

Israeli navy vet wants to sink smugglers with sea of data

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Israeli Ami Daniel, CEO and co-founder of the Windward company speaks as he poses at the company's offices on February 9, 2016 in the Israeli city of Tel Aviv

Israeli navy veteran Ami Daniel points at his computer screen and explains why the ship he was tracking should have been stopped and searched.

It sailed near the Libyan port of Tobruk and waited four days more than

a mile off the coast without ever docking, then moved west to Misrata, which it had never visited before.

Next came Greece, where it waited another four days offshore.

Whatever was on the ship—possibly drugs, weapons or people—likely eventually made its way onto Europe's shores, he said.

At a time of deep concern over migrant smuggling, Daniel said his company Windward has the ability to pick up such suspicious maritime behaviour that would otherwise go unnoticed.

In October, in a similar case, the Italian navy intercepted a cargo ship that was found to be carrying 20 tonnes of hashish.

"The overarching problem we are trying to solve is bringing visibility to the oceans—there is a huge gap in our understanding of the world," he said.

Europe has long been aware of the threat of maritime smuggling along its 65,000 kilometres of coastline, what Daniel called its "back door".

Ninety percent of the world's trade is via the oceans and ports simply cannot check even a fraction of all the containers. For that reason, they try to narrow it down with watch lists of ships.



An engineer of the Windward company shows on a computer how their technology works at the company's offices on February 9, 2016 in the Israeli city of Tel Aviv

But with turbulence in northern Africa and the collapse of Libya, smuggling networks have taken advantage of the situation while also becoming more sophisticated, Silvia Ciotti, head of the EuroCrime research body, explained.

And with the influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees across the seas, resources in Europe have been stretched threadbare.

The same smugglers taking desperate migrants and refugees into Europe also take contraband goods, Ciotti said.

"One day it is drugs. One day it is weapons. They do not care," she said.

Data-rich, information-poor

In a bid to combat this, Europe has sought to improve its coordination, establishing a common policy on sharing information.



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But much of the data, including where ships are at any given moment—which is self-reported—is prone to manipulation and error.

Likewise, over half of the ships that enter Europe sail under so-called flags of convenience—countries like Panama that require almost no checks to register—and around one percent of ships sail on a completely

false identity, Daniel said.

Security forces are often reliant on tip-offs and information about specific ships, Ciotti said. As Daniel put it, Europe is "data-rich but information-poor."

Windward, formed by Daniel after his stint in the Israeli navy enabled him to understand what information security services lacked, claims to fill that gap by providing to the minute and in-depth information on the ships, while also running checks on its ownership and history.

If a ship's activities are unusual—turning off its radar or visiting an at-risk port—it will be flagged up.

While not the only company offering such solutions, it has at least one prominent backer: Former CIA chief David Petraeus recently invested an undisclosed amount in the company.

The company is also using its technology to track Iran's oil shipments as sanctions are eased.

"One of the main innovations is the idea of activity-based intelligence – where you look at all the ships all the time to find suspicious patterns, rather than just the wanted ships," said Daniel.

Even with such data, catching smugglers is still limited by a range of factors, including legislation that varies between countries, said Michael Newton, co-editor of the book *Prosecuting Maritime Piracy*.

But firm evidence of wrongdoing could enable quicker interceptions, he said.

A United Nations report points out that operations at sea are difficult to

carry out, so enforcement tends to take place when [ships](#) dock.

"But, when successful, interception operations at sea often result in the seizure of larger quantities of drugs than those on land or in the air," it concluded.

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