

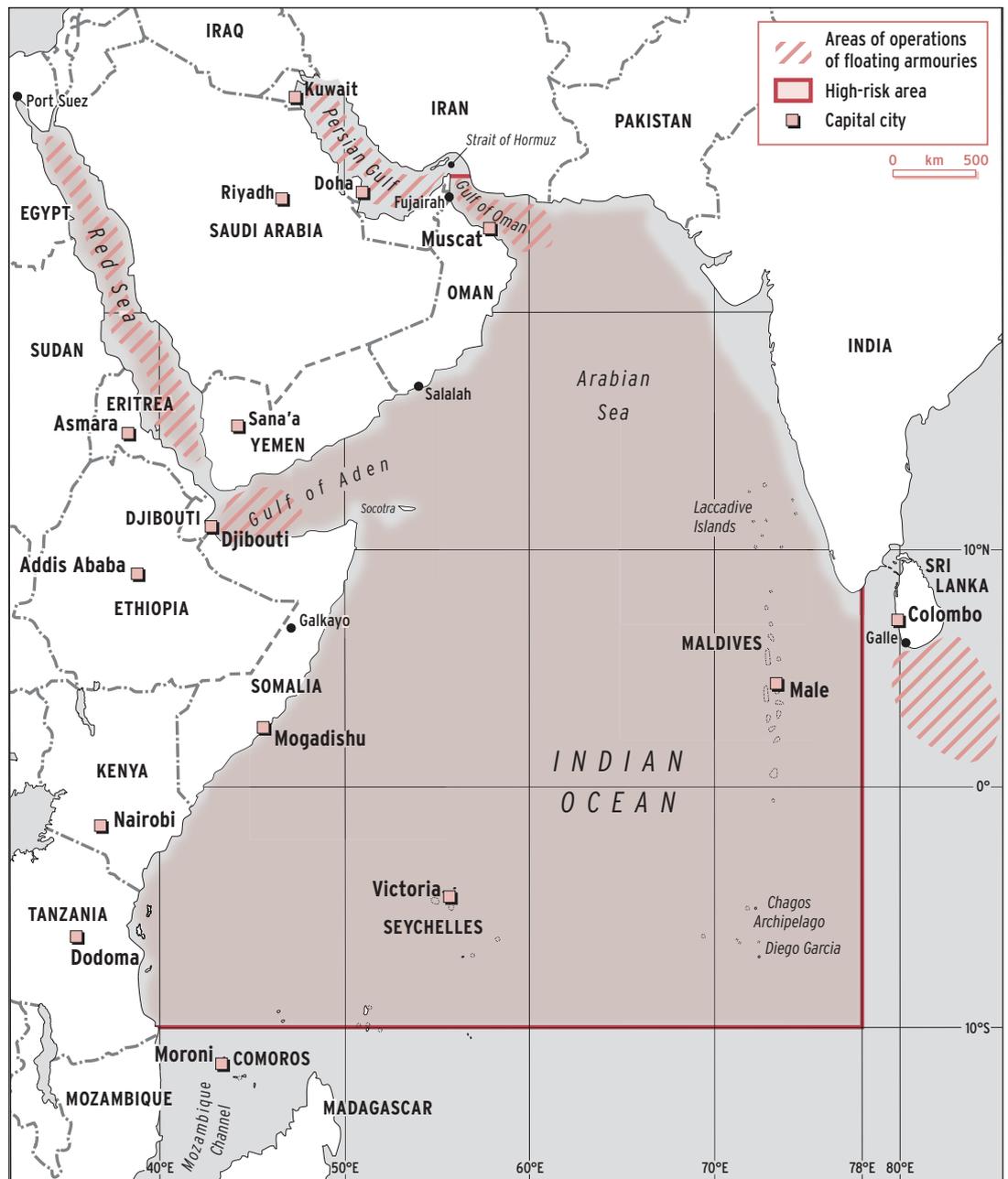
# Floating Armouries in the Indian Ocean

Maritime private security companies (PSCs) are utilized as anti-piracy measures in the Indian Ocean, providing armed security on board merchant vessels transiting the high-risk area (HRA; see Map 1).<sup>1</sup> During the past decade, sea piracy flourished in the HRA<sup>2</sup>, growing into a menace to international shipping. Although there has not been a single successful pirate attack since 2012, the shipping industry's demand for maritime PSC services has remained high. During 2013, 35–40 per cent of the estimated 65,922 merchant vessels transiting across the Indian

Ocean's HRA carried private armed guards on board (OBP, 2014, p. 18).

One of the major challenges for the operation of maritime PSCs in the HRA relates to the storage of arms and ammunition, particularly because coastal states in the region either prohibit or severely restrict entry into territorial waters by vessels with arms on board. In the face of such regulatory hurdles, including the often high cost of permits and storage in government-owned, land-based armouries, maritime PSCs increasingly use floating armouries for convenience, economy, and safety. This

Map 1 Floating armouries and the high-risk area, 2014



practice has been the source of international concern as there is a lack of information regarding their number, their use, the number of arms they store, and related physical security and stockpile management practices (UNSC, 2012, para. 73; 2013, para. 9).

This Research Note summarizes the findings of a chapter on floating armouries in the *Small Arms Survey 2015: Weapons and the World* (Chapsos and Holtom, 2015). It presents basic information on the number of floating armouries operating in the HRA, their use, the number of arms they store, and an overview of some of the nascent—and potential—approaches to regulating floating armouries to ensure safe and secure practices. In addition, it highlights some of the risks of using floating armouries, profiles the Sri Lankan government’s approach to floating armouries, and considers the potential use of floating armouries in the Gulf of Guinea.

## What is a floating armoury?

A floating armoury is a ship that operates in international waters and provides services for maritime PSCs. Although every ocean-going vessel is classified in accordance with particular standards and its details are entered into a national registry, classification societies have not yet designated any vessel as a ‘floating armoury’, nor have any flag states registered vessels as such. In 2014, most floating armouries were converted tugs, but others included offshore supply ships, patrol vessels, diving support vessels, anchor handling vessels, research or survey vessels, pleasure craft, trawlers, and general cargo ships.

In 2012 and 2013, various sources estimated that there were between 10 and 20 floating armouries operating in the HRA (Chapsos and Holtom, 2015; UNSC, 2012, annexe 5.4, para. 9). Research carried out in 2014 identified around 30 floating armouries in the HRA—mostly deployed in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Oman, while one was in Sri Lanka. At the time of writing,

### Box 1 The Sri Lankan monopoly model

Avant Garde Maritime Services (AGMS) operates the MV *Mahanuwara*, a Mongolian- and Sri Lankan-registered anchor-handling vessel, which is the only floating armoury authorized by the Sri Lankan government to operate in its territorial waters (AGMS, n.d.a). It also operates in international waters, like the other floating armouries in and around the HRA, but tends to remain close to the Sri Lankan port of Galle. The Sri Lankan government has granted AGMS permission for the floating armoury to be moored next to the Galle naval base whenever necessary—for example, in order to avoid rough seas or replenish stocks, an advantage that other floating armouries in the HRA do not enjoy.

The MV *Mahanuwara* can store up to 1,000 weapons and associated ammunition in ‘air-conditioned TEU containers with custom made racks for storage of weapons’ (AGMS, n.d.a). All other maritime PSC equipment is stored on land in the Sri Lankan naval base’s warehouses in Galle. The vessel operates strictly as a ‘floating armoury’ and does not provide accommodation for private armed guards. It offers Sri Lankan government arms for rental, accompanied not only by an end-user certificate issued by the Sri Lankan Ministry of Defence, but also by a sea marshal who is employed by the state-owned company Rakna Arakshaka Lanka to safeguard the weapons and ensure their proper use (AGMS, n.d.b). The fact that the Sri Lankan Ministry of Defence is willing to rent its arms to maritime PSCs suggests an economic motivation for the monopoly.

The MV *Mahanuwara* became a political issue following the January 2015 presidential elections in Sri Lanka. Following the defence minister’s departure from office, the floating armoury was detained by the Sri Lankan police, after they had ‘discovered’ 3,000 ‘illegal’ weapons on board, and equipment for more than 200 maritime PSCs (BBC, 2015; Irugalbandara, 2015). Although investigations were reportedly still ongoing in April 2015, the vessel continued to operate as a floating armoury (Yatawara, 2015).

governments in and around the HRA were not known to own or operate any floating armouries. The Sri Lankan government has authorized and closely controls the floating armoury MV *Mahanuwara*, which operates in its territorial waters (see Box 1).

The services provided by floating armouries include: the embarkation and disembarkation of PSC personnel, arms, and equipment between a commercial vessel or port and the floating armoury; storage, service, and maintenance, or rental of arms; and the provision of accommodation and other services for private armed guard teams, such as visa arrangements. Table 1 presents average prices in 2014 for the services provided by floating armouries in the HRA, based on interviews with several maritime PSCs. Storage capacities vary, but some floating armouries can hold approximately 1,000 firearms, as well as ammunition.

Sovereign Global, a company that maintains a floating armoury in the Gulf of Oman and another in the Red Sea, reported in early 2014 that more than 1,000 private armed guards were transiting through the company’s two floating armouries on a monthly basis

(Sovereign Global, 2014). Avant Garde Maritime Services, which runs the Sri Lankan floating armoury that enjoys a monopoly around the island country (see Box 1), reported ‘800–1,000 movements on and off’ its floating armoury each month (Rickett, 2013).

## Risk of diversion

Due to limited transparency, questions persist regarding the control of supplies of small arms and ammunition to maritime PSCs operating in the HRA, as well as the total volume of small arms and ammunition that they use and store in floating armouries in the region. Only the Netherlands and the UK have provided public information regarding small arms transfers to maritime PSCs and the use of floating armouries. During the period April 2012–June 2014, the UK government licensed more than 180,000 individual items for anti-piracy purposes, but only just over 3,000 were shipped (UKHC, 2015, p. 167). Estimates of the total number of maritime PSC firearms in the HRA are in the range of 7,000–10,000 (Chapsos and Holtom, 2015).

Table 1 Average prices (USD) for services provided by floating armouries, 2014

Offered service	Dis- and embarkation of arms and equipment and their storage	Dis- and embarkation of private armed guards	Visa arrangements	Arms service	Accommodation
Average price	3,000–4,000	500 per person	50 per person	100 per piece	25–50 per person per day

Floating armoury security and management practices vary significantly. Due to the fact that floating armouries operating in the HRA are not designed to serve as armouries, storage space for arms, ammunition, and equipment may be inadequate (see Photo 1). Poor storage conditions risk advertising the status of the vessel as a floating armoury and possibly attracting unwanted attention from pirates or terrorists. In addition, new market entrants could seek to undercut existing operations by slashing costs and neglecting armoury security.

The UK expressed confidence that arms delivered to maritime PSCs had not been diverted, observing that no evidence of diversion had been presented to the government (UKHC, 2015, para. 333). Without post-licensing checks, however, the government is not likely to find out about such incidents. The conditions of the Open General Trade Control Licence (Maritime Anti-piracy)—which authorizes vetted maritime PSCs to supply, deliver, and transfer particular types of small arms and ammunition for use onto commercial vessels in the HRA—include a commitment not to transfer the materiel to any other entity (UK, 2014). Yet anecdotal evidence indicates that maritime PSCs increasingly share arms and

**Photo 1 Storage of weapons on board a floating armoury off Fujairah, United Arab Emirates, 2014**



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equipment, using floating armouries to carry out such practices. A company storing arms on a floating armoury simply completes a 'transfer request form' to transfer the arms to another company that requires them to conduct a transit of a protected vessel. The transfer takes place with or without the knowledge of the owners of the floating armoury; the property of the first company is disembarked for use by the second company.

## Regulation of floating armouries

The International Maritime Organization has issued recommendations and guidance to ensure that the carriage and use of weapons and equipment by private armed guards comply with the legislation and policies of their vessel's flag state and of the countries with jurisdiction over the territorial waters and ports that the vessel is to enter (IMO, 2011; 2012). Nevertheless, there are no common standards or practices agreed among states regarding the regulation of floating armouries or international standards for floating armoury security or storage. A variety of approaches have been proposed for regulating floating armouries. These include:

- the establishment of an international regulatory authority for monitoring and inspecting floating armouries;
- International Maritime Organization guidelines, standards, and recommendations for floating armouries, similar to those issued with respect to the use of maritime PSCs (IMO, 2011; 2012);
- flag state regulations for floating armouries, drawing upon the practice of the Saint Kitts and Nevis registry, which has elaborated a set of minimum requirements for the registration of ships to be used as floating armouries;
- arms licensing requirements and record-keeping practices for maritime PSCs by government authorities in arms-exporting states (UKHC, 2015, pp. 163–64); and
- an international standard connected to ISO/PAS 28007, which covers maritime PSCs' operations and guard training and qualifications, but not floating armouries (ISO, 2013).

## Floating armouries in the Gulf of Guinea?

The Gulf of Guinea, on the western coast of Africa, is a hot spot of maritime insecurity due to piracy and armed robbery at sea. An estimated 100 vessels were attacked in these waters in 2013, with 56 attacks succeeding (OBP, 2014, p. 5). Several companies are reportedly exploring the option of deploying floating armouries in the Gulf of Guinea, but the application of the Indian Ocean's model seems unlikely (Chapsos and Holtom, 2015, p. 236). First, the risk of violent armed pirate groups attacking a floating armoury in the region is high and therefore other measures are preferred for addressing piracy. Second, in 2015 the UK rejected applications for licences for armed anti-piracy operations and floating armouries in West Africa. It made clear that the UK licenses the use of floating armouries in the Indian Ocean only for anti-piracy operations off Somalia, and that this policy does not currently apply in West Africa (UKHC, 2015, p. 333).

## Conclusion

The use of floating armouries is a lucrative business that has responded to diverse, often contradictory, legislative and administrative measures relating to the carriage of armed guards into territorial waters and ports. As the use of floating armouries has become commonplace among maritime PSCs transiting the HRA, its decline may require a dramatic drop in the use of the PSCs themselves. Yet it is more likely that other areas at risk from piracy and armed robbery at sea will copy the HRA model. While the Gulf of Guinea has been identified as a potential site for such activity, a shift in existing policies would be required to authorize the use of floating armouries in West Africa.

To date, few flag states have shown interest in regulating or monitoring vessels operating as floating armouries. Coastal states and other stakeholders also exhibit low levels of interest in the development of regulations and standards for floating armouries. This reluctance has fuelled concern for the security of maritime PSC arms and ammunition on board floating armouries. It has also limited efforts to determine the number of floating armouries in the HRA, map their location, and monitor their use. ■

## Notes

- 1 The fourth edition of the *Best Management Practices for Protection against Somalia Based Piracy* defines the HRA as an area that is bounded by Port Suez and the Strait of Hormuz to the north; that includes the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Red Sea; and that extends eastward to the Indian Ocean, up to the western coast of India. Attacks to the south have extended into the Mozambique Channel (UKMTO et al., 2011).
- 2 Detailed pirate event statistics from 2008 to the present are available from EUNAVFOR–Somalia (2015).

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For more information on private security companies, please visit <<http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/armed-actors/private-security-companies.html>>

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The Small Arms Survey is a global centre of excellence whose mandate is to generate impartial, evidence-based, and policy-relevant knowledge on all aspects of small arms and armed violence. It is the principal international source of expertise, information, and analysis on small arms and armed violence issues, and acts as a resource for governments, policy-makers, researchers, and civil society. It is located in Geneva, Switzerland, at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies.

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