

SYNERGY BOSS ON CREW DUTY AND GULF RISK

Requests for repatriation came before voyage continuity when 13 managed ships were inside the Middle East Gulf

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Synergy Marine Group head Jesper Kristensen is clear on where the ship manager's priorities lie in finding a path through the conflict in the Middle East.

Seafarers will be the most important factor in any plans, the chief executive said.

"Our standard throughout was that a request to leave [a ship] would be acted upon rather than argued with."

"Where seafarers exercised that right, it was respected without detriment to their employment or future assignment," he told TradeWinds.

The loss of seafarers across the region is a reminder that these are decisions about human lives, not simply schedules or cargoes, Kristensen added.

"No responsible manager should become comfortable with that risk."

Synergy ended management deals when, after sustained discussion, an acceptable risk threshold could not be "aligned with the proposed operating mandate", Kristensen said.

"We accepted the commercial consequence and completed or orderly management handovers."

When hostilities began, the company, founded by Rajesh Unni, had 13 managed ships, with 286 seafarers on board, operating inside the Middle East Gulf.

Kristensen told TradeWinds that describing these ships as "trapped" is understandable shorthand, but each case was different. Some were safely alongside or at anchor, but unable to continue their intended voyages, he explained.

As of the middle of September, six Synergy-managed vessels remained inside the Gulf.

The difference from the original number reflects subsequent vessel movements and changes in management responsibility, Synergy said.

The company does not discuss individual vessels or owner relationships.

But Kristensen said: "Where

seafarers asked to be repatriated, we treated those requests as a priority over voyage continuity and arranged relief as soon as safe and practicable arrangements could be made.

"For operational and security reasons, we will not disclose vessel identities, exact positions or intended transit timings."

The CEO added that the response began with the people on board.

"We increased direct contact with every affected vessel and developed a ship-specific plan based on its crew, cargo, location, trading commitments and risk profile," he said.

Synergy also worked closely with owners, charterers, flag administrations, insurers and specialist security advisers.

However, the master retained overriding authority, Kristensen stressed.

"Our responsibility as manager was to ensure that the master had reliable information, direct access to shore leadership and confidence that a safety-based decision would be supported," he said.

"Our handling of the crisis was also supported by our significant presence on the ground, including technical and marine-service professionals. This meant that a broad range of support could be coordinated and delivered in-house."

In terms of owner relationships, Kristensen said: "The point is not to judge others, but to be clear about our own accountability: where risk to those on board cannot be reconciled with the mandate, we must be prepared to decline the operation or, ultimately, the mandate itself."

As for movements in and out of the Strait of Hormuz now, Kristensen said that where transits take place, the company is selective and follows a vessel-specific assessment.

"We do not regard a few successful passages as evidence that conditions have returned to normal," he said.

Each decision is informed by consultation with the relevant protection and indemnity club, compliance with applicable flag-

state requirements and independent threat assessment. Vessels are monitored continuously while in the area.

The assessment includes the latest threat picture, vessel and cargo profile, route and timing, crew concerns, available emergency support and the master's judgement. Electronic navigation has also become part of the security assessment.

Persistent global navigation satellite system (GNSS) interference means bridge teams must be prepared to verify their position through independent means rather than relying on a single electronic source, Kristensen said.

"AIS is similarly not a simple on-or-off solution. An unexplained loss of transmission can create ambiguity around a vessel's identity or intentions, while continuous transmission can create other exposure."

"Any decision must therefore be made by the master under the applicable regulations and current security guidance," Kristensen added.

He said that managers cannot simply impose a Hormuz surcharge on clients.

"Any additional remuneration must have a basis in the management agreement or be specifically agreed with the owner."

"There are nevertheless

genuine additional costs associated with operating in such an environment, including specialist intelligence, enhanced security arrangements, war-risk insurance, diversions, crew changes and prolonged shore support."

"Those costs should be distinguished clearly from the manager's remuneration."

Synergy's principle is transparency with the owner and agreement in advance wherever practicable. Most importantly, a safety decision should never depend on whether an additional fee can be charged, Kristensen said.

The crisis has not changed Synergy's long-term view of the Middle East, but it has sharpened the conditions under which it grows, he explained.

"We will place greater weight on alignment with owners over decision rights, crew welfare and acceptable risk, alongside the normal commercial and technical considerations. Growth must also be matched by credible regional response capability."

The crisis has reinforced the case for stronger local networks covering security intelligence, medical evacuation, crew changes, firefighting, rescue and other emergency support. That capability must be established before it is needed, Kristensen said.

"We remain interested in healthy regional growth, but fleet count cannot be the only measure. The quality of the owner relationship and the ability to protect and support the people on board are equally important," the CEO added.

The Middle East remains strategically important to Synergy, sitting as it does at the intersection of global energy supply, maritime trade and substantial investment in new shipping and fuel infrastructure.

"We also have long-standing owner relationships and an established presence in the region," Kristensen said.

"We intend to deepen those relationships and capabilities over the long term."

He added: "However, commercial importance does not change our operating threshold."

"We will be selective about where and how we grow, and particularly about whether the manager, owner and master share a clear understanding of decision rights when conditions deteriorate."

— Jesper Kristensen

JESPER KRISTENSEN: Synergy Marine Group chief executive
Photo: Synergy



CONSOLIDATION IS NOT A STRATEGY, WARNS KRISTENSEN

Jesper Kristensen believes more consolidation is likely in the ship management sector.

Regulation, decarbonisation, cyber security, technology and the competition for skilled people all require investment, the chief executive of Singapore's Synergy Marine Group said.

That will continue to encourage mergers, partnerships and more specialised combinations, Kristensen said.

But Kristensen has a warning for those seeking to bolt-on capacity without proper planning.

"Consolidation is not itself a strategy," he told TradeWinds.

"Scale that is poorly integrated can add layers, dilute accountability and move decisions further away from the vessel."

"The real test is whether scale produces better technical support, stronger intelligence, deeper capability and lower total cost of ownership while preserving the owner's visibility and control."

Consolidation also tests whether the organisation behind the vessels is built to support the resulting scale, he said.

The operating model, processes, data and use of AI must be capable of carrying a larger fleet without adding distance between the vessel, the owner and the people making decisions, he added.

Synergy's approach is about making scale usable at vessel level, not merely impressive at group level.

"Synergy's priority is healthy growth. We would assess any consolidation opportunity against its technical capability, cultural fit and value to owners, rather than pursuing fleet numbers or league-table position as ends in themselves," Kristensen said.

As for more general plans for the group, Kristensen said the company is marking its 20th anniversary in October.

"As we enter our third decade, our focus is on translating the group's scale, experience and specialist capability into more consistent and measurable value at vessel level and for every owner," he added.

Kristensen believes ship man-

agement has changed materially over the past five to seven years.

Decarbonisation, digitalisation, cyber risk and geopolitical disruption have broadened the manager's remit, he said.

"Partnership is no longer a differentiator; the test is whether a manager can deliver consistent outcomes at scale."

What the group described as "ship management 2.0" focuses on technical excellence close to the vessel, centralised intelligence across the fleet, integrated specialist support and clear accountability to the owner.

It shifts the conversation from management fees to total cost of ownership and from fragmented information to decisions people can act upon, Kristensen added.

"We are increasingly pursuing performance-based fees and deeper partnership structures with selected owners, and we are beginning to see traction."

That model depends on people, with Synergy building multidisciplinary teams combining seagoing judgement, engineering, digital and leadership capability, with clearer pathways between ship-board and shore-based careers.

It is also investing further in education and training infrastructure to secure the pipeline of talent at sea and ashore for the next decade.

Technology and AI should identify risk earlier and remove repetitive work, but human judgement and the master's authority remain decisive, Kristensen said.

Synergy, which was founded by executive chair Rajesh Unni, is a partner in Singapore's Maritime Energy Training Fund.

The group is also contributing to training for the safe handling and incident management of fuels such as methanol and ammonia.

The wider programme expects to train about 10,000 maritime professionals by 2030.

"Owners do not buy our transformation. They buy safer ships, reliable operations, fewer surprises and better performance," Kristensen said.



RAJESH UNNI: Synergy Marine Group founder and executive chair.
Photo: Synergy Marine Group