

FROM THE
Black Sea TO
every ocean

TOR Group is a family shipbuilder that has gradually stretched its links from its Black Sea roots in Türkiye to different shores worldwide. The business is currently in transition, diversifying to own and operate a fleet while continuing to offer the best engineering competencies to clients. CEO Kemal Torlak and Chairman David Cullen described TOR Group's journey. Profile by Andy Probert.



Through five generations, shipbuilding has been the beating heart and lifeblood of the Torlak family. From first building wooden boats in the Eastern Black Sea province of Rize in the 1880s to today's

Tuzla manufacturing site in Türkiye, the TOR Group has built various vessels for an increasingly international client list.

Under the leadership of CEO Kemal Torlak, and Chairman David Cullen, the TOR Group is now on a journey of major transition that will see it, for the first time, becoming a vessel owner-operator.

The third generation of the Torlak family successfully delivered Türkiye's first steel hull vessel in 1968, propelling it to the forefront of Turkish shipbuilding. Tor continues to break ground, in 2021 becoming one of the first to manage an external shipbuilding project. In this case, the client was the Pakistani Navy with TOR Group providing the parts, equipment, engineering expertise and project co-ordination to enable the build to take place in Karachi Shipyard.

While building various vessel-types, including bulk carriers, ferries and patrol





boats, for the international market, workboats have recently become a key business line for the company.

“TOR Group holds tremendous tradition and experience,” said Mr Cullen. “In 2019, it decided to set up its commercial headquarters in the UK while retaining operations in Türkiye, with the aim to expand and diversify. It began operating a self-designed and built tugboat in UK waters in 2022, a critical milestone indicative of the direction TOR Group seeks. We are already embarking on the production of a second vessel for UK operations, and more will follow.”

The company has fostered flourishing partnerships with Karachi Shipyard in Pakistan, the Oman Dry Docks Company and a small dry docks operation in Penzance, Cornwall, in the UK, with options to expand these and new links further.

Workboat ambitions

“For the 48-tonne bollard pull workboat for Pakistan, we completed the design, and the full material package from steel cutting to nuts and bolts in Tuzla,” explained Mr Torlak. “It was, under our supervision, assembled in Karachi. The boat is undergoing commissioning and sea trials, and the client is very happy.

“It was the first of this type of contract for TOR Group, apart from physically building the boat. This proved an interesting experience despite the pandemic and a broken supply chain. But it is indicative of our diversification plans and we hope to replicate and extend that to future clients.”

A workboat built in Tuzla, intended for sale to a client but which fell through due to the pandemic, became a focal point of its diversification goals, according to Mr Torlak:

“It was decided to operate the boat in UK waters as a TOR-owned and operated vessel. We wanted to put it to use and prove the concept of launching our own operations here. It attracted a lot of interest and has since been sold to a client in Newfoundland, Canada.”

That has spurred TOR Group to build a new workboat at Tuzla (the first of a small fleet) to operate specifically in UK waters under its sister company TOR Offshore.

Mr Torlak said the 26m hybrid utility vessel would arrive at the end of 2023 and will begin operation in 2024 potentially to service the windfarm sector. The boat will have 4-point mooring, an A-frame, dive support, an offshore crane capability, and a gyrostabiliser. It could also act as

a tugboat with electric propulsion and diesel generators aboard.

“The company is looking to build sister variants, maybe three, and build tugs for the UK market,” said Mr Cullen. “These designs are presently underway. Owner-operation is one route for diversification; another is innovative procurement solutions, including finance, to enable clients to procure vessels and facilitate other partner shipyards to build those vessels.”

Pragmatic approach

The Tuzla yard employs around 50 core staff, increasing that workforce to 300 depending on the contract. It has two slipways with the capacity to build up to 100m, but commercially the optimum is



around 40m-50m vessels. Significant use is made of sub-contractors.

The company is presently building two tugboats with 65-tonne bollard pull capacities. They are nearing completion and sea trials, with a number of potential international clients in advanced negotiations.

Prior to the Pakistan contract, TOR Group delivered three tugboats with an 80-tonne bollard pull for the Ghana Port and Harbour Authority. "All three were built in 12 months: it was a challenge, but the company completed them on time," said Mr Torlak.

The shipyard has previously built pilot boats, tugboats and oil recovery vessels for the Saudi Sea Port Authority. "One of our most significant projects was to build a 45m patrol boat with a speed of 32 knots for Aramco," Mr Torlak continued. "It was a unique project meeting complex engineering and propulsion demands to achieve that speed with that weight. TOR is one of only four companies worldwide with these proven design capabilities."

"Covid, the global economic situation, supply chain delays and rising costs

have inevitably impacted us, but in the past two years, the company has seen growth of about 60%, and it is anticipated to increase by 100% in 2023," Mr Cullen said. "TOR remains, at its heart, a shipbuilder, endeavouring to stay at the forefront of cutting-edge and sustainable technologies, and has diversified its suite of services to help meet this aim."

Both said business relationships with clients and suppliers were built on the collective foundations of trust, loyalty, transparency and compromise while upholding high-quality standards in all operations. "Quality is expected within the group from the product to the people we employ," Mr Torlak explained. "It is a core value of ours that can never be sacrificed."

He added that the company is taking a cautious approach to the sustainability demands of the industry as "there are many options and some significant uncertainty about where green energy is best

evolving and understanding all of the technical complexities."

Mr Cullen agreed, saying: "The maritime industry is not straightforward: It operates in an environment that is multi-faceted and, often, extremely challenging. People are looking for a fundamental breakthrough, such as hydrogen, to embrace change properly and that may be a little way off.

"As for the TOR Group, it will continue to expand and diversify, strengthen its core activities, and evolve its business plans pragmatically." ■

