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Monterey, CA; Naval Postgraduate School

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**NAVAL  
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**MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA**

**THESIS**

**ENHANCING MARITIME SECURITY  
IN THE GULF OF OMAN**

by

Faris L. Al-Balushi

December 2023

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**ENHANCING MARITIME SECURITY IN THE GULF OF OMAN**

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Commander, Royal Navy of Oman  
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS IN SECURITY STUDIES  
(COMBATING TERRORISM: POLICY AND STRATEGY)**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Gulf of Oman faces significant challenges to maritime security, jeopardizing the stability and prosperity of the Western Indian Ocean region. These challenges, such as piracy, illicit drug trafficking, weapons smuggling, and attacks on merchant vessels, contribute to a complex security landscape and disrupt freedom of navigation. This research investigates the underlying factors driving naval malign activities in the region, emphasizing the role of regional rivalries in provoking maritime threats. Focusing on Oman, this research provides a strategic framework for enhancing maritime security in the Gulf of Oman, drawing insights from international best practices and lessons learned. A central theme emphasizes the imperative of enhancing maritime domain awareness by unifying the efforts of multinational task forces, signing bilateral agreements between Oman and its partners, increasing maritime patrols by the Royal Navy of Oman, and enhancing regional cooperation. These proposed strategies align with broader imperatives for regional stability and economic resilience.



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## LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ANF	Anti-Narcotics Force
BECA	Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement
CENTCOM	Central Command
CGFM	Working Group on Fisheries Management
CMF	Combined Maritime Forces
COMCASA	Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement
CTF	Combined Task Force
CTF	Coalition Task Force
DCoC	Djibouti Code of Conduct
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
EMASoH	European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agricultural Organization
FDI	foreign direct investments
FSU	Fisheries Support Unit
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GMCP	Global Maritime Crime Program
GPS	Global Positioning System
IMSC	International Maritime Security Construct
IORA	Indian Ocean Rim Association
IRGC	Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps
IUUF	Illegal Unreported Unregulated Fishing
JOA	Joint Operations Area
JWC	Joint War Committee
LEMOA	Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement
LMA	Lloyds Market Association
MDA	Maritime Domain Awareness



MPA	Maritime Patrol Aircraft
MSC	Maritime Security Centre
MV	Merchant Vessel
NCCHT	National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking
PLO	Palestinian Liberation Front.
PN	Pakistani Navy
PSMA	Port State Measures Agreement
RAFO	Royal Air Force of Oman RAFO
ReCAAP	Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia.
RNO	Royal Navy of Oman
ROP	Royal Oman Police
SAR	Search and Rescue
SUA	Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts Against the Safety of Maritime Navigation, Protocol for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts Against the Safety of Fixed Platforms Located on the Continental Shelf.
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UAVs	Unmanned Aerial Vehicles
UKMTO	United Kingdom Maritime Trade Organization
UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	United Nations Conventional Law of Sea.
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNTOC	United Nations Convention on Transnational Organized Crime
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
USS	United States Ship
VRA	voluntary reporting area
WGBE	Working Group on the Blue Economy
WGMSS	Working Group on Maritime Safety and Security

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# I. INTRODUCTION

## A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

The Sultanate of Oman is strategically located in the Indian Ocean. It overlooks the Strait of Hormuz, a crucial corridor for global energy flow, commerce, shipping, and naval transport. Due to the importance of this area and the amount of the world's oil being exported from it, the international community established many coalitions to ensure freedom of navigation and safe passage for merchant ships.

Yet, despite these efforts, since 2019, number of attacks on merchant ships have been reported in the area and have expanded to include the Gulf of Oman.<sup>1</sup> Iran was the primary suspect behind this malign activity, but Tehran has denied involvement—usually pointing blame at nonstate armed actors who are believed to be unofficial proxies of Iran. However, most of the attacks are believed to be retaliation for Israeli attacks against Iranian merchant ships in the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, as well as retaliation for the seizure of Iranian ships by the United States and its allies.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, Iranian activities resulted in major violations of freedom of navigation for merchant ships in the area.<sup>3</sup>

While the Arabian Gulf has received a great deal of attention, less is known about the growing threats in the Gulf of Oman. This thesis, therefore, will investigate the following questions: *What are the major drivers of malign naval activities in and around the coast of Oman? How do regional rivalries and new security alliances shape maritime threats? What policy options and maritime security measures can be taken to maintain freedom of navigation in the region?*

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<sup>1</sup> Maciej Hacaga, “An Easy Target? Types of Attack on Oil Tankers by State Actors,” *Security and Defence Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (2020): 60–63, <https://doi.org/10.35467/sdq/118147>.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Kingsley et al., “Israel’s Shadow War with Iran Moves Out to Sea,” *New York Times*, March 26, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/26/world/middleeast/israel-iran-shadow-war.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Kingsley et al.

## B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Oman’s economy relies heavily on oil exports, as do the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries; however, it produces much less oil than its counterparts. In 2018, the Omani government announced its new plan—Vision 2040—to move the country to be one of the competitors in the region in terms of a sustainable economy and diversifying its sources of income.<sup>4</sup> The emergence of the maritime sector can strengthen the country’s economy by facilitating trade and commerce in the region. However, this important sector has been challenged recently due to the increase threats in maritime sector such as piracy, trafficking, illegal unreported unregulated fishing (IUUF), and attacks on merchant ships using traditional naval assets as well as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).<sup>5</sup>

The significance of this thesis is multifold. Firstly, it would contribute to the body of knowledge on maritime security in Oman. The research would provide insights into the region’s current state of maritime security, the challenges faced, and the strategies used to combat them. This would immensely benefit policymakers, security agencies, and other stakeholders involved in ensuring maritime security in Oman.

Secondly, the thesis would highlight the importance of maritime security in Oman, a long-term ally of the United States and a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council. It would underscore the need for sustained efforts to improve the security of the maritime environment and incorporate it into the existing US-Gulf security architecture for this critical region of the world. This would be particularly relevant in the context of the increasing threats caused by terrorism, piracy, and other maritime crimes. The thesis would serve as a call to action for all stakeholders to work together to enhance maritime security in Oman.

Thirdly, the thesis would provide practical recommendations on how to enhance maritime security in Oman. The research would identify best practices and lessons learned

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<sup>4</sup> Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit, *Oman Vision 2040* (Muscat, Oman: Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit, 2019), <https://www.oman2040.om/Oman2040-En.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> “Summary of Maritime Risks in Maritime Security Center,” Maritime Security Center, accessed May 13, 2023, <https://www.mod.gov.om/EN-US/MSC/PAGES/DESERT.ASPX>.

from other countries that have successfully implemented strategies to enhance maritime security under similar threats. The recommendations could be used to guide the development of security cooperation policies, procedures, and training programs for security agencies and other stakeholders involved in maritime security in Oman.

Finally, the research can help raise awareness of the importance of maritime security within Oman and other countries and international organizations. By highlighting the significance of maritime security for economic development, national security, and regional stability it can contribute to a broader understanding of the complex issues involved in securing the world's oceans and seas. Thus, it has the potential to make a valuable and important contribution to the field of maritime security and to the ongoing efforts to promote sustainable development and security in the region and beyond.

### **C. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Maritime threats are not confined solely to the Gulf of Oman. Many regions worldwide face similar challenges to their maritime security and have developed responses—local, regional, and international—to address them. These can range from building local defense capabilities to forming regional alliances and appealing to international laws and norms. This literature surveys the various maritime threats and responses to them around the globe to see best practices and options that could inform the policy responses of the Sultanate of Oman.

In an interconnected world heavily reliant on maritime trade, maritime security threats pose significant challenges to global stability, economic prosperity, and the safety of seafarers. Piracy, IUUF, terrorism, and interstate wars are among the threats that jeopardize maritime operations and increasingly attract policymakers' attention.<sup>6</sup> For the purpose of this literature review, I will categorize the common maritime security threats into two categories: maritime threats that disturb the freedom of navigation and maritime threats that abuse the freedom of navigation. I will discuss the measures taken to counter these threats accordingly.

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<sup>6</sup> Lisa Otto, *Global Challenges in Maritime Security: An Introduction* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2020), 1.

## 1. Maritime Threats That Disturb Freedom of Navigation

Freedom of navigation is defined as “the right recognized in international law, especially by treaties or agreements for vessels of one or all states to navigate streams passing through two or more states.”<sup>7</sup> The most common threats that can disturb the vessel’s movement from the port of departure to its destination are piracy, terrorism, interstate conflicts, and malign activities by state and non-state actors.

Piracy continues to pose a persistent and multifaceted threat across maritime regions worldwide, significantly impacting international shipping, seafarers, and global trade. Otto and Jernberg claim that “piracy is not a new phenomenon”<sup>8</sup> and is considered one of the earliest maritime threats to seafarers. Piracy in the modern world started around the 1500s in the Caribbean Sea and reached its peak between the 1690s and 1730s. Using national navies, colonial powers managed to end piracy in the Caribbean Sea by their law enforcement forces around the 1830s. Piracy incidents were declining until contemporary piracy spiked again in the twenty-first century.<sup>9</sup>

Contemporary piracy can be studied in the cases of Southeast Asia, Somalia, and the Gulf of Guinea since the regions were affected by this criminal activity. In Southeast Asia, piracy incidents have occurred primarily in the Malacca Strait, Singapore Strait, and waters surrounding Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines.<sup>10</sup> Davenport explores the reasons and motives behind piracy in Southeast Asia during the late 1990s, including the Asian financial crisis, the fall of the Suharto regime in Indonesia, the poverty of coastal people in Indonesia, and the rise of an independence movement in the Indonesian province of Aceh.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “freedom of navigation”, accessed June 3, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/freedom+of+navigation>.

<sup>8</sup> Lisa Otto and Leaza Jernberg, “Maritime Piracy and Armed Robbery at Sea,” in *Global Challenges in Maritime Security: An Introduction*, ed. Lisa Otto (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2020), 96.

<sup>9</sup> Otto and Jernberg, 96.

<sup>10</sup> Tara Davenport, “Combatting Piracy and Armed Robbery in Southeast Asia: An Evolution in Cooperation,” in *Freedom of Navigation and Globalization*, ed. Myron H. Nordquist and John Norton Moore (Boston: Brill, 2014), 9–50, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>11</sup> Davenport, 26.

In other words, economic and political grievances combined with opportunities such as a safe haven for piracy and weak state capacity to deter pirates.<sup>12</sup> Another factor in Southeast Asia enabled piracy: littoral states viewed the issue as an armed robbery since attacks occurred in their territorial seas and, therefore, were considered internal matters for each state to deal with independently.<sup>13</sup> This was a major obstacle to cooperation between them. Littoral states also refused the offers from external states to overcome piracy in the area because they were reluctant to permit foreign intervention within their territorial waters, notably countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia. This hesitation was often driven by media misinformation that inaccurately implied it would allow the U.S. forces to conduct patrols in the Malacca Straits, which faced significant opposition. Japan offered a joint coastguard patrol program to enhance maritime security. The United States also offered to form a Regional Maritime Security Initiative (RMSI), Originally established as a cooperative alliance among neighboring states, this initiative involved the sharing of information and the provision of advance alerts to counter transnational threats but both initiatives were refused.<sup>14</sup>

Piracy is a transnational act where the execution phase at sea is the result of a long planning process on land. Therefore, ending this process will require tremendous intelligence and security efforts as well as substantial resources, and it is hard for a single state to counter it without collaboration and cooperation with other states, especially when the consequences spill over neighboring littoral states. Davenport emphasized that international pressure continued on Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia to implement countermeasures against piracy.<sup>15</sup> In 2005, the Joint War Committee (JWC) of the Lloyd's Market Association listed the Straits of Malacca and other Indonesian ports as a "war-risk area,"<sup>16</sup> along with places like Iraq, Lebanon, Somalia, and Nigeria, which was a wake-up

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<sup>12</sup> Davenport, 26.

<sup>13</sup> Armed robbery is defined as violations within one's territorial waters, while piracy is defined as violations in the high seas.

<sup>14</sup> Davenport, "Combatting Piracy and Armed Robbery in Southeast Asia," 33.

<sup>15</sup> Davenport, 33.

<sup>16</sup> Davenport, 33.



call to these states and was a major impetus for cooperation. So, in 2004, the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) was established. It was adopted in 2006 and is now considered one of the most significant forms of cooperation in the area. It mainly focused on sharing piracy-related information among contracting states.<sup>17</sup> We can see that even in the event of a major threat like piracy, cooperation among littoral states took a while, and with the contribution of international efforts.

The second type of maritime threat that disturbs the freedom of navigation is maritime terrorism, which is a serious threat to global security. Terrorists could use the maritime environment to attack ships, ports, and other maritime infrastructure. These attacks could cause significant economic disruption, loss of life, and environmental damage. An example of maritime terrorism is the attack on the U.S. destroyer USS Cole in October 2000, which was attacked by two suicide boats loaded with explosives during a refueling stop in Aden, Yemen.<sup>18</sup> The attack left 17 U.S. sailors dead and nearly 40 others injured, creating significant damage to the ship's hull. Kim argues that maritime terrorism follows the same controversial path as international terrorism in terms of internationally agreed definition.<sup>19</sup> He explains that the controversy of the definition is due to the disagreement on the criteria for determining the legitimacy of the use of violence. There is a contentious debate on whether the definition of terrorism should cover state terrorism, where governments use terrorist acts towards their people or lend contribute to global terrorism. He also clarifies that the primary distinction between piracy and maritime terrorism lies in their underlying motives. Maritime terrorism is primarily driven by political motivations, while piracy is primarily financially motivated.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Davenport, 37.

<sup>18</sup> "USS Cole Bombing," Federal Bureau of Investigation, accessed October 17, 2023, <https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/uss-cole-bombing>.

<sup>19</sup> Suk Kyoan Kim, *Global Maritime Safety & Security Issues and East Asia* (Boston: Brill | Nijhoff, 2019), 110.

<sup>20</sup> Kim, 110.

Graham, Otto, and Horn also agree with Kim’s argument that there is a lack of an internationally agreed definition for maritime terrorism, as is the case in international terrorism.<sup>21</sup> The lack of an internationally agreed definition will disrupt the international efforts to combat this threat and consequently delay effective responses. They further argue that although data indicate that maritime terrorism poses a relatively minor threat in comparison to international terrorism, it can have many severe consequences, such as mental issues, life loss, and major economic impact including reductio in tourism.<sup>22</sup>

Kim explains that the 1985 hijack incident of Achille Lauro by four hijackers belonging to the Palestinian Liberation Front (PLO) showed a weakness in the jurisdiction aspect of the case, and the legal gap was clear to the international community.<sup>23</sup> The hijackers of the Italian cruise ship were demanding to free some Palestinian prisoners captured by Israel, but this demand was faced by Israeli refusal, resulting in the killing of an American Jewish citizen. She highlights that the dispute in this case was over whether it could be legally classified as an act of piracy under the United Nations Conventional Law of Sea (UNCLOS). Some countries, such as Austria, Italy, and Egypt, contended that the hijacking did not qualify as piracy as defined in the convention.<sup>24</sup> They argued that the hijackers’ actions did not have “private motives,” and the incident did not involve two ships. This incident contributed to the establishment in 1988 of the Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts (SUA) against the Safety of Maritime Navigation and the Safety of Fixed Platforms Located on the Continental Shelf. The main goal of the SUA Convention is to promote effective international cooperation between states to address unlawful acts committed against ships.<sup>25</sup> It aims to establish rules and mechanisms for criminal jurisdiction, extradition, and prosecution of offenders involved in such acts. The

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<sup>21</sup> Suzanne Graham, Lisa Otto, and Adrienne Horn, “Maritime Terrorism,” in *Global Challenges in Maritime Security: An Introduction*, ed. Lisa Otto (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2020), 147.

<sup>22</sup> Graham, Otto, and Horn, 149–50.

<sup>23</sup> Kim, *Global Maritime Safety & Security Issues*.

<sup>24</sup> Kim.

<sup>25</sup> “Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Maritime Navigation, Protocol for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Fixed Platforms Located on the Continental Shelf,” International Maritime Organization, July 28, 2010, <https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/SUA-Treaties.aspx>.

convention was enforced in 1992, after four years from signing it. After the 9/11 attacks, the international community expressed their concerns about the maritime domain and decided to enhance the convention to safeguard maritime trade. The convention was amended as 2005 SUA protocols and entered into force in 2010.<sup>26</sup>

## 2. Maritime Threats That Abuse Freedom of Navigation

Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated fishing (IUUF) and smuggling are distinct types of maritime threats that can affect a state's security and economic prosperity without disrupting naval activities. Smuggling and trafficking of illicit goods are other important threats in the maritime domain.

Ninety percent of illicit trade occurs at sea. Massive quantities of illicit goods, such as illegally sold oil, counterfeit merchandise, wildlife products, and narcotics, are transported across the world's waterways on a range of ships and boats. Bruwer explains that smuggling is considered a transnational organized crime since it includes transferring illegal goods over land and maritime boundaries, orchestrated by organized criminal networks.<sup>27</sup>

Bruwer further explains that the terms smuggling and trafficking are being used interchangeably to express illicit trade despite the nuances in activities involved. For example, goods might be illegal in the targeted country but legal through the transiting countries. She further clarifies that both terms are defined by international conventions except in the United Nations Convention on Transnational Organized Crime of 2000 and its Protocols (UNTOC 2000), considered the primary international instrument dealing with these types of threats.<sup>28</sup> The lack of internationally agreed definitions on certain maritime activities can lead to confusion in dealing with them and will fail to generate effective responses by states.

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<sup>26</sup> Kim, *Global Maritime Safety & Security Issues*.

<sup>27</sup> Carina Bruwer, "Smuggling and Trafficking of Illicit Goods by Sea," in *Global Challenges in Maritime Security: An Introduction*, ed. Lisa Otto (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2020), 50.

<sup>28</sup> Bruwer, 51.

Illicit trade has a connection with the land, from the source that commences the operation on a certain state to its destination on the land of another state by using the sea as a medium for this operation. Bruwer argues that if a state cannot control the flow of illicit goods from its soil, it will contribute to a further disruption at sea.<sup>29</sup> International efforts to counter trafficking are facing challenges in terms of limitations in the legal framework despite the fact that the jurisdiction acts in the United Nations Conventional Law of Sea (UNCLOS) encourage states to cooperate and respond to general criminal matters at sea but do not specifically address trafficking and smuggling.<sup>30</sup>

Another threat in the maritime domain is IUUF, which is considered a pervasive global problem that not only threatens marine ecosystems but also has significant implications for national security. This illicit activity undermines the economic stability of coastal states, depletes fish stocks, and exacerbates geopolitical tensions. Poling and Cronin explain that IUUF is commonly discussed in relation to economic, regulatory, environmental, and food security challenges. However, its significance as a nontraditional security threat is often overlooked by policymakers worldwide.<sup>31</sup>

IUUF has a dual impact on national security. Firstly, it provides direct support to illicit networks involved in various illegal activities such as trafficking narcotics, weapons, wildlife, and people. Secondly, IUUF undermines local livelihoods and food security, creating fertile grounds for piracy, terrorism, armed insurgency, and organized crime, within affected communities.<sup>32</sup> As explained by Poling and Cronin that the reduction in government revenues for coastal states further compounds these direct and indirect security risks, limiting their capacity to address these challenges effectively.<sup>33</sup> They also highlight that the United Nations General Assembly has expressed worry since 2009 regarding the

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<sup>29</sup> Bruwer, “Smuggling and Trafficking of Illicit Goods by Sea.”

<sup>30</sup> Bruwer, 57.

<sup>31</sup> Gregory B. Poling and Conor Cronin, *Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing as a National Security Threat* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2017), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep23297>.

<sup>32</sup> Poling and Cronin, 8.

<sup>33</sup> Poling and Cronin, 8.

potential associations between IUUF and transnational organized crime. This connection has led to the development of the term “fisheries crime,” which refers to the criminal activities related to IUUF and other illegal practices in the fishing industry.

The most significant international initiative to combat IUUF is the Port State Measures Agreement (PSMA).<sup>34</sup> It is considered the most ambitious effort to tackle IUUF and has the potential to have a significant impact. The Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) adopted the agreement in 2009, and it became the world’s first legally binding treaty aimed at combating IUUF when it came into force in 2016. The PSMA imposes several responsibilities on participating nations to enhance the management of their ports in order to detect, prevent, and report IUUF. Parties are required to mandate that foreign fishing vessels seek permission prior to entering a port and provide comprehensive information about their identities, operations, and catches. The port state authority holds the power to take various measures against suspected vessels engaged in illegal fishing, such as denying them the ability to unload, refuel, or resupply or even refusing entry to the port entirely.<sup>35</sup> Despite this international initiative, China did not join this agreement despite having a large fleet of fishing vessels.<sup>36</sup> According to the FAO, seventy-six states have joined this agreement to date.<sup>37</sup> The lack of international consensus hampers progress in combating this pervasive threat.

In summary, maritime security threats such as piracy, terrorism, IUUF, smuggling, and interstate wars pose significant challenges to global stability, economic prosperity, and seafarer safety. Countries have developed various responses to these threats, including building defense capabilities, forming regional alliances, and appealing to international laws. Effective responses involve collaboration among states, sharing information, enhancing defense capabilities, and targeting the root causes of these threats.

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<sup>34</sup> Poling and Cronin, 12.

<sup>35</sup> Poling and Cronin, 12.

<sup>36</sup> Poling and Cronin, 12.

<sup>37</sup> “Parties to the PSMA,” Agreement on Port State Measures (PSMA), accessed May 17, 2023, <https://www.fao.org/port-state-measures/background/parties-psma/en/>.

## **D. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SULTANATE OF OMAN**

The literature review highlights common threats to maritime security and best practices for countering those threats. This thesis is concerned with maritime security threats to Oman and how the government of Oman, and its navy in particular, could counter those threats. Three conditions have expanded threats around the coast of Oman:

- The shadow war between Iran and Israel
- The conflict in Yemen
- Iranian retaliation and balancing against the U.S. and its allies through aggressive naval activities is called “forward defense.”<sup>38</sup>

The thesis will explore how all these conditions have produced new challenges for Oman and what possible responses it could adopt based on best practices outlined in the literature review. Additionally, region-specific responses might contribute to the growing literature on maritime security threats and responses.

I will explore the drivers of malign naval activities, the impact of regional rivalries and security alliances on maritime threats, and potential policy options and security measures to maintain freedom of navigation in the region. I will also focus on Omani and regional responses to maritime threats. Published coalition forces reports such as reports from the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) or the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Organization (UKMTO), and other open-source documents will inform my analysis. The goal is to develop policy options to address the evolving threat environment in the Gulf of Oman.

## **E. THESIS OVERVIEW**

Following this introduction, Chapter II focuses on the maritime threats in the Gulf of Oman area and the emergence of new threats against merchant ships that hinder freedom

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<sup>38</sup> Ali Bagheri Dolatabadi and Mehran Kamrava, “Iran’s Changing Naval Strategy in the Persian Gulf: Motives and Features,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* ahead-of-print, no. ahead-of-print (2022): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2022.2105815>.

of navigation. Chapter III will describe the main responses to the maritime security threats in the Gulf of Oman area by regional states and the international community to counter them. The conclusion will focus on how Oman can respond more effectively and efficiently to these maritime threats in order to ensure the freedom of navigation along the Omani coasts.

## **II. MAIN MARITIME SECURITY THREATS IN THE GULF OF OMAN**

This chapter explores the significant maritime security threats in the Gulf of Oman, a strategically important region connecting major shipping routes. Maritime threats include piracy and boat seizures, small arms and drug trafficking, and, increasingly, attacks on merchant ships. Piracy has been a persistent concern, posing a significant threat to international trade routes, while terrorist activities and trafficking further add to the region's security challenges. Additionally, the alarming emergence of attacks on merchant ships using sophisticated methods like limpet mines, missiles, aerial drones, and unmanned surface vessels underscores the need for enhanced security measures in the Gulf of Oman. Interstate rivalries and tensions involve the United States, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, and Israel on the one hand, and Iran and its network of nonstate proxy actors on the other. These rivalries have motivated attacks on commercial vessels and acts of sabotage, complicating maritime security measures in the Gulf of Oman.

The obscurity of state and nonstate armed actors engaged in malign activities in this maritime domain adds to the challenge of assessing risks and undertaking effective countermeasures. Overall, this chapter highlights the complexities and interconnections of the aforementioned threats and the importance of international cooperation to address these challenges in the Gulf of Oman and its vital trade routes.

### **A. THE GULF OF OMAN**

The Gulf of Oman, which is also known by the name of the Sea of Oman lies to the west of the Arabian Sea. It is in the northwestern part of the Indian Ocean that joins the Arabian Sea with the Strait of Hormuz leading to the Arabian Gulf, as shown in Figure 1. The Gulf of Oman has borders with Iran and Pakistan to the north and the United Arab Emirates to the west. The Gulf of Oman spans approximately 560 kilometers in length and



has a maximum width of around 320 kilometers, measured between Ras al-Hadd in Oman and Gwadar Bay in Pakistan.<sup>39</sup>



Figure 1. Gulf of Oman map<sup>40</sup>

The Gulf of Oman serves as the entrance to the Arabian Gulf through the strategic Strait of Hormuz, as shown in Figure 2, making it crucial to maintain security in the region. The strait, one of the world’s most important waterways, connects the oil fields of the Arabian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, and the Indian Ocean.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> “Gulf of Oman,” WorldAtlas, February 18, 2021, <https://www.worldatlas.com/gulfs/gulf-of-oman.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Source: Jonathan Schanzer and Nicole Salter, *Oman in the Middle: Muscat’s Balancing Act between Iran and America* (Washington, DC: Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 2019), 7, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/05/09/oman-in-the-middle/>.

<sup>41</sup> Qamar Fatima and Asma Jamshed, “The Political and Economic Significance of Indian Ocean: An Analysis,” *South Asian Studies* 30, no. 2 (December 2015): 73–89.



Figure 2. Sea of Oman and the Arabian Gulf <sup>42</sup>

The Strait of Hormuz has a narrow width of 48 to 80 kilometers, featuring two 3-kilometer-wide channels exclusively used for inbound and outbound vessel traffic.<sup>43</sup> The strait carries approximately 88% of Arabian Gulf oil to the world, accounting for nearly 20% of global oil and about 35% of all seaborne oil shipments. Disruptions or closures in the Strait of Hormuz would have significant implications for both the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Gulf, emphasizing the inseparable link between their security. Therefore, maintaining security and stability in the Gulf of Oman is vital to ensure uninterrupted access to the Arabian Gulf and secure global energy supplies.<sup>44</sup>

For the Sultanate of Oman, the security of the Gulf of Oman is critical for its national defense and economic progress. Oman has invested in several ports—Sultan Qaboos, Sohar, Duqm, and Salalah—and is interested in maintaining stability around them

<sup>42</sup> Source: Ministry of Information, “Ministry of Information | Sultanate of Oman,” Sultanate of Oman, accessed July 31, 2023, <https://omaninfo.om/>.

<sup>43</sup> Fatima and Jamshed, “The Political and Economic Significance of Indian Ocean,” 75.

<sup>44</sup> Fatima and Jamshed, 75.

to attract foreign direct investments (FDI).<sup>45</sup> According to Ibrahim et al., the Sultanate of Oman’s foreign trade heavily depends on the port sector, a crucial driver for economic growth, economic diversification, and a reduction in the nation’s overreliance on oil.<sup>46</sup> As highlighted in a 2018 Ministry of Transport, Communications, and Information Technology report, the logistics domain, primarily led by ports, made up 3.8% of the country’s GDP in the same year.<sup>47</sup> Notably, over 80% of Oman’s cargo operations are managed by the ports located in Sohar and Salalah.<sup>48</sup>

## **B. BACKGROUND TO MARITIME SECURITY THREATS**

Over the past three decades, conflicts such as the Iran-Iraq War, the U.S. global war on terrorism, Iran-GCC rivalries, and the shadow war between Iran and Israel have significantly impacted maritime security in the Gulf. These conflicts have resulted in attacks on commercial vessels, deployment of naval forces, proxy wars, covert operations, and acts of sabotage, posing ongoing challenges to maintaining robust maritime security measures and safeguarding vital trade routes. The following outlines some of the historical and contemporary rivalries within this maritime domain to illustrate potential dangers in the future and the challenge of securing this environment.

### **1. Iran-Iraq War**

The Iraq-Iran War has profoundly affected the maritime security in the Arabian Gulf consequently affecting the Gulf of Oman due to their connection through the Strait of Hormuz, including increased naval presence, disruptions in trade routes, and tanker wars. In September 1980, Saddam Hussein launched a war against Iran taking advantage of the

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<sup>45</sup> Omer Ali Ibrahim, Sufian Eltayeb Mohamed Abdel- Gadir, and Sonal Devesh, “The Potential of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) as a Means of Developing Ports: Evidence from Oman,” *International Journal of Maritime History* 31, no. 4 (2019): 879–95, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0843871419874005>.

<sup>46</sup> Ali Ibrahim, Eltayeb Mohamed Abdel- Gadir, and Devesh, 880.

<sup>47</sup> Sultanate of Oman Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, *Ministry of Transport & Communications Annual Report 2018* (Sultanate of Oman: Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, 2018), 9, <https://www.mtcit.gov.om/ITAPortal/Data/English/DocLibrary/20201214114036593/MOTC-Annual%20Report%202018-English-min.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> Ali Ibrahim, Eltayeb Mohamed Abdel- Gadir, and Devesh, “The Potential of Foreign Direct Investment,” 880.

unstable conditions in Iran after the revolution in 1979.<sup>49</sup> Saddam anticipated a swift victory against Iran; however, his expectations were shattered as Iranian forces fiercely resisted, eventually driving Iraqi troops out of Iranian territories approximately after one and a half year. Subsequently, the Islamist forces of Iran extended the conflict inside Iraq, leading to six more years of war between them. This prolonged war ended in August 1988, resulting in the devastation of the war parties.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, it is important to note that this war also triggered the infamous “Tanker War” in the Gulf, as both sides targeted commercial vessels, particularly oil tankers, disrupting maritime security in the region.<sup>51</sup> Figure 3 shows the number of attacks on merchant ships during the war, including mine attacks.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, “Factional Politics in the Iran–Iraq War,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 42, no. 3–4 (2019): 480, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1347873>.

<sup>50</sup> Tabaar, 480.

<sup>51</sup> Tabaar, 501.

<sup>52</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman and Abraham Wagner, “The Tanker War and the Lessons of Naval Conflict,” in *Lessons of Modern War- Volume II: The Iran-Iraq War* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 1990), XIV–17, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/lessons-modern-war-volume-ii-iran-iraq-war-chapter-14-tanker-war-and-lessons-naval>.

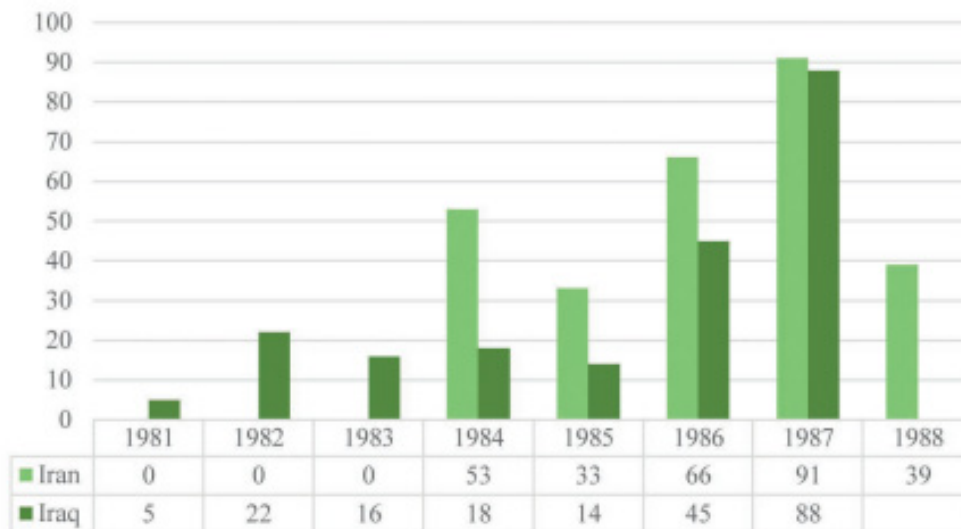


Figure 3. Number of attacks on ships by each state during the war<sup>53</sup>

## 2. U.S.–Iranian Rivalry

After the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1979, Iranian-U.S. relations experienced a dramatic shift. The new Iranian leadership displayed hostility, leading to the breakdown of diplomatic ties and the Iran hostage crisis.<sup>54</sup> According to Hussain, tensions increased between the U.S. and Iran due to the U.S. support of Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War, resulting in confrontational relations throughout the 1980s.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, as the Tanker War intensified and Kuwait faced increasing threats to its tankers, the country sought international assistance to protect its maritime interests. Kuwait requested U.S. help in safeguarding its tanker fleet by reflagging its tankers in order to protect them as they navigate through the Gulf.<sup>56</sup> The reflagging of Kuwaiti tankers got the U.S. involved in the war through a series of events that led to the U.S. taking action to protect the reflagged vessels and maintain

<sup>53</sup> Adapted from Cordesman and Wagner, XIV–17.

<sup>54</sup> Nazir Hussain, “US-Iran Relations: Issues, Challenges and Prospects,” *Policy Perspectives* 12, no. 2 (2015): 29–47, <https://doi.org/10.13169/polipers.12.2.0029>.

<sup>55</sup> Hussain, 29–47.

<sup>56</sup> Lee Allen Zatarain, *Tanker War: America’s First Conflict with Iran, 1987-1988* (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2008), 33–35.

freedom of navigation in the region.<sup>57</sup> The animosity between the U.S. and Iran deepened as the U.S. froze Iranian assets and tragically shot down an Iranian passenger plane in 1988, killing 370 people.<sup>58</sup>

U.S.–Iranian relations further deteriorated at the beginning of the new century when President George W. Bush involved Iraq, Iran, and North Korea in his “Axis of Evil” speech while addressing the Congress on January 29, 2002. U.S. presence in the Gulf during the global war on terror, the invasion of Afghanistan, and the invasion of Iraq resulted in Iran sponsoring anti-American militias in Iraq and shifting its naval strategy from defensive to defensive-offensive.<sup>59</sup> The updated strategy did not eliminate Iran’s defensive plans for its borders; rather, it may have been augmented to encompass offensive actions in response to potential attacks on Iran.<sup>60</sup> The current Iranian naval strategy started in 2016 when Iranian leaders perceived the United States as their primary threat and perceived its actions as part of a ‘soft war’ aimed at destabilizing and overthrowing the Islamic Republic, which led to the adoption of an offensive strategy.<sup>61</sup>

### 3. Iran and GCC Rivalries

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Saudi Arabia and Iran have become bitter adversaries due to historical factors and conflicting interests.<sup>62</sup> While they were once allies and conservative monarchies working together against Soviet influence, the revolution marked a shift in their relationship as Iran sought to export its revolutionary ideology to Arab Gulf states as explained by Bahi.<sup>63</sup> Religious tensions between Saudi Arabia’s Sunni sect and Iran’s Shiite sect have contributed to their rivalry, extending into regional politics and competing for Islamic leadership. The Iran-Iraq war further strained their relations,

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<sup>57</sup> Zatarain, 33–35.

<sup>58</sup> Hussain, “US-Iran Relations,” 31.

<sup>59</sup> Bagheri Dolatabadi and Kamrava, “Iran’s Changing Naval Strategy in the Persian Gulf,” 8–11.

<sup>60</sup> Bagheri Dolatabadi and Kamrava, 8–11.

<sup>61</sup> Bagheri Dolatabadi and Kamrava, 11–17.

<sup>62</sup> Riham Bahi, “Iran, the GCC and the Implications of the Nuclear Deal: Rivalry versus Engagement,” *International Spectator* 52, no. 2 (2017): 96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2017.1306395>.

<sup>63</sup> Bahi, 96.

with Saudi Arabia supporting Iraq against Iran. Despite a brief period of improved ties in the early 2000s, their rivalry and competition for influence persist, influencing their actions in the region and beyond.<sup>64</sup>

Both Iran and Saudi Arabia compete regionally to expand their influence through proxy actors.<sup>65</sup> Fundamentally, Iran is a revisionist state interested in removing U.S. forces from the region, thus increasing the risk to GCC states. In contrast, Saudi Arabia is a status quo state interested in maintaining the U.S. security architecture at the expense of Iran's sense of insecurity. In the face of perceived military inadequacy, Saudi Arabia along with some GCC members sought security by aligning with the United States, given its strong involvement in the regions affairs.<sup>66</sup> However, the change of U.S.'s policy towards the region and signing a nuclear deal with Iran have fueled fears of abandonment among the GCC states, prompting them to take on greater responsibility for their security. This has led to changing alliances and alignments as a key policy to safeguard the security of GCC.<sup>67</sup> In particular, Saudi Arabia started to emerge as a proactive leader, attempting to forge an Arab and Sunni coalitions to counter the influence of Iran in Arab's issues. The Iran nuclear deal further strengthened the alliance between Saudi Arabia, Egypt, UAE, Jordan, Qatar and some GCC members. Demonstrating a more assertive stance, Saudi Arabia lead a coalition and employed its military against Iran has shown its willingness to employ military force to push back against the Iran-backed Houthi militia in Yemen.<sup>68</sup>

The war in Yemen resulted in the escalation of the conflict between Iran and the Arab Gulf states, particularly regarding their maritime influence in the Red Sea and the Strait of Bab al-Mandab.<sup>69</sup> Iran's support for the Houthis involves smuggling weapons,

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<sup>64</sup> Bahi, 96.

<sup>65</sup> Bahi, 99.

<sup>66</sup> Bahi, 97.

<sup>67</sup> Bahi, 97.

<sup>68</sup> Bahi, 97.

<sup>69</sup> Haifa Ahmed Al Maashi, "From Security Governance to Geopolitical Rivalry: Iran-GCC Confrontation in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 11, no. 4 (2017): 46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2017.12023317>.

military supplies, equipment, and logistical support.<sup>70</sup> Bab al-Mandab has become a focal point of contention between the Gulf states and Iran, potentially leading to naval confrontations. Given the interests at stake, the GCC places greater importance on strategic maritime routes than Iran does. United Arab Emirates UAE and Saudi Arabia view the area as a vital threat area, where as Iran considers it as an area of interest.<sup>71</sup> The imperatives arising from security vulnerabilities inherent in the political and economic entanglements with Yemen, coupled with its geographical proximity, necessitate the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to enhance its maritime capabilities and cultivate novel partnerships with nations in the Horn of Africa, as well as with external powers beyond the immediate regional context. Consequently, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) strategically established naval installations in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Arabian Sea. This initiative not only bolstered its maritime prowess but also facilitated its engagement in regional security dynamics, positioning the UAE alongside Iran and Saudi Arabia in this collective security framework.<sup>72</sup>

#### **4. The Shadow War between Iran and Israel**

Iran and Israel are undergoing a shadow war between them, fought in a multi-domain land and sea.<sup>73</sup> The main reason behind this shadow war is believed to be the denial of the Iranian nuclear project by Israel, especially when the targets were nuclear scientists. Five Iranian scientists were killed between 2007 and 2012, in the form of assassination.<sup>74</sup> The killing of scientists stopped for several years until November 2020 with the assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizade a top scientist in the Iranian nuclear program.<sup>75</sup> According to Vielhaber and Bleek, the shadow war developed between them in 2005 with

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<sup>70</sup> Al Maashi, 46.

<sup>71</sup> Al Maashi, 46.

<sup>72</sup> Al Maashi, 62.

<sup>73</sup> David Vielhaber and Philipp C. Bleek, "Shadow Wars: Covert Operations against Iran's Nuclear Program," *The Nonproliferation Review* 19, no. 3 (November 2012): 484, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2012.734194>.

<sup>74</sup> Vielhaber and Bleek, 482.

<sup>75</sup> Niall McCarthy, "Chaos & Suspicion: The Killing of Iran's Nuclear Scientists," Statista Daily Data, December 7, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/chart/23680/assassinations-of-iranian-nuclear-scientists>.



a series of plane crashes that resulted in killing dozens of Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officers and continued since then, resulting in tit-for-tat retaliation.<sup>76</sup> The main shift in the war sparked when it shifted to the maritime domain, and several ships owned by these states were attacked in the sea.<sup>77</sup> Iranian vessels faced attacks both in the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, the ambiguous engine defect in an Iranian tanker in May 2019 in the Red Sea seemed to be series of attacks on Iranian ships.<sup>78</sup> Israeli-owned ships were attacked in the vicinity of the Omani coast in the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea, with one notable incident involving an Israeli owned cargo ship Helios Ray, under the flag of Bahamas, which sustained damage from two limpet mines on February 26, 2021.<sup>79</sup>

This brief historical and contemporary overview illustrates that threats to maritime security in the Gulf of Oman are both real and likely to persist in light of regional rivalries. Beyond interstate conflicts, the maritime environment is also challenged by traditional threats that are no less important to Oman’s economic and territorial security.

### **C. MARITIME THREATS IN THE GULF OF OMAN**

This section undertakes review of piracy, trafficking, and the emergence of attacks on merchant ships in the Gulf of Oman and how it impacts the maritime security and freedom of navigation in the region.

#### **1. Piracy and Armed Robbery**

Piracy in the northwestern Indian Ocean has been an enduring concern, posing a significant threat to maritime security and international trade routes. This area witnessed a surge in piracy incidents between 2008 and 2014.<sup>80</sup> Criminal networks employed sophisticated tactics to target vulnerable vessels, cargo ships, and even passenger ferries. The absence of effective governance in Somalia had created an atmosphere of instability

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<sup>76</sup> Vielhaber and Bleek, “Shadow Wars,” 486.

<sup>77</sup> Bagheri Dolatabadi and Kamrava, “Iran’s Changing Naval Strategy in the Persian Gulf.”

<sup>78</sup> “Israel-Iran Conflict at Sea,” The Iran Primer, February 21, 2023, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2021/apr/14/israel-iran-conflict-sea>.

<sup>79</sup> United States Institute of Peace.

<sup>80</sup> Sarah Percy, “Counter-Piracy in the Indian Ocean: A New Form of Military Cooperation,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 1, no. 4 (November 2016): 270, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogw018>.

and insecurity, paving the way for the emergence of an illicit economy. The widespread violence and turmoil gripped the country and created an environment in which piracy flourished, extending criminal activities from land to sea. The financial gains derived from piracy, in turn, contributed to the ongoing insurgency in Somalia, perpetuating a cycle of violence and instability throughout the nation.<sup>81</sup>

Between 2008 and 2009, piracy incidents in the north-western Indian Ocean region witnessed a drastic surge, with a staggering 200% increase in attacks involving lethal weapons, often sourced from Yemen and Somalia.<sup>82</sup> Continuing in 2010, the number of hijacked vessels rose to 53, a 12% increase from 2009 and 2008. Furthermore, the total count of crew members taken hostage reached 1,181, representing a 12% increase from the previous year and a significant 32.8% increase from 2008.<sup>83</sup> On the other hand, pirates increasingly relied on firearms during their attacks, marking a remarkable 78% rise from 2008 and a substantial 240% increase compared to 2007, continuing through February 2012. Oil tankers became the primary targets of pirates in the Gulf of Aden, Yemen's coast, the Indian Ocean, the East African coast, and the Arabian Sea. Over two-thirds of pirate attacks from 2008 to 2012 were directed at oil tankers originating from Arabian Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran.<sup>84</sup> These incidents highlighted the pirates' capability to disrupt critical shipping lanes, posing a significant threat to maritime security in the region.<sup>85</sup> In the context of the shipping industry, the main consequence was a reduction in port activities, affecting Somalia and major regional ports. This was due to increased insurance costs. The Joint War Committee of the Lloyds Market Association (LMA) had formally announced the classification of parts of the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden as war zones, consequently by May 2008, insurance premiums had

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<sup>81</sup> Freedom Onuoha, "Sea Piracy and Maritime Security in the Horn of Africa: The Somali Coast and Gulf of Aden in Perspective," *African Security Studies* 18, no. 3 (2009): 31–44, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10246029.2009.9627540>.

<sup>82</sup> Batoul Modarress, A. Ansari, and Emil Thies, "The Effect of Transnational Threats on the Security of Persian Gulf Maritime Petroleum Transportation," *Journal of Transportation Security* 5, no. 3 (September 2012): 173, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12198-012-0090-y>.

<sup>83</sup> Modarress, Ansari, and Thies, 173.

<sup>84</sup> Modarress, Ansari, and Thies, 173.

<sup>85</sup> Modarress, Ansari, and Thies, 173.

seen a substantial surge, escalating from \$500 per ship per journey to \$150,000 per ship per journey by 2010.<sup>86</sup> In the face of these escalating challenges, combating piracy in the northwestern Indian Ocean demanded a concerted effort from the international community to fortify maritime security and safeguard the vital trade routes that connect nations and economies across the globe.

## **2. Trafficking**

### **a. Human**

Human smuggling, a form of trafficking, is a current issue in the Gulf of Oman. During the third quarter of 2020, the Coast Guard Police Command intercepted and handled 322 individuals of various nationalities who were apprehended attempting to smuggle into Omani territorial seas on boats.<sup>87</sup> In this thesis, I will focus on the ones originating from and passing through Pakistan, which remains a concern to the region's security. As per a 2019 Pakistani report, the ministry of interior in Pakistan stated that, the number of organizations involved in human smuggling has exceeded one thousand across the country. These organizations actively seduce the locals to migrate abroad, coercing them to accept low-income jobs in agriculture and industrial workers or being exploited in the sex trade. Usually, these migrants get arrested and detained for a while before deporting them back to Pakistan by law enforcement in destination countries.<sup>88</sup>

Between 2009 and 2014, more than 31,000 Pakistanis were repatriated from Oman; 6,123 individuals were deported in 2013 alone.<sup>89</sup> In order to address this issue, in January 2011, the Royal Navy of Oman (RNO) and the Pakistani Navy (PN) joined forces in a joint

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<sup>86</sup> Farah Robleh Hamza and Jean-Philippe Priotti, "Maritime Trade and Piracy in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean (1994–2017)," *Journal of Transportation Security* 13 (2020): 150, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12198-018-0190-4>.

<sup>87</sup> "Oman: Over 300 Smugglers, Infiltrators Caught Entering Illegally," *Gulf Insider*, October 18, 2020, <https://www.gulf-insider.com/oman-over-300-smugglers-infiltrators-caught-entering-illegally/>.

<sup>88</sup> Waqas Ahmed, "Illegal Travels: Over Half a Million Pakistanis Sent Home in Five Years," *The Express Tribune*, October 19, 2019, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2083017/1-illegal-travels-half-million-pakistanis-sent-home-five-years>.

<sup>89</sup> Zahid Gishkori, "Illegal Immigrants: 208 Pakistanis Deported Every Day since 2009," *The Express Tribune*, January 8, 2014, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/656301/illegal-immigrants-208-pakistanis-deported-every-day-since-2009>.

effort to enhance their collaboration in addressing human trafficking, drug trafficking, and illegal fishing in the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea.<sup>90</sup> In 2019, a Pakistani report revealed that between 2014 and 2019, the number of Pakistanis deported from Oman was 26,000.<sup>91</sup>

***b. Drugs and Narcotics***

Narcotics trafficking in the Gulf of Oman remains a pressing concern due to its strategic location and susceptibility to criminal networks exploiting maritime routes for drug smuggling. As highlighted by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Global Maritime Crime Program (GMCP), drug traffickers have established a common route in the Indian Ocean.<sup>92</sup> In 2018, the UNODC GMCP held a gathering titled “Countering Narcotics Trafficking in the Indian Ocean” to evaluate the contemporary advancements in the illicit trade of narcotics within the region.<sup>93</sup> During the course of the event, analysts discerned a noteworthy evolution in the patterns of narcotics trafficking, with a discernible transition across the Indian Ocean from the Makran region to the Swahili Coast. To facilitate the subsequent conveyance from the Makran coast, traffickers employ a tactic of subdividing larger drug shipments into smaller consignments destined for diverse locations within the Indian Ocean. Leveraging the substantial maritime activity in the northern Arabian Sea, these illicit operators exploit the advantageous cover provided by dense shipping traffic to clandestinely conduct their trade in narcotics. Noteworthy drug seizures in 2019, including opium, heroin, and hashish, are documented in Table 1 according to quarterly reports issued by Pakistan’s Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF).<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Fatima Habib, “The Maritime Neighbor: Pakistan’s Relations with Oman – A Review,” *Policy Perspectives* 14, no. 1 (2017): 105–19, <https://doi.org/10.13169/polipers.14.1.0105>.

<sup>91</sup> Ahmed, “Illegal Travels.”

<sup>92</sup> Prakash Panneerselvam, “Maritime Narcotics Trafficking in the Western Indian Ocean,” *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India* 17, no. 1 (2021): 110–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09733159.2021.1963044>.

<sup>93</sup> Panneerselvam, 113.

<sup>94</sup> “ANF Publications,” Government of Pakistan Anti Narcotics Force, accessed July 25, 2023, <http://anf.gov.pk/lib-details.php?title=ANF%20Publications&type=PUBS&folder=PUBS>.

Table 1. Narcotics seized by Pakistan’s Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF)<sup>95</sup>

Agency	Cases	Arrested	Kind and quality of drugs seized (kg)				
			Opium	Heroin/morphine	Hashish	Ketamine	Cocaine
ANF	1,087	1,259	7,901.674	4,590.417	62,389.805	0	3.256
Intelligence based operations	5	15	0	1,799.00	0	150	0
Total	1,092	1,274	7,901.674	6,290.417	62,389.805	150.199	3.256

<sup>95</sup> Source: Government of Pakistan Anti Narcotics Force.

In 2021, the U.S., along with its allies and partners, working under U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, U.S. 5th Fleet, and Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) achieved a high number of seizures of illegal goods through their maritime operations.<sup>96</sup> Vice Adm. Brad Cooper led the efforts, resulting in increased seizures due to heightened naval presence and patrolling the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman. Notably, the intercepted drugs by CMF valued at over \$193 million (based on wholesale prices in the region) during their counter-drugs interdiction in 2021, surpassing the total value of drugs seized between 2016 and 2020 together.<sup>97</sup> In the context of the ongoing efforts to combat illicit activities in the maritime domain, U.S. and international forces, operating under U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, U.S. 5th Fleet, and Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), have continued their vigilant counter-narcotics operations in the Gulf of Oman and its surrounding regions. As a follow-up to the record-breaking seizures of illicit cargo achieved in 2021, the present study examines the subsequent years, 2022 and 2023, to assess the effectiveness of heightened patrols and interdiction efforts.<sup>98</sup>

Table 2 provides a comprehensive overview of the drug seizures the U.S. and its allies conducted during the specified period. The value of illicit drugs seized, based on regional wholesale prices, along with the types of drugs intercepted during the maritime interdictions.

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<sup>96</sup> “Record Seizures in 2021 after NAVCENT and CMF Increase Patrols,” U.S. Central Command News, January 18, 2022, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/2903023/record-seizures-in-2021-after-navcent-and-cmf-increase-patrols/>.

<sup>97</sup> NAVCENT Public Affairs.

<sup>98</sup> NAVCENT Public Affairs.

Table 2. Seized narcotics in 2022–2023<sup>99</sup>

Date	Forces	Area	Types of drugs	Market value
15 Jan 2022	Royal Navy – UK	Gulf of Oman	Heroin Methamphetamine Hashish	\$ 26 million
23 Apr 2022	Pakistan Navy	Gulf of Oman	Hashish	\$ 2 million
05 May 2022	Royal Navy – UK	Gulf of Oman	Heroin	\$ 4 million
12 May 2022	United States Coast Guard	Gulf of Oman	Hashish	\$ 10000
15 May 2022	United States Coast Guard	Gulf of Oman	Heroin Methamphetamine Hashish Amphetamine pills	\$ 17 million
16 May 2022	United States Navy	Gulf of Oman	Methamphetamine	\$ 39 million
31 May 2022	United States Coast Guard	Gulf of Oman	Heroin	\$ 11 million
30 Aug 2022	United States Coast Guard	Gulf of Oman	Hashish Amphetamine	20 \$ million
27 Sept 2022	United States Coast Guard	Gulf of Oman	Heroin	\$ 85 million
28 Sept 2022	United States Navy	Gulf of Oman	Hashish	\$ 10 million
02 Oct 2022	Royal Navy – UK	Middle east	Crystal methamphetamine	\$ 45 million
10 Oct 2022	United States Coast Guard	Gulf of Oman	Hashish Amphetamine	\$ 48 million
27 Dec 2022	French Navy	Arabian Sea	Hashish Heroin	\$ 24 million
30 Jan 2023	United States Coast Guard	Gulf of Oman	Methamphetamine Hashish	\$ 33 million
25 Feb 2023	United States Coast Guard	Arabian Sea	Methamphetamine Hashish Amphetamine	\$ 20 million
21 Apr 2023	United States Navy	Arabian Sea	Methamphetamine Hashish	\$ 42 million
8–10 May 2023	United States Coast Guard	Arabian Sea	Methamphetamine Hashish	\$ 30 million
19 Apr–18 May 2023	Four operations by French Navy	Arabian Sea	Methamphetamine Hashish	\$ 108 million

<sup>99</sup> Adapted from “News Articles,” U.S. Central Command, accessed July 25, 2023, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/>.

It is worth noting that the data presented here is crucial in understanding the ongoing efforts to combat drug trafficking and other illicit activities in the region.

*c. Weapons*

The Gulf of Oman has become a concerning hotspot for weapon trafficking, characterized by challenges in identifying the origin and destination of illegal arms shipments due to the absence of proper paperwork's, identification numbers, and means of tracking.<sup>100</sup> Despite these difficulties, patterns have emerged from maritime interdictions, with a significant number of captured vessels navigating between Yemen and Iran. Moreover, stateless dhows, often sailed by crew from Yemen, were frequently involved in trafficking. The alarming escalation in arms trafficking was exemplified by recent incidents when a fishing vessel was interdicted by U.S. warships On November 8, 2022, three U.S. and was carrying ammonium perchlorate urea fertilizer of more than 170 tons.<sup>101</sup> Subsequently, USS Lewis B. Puller seized about seven thousand proximity fuses, one million bullets, and approximately five thousand pounds of propellant for rocket grenades on December 1, 2022. Soon after this seizure, in mid-January 2023, another fishing vessel was boarded by a French warship patrolling in the Gulf of Oman and was full of weapons and ammunitions consisting of three thousand assault rifles, half a million of bullets and twenty anti-tank missiles. These incidents demonstrate the sophistication and dangerous magnitude of weapon trafficking operations in the area, posing significant risks to regional stability and maritime security.<sup>102</sup>

According to the United Nations panel report S/2023/130 dated 21 February, 2023, the manner in which arms were supplied to the Houthis was relatively consistent throughout the reported period.<sup>103</sup> The report showed that Traditional sailing vessels

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<sup>100</sup> Leonardo Jacopo Maria Mazzucco, "Countering Smuggling in the Arabian Sea: Multinational Approach Delivering Results," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington* (blog), March 1, 2023, <https://agsiw.org/countering-smuggling-in-the-arabian-sea-multinational-approach-delivering-results/>.

<sup>101</sup> Mazzucco.

<sup>102</sup> Mazzucco.

<sup>103</sup> "Reports," United Nations Security Council, accessed July 20, 2023, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/2140/panel-of-experts/work-and-mandate/reports>.



(dhows) and smaller boats in the Arabian Sea were utilized for transporting weapons, ammunition, and related items. The report further indicates a consistent trend of smuggling activities. Additionally, the UN Panel has been investigating the emergence of fertilizer trafficking along with chemicals that believed to be contributing to the development of explosives and oxidizers for solid fuel propellants.<sup>104</sup>

### **3. Attacks on Merchant Ships**

The Gulf of Oman has witnessed an alarming emergence of maritime attacks against merchant ships, raising concerns about the safety and security of commercial vessels in the region. The attacks against merchant ships in the Gulf of Oman have employed diverse methods, including the use of limpet mines, missiles, and drones to target and inflict damage on these vessels. These sophisticated techniques have posed significant challenges to maritime security in the region. Additionally, there have been reports of hijack attempts, where armed assailants sought to seize control of merchant ships, further emphasizing the need for enhanced security measures to safeguard commercial shipping lanes in the area.

#### ***a. Types of Attacks on Merchant Ships***

Table 3 presents an overview of the recent attacks against merchant ships, highlighting the methods employed in these incidents. Covering the period from 2019 to 2023, this comprehensive analysis sheds light on the evolving tactics utilized by perpetrators during this timeframe in order to provide a valuable snapshot of the patterns and strategies observed during these attacks.

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<sup>104</sup> United Nations Security Council.

Table 3. Attacks in the Gulf of Oman from 2019 until 2023

Year	Date	Targets	Owner	Type of attack	Casualties	Source Note
2019	12 May	Four tankers	2 x Saudi 1 x Norway 1 x UAE	Limpet mines	Nil	Source <sup>105</sup>
	13 June	Front Altair	Norway	Limpet mines	Nil	Source <sup>106</sup>
Kokuka Courageous		Japan	Limpet mines	Nil		
2021	26 Feb	Helios Ray	Israel	Limpet mines	Nil	Source <sup>107</sup>
	25 March	Container ship Lori	Israel	Missile attack.	Nil	
	13 April	Hyprion Ray	Israel	Missile attack	Nil	
	30 July	MV Mercer street	Israel	Drone attack	2 x killed	
	3 Aug	Asphalt princess	UAE	Hijack.	Nil	Source <sup>108</sup>
2022	15 Nov	Pacific Zircon	Israel	Drone attack	Nil	Source <sup>109</sup>

<sup>105</sup> Jonathan Marcus, “UAE Tanker Attacks Blamed on ‘State Actor,’” BBC News, June 7, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48551125>.

<sup>106</sup> “Gulf of Oman Tanker Attacks: What We Know,” BBC News, June 13, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48627014>.

<sup>107</sup> Seth J. Frantzman, “Is Iran Escalating in the Gulf of Oman? - Analysis,” *Jerusalem Post*, November 16, 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran-news/article-722540>.

<sup>108</sup> “MV Asphalt Princess: Ship Hijacked off UAE Ordered to Sail to Iran,” BBC News, August 3, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-58078506>.

<sup>109</sup> Frantzman, “Is Iran Escalating in the Gulf of Oman?”

Year	Date	Targets	Owner	Type of attack	Casualties	Source Note
2023	10 Feb	Campo Square	Israel	Drone attack	Nil	Source <sup>110</sup>
	27 Apr	Advantage Sweet	USA	Siezed	Nil	Source <sup>111</sup>
	3 May	Niovi	Greece	Siezed	Nil	Source <sup>112</sup>
	5 Jul	TRF Moss	Singapore	Attempt	Nil	Source <sup>113</sup>

***b. Motives behind Attacks***

Hacaga argues that states continue to hold the utmost significance as the primary actors in the maritime domain, surpassing transnational actors by a substantial margin. Actions by nonstate actors are often regarded as relatively less influential at a regional level due to their limited capabilities when compared to states’ capabilities. He focuses on three occasions when state actors were involved in attacks on merchant ships during world wars, tanker wars between Iran and Iraq, and the tanker attacks in 2019 in the Gulf of Oman.<sup>114</sup> He explains that on the first two occasions, the actors were the parties involved in the wars, but on the third occasion, the attackers were unclear due to the denial of taking responsibility for carrying out the attacks by any party. However, the Houthi group claimed the attacks on Saudi-flagged ships in 2018 due to the conflict in Yemen.

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<sup>110</sup> “Israeli-Linked Ship Attacked Last Week in Arabian Sea, Manager Says,” Reuters, February 18, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-linked-ship-attacked-last-week-arabian-sea-manager-says-2023-02-18/>.

<sup>111</sup> Beatrice Farhat, “Iran’s IRGC Seizes Second Oil Tanker in Gulf Waters in Six Days, Says US Navy,” Al-Monitor, May 3, 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/05/irans-irgc-seizes-second-oil-tanker-gulf-waters-six-days-says-us-navy>.

<sup>112</sup> Farhat.

<sup>113</sup> “U.S. Prevents Iran from Seizing Two Merchant Tankers in Gulf of Oman,” U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, July 5, 2023, <https://www.cusnc.navy.mil/Media/News/Display/Article/3448159/us-prevents-iran-from-seizing-two-merchant-tankers-in-gulf-of-oman/#:~:text=On%20July%205%2C%20U.S.%20forces,incidents%20occurred%20in%20international%20waters>.

<sup>114</sup> Hacaga, “An Easy Target?”

The diversity of selected targets, ranging from tankers and container ships to specific vessels belonging to different countries, underscores the likelihood of multiple motives driving the maritime attacks in the Gulf of Oman and its vicinity. This variety of targets suggests that a single factor may not solely drive the motivations behind these incidents but rather a combination of factors, including geopolitical interests, territorial disputes, regional rivalries, and attempts to disrupt critical shipping routes. The involvement of both state and non-state actors further emphasizes the complexity of the situation, as various parties pursue their interests through asymmetric means or as proxies in ongoing conflicts. Analyzing the multifaceted nature of these attacks becomes crucial to comprehending the region's broader security challenges and dynamics.

*c. Attacks Investigations*

A number of investigations have probed attacks on merchant ships, but two incidents have drawn particular attention for their geopolitical implications. The coordinated attacks on four oil tankers near Fujairah in May 2019 and the MV Mercer Street assault both necessitated extensive investigations. The former displayed a “sophisticated and coordinated operation,” while the latter involved the use of high explosives and the loss of lives of two persons, raising questions about potential state involvement.

(1) Fujairah 12<sup>th</sup> May 2019 attack

On June 6, 2019, the United Nations Security Council received a briefing from the Permanent Representatives of the United Arab Emirates, the Kingdom of Norway, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia regarding their initial investigation findings on the coordinated attacks that took place on May 12, 2019, near the Fujairah port, involving four oil tankers. The diplomats described the attack as a “sophisticated and coordinated operation” but refrained from attributing responsibility to any specific nation. The delineation of events underscored the engagement of adept navigation utilizing high-speed watercraft and proficient divers, conjecturally involved in the precise emplacement of limpet mines beneath the waterline of the vessels. This phenomenon implies a requisite association with

a state actor possessing substantial operational capabilities.<sup>115</sup> However, Iran’s Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, expressed disapproval of the meeting and accused the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad of fabricating intelligence related to the oil tanker attacks. In contrast, U.S. officials directly implicated Iran as the responsible party for the attack.<sup>116</sup>

(2) MV Mercer Street attack

The investigation on the MV Mercer Street attack revealed the use of a military-grade explosive in the attack, resulting in significant damage in the wheelhouse. Chemical tests confirmed the explosive as RDX, while experts identified drone components that closely resembled Iranian attack drones. The attack’s proximity to the Iranian coast, within the typical range of Iranian drones, heightened suspicions of Iranian involvement. Certain evidence was sent for further testing and verification at a U.S. national laboratory, and the findings were corroborated by both U.K. and Israeli explosive experts, pointing to the production of the responsible drone in Iran.<sup>117</sup>

Although both attacks took place in the Gulf of Oman and the surrounding area, Oman was not part of these investigations.

In conclusion, the Gulf of Oman is marked by a complex and diverse array of maritime security threats that pose significant challenges to the stability and safety of this critical waterway. These threats span a wide spectrum, encompassing both traditional and emerging issues. The interstate rivalries and tensions among major regional and global powers, including the United States, Iraq, Iran, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and

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<sup>115</sup> “United Arab Emirates, Norway, Saudi Arabia Brief UN Security Council on High Degree of Sophistication behind Fujairah Attacks,” Permanent Mission of the United Arab Emirates to the United Nations, June 6, 2019, <https://uaeun.org/united-arab-emirates-norway-saudi-arabia-brief-un-security-council-on-high-degree-of-sophistication-behind-fujairah-attacks/>.

<sup>116</sup> “Iran Says Mossad ‘Fabricating Intelligence’ on Oil Tanker Attacks,” Al-Monitor, June 6, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/06/iran-uae-fujairah-oil-tankers-sabotage-zarif-mossad-unsc.html>.

<sup>117</sup> “U.S. Central Command Statement on the Investigation into the Attack on the Motor Tanker Mercer Street,” U.S. Central Command, August 6, 2021, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/2722418/us-central-command-statement-on-the-investigation-into-the-attack-on-the-motor/>.

Israel, have further contributed to a volatile environment. The shadow war between Iran and Israel has resulted in a new form of maritime threats by attacking commercial vessels. These rivalries illustrate the range of geopolitical threats that impact maritime security in the Gulf of Oman.

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### III. MAIN RESPONSES TO MARITIME SECURITY THREATS

This chapter embarks on an in-depth analysis of the strategies employed by the Sultanate of Oman at three distinct levels—national, regional, and international—to counter the myriad maritime threats that pervade Oman’s extensive territorial seas and the sprawling Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), spanning 556,081 square kilometers as shown in Figure 4. These multipronged strategies reflect Oman’s unwavering commitment to safeguarding its maritime interests. This chapter will also assess the effectiveness of these strategies in safeguarding maritime security in the Gulf of Oman.

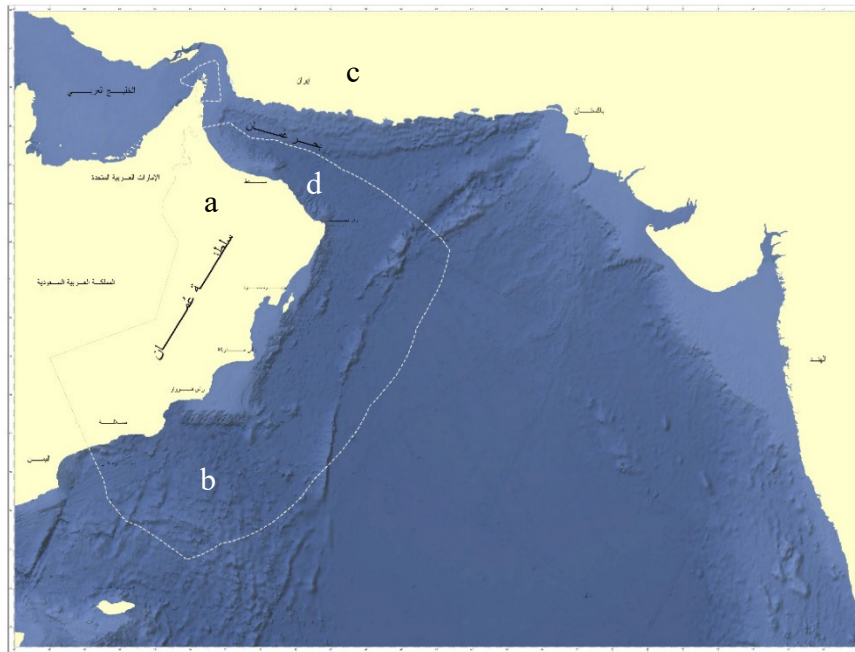


Figure 4. Economic Exclusive Zone area of Oman<sup>118</sup>

- a. Sultanate of Oman
- b. Omani EEZ
- c. Islamic Republic of Iran
- d. Oman Sea or Gulf of Oman

<sup>118</sup> Adopted from the Oman National Hydrographic Office (ONHO) in Muscat, showing the median line of Oman’s EEZ, and is not to be used to determine international borders.



At the national level, Oman has made significant investments in military and civilian sectors to address maritime threats comprehensively. The Royal Navy of Oman, established during Sultan Qaboos bin Said's reign, plays a pivotal role in safeguarding coastal waters, territorial seas, and the EEZ. The Omani Coast Guard Police, under the Royal Oman Police (ROP), forms a maritime security barrier, responding to various threats promptly. The Royal Air Force of Oman actively engages in maritime security operations, including reconnaissance, search and rescue. On the civilian front, Oman has enacted legislation to combat internationally agreed-upon threats, such as human trafficking<sup>119</sup> and illegal fishing.<sup>120</sup> Collaboration between various government entities underscores Oman's commitment to addressing these global challenges effectively.

At the regional level, Oman strongly emphasizes fostering cooperation among neighboring nations. As an active member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA),<sup>121</sup> Oman collaborates with regional partners to address maritime security challenges. Additionally, Oman plays a pivotal role in regional initiatives, such as the Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC) to combat piracy and other illicit activities within the Indian Ocean's western region.<sup>122</sup> Moreover, Oman's participation in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Unified Naval Operations Center highlights its commitment to enhancing coordination with fellow Gulf states in countering maritime threats in the region.<sup>123</sup>

At the international level, Oman pursues a strategy of positive neutrality to safeguard the security and stability of the region, emphasizing a commitment to non-alignment by actively avoiding affiliation with any international coalitions.<sup>124</sup> However,

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<sup>119</sup> H.M. Sultan Qaboos bin Said, "Law of Combatting Human Trafficking," *The Law*, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://nccht.om/the-law/>.

<sup>120</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization, "Parties to the PSMA."

<sup>121</sup> "IORA," Indian Ocean Rim Association, accessed May 19, 2023, <https://www.iora.int/en>.

<sup>122</sup> "About DCOC," Djibouti Code of Conduct, January 29, 2009, <https://dcoc.org/about-us/>.

<sup>123</sup> "Sultanate of Oman," GCC Member States, accessed October 29, 2023, <https://www.gcc-sg.org/en-us/AboutGCC/MemberStates/Pages/MemberStatesDetails.aspx?MemberID=4>.

<sup>124</sup> Hamood Mansoor Al Amri, "Oman's Foreign Policy: Neutrality & Mediation" (Sultan Qaboos University, April 9, 2022), 8.

several collaborative initiatives have been established to enhance regional maritime security with Oman not being part of them. These efforts include the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), which addresses piracy, smuggling, and other maritime threats. The European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH) initiative also focuses on navigational security and regional dialogue.<sup>125</sup> Furthermore, the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) is dedicated to deterring state-sponsored threats and ensuring navigational freedom in the Middle East’s international waters. These international partnerships reflect a commitment to working collectively with the global community to safeguard maritime interests and promote stability in the region.<sup>126</sup>

#### **A. OMAN’S RESPONSE TO MARITIME THREATS AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL**

Oman invested in both military and civilian sectors to address maritime threats and combat them in all aspects. Militarily, the Royal Navy of Oman has developed since the Renaissance in 1970 when His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said became the Sultan of Oman and established the navy under the Sultan’s Armed Forces umbrella. Since then, the Navy has developed in all aspects. Various ships joined the fleet to fulfill their requirement to defend the coastal waters and exercise sovereignty over the territorial seas.<sup>127</sup> Along with the Navy, Omani coastguards developed under the umbrella of the Royal Oman Police (ROP). Coast Guard Police command centers are deployed along the coastal strip of the Sultanate, from the northern and southern borders, forming a maritime security barrier for prompt and immediate response to maritime incidents.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> “European Maritime Awareness in the SoH (EMASOH): Political Statement by the Governments of Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, and Portugal,” France Diplomacy, January 20, 2020, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/europe/news/article/european-maritime-awareness-in-the-soh-emasoh-political-statement-by-the>.

<sup>126</sup> “IMSC - International Maritime Security Construct,” International Maritime Security Construct, accessed June 3, 2023, <https://www.imscsentinel.com>.

<sup>127</sup> Royal Navy of Oman, “About Royal Navy of Oman,” Royal Navy of Oman, accessed October 4, 2023, <https://www.mod.gov.om/en-US/rmo/pages/about-us.aspx>.

<sup>128</sup> Maritime Security Center, “مركز الأمن البحري شرطة عمان السلطانية (خفر السواحل) [Royal Oman Police (Coast Guard)],” Oman Ministry of Defence, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://www.mod.gov.om/ar-OM/MSO/Pages/2016/06/21-6-2016.aspx>.

The Coast Guard Police command responds through its operational room, which continuously handles various maritime threats, including maritime assistance and other security crimes such as smuggling and infiltration. It also receives reports related to marine pollution and unusual maritime phenomena.<sup>129</sup> In order to uphold a heightened standard of security within ports, the Port Security Administration was instituted in September 2013. This establishment operates under the jurisdiction of the Coast Guard Police, as directed by the decision of the Inspector General of Police and Customs. The primary mandate of the Port Security Administration is to assume responsibility for the maintenance of security protocols and the safeguarding of port facilities.<sup>130</sup>

The Royal Air Force of Oman actively engages in maritime security operations by providing maritime reconnaissance and search and rescue missions. Additionally, the Air Force plays a crucial role in combating oil pollution, employing dedicated aircraft and coordinating efforts with the Ministry of Environment and Climate Affairs to supply oil dispersants for containing any oil pollution within Omani territorial waters and the EEZ.<sup>131</sup>

In the civilian sector, the Anti-Trafficking Law of 2008 (promulgated by Royal Decree No 126/2008) clearly shows Oman's role in combatting internationally agreed threats.<sup>132</sup> The Foreign Ministry collaborates with various governmental entities, including the National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking (NCCHT), the Public Prosecution, Royal Oman Police, the Ministry of Social Development, the Ministry of Manpower, and the Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs, to address the global issue of human trafficking.<sup>133</sup> On the fisheries side, the Royal Decree 20/2019 promulgated the Aquatic Living Resources law, which obliges the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries the

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<sup>129</sup> Maritime Security Center.

<sup>130</sup> Rashid Al Mahrazi, "قائد شرطة خفر السواحل: جهاز الشرطة يشهد تطوراً ملحوظاً في كافة المجالات," [Coast Guard Police Commander: The police force is witnessing remarkable development in all fields], Shabiba, January 4, 2016, <https://shabiba.com/article/220>.

<sup>131</sup> Maritime Security Center, "مركز الأمن البحري سلاح الجو السلطاني العماني," [Maritime Security Center, Royal Airforce of Oman], 2014, <https://www.mod.gov.om/ar-OM/MSC/Pages/forcs.aspx>.

<sup>132</sup> H.M. Sultan Qaboos bin Said, "Law of Combatting Human Trafficking."

<sup>133</sup> "Human Trafficking," Foreign Ministry of Oman, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://fm.gov.om/policy/human-trafficking/>.

responsibility to issue all regulations regarding fishing activities in Oman, including hobby fishing and commercial fishing. The ministry is also responsible for allocating observers to monitor any violation in the fishing regulations regarding fishing seasons or the type of gear used.<sup>134</sup>

## 1. The Royal Navy of Oman

The formation of the Royal Navy of Oman (RNO) during the early 1970s can be seen as a revival and extension of Oman’s rich maritime heritage. In the past, Oman boasted one of the region’s largest naval and commercial fleets, spanning from the Arabian Gulf to Madagascar.<sup>135</sup> This fleet maintained close ties with various international ports, significantly enhanced diplomatic and trade relations, and safeguarded the Omani Empire. Today, the Royal Navy of Oman carries forward this historical legacy, fulfilling its noble responsibilities to ensure security and stability in Oman’s maritime surroundings.<sup>136</sup>

The RNO’s primary responsibility in maritime security involves carrying out sea patrols along the coastlines, within Oman’s territorial seas, and within the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), along with other tasks as follows:

- Conduct maritime patrols in order to protect the Omani Territorial Seas and Exclusive Economic Zone from illicit activities.
- Coordinate with maritime patrol aircraft (MPA) from RAFO during patrols.
- Conduct boarding operations at sea as required.
- Response to any maritime threat under multi-forces operations.
- Provide the required assistance and/or aid to stranded, defected ships.<sup>137</sup>

The Royal Navy of Oman (RNO) faces various maritime challenges necessitating its presence in Oman’s territorial seas and exclusive economic zone. To counter these

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<sup>134</sup> وزارة الثروة الزراعية و السمكية وموارد المياه، [Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries],” Oman Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://maf.gov.om/laws/Details/1080>.

<sup>135</sup> “Royal Navy of Oman,” Maritime Security Center, accessed October 4, 2023, <https://internal.mod.gov.om/EN-US/MSC/PAGES/NAVY.ASPX>.

<sup>136</sup> Maritime Security Center.

<sup>137</sup> “Maritime Security Center,” Oman Ministry of Defence, accessed October 4, 2023, <https://internal.mod.gov.om/en-US/MSC/Pages/aboutus.aspx>.

challenges and threats, the maritime area along the coast of Oman is divided into different naval operation areas, with assigned ships patrolling these areas under the direct control of an area commander. Additionally, the RNO conducts search and rescue operations and plays a crucial role in supporting the Maritime Security Center.<sup>138</sup> While patrol ships are stationed in each naval operational area, the extensive Omani coastline necessitates ongoing surveillance, potentially benefitting from technological advancements to enhance patrol capabilities.

RNO cultivates strong relationships with the naval forces of neighboring countries to foster mutual cooperation to enhance maritime security in the region by conducting annual exercises.<sup>139</sup> Oman maintains a unique diplomatic position in its relationships with Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Oman has successfully nurtured positive and constructive relations with its neighboring country.<sup>140</sup> Simultaneously, Oman is a member of the GCC, which includes countries with varying levels of relations with Iran. Furthermore, Oman conducts annual search and rescue exercises with Iran, demonstrating its commitment to fostering regional safety and security. This cooperative effort in search and rescue further solidifies Oman's role as a stabilizing force in the region by promoting cooperation and trust among neighboring nations, which is essential for the overall well-being and security of the area.<sup>141</sup> Table 4 shows the main exercises conducted by RNO with neighboring and partner countries. This collaboration extends beyond joint exercises; it also encompasses real-time operations. An exemplary instance is the joint response of the Royal Navy of Oman (RNO) and the U.S. Navy to the hijacking of MV Asphalt Princess. In this operation, both Navy warships closed in on the vessel, which compelled the hijackers to abandon the ship and make their escape. Furthermore, the Royal

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<sup>138</sup> Maritime Security Center, "Royal Navy of Oman."

<sup>139</sup> Maritime Security Center.

<sup>140</sup> Noraini Zulkifli and Mohd Ariffin, "Iran and Oman Conflict in The Strait of Hormuz: The Potential for Cooperation," *International Journal of Education and Humanities* 3 (2023): 27, [https://doi.org/10.58557/\(ijeh\).v3i1.131](https://doi.org/10.58557/(ijeh).v3i1.131).

<sup>141</sup> "Oman, Iran Conduct Naval Exercise," Oman News Agency, December 16, 2021, <https://omannews.gov.om/topics/en/79/show/106669>.

Air Force of Oman’s maritime patrol aircraft played an integral role in this well-coordinated operation.<sup>142</sup>

Table 4. Naval exercises conducted by RNO and its partners

Name of Exercise	Forces involved	When	Source note
International Maritime Exercise	Oman and International partners	Annually	Source <sup>143</sup>
Khunjar Hadd	Oman, USA, UK, and France	Annually	Source <sup>144</sup>
Naseem Albahr	Oman and India	Every two years	Source <sup>145</sup>
Search and Rescue Exercise	Oman and Iran	Annually	Source <sup>146</sup>
Thamar Altayeb Exercise	Oman and Pakistan	Every two years	Source <sup>147</sup>
Deraa Aljazeera Exercise	Oman and GCC	Determined by GCC	Source <sup>148</sup>
Swift Sword Exercise	Oman and UK	Determined by Oman and UK authorities	Source <sup>149</sup>

<sup>142</sup> “Asphalt Princess Crew Reportedly Disabled Vessel to Stop Boarders,” *Maritime Executive*, August 6, 2021, <https://maritime-executive.com/article/asphalt-princess-crew-reportedly-disabled-vessel-to-stop-boarders>.

<sup>143</sup> “U.S. Navy, 50 Partners Start International Maritime Exercise 2023,” U.S. Navy News, February 27, 2023, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/3310707/us-navy-50-partners-start-international-maritime-exercise-2023>.

<sup>144</sup> “U.S. Navy Completes Participation in Oman-Led Naval Exercise,” U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, May 11, 2023, <https://www.cusnc.navy.mil/Media/News/Display/Article/3391949/us-navy-completes-participation-in-oman-led-naval-exercise>.

<sup>145</sup> “Naseem Al Bahr - 2022,” Indian Navy, November 24, 2022, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/%E2%80%98naseem-al-bahr-2022%E2%80%99>.

<sup>146</sup> Oman News Agency, “Oman, Iran Conduct Naval Exercise.”

<sup>147</sup> “Royal Navy of Oman and Pakistan Navy Hold Exercise,” *Times of Oman*, December 10, 2021, <https://timesofoman.com/article/110369-royal-navy-of-oman-and-pakistan-navy-hold-exercise>.

<sup>148</sup> “The Conclusion of the 10th Joint Peninsula Shield Military Drill,” GCC News, March 9, 2019, <https://www.gcc-sg.org/en-us/MediaCenter/NewsCooperation/News/Pages/news2019-3-9-1.aspx>.

<sup>149</sup> “A Visual Guide to Exercise Saif Sareea Logistics,” UK Defence and Armed Forces, September 25, 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/a-visual-guide-to-exercise-saif-sareea-logistics>.

## 2. Maritime Security Center

According to the directives of His Majesty, the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, the Maritime Security Centre (MSC) was established in 2013.<sup>150</sup> The MSC collaborates with various military, security, and civilian agencies involved in maritime security operations.

The primary responsibilities of the MSC include the command and control of maritime security operations within Oman's maritime territory. This involves safeguarding ports, marine installations, and the coastline, as well as combating organized crime, illegal trade, piracy, sea pollution, obstruction of international navigation routes, maritime terrorism, global changes affecting the sea, maritime conflicts, infiltration, smuggling, fisheries protection, search and rescue (SAR) operations, and providing assistance to vessels in Oman's maritime zone. The MSC works closely with Omani agencies responsible for maritime security and also collects and analyzes data, which is shared with international maritime security organizations monitoring threats to maritime safety.

The MSC utilizes a variety of communication channels and methods to receive incident reports, ensuring a rapid and efficient response. Its dedicated team employs specialized systems and equipment to continuously monitor the Omani Maritime zone 24/7 to preserve safety and stability to carry out a number of tasks, mainly being:

- Active coordination with government agencies for the enhancement of maritime security.
- Enhance collaboration and information sharing with allies, partners and with the regional organizations involved in maritime security.
- Formulate action plans to address illegal activities and organized maritime crimes within ports, facilities, and along coastal areas.<sup>151</sup>

Despite Oman's dedicated efforts in addressing maritime threats, the sheer expanse of its territorial seas and the strategic significance of its location at the Arabian Gulf entrance underscore the challenge's magnitude. The vast sea area and Oman's pivotal role in global trade routes necessitate a broader international response to counter these threats

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<sup>150</sup> Oman Ministry of Defence, "Maritime Security Center."

<sup>151</sup> Oman Ministry of Defence.

effectively. Recognizing the global importance of this maritime gateway, the international community has been prompted to join forces, setting up collaborative initiatives and partnerships that extend beyond Oman’s individual capabilities. This collective response reflects the shared commitment to safeguarding Oman’s interests and upholding global maritime security and stability in this critical region.

## **B. REGIONAL RESPONSES**

Oman places particular importance on regional cooperation and actively engages in regional treaties and initiatives. The regional policy emphasizes the pursuit of peace, with Oman actively participating in regional cooperation and fostering harmonious relationships among nations.<sup>152</sup> Oman is a member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA),<sup>153</sup> a signatory member in the Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC) and its Jeddah Amendment,<sup>154</sup> and a member in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).<sup>155</sup>

In the realm of maritime security in the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman area, several regional initiatives have emerged as robust responses to address common threats and challenges. These initiatives are driven by the imperative need for enhanced cooperation and coordination among nations sharing these vital maritime waters. In this section, we will explore three significant endeavors: the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC) and its Jeddah Amendment, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Unified Naval Operations Center. These initiatives collectively demonstrate a commitment to safeguarding maritime security, combating piracy, illegal activities at sea, and promoting stability in a strategically vital region.

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<sup>152</sup> “Foreign Policy,” Foreign Ministry of Oman, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://fm.gov.om/policy/foreign-policy/>.

<sup>153</sup> Indian Ocean Rim Association, “IORA.”

<sup>154</sup> Djibouti Code of Conduct Trust Fund, “About DCOC.”

<sup>155</sup> Secretariat General Gulf Cooperation Council, “Sultanate of Oman.”



## 1. Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) was established on March 7, 1997.<sup>156</sup> It emerged as an inter-governmental organization in response to the need for enhanced regional cooperation and dialogue among the countries bordering the Indian Ocean. The organization was established with the aim of fostering economic growth, encouraging sustainable progress, and cooperation across various sectors within the Indian Ocean region.<sup>157</sup> Additionally, given the geopolitical significance of the Indian Ocean and its susceptibility to various security challenges, IORA also serves as a platform for addressing security issues such as maritime security, piracy, terrorism, and transnational crime.<sup>158</sup> Through its comprehensive framework, IORA seeks to foster collaboration in trade, investment, maritime safety, academic exchange, and other areas of shared interest within member nations, contributing in both economic and security progress within the area.<sup>159</sup>

The IORA is a dynamic organization comprising 23 Member States and 11 Dialogue Partners. It is committed to fostering collaborative regional initiatives that yield mutual benefits. Guided by a consensus-based approach and respecting each member's sovereignty, IORA's evolving nature enables it to adapt to address regional challenges effectively.<sup>160</sup> Within its comprehensive framework, IORA encompasses diverse groups engaging in discussions spanning various domains, including business and science. Particularly noteworthy are the dedicated Working Groups, such as the Working Group on Maritime Safety and Security (WGMSS), the Working Group on Fisheries Management (CGFM), and the Working Group on the Blue Economy (WGBE), which play integral roles in IORA's mission. These groups focus on critical areas like maritime security, fisheries

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<sup>156</sup> "About IORA," Indian Ocean Rim Association, accessed September 1, 2023, <https://www.iora.int/en/about/about-iora>.

<sup>157</sup> Indian Ocean Rim Association.

<sup>158</sup> Indian Ocean Rim Association.

<sup>159</sup> Indian Ocean Rim Association.

<sup>160</sup> Indian Ocean Rim Association.

management, and the promotion of maritime economic opportunities, contributing significantly to regional security and sustainable resource management.<sup>161</sup>

IORA's unequivocal stance against terrorism and violent extremism is prominently articulated in a declaration made in March 2017 in Jakarta.<sup>162</sup> The Member States collectively commit to denounce and counter these threats, emphasizing cooperation, information sharing, and the promotion of positive values like respect and inclusion. Furthermore, they highlight the crucial roles of education, society, and women in fortifying resilience against extremism and advocate for collaboration in rehabilitating radicalized individuals and enhancing social cohesion. IORA actively encourages the involvement of civil society, religious, cultural, and educational institutions while supporting the reinforcement of both national and regional anti-terrorism mechanisms. This commitment is inclusive of endeavors aimed at conflict resolution, poverty eradication, the promotion of sustainable development, the safeguarding of human rights, and collaborative initiatives with international institutions such as the United Nations. This multifaceted approach is undertaken in the pursuit of countering terrorism and attenuating the prevalence of violent extremism.<sup>163</sup>

The Indian Ocean Rim Association IORA serves as a vital platform for enhancing cooperation and addressing shared challenges among its member states in the Indian Ocean region. IORA's focus on promoting economic growth, sustainable development, and regional security. Its comprehensive framework, including specialized Working Groups, underscores the organization's commitment to addressing multifaceted regional issues. Notably, IORA's strong stance against terrorism and violent extremism, coupled with an emphasis on cooperation, information sharing, and the promotion of positive values, highlights its holistic approach to addressing security threats and fostering resilience within the region.

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<sup>161</sup> "Overview," Indian Ocean Rim Association, accessed September 1, 2023, <https://www.iora.int/en/priorities-focus-areas/overview>.

<sup>162</sup> Indian Ocean Rim Association, "Declaration on Preventing and Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism" (Jakarta, Indonesia: Indian Ocean Rim Association, March 2017), <https://www.iora.int/media/8214/iora-extremism-declaration-7-march-2017.pdf>.

<sup>163</sup> Indian Ocean Rim Association.

Information sharing among IORA member states can be challenging due to differing national interests, trust issues, varying security priorities, legal and regulatory barriers, technological disparities, and bureaucratic hurdles. However, recognizing the importance of information sharing in addressing regional security concerns, member states may need to work collaboratively to overcome these obstacles by building trust, harmonizing legal frameworks, and investing in secure technological solutions. Such efforts are crucial to effectively address security challenges and promote mutual benefits within the Indian Ocean region.

Oman, as a coastal state deeply engaged in Indian Ocean affairs, can play a pivotal role in advancing IORA's objectives and fostering regional cooperation. Oman is not only one of the founding nations of IORA but also hosts the association's Fisheries Support Unit (FSU), underscoring its commitment to maritime issues.<sup>164</sup> Oman can benefit from IORA's multifaceted opportunities, including economic growth, maritime security, sustainable development, academic and cultural exchange, diplomatic outreach, and the promotion of its Blue Economy. By active participation in IORA, Oman can strengthen its regional and international ties while actively contributing to the advancement of shared goals in the Indian Ocean region.

## **2. Djibouti Code of Conduct and Jeddah Amendments**

Another form of regional collaboration took shape by establishing the Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC) to counter pirate activities in the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Aden region.<sup>165</sup> This cooperative endeavor was adopted on January 29, 2009, with initial signatories including Kenya, Madagascar, Seychelles, Somalia, Djibouti, Yemen, Ethiopia, the United Republic of Tanzania, Maldives. Subsequently, Jordan, South Africa, Mauritius, Saudi Arabia, Eritrea, Oman, Sudan, United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Comoros, Mozambique joined, resulting in a total of 20 countries out of the 21 eligible for signature.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> "Oman Attends the 24th IORA Meeting," The Arabian Stories News, November 22, 2022, <https://www.thearabianstories.com/2022/11/22/oman-attends-the-24th-iora-meeting/>.

<sup>165</sup> "About Us," Djibouti Code of Conduct, accessed September 1, 2023, <https://dcoc.org/>.

<sup>166</sup> Djibouti Code of Conduct.

Specifically, the Code’s signatories committed to collaborating in accordance with international law to:

(a) the investigation, arrest and prosecution of persons, who are reasonably suspected of having committed acts of piracy and armed robbery against ships, including those inciting or intentionally facilitating such acts.

(b) the interdiction and seizure of suspect ships and property on board such ships.

(c) the rescue of ships, persons and property subject to piracy and armed robbery and the facilitation of proper care, treatment and repatriation of seafarers, fishermen, other shipboard personnel and passengers subject to such acts, particularly those who have been subjected to violence.

(d) the conduct of shared operations—both among signatory States and with navies from countries outside the region—such as nominating law enforcement or other authorized officials to embark on patrol ships or aircraft of another signatory.<sup>167</sup>

In 2017, the DCoC underwent an expansion of its scope to encompass a broader range of illicit maritime activities occurring in the western Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden region.<sup>168</sup> These newly incorporated activities included “human trafficking and smuggling, IUUF, trafficking in narcotics and psychotropic substances, arms trafficking, illegal wildlife trade, crude oil theft, and illegal dumping of toxic waste.”<sup>169</sup> This revision recognized as the Jeddah Amendment to the Djibouti Code of Conduct 2017, was signed in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on January 12, 2017.<sup>170</sup> Effective immediately upon signing, the signatories expressed their commitment to comprehensive cooperation in combatting transnational organized crime in the maritime domain, maritime terrorism, and other unlawful activities at sea.<sup>171</sup> The underlying spirit of the Jeddah Amendment is inclusivity, emphasizing that no country should be excluded. Consequently, the code promotes the

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<sup>167</sup> Djibouti Code of Conduct Trust Fund, “About DCOC.”

<sup>168</sup> “Jeddah Amendment,” Djibouti Code of Conduct, accessed September 1, 2023, <https://dcoc.org/about-us/jeddah-amendment/>.

<sup>169</sup> Djibouti Code of Conduct.

<sup>170</sup> Djibouti Code of Conduct.

<sup>171</sup> Djibouti Code of Conduct.

exchange of experiences and best practices among its members. Furthermore, the Jeddah Amendment has emerged as the central regional initiative for coordinating maritime capacity-building efforts, serving as an excellent framework for aligning technical assistance the international community provides.<sup>172</sup>

DCoC is a significant regional initiative established to combat piracy and other illicit maritime activities in the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Aden region.<sup>173</sup> It has shown adaptability by expanding its scope to address a broader range of maritime threats, including human trafficking, illegal fishing, narcotics trafficking, and environmental crimes. It aims to foster cooperation among its signatory states and promotes the exchange of experiences and best practices in maritime security.<sup>174</sup> Additionally, the DCoC's role in coordinating international assistance for capacity building enhances the capabilities of member states to address security challenges at sea effectively.

Oman signed the DCoC and its amendment in Jeddah in 2017; therefore, Oman is responsible for complying with its contents and being an effective member.<sup>175</sup> In this context, and to bolster its operational effectiveness, Oman offered Djibouti coastguard crucial training sessions. These included basic marine engineering practices on June 6, 2023, and a basic life-saving at sea training course on August 6, 2023, both held in Muscat.<sup>176</sup>

However, the DCoC faces several challenges in its successful conduct. These include the need for effective coordination and shared patrols among member states, resource constraints regarding funding and capabilities, legal and jurisdictional

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<sup>172</sup> Djibouti Code of Conduct.

<sup>173</sup> Djibouti Code of Conduct Trust Fund, "About DCOC."

<sup>174</sup> Djibouti Code of Conduct, "Jeddah Amendment."

<sup>175</sup> Secretary-General of the International Maritime Organization, "Revised Code of Conduct Concerning the Repression of Piracy, Armed Robbery against Ships, and Illicit Maritime Activity in the Western Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden Area" (London: International Maritime Organization, March 9, 2017), 7, <https://www.wcdn.imo.org/localresources/en/OurWork/Security/Documents/DCOC%20Jeddah%20Amendment%20English.pdf>. This is also referred to as "The Jeddah Meeting."

<sup>176</sup> Royal Oman Police, "شرطة عُمان السلطانية" (@RoyalOmanPolice) / X," X (formerly Twitter), October 25, 2023, <https://twitter.com/RoyalOmanPolice>.

complexities in interdiction and prosecution at sea, potential political and geopolitical tensions among member states, and the secure sharing of sensitive information. To overcome these challenges, the DCoC could learn from successful maritime coalitions worldwide by implementing best practices such as joint exercises, clear rules of engagement, shared intelligence databases, and diplomatic efforts to manage political rivalries. Additionally, international support in terms of technical assistance and financial resources can play a pivotal role in bolstering the capacity and cooperation of member states in maritime security efforts.

### **3. The Unified Naval Operations Center – Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)**

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) established the Unified Naval Operations Center to safeguard its member states' maritime security through enhanced coordination, integration, and interdependence.<sup>177</sup> Recognizing the significance of cooperation and coordination in security and naval defense, the Centre was officially established on February,4 2016, with its headquarters situated in Bahrain. This initiative aims to strengthen and develop military and defense capabilities while preserving the security, stability, and sovereignty of the GCC states.<sup>178</sup>

The establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Unified Naval Operations Center represents a significant step towards bolstering maritime security and coordination among GCC member states. The Center's primary objective is to enhance coordination, integration, and interdependence in maritime security efforts.<sup>179</sup> This centralized platform can facilitate more efficient responses to maritime threats, such as piracy and smuggling, by streamlining information sharing and operational planning. Additionally, it allows member states to pool their naval resources, share expertise, and

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<sup>177</sup> Fahad Almutairi et al., “معاينة دور دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي في مواجهة التهديدات الإيرانية لتعزيز أمنها المشترك في” المجال البحري [The Role of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Countries in Countering the Iranian Threats for Promoting Their Common Security in Maritime Domain],” *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 5, no. 8 (June 30, 2021): 100, <https://journals.ajsrp.com/index.php/jhss/article/view/3722/3519>.

<sup>178</sup> Almutairi et al., 100.

<sup>179</sup> Almutairi et al., 100.

collectively address common challenges, thus maximizing the effectiveness of their maritime defense.

However, the Unified Naval Operations Center’s effectiveness hinges on overcoming operational challenges and maintaining a strong commitment from GCC member states. Operational hurdles include establishing smooth communication and coordination mechanisms, harmonizing operational procedures, and addressing potential political and diplomatic sensitivities between its members. Additionally, challenges from outside forces and the local interactions in the Gulf area may impact the Center’s effectiveness, necessitating adaptability in its strategies and capabilities to address evolving security challenges. With dedicated resources, political will, and diplomatic efforts, the Center has the potential to significantly contribute to preserving maritime security, stability, and sovereignty within the GCC states, promoting a more secure maritime environment in the Gulf.

### C. INTERNATIONAL EFFORTS

Oman’s policy towards international treaties is pragmatic, taking into account its national interests, regional dynamics, and the potential benefits and implications of each treaty.<sup>180</sup> Oman carefully evaluates the impact of joining or ratifying a treaty and considers how it aligns with its domestic laws, economic development, and security.<sup>181</sup>

First, internationally, Oman’s policy towards international treaties is non-aligned and neutral, seeking to maintain friendly relations with all nations and avoid entanglements in regional conflicts.<sup>182</sup> Oman ratified UNCLOS in 1989,<sup>183</sup> the Suppression of Unlawful

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<sup>180</sup> “Principles,” Foreign Ministry of Oman, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://fm.gov.om/policy/principles/>.

<sup>181</sup> Foreign Ministry of Oman.

<sup>182</sup> Foreign Ministry of Oman, “Foreign Policy.”

<sup>183</sup> “وزارة النقل والاتصالات وتقنية المعلومات [Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology],” Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, accessed May 20, 2023, [https://www.mtcit.gov.om/ITAPortal\\_AR/Pages/Page.aspx?NID=2811&PID=388815](https://www.mtcit.gov.om/ITAPortal_AR/Pages/Page.aspx?NID=2811&PID=388815).

Acts<sup>184</sup> (SUA) in 1990,<sup>185</sup> and the Port Security Measures Agreement (PSMA) in 2013.<sup>186</sup> The foreign policy of Oman is rooted in a deep and long-lasting vision of Oman as a friend to all.<sup>187</sup> In this regard, Oman has always played a neutral role in the conflicts in the region and presented itself as a mediator. Oman's aim in maintaining positive neutrality is to ensure the security and stability of the region.<sup>188</sup> This vision is built upon the political ideology established by the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said and continued and developed since 2020 by Sultan Haitham bin Tarik.<sup>189</sup>

To address the challenges in the Gulf of Oman region, Gulf states, excluding Oman, and their international partners forged coalitions that facilitated coordinated patrols, information sharing, and joint response mechanisms. These coalitions aim to enhance maritime domain awareness and promote the region's stability, security, and economic prosperity.

### **1. Combined Maritime Forces (CMF)**

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. established the combined maritime forces (CMF), to counter terrorism in the Arabian Gulf region.<sup>190</sup> The primary areas of emphasis for the CMF include combating drug trafficking, preventing smuggling activities, combating piracy, fostering regional collaboration, and enhancing relevant capabilities in

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<sup>184</sup> Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Maritime Navigation, Protocol for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts Against the Safety of Fixed Platforms Located on the Continental Shelf

<sup>185</sup> Sultanate of Oman Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, "Royal Decree 66/90 - Suppression of Unlawful Acts at Sea," accessed May 20, 2023, [https://www.mtcit.gov.om/ITAPortal\\_AR/Data/SiteImgGallery/20122020/18921771-8eb7-4fae-961b-bfdd830ea52a.pdf](https://www.mtcit.gov.om/ITAPortal_AR/Data/SiteImgGallery/20122020/18921771-8eb7-4fae-961b-bfdd830ea52a.pdf).

<sup>186</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization, "Agreement on Port State Measures to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate Illegal Unreported and Unregulated Fishing (PSMA)" (Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, November 22, 2009), <https://www.fao.org/treaties/results/details/en/c/TRE-000003/>.

<sup>187</sup> Foreign Ministry of Oman, "Foreign Policy."

<sup>188</sup> Al Amri, "Oman's Foreign Policy," 8.

<sup>189</sup> Foreign Ministry of Oman, "Foreign Policy."

<sup>190</sup> "Combined Maritime Forces (CMF)," Combined Maritime Forces, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/>.



partnership with regional and other stakeholders. Additionally, the CMF aims to create a secure maritime environment that is void of unauthorized nonstate actors.<sup>191</sup>

Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) was established under the leadership of the United States.<sup>192</sup> The CMF consists of 38 members, with its headquarters in Bahrain. It was initially authorized by UN Security Council Resolutions 1368 (2001) and 1373 (2001) with the objective of addressing terrorism and enhancing maritime security.<sup>193</sup> The primary areas of concentration for the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) encompass countering narcotics and smuggling activities, counter piracy operations, promoting cooperation among members, and collaborating with allies and partners to enhance their efficiency, thereby enhancing overall security and stability.<sup>194</sup> In this regard CMF also strives to establish a secure maritime environment by deterring illicit non-state actors. Additionally, CMF assets are prepared to respond to environmental and humanitarian crises upon request.<sup>195</sup>

Combined Task Force 150 (CTF 150) is a component of the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) and is tasked with carrying out Maritime Security Operations (MSO) in areas outside the Arabian Gulf.<sup>196</sup> Its primary objective is to safeguard the unhindered passage of lawful merchant vessels shipping through the area by countering non-state threats. CTF 150 mission is to disrupt criminal activities and terrorist organizations to hinder their operations within the maritime domain.<sup>197</sup> CTF 150 aims to prevent these organizations from conducting operations and transporting personnel, weapons, and illicit

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<sup>191</sup> Combined Maritime Forces.

<sup>192</sup> Jessica Larsen and Christine Nissen, “The International Response to Maritime Piracy off the Coast of Somalia and Drivers of Danish Involvement,” in *Learning from Danish Counter-Piracy off the Coast of Somalia*, by Jessica Larsen and Christine Nissen (København, Denmark: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2017), 16, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep17374.6>.

<sup>193</sup> Larsen and Nissen, “The International Response to Maritime Piracy off the Coast of Somalia and Drivers of Danish Involvement.”

<sup>194</sup> “CTF 150: Maritime Security,” Combined Maritime Forces, September 17, 2010, <https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/ctf-150-maritime-security/>.

<sup>195</sup> Combined Maritime Forces.

<sup>196</sup> Combined Maritime Forces.

<sup>197</sup> Combined Maritime Forces.

substances such as narcotics and charcoal that generate revenue by impeding their freedom of movement. In essence, CTF 150's efforts aim to eliminate the safe havens and secure routes that criminal and terrorist organizations rely on, ensuring a more secure and risk-controlled environment for commercial shipping and international maritime trade in the region.<sup>198</sup>

Adapting to evolving threats and ensuring flexibility to meet regional challenges, CMF has taken significant strides by establishing CTF 154 on May 22, 2023. This coalition leads multinational maritime training efforts that empower partner nations within CMF to engage in essential training opportunities ashore, thereby bolstering their capabilities to uphold exceptional standards of security in the area.<sup>199</sup>

The effectiveness of CMF's Combined Task Force (CTF) 150 in countering maritime threats within the Gulf of Oman area has been remarkable. Notably, CTF 150's operations have led to successful seizures of drug and weapon trafficking, as highlighted in previous chapters. Through its continuous and vigilant presence, the task force has efficiently deterred illicit activities and thwarted the movement of contraband. By collaborating with regional navies and law enforcement agencies, CTF 150's efforts have disrupted criminal networks, significantly enhancing maritime security and ensuring the safety of crucial trade routes. To maintain its effectiveness, CTF 150 must remain adaptable, sustain its cooperative approach, and continue employing intelligence-driven tactics to address emerging challenges in the Gulf of Oman region.

## **2. International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC)**

In another manifestation of collaborative efforts in the region, the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) was founded in July 2019 to respond to escalating risks to freedom of navigation and unhindered trade for lawful seafarers in the Middle East's international waters.<sup>200</sup> To execute this mission of deterring state-sponsored

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<sup>198</sup> Combined Maritime Forces.

<sup>199</sup> "CTF 154: Maritime Security Training," Combined Maritime Forces, May 26, 2023, <https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/ctf-154-maritime-security-training/>.

<sup>200</sup> International Maritime Security Construct, "IMSC - International Maritime Security Construct."

malicious activities and instilling confidence within the maritime shipping sector, the Coalition Task Force (CTF) Sentinel was inaugurated on November 7, 2019. Furthermore, the task force operates across a vast area encompassing international waters extending from the South Red Sea through the Bab el-Mandab Strait, extending down to the Gulf of Aden, then through the Gulf of Oman and the Strait of Hormuz, all the way to the Arabian Gulf.<sup>201</sup> IMSC consists of 11 member nations. The coalition includes Lithuania, Seychelles, United States of America, United Arab Emirates, Romania, United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Albania, Estonia, Latvia.<sup>202</sup>

The establishment of the IMSC in a region already covered by the CMF with a relatively small group of 11 member nations patrolling a vast maritime area from the Arabian Gulf to the South Red Sea signifies a response to escalating threats endangering navigational freedom and trade in the Middle East's international waters. IMSC's distinct focus on countering state-sponsored threats and the inauguration of its operational arm, CTF Sentinel, reflect a commitment to active deterrence and safety measures. While IMSC's formation complements CMF's broader mandate, it raises questions about the capacity to effectively monitor and respond across such a vast expanse, necessitating strong coordination and cooperation among its diverse member nations to ensure maritime security and stability.

### **3. European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH)**

As the newest coalition in the area, the European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH) initiative, launched on January 20, 2020, represents a distinctive collaborative effort among European nations.<sup>203</sup> Comprising the active participation of Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Norway, EMASoH is undertaking a dual mission of bolstering navigational security and fostering de-escalation while simultaneously advocating for a comprehensive regional

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<sup>201</sup> International Maritime Security Construct.

<sup>202</sup> International Maritime Security Construct.

<sup>203</sup> "European Maritime Awareness in The Strait of Hormuz (EMASOH)," Danish Ministry of Defence, accessed August 29, 2023, <https://www.fmn.dk/en/topics/operations/ongoing-operations/hormuz/>.

dialogue.<sup>204</sup> This initiative operates on two parallel tracks: a diplomatic avenue and a military effort known as Operation AGENOR.<sup>205</sup> According to Bueger and Edmunds, EMASoH was established to counter Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy activities and ensure the freedom of navigation in the area.<sup>206</sup>

Despite its name explicitly referring to the Strait of Hormuz, AGENOR operates within a designated joint operations area (JOA) that expansively covers the entirety of the Arabian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz, and a segment of the Arabian Sea, and within this area it also established a designated voluntary reporting area VAR, as shown in Figure 5 for the ships transiting the area to enhance navigation freedom.<sup>207</sup> Ships enrolling in the voluntary scheme are to report any suspicious activities in the area to EMASoH and the coastal authorities of the coastal state. The voluntary scheme enhances EMASoH’s ability to support and guide ships, fostering better communication and cooperation. As a result, ships that are involved in the scheme are prioritized for potential assistance from EMASoH’s naval resources and reassurance through calls with naval and aerial assets.<sup>208</sup>

It is of pivotal significance to underscore that the operational conduct of the military assets associated with AGENOR maintains alignment with the specific national legal frameworks of the respective participating nations.<sup>209</sup> EMASoH accentuates the legal classification of the Strait of Hormuz as a “strait used for international navigation,”<sup>210</sup> meticulously abiding by the stipulations outlined in article 37 of UNCLOS. This pivotal recognition stems from the strait’s role as a conduit that interconnects distinct sectors of

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<sup>204</sup> “European Maritime Awareness in The Strait of Hormuz (EMASOH).”

<sup>205</sup> “About EMASoH,” European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz, accessed August 29, 2023, <https://www.emasoh-agenor.org>.

<sup>206</sup> Christian Bueger and Timothy Edmunds, “The European Union’s Quest to Become a Global Maritime Security Provider,” *Naval War College Review* 76, no. 2 (June 2023): 72, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol76/iss2/6>.

<sup>207</sup> Source: European Maritime Awareness in The Strait of Hormuz, “Voluntary Reporting Scheme - VRS.”

<sup>208</sup> “Voluntary Reporting Scheme - VRS,” European Maritime Awareness in The Strait of Hormuz, accessed October 6, 2023, <https://www.emasoh-agenor.org/voluntary-reporting-scheme>.

<sup>209</sup> United Nations, *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* (New York: UN Oceans and Law of the Sea, 1982), 37, [https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention\\_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos\\_e.pdf](https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf).

<sup>210</sup> United Nations, 37.

the high seas and exclusive economic zones.<sup>211</sup> However, an intricate legal discourse emerges due to the concurrent assertions of both the Sultanate of Oman and Iran, who contend that the nature of passage within the strait adheres to the innocent passage framework rather than the transit passage regime.<sup>212</sup> This discourse finds its origin in delineating traffic separation schemes within the territorial waters of both nations. Notably, implementing transit passage in this context would facilitate the operation of warship's aircraft during strait transit, a nuanced aspect that adds complexity to the legal interpretation of this maritime passageway.<sup>213</sup>

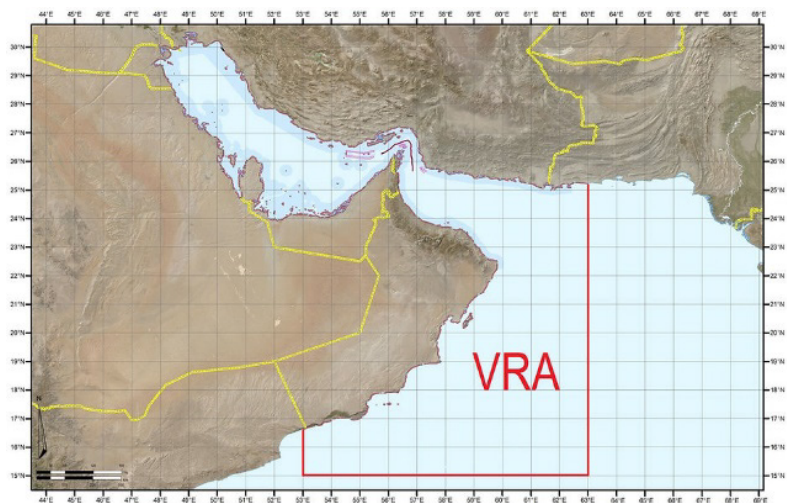


Figure 5. Joint operations area (JOA) of Agenor and voluntary reporting area (VRA)<sup>214</sup>

It is worth noting that European naval forces encounter various difficulties, including strategic competition at seas against nations like Russia and China, diverse

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<sup>211</sup> United Nations, 37.

<sup>212</sup> Farzin Nadimi, “Clarifying Freedom of Navigation in the Gulf,” Washington Institute Policy Analysis, July 24, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/clarifying-freedom-navigation-gulf>.

<sup>213</sup> United Nations, *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*, 37.

<sup>214</sup> Source: European Maritime Awareness in The Strait of Hormuz, “Voluntary Reporting Scheme - VRS.”

maritime dangers like piracy and trafficking, and the impact of climate change.<sup>215</sup> Droin, Herdt, and Bolstad highlight that the downsizing of EU naval forces limits their sustained presence in critical areas such as the Indo-Pacific. To tackle these issues, EU navies need a spectrum of capabilities, both advanced and more basic.<sup>216</sup> However, European states can't handle all these challenges simultaneously, compelling them to prioritize each issue individually and collaborate with partners to address them collectively.<sup>217</sup>

After studying the European Union initiative, it is obvious that its contribution to maritime security globally aligns with its global geo-strategy, emphasizing the need for a visible presence.<sup>218</sup> The new EU strategy underscored that the EU's interests extend across the world's oceans, driven by both liberal principles like promoting better governance and freedom of the seas as well as realist considerations of power politics. Member nations involved their forces to have a vital role in implementing this strategy and to engage in a wide range of maritime responsibilities.<sup>219</sup>

EMASoH operates in a vast maritime expanse, utilizing a relatively limited number of member nations compared to CMF. Notably, all participating members belong to the European Union due to their tendency to foster collaboration within their group.<sup>220</sup> The absence of littoral state members within EMASOH's composition may bolster mutual trust among these European participants. Nevertheless, this exclusive focus on EU members could potentially impede regional cooperation within the broader geographic context.

EMASOH has introduced a multifaceted initiative combining diplomatic and military efforts, primarily focusing on the Strait of Hormuz. Notably, the strait primarily lies within the territorial seas of Oman and Iran. This situation raises concerns about the

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<sup>215</sup> Mathieu Droin, Courtney Stiles Herdt, and Gabriella Bolstad, *Are European Navies Ready to Navigate an Ever More Contested Maritime Domain?* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2023), 4–8, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep49323>.

<sup>216</sup> Droin, Herdt, and Bolstad, 3.

<sup>217</sup> Droin, Herdt, and Bolstad, 8–9.

<sup>218</sup> Basil Germond, "The Geopolitical Dimension of Maritime Security," *Marine Policy* 54 (April 2015): 140, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2014.12.013>.

<sup>219</sup> Germond, 140.

<sup>220</sup> Droin, Herdt, and Bolstad, *Are European Navies Ready to Navigate*, 17.

potential negative implications of having coalition warships conducting patrols within these territorial waters, especially without the direct involvement of Oman and Iran.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

Oman's approach to maritime threats is characterized by a comprehensive strategy that encompasses international, regional, and domestic dimensions. On the international front, Oman's policy of non-alignment and neutrality informs its careful consideration of international maritime treaties. By ratifying key agreements such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Suppression of Unlawful Acts (SUA), and Port Security Measures Agreement (PSMA), Oman demonstrates its commitment to adhering to international norms and standards governing maritime governance. This approach aligns with Oman's overarching vision of maintaining amicable relations with all nations and actively contributes to fostering peace, security, economic growth, and cultural development.

Regionally, Oman strongly emphasizes cooperation and engagement with neighboring nations and the broader Indian Ocean countries. The active participation of Oman in regional initiatives and organizations, exemplified by its membership in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), underscores its commitment to fostering regional collaboration to address common maritime challenges. This approach reflects Oman's dedication to pursuing harmonious relationships and peaceful coexistence with neighboring states while actively contributing to regional maritime security and cooperation efforts.

Domestically, Oman's strategy involves significant investments in military and civilian sectors to address maritime threats effectively. This multi-faceted approach includes the development of the Royal Navy of Oman, Coast Guard Police, and the Royal Air Force of Oman. These institutions are equipped to safeguard coastal waters, respond swiftly to maritime incidents, combat environmental pollution, and conduct search and rescue operations. Additionally, establishing the Port Security Administration enhances security measures at key port facilities. Moreover, Oman has enacted relevant legislation, such as the Anti-Trafficking Law and the Aquatic Living Resources Law, highlighting its

commitment to addressing internationally recognized maritime threats through legal frameworks and multilateral collaboration among various governmental entities, including law enforcement agencies, labor, social development, and justice ministries, and the National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking (NCCHT).

However, it is important to note that Oman faces significant challenges in preventing all maritime threats due to the vast expanse of its sea areas. Despite its best efforts, maritime attacks and illicit activities may continue to pose challenges in the region. This geographical reality underscores the need for international cooperation and concerted efforts by all stakeholders to effectively address and mitigate these ongoing maritime threats.



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## IV. CONCLUSION

The Gulf of Oman presents a complex and diverse array of maritime security threats, ranging from traditional concerns about piracy, illegal migration, and smuggling to emerging issues related to malign nonstate armed groups as well as interstate rivalries and tensions involving major regional and global powers. The ongoing shadow war between Iran and Israel has introduced new maritime threats, including attacks on commercial vessels. These rivalries underscore the geopolitical dynamics that profoundly impact maritime security in the Gulf of Oman.

Piracy remains a persistent concern in the northwestern Indian Ocean, demonstrating the vulnerability of vessels in the area. While the threat of terrorism looms relatively low regarding maritime security, it requires continued vigilance. Human smuggling from Pakistan has a historical presence in the region, characterized by organized and sophisticated human smuggling networks. Narcotics traffickers continue to utilize maritime drug smuggling routes, posing regional stability risks. Weapons trafficking has emerged as a significant concern, marked by the sophistication of operations and the difficulty in tracing the origin and destination of illegal arms shipments. Recent incidents, including seizures of weapons and ammunition, underscore the gravity of this threat to regional stability and maritime security.

Oman's approach to maritime threats is characterized by a comprehensive strategy that addresses international, regional, and national dimensions. On the international front, Oman's policy of non-alignment and neutrality informs its careful adherence to international maritime agreements and conventions. These include the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the Suppression of Unlawful Acts (SUA) agreement, and the Port Security Measures Agreement (PSMA), emphasizing its commitment to global maritime norms and standards. Regionally, Oman emphasizes cooperation and engagement with neighboring nations and the broader Indian Ocean region. Active participation in regional initiatives and organizations, exemplified by its membership in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), underscores Oman's

commitment to fostering regional collaboration to address common maritime challenges and promote peaceful coexistence.

At the national level, Oman has significantly invested in military and civilian sectors to address maritime threats effectively. This approach includes the development of the Royal Navy of Oman, the Coast Guard Police, and the Royal Air Force of Oman, equipped to safeguard coastal waters, respond swiftly to maritime incidents, combat environmental pollution, and conduct search and rescue operations. Establishing the Port Security Administration further enhances security measures at key port facilities. Oman has also enacted relevant legislation, such as the Anti-Trafficking Law and the Aquatic Living Resources Law, demonstrating its commitment to addressing internationally recognized maritime threats through legal frameworks and multilateral collaboration. It is important to acknowledge that Oman faces significant challenges in preventing all maritime threats, given the vast expanse of its sea areas. Despite its best efforts, maritime attacks and illicit activities may continue to pose challenges in the region. This geographical reality underscores the need for international cooperation and concerted efforts by all stakeholders to address and mitigate these ongoing maritime threats effectively.

The central strategy for bolstering maritime security in the Gulf of Oman lies in the enhancement of maritime domain awareness, necessitating a comprehensive approach. This strategy, particularly in its technological aspects, can incur significant costs. Nevertheless, Oman has the opportunity to access valuable resources from partner states like the U.S. through bilateral agreements, thereby mitigating the financial burden and enhancing its capability to monitor and secure the maritime domain effectively.

It is worth noting that the U.S. Navy possesses superior capabilities for monitoring the Indian Ocean, which led India to sign several agreements with the U.S. to enhance its maritime domain awareness.<sup>221</sup> In 2016, India and the United States signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), which focuses on providing logistical

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<sup>221</sup> Rana Danish Nisar, “Assessing India - United States Security Agreements: A Critical Analysis,” *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations* 23, no. 3 (2023): 539–43, <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-0660-2023-23-3-536-546>.

support during military operations, enhancing military communication, and enabling using bases in the Indo-Pacific region. LEMOA strengthens India’s regional naval activities and aligns with U.S. strategic interests in the region. After LEMOA, the U.S. and India signed the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), which enhances interoperability and communications between the Indian and U.S. militaries, allowing for joint operations, training, and logistical support.<sup>222</sup> The most recent agreement, signed in 2020, is the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), granting India real-time access to U.S. geo-spatial data, including satellite imagery.<sup>223</sup> BECA significantly enhances India’s military capabilities in the digital age. These agreements would enhance collaboration, navigation, and targeting, benefiting from the U.S. experience and technology in areas where India seeks support.<sup>224</sup> Oman could similarly benefit from such a bilateral agreement, which would signal America’s commitment to the security of the Gulf region and deter future threats.

#### **A. RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENHANCE MARITIME SECURITY IN THE GULF OF OMAN**

To enhance maritime security in the Gulf of Oman, a multifaceted approach involving national, regional, and international efforts is crucial. This approach aims to boost maritime domain awareness to enable rapid responses to maritime threats. Achieving this approach involves developing naval assets, procuring technological equipment, and implementing new regulations to adapt to evolving challenges. Consequently, the following recommendations can be instrumental in achieving these goals and fortifying maritime security in the region:

1. **Increased maritime patrols:** The Royal Navy of Oman and the Royal Oman Police Coastguard currently are operating under a specific concept of operation; however, trafficking and other maritime threats are still occurring. Increasing the naval presence at sea along with the Royal Air

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<sup>222</sup> Nisar, 539–43.

<sup>223</sup> Nisar, 539–43.

<sup>224</sup> Nisar, 539–43.

Force of Oman's maritime patrol aircraft (MPA) will have a vital role in building a recognized maritime picture in order to deter potential threats and facilitate rapid response to security incidents, helping safeguard the region's waters.

2. **Establish a coastal surveillance system:** As mentioned in chapter two, the coast of Oman is divided into naval operation areas with assigned ships in each area. These ships cannot remain at sea throughout their period and will be required to return to their bases after a certain period. Implementing surveillance monitoring systems, such as radars or satellites, can offer real-time data on maritime activities and address the gaps in patrolling ship coverage. While radar systems are cost-effective, satellite technology remains limited in some countries. To bolster the Gulf of Oman's maritime security, Oman should explore collaboration with countries like the U.S., which employs satellite monitoring for maritime awareness. Such a surveillance system will elevate situational awareness and enable early detection of threats.
3. **Establish vessel reporting and monitoring system in the Strait of Hormuz:** The current mode of operation in the Strait of Hormuz is similar to the other coastal regions of Oman where patrol ships are deployed. However, in the event of the increased presence of military ships due to the establishment of IMSC and EMASoH and the seizure of MV Niovi in the vicinity of the Strait of Hormuz by Iran,<sup>225</sup> Oman should augment its monitoring capabilities by introducing a vessel reporting and monitoring system. Given the presence of a traffic separation scheme in Omani territorial waters, this system would enable real-time tracking and reporting of vessel movements, enhancing transparency and safety in this strategically crucial area. Bolstering situational awareness at this critical maritime choke point can deter potential threats and enable swift

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<sup>225</sup> Farhat, "Iran's IRGC Seizes Second Oil Tanker."

responses to emerging security concerns, preserving the safety and integrity of this vital corridor.

4. **Involvement of Oman in incident investigations:** As we discussed in chapter one regarding the summaries of the investigation findings related to the Fujairah attacks on May 12, 2019, and the MV Mercer Street attacks, underscoring their significance. However, it is notable that Oman was not involved in the investigations of these incidents. Therefore, it is crucial to include Oman in the examination of maritime incidents within the region. This inclusion would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of regional security challenges and enable more timely and effective responses to such incidents. Such collaborative efforts would foster information sharing between Oman and its partners and enhance the legal expertise of Omani authorities in handling similar incidents.
5. **Bilateral agreements:** despite not being part of regional coalitions, Oman engages in regular training and joint exercises with countries like the U.S., UK, France, and Iran as part of its foreign policy approach. These interactions have fostered strong diplomatic ties and mutual interests in regional security. Oman can access information and intelligence regarding maritime threats like India and U.S. agreements. This approach will provide Oman with an extended range of maritime threat detection, allowing for quicker responses and ultimately bolstering its maritime domain awareness.
6. **Enhance information sharing:** Given the time-consuming nature of signing bilateral agreements and treaties between states, Oman can concurrently optimize its existing operational procedures for the immediate exchange of information between its maritime security center and regional counterparts. This practical approach expedites cooperation and data sharing, thereby enabling swifter and more effective responses to emerging maritime security threats. The strategy for enhancing information sharing, both nationally and internationally, focuses on the

exchange of data related to vessel movements, suspicious activities, and potential threats. This collaborative practice substantially elevates situational awareness and streamlines responses to security challenges.

7. **Enhance regional cooperation:** Cooperation among the Gulf of Oman’s littoral states is vital. Oman and UAE share land and sea borders in the Gulf of Oman and can work together to address shared security concerns. On the other hand, both countries can work through the Unified Naval Operations Center – Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), to pool resources, share information, and conduct joint operations, fostering a collaborative and unified approach to maritime security.
8. **Strengthening legal frameworks and definitions for maritime security:** As highlighted in the introduction with the Achille Lauro hijacking case, which prompted the establishment of the SUA Convention due to international rule ambiguities, it is paramount that international rules and regulations remain consistently updated to address the evolving maritime threats. Collaborative efforts between littoral states and international partners are essential for adapting these regulations in response to current regional threats. Moreover, establishing universally agreed-upon definitions for state-sponsored activities is of utmost importance. This clarity not only facilitates coordinated responses but also enhances data collection and analysis, simplifying the identification and attribution of actions to specific state actors. These measures are essential for effective responses to security breaches and for deterring future incidents.
9. **Unify the efforts of multinational task forces:** currently, there are three coalitions operating in the Gulf of Oman under their respective concepts of operations. Unifying their efforts will enable better coordination, resource optimization, and information sharing. It will ensure more comprehensive and effective responses to maritime security challenges,

promote diplomatic relations, and bolster overall security in the Gulf of Oman.

Implementing above recommendations would enhance the Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) in the Gulf of Oman and would play a pivotal role in ensuring maritime security by establishing a comprehensive understanding of maritime activities, which is crucial for addressing threats and challenges in a proactive manner. Given the Gulf's strategic significance as a conduit for global trade and energy, MDA would enable the real-time tracking of vessel movements, facilitating the early identification of irregularities and enabling the anticipation of potential threats like piracy and smuggling. Encompassing the expansive maritime area and intricate coastlines, MDA would encourage collaborative initiatives among neighboring states, surmounting geographical barriers to facilitate the timely sharing of critical information and the execution of harmonized responses. In essence, the introduction of MDA would elevate situational awareness, foster productive regional collaborations, and reinforce the collective capacity to uphold stability and security within the dynamic maritime environment of the Gulf of Oman. As said in a famous quote by Walter Johnson "You cannot hit what you cannot see."<sup>226</sup>

## **B. FUTURE STUDIES AND CONSIDERATIONS**

The current study has relied on available open-source data; however, this study can be further improved by conducting interviews with respective civilian and military authorities in the Sultanate of Oman. These interviews would offer a comprehensive understanding of Oman's maritime security approach, providing valuable insights and recommendations for strengthening security in the Gulf of Oman. Moreover, this study focused on Oman's responses to the maritime threats in the region, but Oman has other littoral states like UAE and Iran that also can be affected by the security status of the region, and studying their approach to these threats is essential. A comparative analysis of their approaches to maritime threats in the region can reveal commonalities and differences in

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<sup>226</sup> "Walter Johnson Quotes," BrainyQuote, accessed August 20, 2023, <https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/walter-johnson-quotes>.



strategies and policies. This cross-national examination can provide a holistic view of regional security dynamics.

A comprehensive analysis of emerging maritime threats in the Gulf of Oman, including trafficking, terrorism, state-sponsored activities, and environmental challenges, is of paramount importance. Future research could delve into the contributing factors behind these threats and suggest proactive measures for mitigation. Subsequently, a focused study on regional cooperation and diplomacy can further address shared maritime security concerns, facilitating joint efforts, collaborative agreements, and diplomatic dialogues to enhance Gulf of Oman's security.

It is worth also considering the potential for private sector collaboration, particularly involving entities like the Oman Shipping Company and the National Ferries Company, which maintain a continuous presence along Oman's coasts. These companies could contribute significantly to maritime security by actively reporting suspicious activities, such as migrant boats or fishing incidents. The realization of this potential can be facilitated through the organization of tailored training programs and workshops focusing on regional maritime threats. The valuable insights offered by these companies have the potential to enhance and strengthen maritime security efforts.

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