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Ship agency: port, liner and protecting agents

Types of agent, the steps of a port call, proforma and final DA, the liner agent's work on bills of lading, containers and demurrage, Türkiye's regulation and the FONASBA framework

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SHORT ANSWER

A ship agent is the company that represents the shipowner, operator or charterer in port. A port agent runs a port call: berthing, pilot and tugs, official notifications, stores and crew matters. It estimates the costs in a proforma DA, pays them from funds sent in advance and closes the account with a final DA after the ship sails. A liner agent works for a container line: it takes bookings, issues bills of lading and delivery orders, and handles containers and demurrage. In Türkiye the work requires a licence from the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure under the Regulation on Ship Agents of 14 May 2026.

Who is the ship agent?

As a ship approaches a port, someone ashore has to look after its business: book the berth, order the pilot and tugs, make the official notifications, arrange stores and crew changes, and finally gather every cost into a single account. That someone is the ship agent.

The IMO Convention on Facilitation of International Maritime Traffic (FAL), in an amendment that entered into force on 1 January 2018, defines the shipping agent as the party representing the shipowner and/or charterer in port. The party that appoints the agent is called the **principal**. In Türkiye, the 2026 Regulation on Ship Agents (Gemi Acenteleri Yönetmeliği) likewise defines the agent as a person or company acting, under an agreement, on behalf of the ship or yacht owner, master or operator.

Two principles explain most of what an agent does:

- **It acts for the principal, not for itself.** The agent does not carry cargo; it signs contracts and pays costs within the authority the principal gives it. According to FONASBA's 2020 introduction, as long as the agent stays within that authority the obligations fall on the principal. To rely on this, the agent should describe itself in all correspondence as acting "as agents only".
- **One ship may have more than one agent.** While one agent handles the port call, the owner may appoint a separate protecting agent to watch its own interests. On a container service, the cargo side is usually handled by the line's own agent in that country.

The wider map of companies and authorities in a port is in the section The parties in a port. For the everyday vocabulary an agent uses, from berths and mooring lines to the parts of the ship, see **Ship terminology: directions and the parts of a ship**.

Types of agent: port, liner and protecting agents

In practice an agent is named after whom it works for and what it does. The split below follows FONASBA's standard agency agreements. Turkish legislation does not define every one of these names; the Regulation on Ship Agents defines the protecting agent separately.

Type	Works for	Main job	Basis
Port agent	The owner, operator or charterer bringing the ship to that port	Runs a single port call from start to finish: berthing, port services, formalities, ship and crew needs, the cost account	BIMCO/FONASBA Agency Appointment Agreement (AAA, 2017): for a single call or a short series of calls
Liner agent	A carrier running a scheduled service	Represents the line in a country or region: canvasses cargo, takes bookings, issues bills of lading and delivery orders, controls containers, collects freight; usually also handles the line's port calls	FONASBA Standard Liner & General Agency Agreement (2001)
General agent	A line or an owner	Directs and supervises sub-agents in a country or region; coordinates space allocation and vessel rotation	The same 2001 agreement; for longer-term, multi-port work the FONASBA/BIMCO General Agency Appointment Agreement (GAA, 2017)
Protecting agent	An owner or operator that did not choose the port agent	Monitors the main agent's work; checks the cost account and the time records	Defined in Türkiye's Regulation on Ship Agents; its fee is a separate item in the Turkish agency tariff

Husbandry. Crew changes, stores and spare parts, repairs and medical care are known as husbandry. On the AAA form, husbandry is a separate service box alongside inward clearance, outward clearance and cargo operations. In other words, the services an agent takes on for a call are selected one by one in the contract.

When is a protecting agent needed?

The owner does not always choose the port agent. A charter party or a sale contract may let the charterer or the cargo side nominate the agent. Sources based on the ICS *Port Agency* textbook explain that such an agent may lean towards the party that brings it business, which is why the owner appoints a second agent to look after its own interests.

Turkish law describes the role in two places. Under the Regulation on Ship Agents, a protecting agent is appointed in addition to the agent named under the contract of carriage, to protect the interests of the owner, master or operator. The Ministry of Trade's agency tariff communiqué describes it as the agent that protects its principal's rights where the ship's agent and the cargo agent are different. The Regulation also obliges the main agent to share the information and documents the protecting agent asks for (Art. 13).

The protecting agent's main job is to check: it reviews the proforma cost account, the statement of facts (SOF) and the time sheet. On a chartered ship these records feed straight into the laytime and demurrage calculation, which is why they matter to the owner.

A port call: before, during and after

FONASBA's port procedures survey, published in 2012, found that a single port call may involve as many as 150 separate actions, and that the way they are carried out varies from country to country and even from port to port. The table summarises the main steps; which of them are given to the agent is agreed for each appointment.

Stage	The agent's main tasks	Works with
Before arrival	Receives the appointment and instructions; sends the proforma cost account and requests funds. Books the berth and the berthing slot, orders the pilot and tugs. Passes crew and passenger details to immigration, arrival and cargo details to customs, and the health declaration to the port health authority. Sends the cargo manifest to the terminal and stevedores for stowage planning.	Principal, harbour master, port and terminal operators, customs, health and immigration authorities
In port	Follows berthing and mooring. Monitors loading and discharge with the terminal and stevedores. Arranges stores, bunkers and spare parts, crew changes, medical care and repairs. Keeps the statement of facts and reports regularly to the principal.	Master, terminal, stevedores, suppliers, surveyors
Departure and after	Handles outward clearance. Completes the cargo documents. Collects the invoices, sends the final cost account (final DA) to the principal and settles it against the funds received.	Harbour master, customs, principal

In Türkiye, the Regulation on Ship Agents lists most of these tasks in its definition of ship agency services: passenger and cargo work, maintenance and repair, surveys, supplies, loading and discharge, ordering pilots and tugs, crew changes, and port entry and departure notifications.

Two practical notes:

- **"Ordino" can mean two different documents in Türkiye.** The harbour master's berthing permit for the ship and the delivery order an importer collects from the agent share the same Turkish name. The difference is explained in the ports topic.
- **The agent's time records turn into money.** On a chartered ship, the time allowed for loading and discharge starts to run according to the notice of readiness (NOR) and the conditions in the charter; the times in the statement of facts are the basis of the calculation. The calculation itself is in **Chartering, laytime and vessel demurrage**.

Proforma and final DA: the port cost account

The agent pays the costs of the port call on the ship's behalf, and the principal sends the money to the agent in advance. The document behind this cycle is the **disbursement account** (DA).

- **Proforma DA (PDA):** The agent's estimate of the costs, prepared before the ship arrives. Clause 10 of the BIMCO/FONASBA AAA treats the proforma as a non-binding estimate; the principal pays the costs actually

incurred. The amount and timing of the advance (funding) are agreed separately in the contract.

- **Final DA (FDA):** The definitive account prepared after the ship has sailed and the invoices are in. The difference from the advance is settled here.

Because the proforma is only an estimate, it is one of the most common sources of dispute. ITIC, which insures transport intermediaries, reports cases where principals underpaid because the final account differed from the proforma, and recommends that agents add a note to every proforma stating that it is only an estimate and that the principal will pay the actual account.

What goes into a DA?

The items depend on the port and the purpose of the call. The table shows the general groups.

Group	Examples	Who receives the money?
Port dues and official charges	Port dues based on the ship's tonnage; taxes, levies and fees	Port authority, public bodies
Services to the ship	Pilotage, towage, mooring	The body or company providing the service
Ship and crew matters	Supplies, crew changes, cash advance to the master	Suppliers, the master
Agency fee	The agent's own fee	The agent

Who finally bears each cost is a separate question. On a container service these items reach the cargo side through the freight; see Who pays whom?. On a chartered ship, the charter party decides which costs fall on the owner and which on the charterer; the ICS Port Agency syllabus treats the allocation of costs between the parties as a topic of its own.

Agency fees in Türkiye

In Türkiye, agency fees are set by the Ministry of Trade's Communiqué on the Tariff for Ship Agency Services (Official Gazette, 19 September 2023, No. 32314):

- The tariff amounts are **minimum fees**; the agent may not charge less. A fee above the tariff may be charged only after written notice and approval (Art. 8).
- For ships calling at Turkish ports or transiting the Turkish Straits, the agency, protecting agency, supervision and port charges and all other costs are paid to the agent **in advance** (Art. 7). An agent asking for funds before the ship arrives is consistent with this rule.
- Mandatory items such as taxes, levies and fees, and freight collection and transfer costs, are not included in the agency fee (Art. 9).
- Turkish-flagged ships get a 50 per cent discount on the port, straits transit and supervision tariffs (Art. 8). Cabotage voyages are outside the scope of the communiqué (Art. 2).

The communiqué still refers to the 2012 regulation, which has since been repealed. As of November 2026 we found no replacement communiqué; check the current text before relying on it for official purposes.

The liner agent: bills of lading, containers and demurrage

As an exporter or importer, the agent you will deal with most is the container line's agent. FONASBA's Standard Liner & General Agency Agreement (2001) groups this agent's work as follows:

Area	What the agent does	What the cargo side sees
Sales and bookings	Canvasses cargo, takes bookings, announces sailings and arrivals, quotes freight under the line's tariff	Freight quotation, booking confirmation, cut-off dates
Documents	Issues bills of lading, manifests and delivery orders on the line's behalf	Draft bill of lading, arrival notice, delivery order
Container (equipment) control	Keeps a register and control system for containers, arranges storage and positioning, handles interchange documents and seals, follows damage control and repairs	Empty pick-up, empty return, damage invoices
Collection and accounts	Calculates freight and related charges under the line's tariff, collects them and remits them to the line; also collects ancillary charges such as container demurrage	Freight invoice, local charges, demurrage and detention invoices

What this means in practice:

- **The demurrage invoice comes from the agent; the rules come from the line.** The agent invoices container demurrage and detention on the line's behalf, but the line sets the free time and the tariff. The counters are explained in **Demurrage, detention and storage**. Vessel demurrage, which arises when the ship itself is delayed in port, is a separate calculation; see Not to be confused with vessel demurrage.
- **The agent may sign the bill of lading.** The signature box then shows that it signs on behalf of the carrier; the agent does not become the carrier by issuing the document. For how to read the fields, see A sample bill of lading, field by field.
- **Release instructions go through the agent.** Telex release or release against original bills is carried out through the agent at the port of discharge. The options are in How is the cargo released?.

The same agreement restricts the agent, without the line's consent, from representing other shipping lines in its territory and from running NVOCC or freight forwarding business that competes directly with the line (Clause 1.04). This clause shows well why the liner agent and the forwarder are treated as separate roles.

Ship agent, forwarder and broker: what is the difference?

All three are called intermediaries, but they represent different parties and work under different contracts.

	Ship agent	Freight forwarder	Shipbroker
Represents	The ship side: owner, operator or charterer	The cargo owner: exporter or importer	One party to a contract: owner, charterer, buyer or seller of a ship

	Ship agent	Freight forwarder	Shipbroker
Main job	Represents the ship in port; as a liner agent, also handles the line's cargo and documents	Organises the transport end to end; becomes liable like a carrier if it issues its own document	Brings business in chartering or ship sale and purchase, runs the negotiation and concludes the contract
When involved	From before the ship arrives until the final account is closed	From cargo readiness to delivery	From negotiation to completion of the contract

FONASBA describes four kinds of broker: the **owners' broker**, who finds charters for a shipowner; the **charterers' broker**, who finds ships for a charterer's cargo; the **independent broker**, who works with both sides; and the **sale and purchase (S&P) broker**, who represents one party in buying or selling a ship.

In Türkiye, a ship agency needs a ship agency authorisation certificate from the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure, and freight forwarding needs a separate TİO (freight forwarder) authorisation certificate from the same ministry. One company may hold more than one role; what matters is the capacity in which it acts on a given job. The forwarder's side is covered in **What does a freight forwarder do?**, and the four roles are compared side by side in Forwarder, customs broker, shipping agent and carrier.

Ship agency in Türkiye: the regulation and the licence

In Türkiye, ship agency is governed by the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure's **Regulation on Ship Agents** (Gemi Acenteleri Yönetmeliği). It was published in the Official Gazette of 14 May 2026 (No. 33253) and replaced the regulation of 5 March 2012. Its opening articles took effect on publication and the rest three months later. Its legal basis is the Ports Law No. 618, Decree-Law No. 655 and Presidential Decree No. 1 on the Presidential Organisation.

A licence is mandatory. No person or company without an authorisation certificate may provide agency services on behalf of an owner, master, operator or charterer (Art. 6). The Regulation divides agencies into three classes (Art. 5):

Class	Ships it may serve	Minimum capital (Art. 27)	Certificate fee (Art. 26)
A	All ships and yachts in its region, including the Turkish Straits	TRY 5,000,000	TRY 300,000
B	All ships outside the Turkish Straits; all yachts, including in the Straits	TRY 1,000,000	TRY 200,000
C	Yachts only, including in the Straits	TRY 500,000	TRY 150,000

Each branch needs additional capital: TRY 100,000 for class A, TRY 75,000 for class B and TRY 50,000 for class C (Art. 27). Renewal costs half of the fee.

- **Four regions (Art. 7):** the Black Sea from Hopa to Bartın; Zonguldak to Ayvalık including Gökçeada, Bozcaada and the whole Marmara region; the Aegean from Dikili to Fethiye; and the Mediterranean from Kaş to İskenderun. A certificate is valid in its own region. An agency may open branches in other regions, each with its own branch certificate (Art. 6).

- **Validity:** Certificates are issued for five years; renewal must be applied for at least 30 days before expiry (Arts. 6 and 13). Applications, certification and registration run through the Ministry's electronic system, GABS. Certificates cannot be transferred.
- **Who may apply:** sole traders and companies established under the Turkish Commercial Code. Ship agency must be among their registered activities and they must be members of the Chamber of Shipping (Deniz Ticaret Odası). Individuals must be Turkish citizens with no disqualifying criminal record.
- **Staff:** Every agency appoints a responsible manager. Class A and B head offices employ at least two staff with maritime degrees. Staff receive a five-year identification certificate after training and an exam; maritime bachelor's and associate degree holders are exempt from the training but must pass the exam (Art. 11).
- **Premises:** A dedicated office, an archive system and a registered electronic mail (KEP) address are required; residential or virtual offices are not accepted.
- **Obligations (Art. 13):** follow the Ministry of Trade's agency tariff, report changes of name or address within 30 days, enter required data into the electronic systems on time and accurately, and share the information and documents a protecting agent requests. Records must be kept for at least five years (Art. 25).

Transition: Under the Regulation, certificates issued under the old regulation that were due to expire within six months were extended to the end of that period. The others remain valid until expiry, but for no more than one year from the date the Regulation took effect (Provisional Art. 1).

Figures and conditions follow the May 2026 text of the Regulation (last checked: November 2026).

Note: The legal information in this section is compiled from a copy of the official text; check the current text on mevzuat.gov.tr before taking any action.

The international framework: FONASBA and standard agreements

FONASBA (the Federation of National Associations of Ship Brokers and Agents) is the London-based umbrella body for national associations of shipbrokers and agents. It was founded in 1969; according to its August 2020 introduction it has 64 member countries and represents more than 5,000 companies. For the professional bodies of the maritime sector in Türkiye, see **Logistics and trade organisations**.

FONASBA's standard documents, most of them prepared with BIMCO:

Document	Used for
Agency Appointment Agreement (AAA), 2017	Appointing an agent for a single port call or a short series of calls at a few ports; usable in all trades
General Agency Appointment Agreement (GAA), 2017	Longer-term or multi-port agency relationships
Standard Liner & General Agency Agreement, 2001	The contract between a line and its liner or general agent; combines the two earlier liner agency forms
Normal Agency Services Summary, 2019	Lists the services the normal agency fee covers, to prevent disputes later

Document	Used for
Sub-Agency Agreement, 1998	The relationship between an agent and its sub-agent

These forms are not compulsory; they become part of the contract when the parties agree to use them. A few AAA provisions worth knowing for people in the trade:

- The agent is not liable to the principal unless the loss is due solely to its own negligence or wilful default; liability for negligence is capped at ten times the agreed agency fee, except where the loss results from the agent's personal act or omission (Clause 14).
- The agent is discharged from liability unless suit is brought within one year (Clause 17).
- If the principal does not send the agreed funds, the agent may terminate the agreement and keep the documents in its possession (Clause 11).
- The form records whether the agent holds FONASBA Quality Standard certification. FONASBA describes the standard as a way for shipowners to identify agents and brokers that are financially sound and committed to quality.

VOYLAYRULES 2013, used to interpret laytime terms on chartered ships, is also a joint text of BIMCO, CMI, FONASBA and Intercargo.

Where to go next in the guide

- The parties, terminals and charges in a port: **How cargo moves through a port: terminals, parties and charges**
- Berths, mooring, the parts of a ship and directions: **Ship terminology: directions and the parts of a ship**
- NOR, laytime and vessel demurrage: **Chartering, laytime and vessel demurrage**
- Container demurrage and detention: **Demurrage, detention and storage**
- The bill of lading and release methods: **The bill of lading**
- The forwarder's role and liability: **What does a freight forwarder do?**
- Ship agency as a career path: **Careers in logistics: roles and paths**

Which courses cover this topic?

Ship agency is taught as a stand-alone course in maritime business and in maritime and port management programmes. In the curricula we reviewed, it is a separate course in 6 programmes and part of another course in 16. A few examples:

- Piri Reis University — Maritime Business Administration (bachelor's) — Ship Agency (DİY 414)
- Samsun University — Maritime Business Administration (bachelor's) — Maritime Agency and Brokerage (DİY305)

- Tekirdağ Namık Kemal University, Barbaros Maritime Vocational School — Maritime and Port Management (associate degree) — Maritime Agency Management (BDL303)
- İstanbul Gelişim University, İstanbul Gelişim Vocational School — Maritime and Port Management (associate degree) — Maritime Agency Management (DLP253)
- İzmir University of Economics — Logistics Management (bachelor's) — Ship Agency and Freight Forwarding Business (LOG 422)
- Institute of Chartered Shipbrokers (ICS) — Foundation Diploma, Advanced Diploma and PQE (certificate) — Port Agency

Test yourself

1. A bulk carrier on a voyage charter is heading for the load port; under the charter party the charterer nominated the port agent. How can the owner watch its own interests? *(Answer: By appointing a separate protecting agent, which checks the proforma cost account, the statement of facts and the time sheet.)*
2. The final DA received after the ship sailed is 15 per cent higher than the proforma. Is the principal entitled to pay only the proforma amount? *(Answer: As a rule, no. Under the AAA the proforma is a non-binding estimate and the principal pays the costs actually incurred. It can ask for the items to be documented.)*
3. The demurrage invoice for your import container came from the line's agent. Who sets the free time and the daily rate? *(Answer: The shipping line. The agent issues and collects the invoice on the line's behalf.)*
4. Can an agency licensed only for yachts act for a dry cargo ship transiting the Istanbul Strait? *(Answer: No. A class C certificate covers yachts only; ships transiting the Straits can be served by a class A agency.)*

Frequently asked questions

Is a ship agent the same as a liner agent?

No, although one company can do both. A port agent represents the ship during a single port call: berthing, port services, formalities and the cost account. A liner agent represents a container line in a country on a continuing basis: it takes bookings, issues bills of lading and delivery orders, controls containers and collects freight and demurrage; it usually also handles the line's port calls.

Is a proforma DA binding?

No. The BIMCO/FONASBA Agency Appointment Agreement treats the proforma as a non-binding estimate and says the principal pays the costs actually incurred. The definitive amount is set by the final DA, prepared after the ship sails and the invoices are in; the difference from the advance is settled there.

What does a protecting agent do?

It looks after the interests of an owner that did not choose the port agent. It monitors the main agent's work and in particular checks the proforma cost account, the statement of facts (SOF) and the time sheet. In Türkiye, the Regulation on Ship Agents obliges the main agent to share the information and documents the protecting agent requests.

What licence does ship agency require in Türkiye?

A ship agency authorisation certificate from the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure. Under the 2026 Regulation on Ship Agents, certificates are issued in classes A, B and C, are valid in one of four regions and last five years. Applications go through the GABS system; membership of the Chamber of Shipping, minimum capital and trained staff are required.

What is the difference between a ship agent and a freight forwarder?

The ship agent represents the ship side: the owner, operator or charterer. The freight forwarder organises transport on behalf of the cargo owner. In Türkiye each needs its own authorisation certificate from the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure: a ship agency certificate for one, a TİO certificate for the other.

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