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Multinational naval force guards Iraq's oil exports

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aboard HMS Norfolk in northern Persian Gulf

Naval elements from Singapore, the UK and the US are enforcing a maritime exclusion zone in the northern Persian Gulf to protect Iraq's only functioning oil export terminal from maritime terrorist attack.

Up to four tankers a day are now taking on crude oil from the Mina al Bakr oil terminal (known as MABOT), making it one of the most important infrastructure assets in Iraq, according to coalition naval officers assigned to protect it.

"The projected earnings of \$21 billion a year from MABOT represents more than 90% of Iraq's [total] oil exports and revenue," Cdr Tony Radakin, captain of the UK Royal Navy (RN) Duke-class Type 23 frigate *HMS Norfolk*, told *Jane's Defence Weekly*. "Iraq's target is to export \$60 million in oil a day through MABOT and that is projected to double over the coming year. It is the biggest source of revenue that Iraq has at the moment and rebuilding the country would be put back if it was hit."

HMS Norfolk (one of two RN Type 23 frigates in the region), the US Navy's Spruance-class destroyer USS *Fletcher* and the Republic of Singapore Navy's Endurance-class amphibious transport ship *Endurance* are currently patrolling a two-mile exclusion zone around MABOT. Helicopters and fast patrol boats launched from the warships are deployed on a 24-hour basis to shepherd away the hundreds of small fishing boats and trading dhows that have proliferated in the northern Gulf since the end of the combat phase of the US-led Operation 'Iraqi Freedom'.

"The potential threat - a live threat - are dissidents, and the likely methods [of attack] they would use are small boats full of explosives," said Cdr Radakin. He added: "We are ready to combat it if it makes an appearance; we have the weapons on board to stop dissidents impacting on the terminal."

The recent discovery by UK troops in Basra of a 'Seersucker'/'Silkworm' medium-range anti-ship missile has raised the prospect of missile engagements against coalition warships protecting MABOT, although this is at the lower end of possibilities, according to naval officers in the Gulf. "There is a certain missile threat [that could] potentially [engage us]," said Cdr Radakin. "We are more likely to face suicide bombers akin to the USS *Cole* attack [in Aden in 2000]."

The naval force also intercepts vessels attempting to smuggle oil out of Iraq and has seized more than 24 suspect vessels since May.

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