli navy uncovered a plan by the Islamic Jihad to carry out an attack involving the use of antitank missiles against Israeli naval vessels and the attempt to capture Israeli seamen.
- Another important example is the fact that Hamas is currently using several components of hybrid warfare. According to a Palestinian captured and interrogated by the defense forces, Hamas is using fishermen from Gaza to smuggle weapons by way of the sea.

According to various assessments by the Israeli navy, Hamas and other terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip are expected to invest greater resources in carrying out terrorist attacks at sea. This follows Israel's success in making it more difficult for attacks to be carried out using the attack tunnels or by means of rockets. Hamas is continuing its military buildup in the Gaza Strip, including efforts to acquire naval capabilities. It is also continuing efforts to smuggle in naval equipment, diving equipment, etc, as well as to build up its naval commando force. The Israeli navy is responsible for the naval blockade of Gaza, including control over the movement of ships (primarily fisherman/smugglers) opposite Gaza. The war against this terror organization has the characteristics of asymmetric and hybrid warfare, which makes it difficult to defend against these threats.

---

## The current challenge of maritime terror facing Israel

The terror organizations have set themselves the goal of striking at strategic targets (such as national facilities and infrastructures). The discovery of the Noa natural gas field in 1999 and following that the discovery of the Mary field in 2000 ushered in a new era in Israel's energy sector. However, alongside the numerous opportunities implicit in the development of the offshore energy sector, the Israeli navy is currently facing major challenges. Protecting Israel's economic waters is a major challenge in view of both the size of the maritime domain, which is larger than the entire State of Israel, and the nature of natural gas exploration and production. The drilling rigs are civilian installations which of course are not equipped with any means of self-defense. Damage to these facilities will constitute a major strategic blow to Israel and therefore they are liable to serve as a "quality target" for terror attacks.<sup>8</sup>

A number of non-state players have declared their intention to carry out terror attacks against Israeli facilities in general and against offshore energy facilities in particular. Thus, for example, Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, has explicitly threatened to attack the Israeli offshore drilling rigs. In this context, an exercise was carried out in 2015 that simulated an attempt by terrorists to take over a drilling rig.

According to the commander of the naval base in Haifa:

"The maritime domain is a classic platform for terror attacks and this sphere will become increasingly active in view of the potential threat to the natural gas platforms and that of infiltration into Israel. Attacks have been carried out by the terror organizations in the distant past, but this is a threat that we must respond to today."<sup>9</sup>

Another important challenge originates from the location of Israel's naval bases. The ports of Haifa and Ashdod, where naval bases are located, are liable themselves to become targets for terrorist activity.

There are numerous threats from the sea.

According to Zeev Almog, commander of the Israeli navy during 1979–1985:

"Terror attacks from the sea are unique. Terror organizations have used various methods to carry out attacks from the sea, including arrival from the sea directly in boats or from ships out at sea; a commercial ship or a speedboat that fires rockets at

---

8 Zarchi, N. (2017), "Marine Energy Security," *Strategic Maritime Assessment for Israel – 2016*, Haifa Research Centre for Maritime Policy Studies & Strategy, University of Haifa: 105-114.

9 Brit, A. (2015), "Ready for anything, even in the north", [web: http://www.navy.idf.il/994-8761-he/Navay.aspx](http://www.navy.idf.il/994-8761-he/Navay.aspx) [10.2.2019].



the shore or delivers a large explosive device that is intended to blow up an essential coastal facility or a naval vessel or tanker; etc.” (Almog, 2014: 1322).

Today, we can already add to this list the dangerous threat in the cyber domain, which can provide terrorists with broad and rapid access to targets. This is a new domain of activity that is becoming increasingly widespread. Cyber terror involves use of the Internet in order to cause loss of life or significant damage to property and to achieve political or ideological gain through threats or intimidation. Modern ships are relying more and more on advanced technologies that can almost completely control the functioning of a ship (navigation, engines, weapons systems, etc.). These systems leave the ship highly exposed to the growing cyber threats. In order to be secure, a system must ensure availability of its service, the integrity of information and the maintenance of its communication security. Security policy includes both technical and non-technical components (physical protection, organizational aspects and manpower considerations). Cyber security has become an important basis for protection against terror.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

Since its establishment, the State of Israel has had to deal with various types of terrorism. Terror activity from the sea has become a serious threat during the last 50 years and has constituted a challenge both to the state and to the Israeli navy. This has created the need to respond and to minimize the effect of maritime terror on the way of life in Israel.

A future peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians will apparently not lead to the complete cessation of terror, nor that of maritime terror in particular. There will always be organizations that do not accept the existence of the State of Israel.

There are a number of factors that make maritime terror a particularly attractive option for the terror organizations due to the growing importance of the maritime domain to the State of Israel. This includes the EEZ as a source of energy, the sea as the exclusive channel for international trade, desalinization, international communication and the density of both the population and infrastructure facilities along the coast.

In recent decades, Israel has identified more than 80 maritime terror attacks. While most of them were foiled, the terrorists learned to adapt quickly to a changing environment. At the same time, Israel has also updated its tactics. Additionally, the terror organizations

---

<sup>10</sup> Clermont, C. (2016), “Cybersecurity applies to a marine field” in *Maritime and Port Security: Public Interest or Privat Business*, French National Institute of Maritime Safety and Administration (ENSAM).

operating in this region have developed closer ties with patrons of terror, such as Iran, which provide them with access to advanced weaponry.

The goal of the war against maritime terror is to protect Israel's shores, its maritime sovereignty and its ports. This effort includes the gathering of intelligence, patrolling outside Israel's territorial waters, protection by means of coastal radar, establishment of maritime security zones and programs for the protection of naval forces. There have been numerous changes in the defense against maritime terror and many of them are based on improvement in technology, which can be seen in the development and innovation of the coastal radar stations, planes, the Typhoon weapon station, etc. The doctrine of the fleet continues to develop, with its main goal being to protect the State of Israel based on a combination of different forces.

The adaptation of fighting tactics to meet the challenges of terrorism is not an easy task. Since modern maritime warfare is taking on the character of asymmetric and hybrid warfare, the media image achieved is sometimes more important than the actual outcome. Added to this is the conflict in the cyber domain. As a result, it is important to continually update the doctrine governing the war on maritime terror. Israel is a relatively young state, but nonetheless it has extensive experience in dealing with maritime terror. Israel, for its part, is prepared to share its experience with other countries, with the goal of creating a terror-protected domain.