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Attempted terrorism on MT Muskie



On the 31st May, MT Muskie came under RPG and small arms fire in the southern end of the Bab al Mandeb (BAM). While the nature of the attack with RPG and small arms fire at the vessel gave the appearance of a Somali pirate attack, there were unconfirmed reports at the time from nearby vessels an explosion may have occurred in one of the attacking skiffs.

Evidence indicates the reported detonation in one of the attacking skiffs was significant and that the most likely explanation for this was a bomb detonating prematurely. This points therefore, to the incident being an attempt at terrorism rather than piracy.

To what end the terrorists were attacking the vessel is unclear. MT Muskie is a product tanker and it is quite possible that AQ in the Arabian Peninsular (or an associated cell) is attempting to deliberately target crude, product or LNG tankers. Whether these are intended as suicide attacks with a detonation alongside the vessel, or whether there is a deeper motive to achieve a boarding and to destroy / damage the vessel thereafter is not known.

It should be noted that this is the second incident of this type, the first being the attack on the LNG tanker Galicia Spirit in October 2016. The 8 month gap between the attacks may have occurred because AQAP have been squeezed out of the Yemeni coastal belt over the past few months and at the same time, their leadership has come under pressure from drone strikes. Nevertheless, the fact that two similar attacks have been conducted is a clear indication that a terrorist organisation in Yemen (probably AQAP) wishes to cause damage to a tanker in the BAM choke point.

There has been an increase in suspect activity reported within the BAM and Southern Red Sea since the beginning of June. Vessels within this vicinity are advised to be particularly wary and to have BMP4 protection measures in place. Armed guards should also be considered, to ensure that any attack along the lines of those carried out on Galicia Spirit and Muskie do not end with the terrorists being able to effect a boarding of the vessel.

