

Iran's maritime terrorism

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Two crew members, a Briton and a Romanian were killed when an Israeli-managed petroleum product tanker came under drone attack on July 29, 2021, off the coast of Oman. The same day a hostile attempt by the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen to attack a Saudi commercial vessel in the Red Sea with a drone has been thwarted.¹

Israel's prime minister, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab directly blamed Iran for the drone attack on the oil tanker off the coast of Oman that killed two people as Tehran denied being involved in the assault.

Iran has used drones to attack US forces in Iraq by supplying them to pro-Iran militias in Iraq and oil industry targets in Saudi Arabia. It has also sent drones to the Houthi rebels in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon and helped Hamas in Gaza to develop them. In February 2018 and May 2021, Iran flew drones from Syria into Israeli airspace and they were shot down. Iran thus has a powerful drone arm that may be behind the attack on the ship.²

The attack on the Israeli oil tanker

The Mercer Street, oil tanker is a Liberian-flagged, Japanese-owned ship, operated by Israeli-owned firm Zodiac Maritime. The London-based Zodiac Maritime, is controlled by Israeli magnate Eyal Ofer. The 27-member crew of the Mercer Street comprised Romanian, Chinese, Ukrainian, Filipino, Georgian and Indian nationals.

The Mercer Street was travelling from Dar El Salaam in Tanzania to Fujairah in the United Arab Emirates with no cargo aboard when it was attacked.³

The assessment in Israel was that the attack appeared to have been carried out by several Iranian drones. There were two attacks on the ship, spaced several hours apart. The first caused no damage, and the second hit the living quarters underneath the ship's command center, or bridge, causing the casualties.⁴

The United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO), which provides maritime security information, said the vessel was about 152 nautical miles (280 km) northeast of the Omani port of Duqm when it was attacked. A source at the Oman Maritime Security Center said that the attack occurred outside Omani territorial waters.

A U.S. Defense Department official said that two American Navy vessels from the US Navy's 5th Fleet responded to a distress call from a ship in international waters after being attacked. American Naval explosive experts were aboard "to ensure there is no additional danger to the crew."⁵

The U.S. official said that multiple drones were involved in the attack, though it was unclear how many actually hit the ship.⁶

London-based Zodiac Maritime, said the ship was sailing under the control of its crew and own power to a safe location with a U.S. naval escort.⁷

The response of Israel

Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, speaking at a cabinet meeting, directly accused Iran of responsibility. "I have now heard that Iran, in a cowardly manner, is trying to evade its responsibility for the incident and

are denying it. So, I'm stating here, absolutely, that Iran is the one that carried out the attack against the ship," he said. The strike aimed to hit an Israeli target, Bennett said, adding that "intelligence evidence exists" tying Iran to the attack.⁸

Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid said he had told Britain's foreign secretary of the need for a tough response to the incident in which two crew members, one British and the other Romanian, were killed.

"Iran is not just an Israeli problem, but an exporter of terrorism, destruction and instability that harms us all. The world must not be silent in the face of Iranian terrorism that also harms freedom of shipping," Lapid said in a statement.⁹

Israel's foreign minister said he has ordered the nation's diplomats to push for UN action against Iran over the deadly attack on the MT Mercer Street tanker. "I've instructed the embassies in Washington, London and the UN to work with their interlocutors in government and the relevant delegations in the UN headquarters in New York."¹⁰

The response of Iran

Saeed Khatibzadeh, a spokesman for the Iranian Foreign Ministry, said on August 1, 2021, that he "condemned" allegations linking Tehran to the attack and called on Israel to "stop spreading accusations," according to the semiofficial Iranian Students' News Agency.¹¹

But Al Alam TV, the Iranian government's Arabic-language television network, cited unnamed sources as saying the attack on the ship came in response to a suspected Israeli attack on Dabaa airport in the Al-Qusayr region in Syria.

It says that the attack on Al-Dabaa had led to the "martyrdom" of two people who were linked to Iran's "resistance axis," which means pro-Iran groups such as Hezbollah or other militias. Al-Dabaa airport was reportedly targeted on July 22, 2021.¹²

The response of US and UK

Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on August 1, 2021, that the United States is confident that Iran conducted the attack on an Israeli-managed tanker off Oman. He added that there was no justification for the attack,

and that the United States is working with partners to consider next steps.

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British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab issued a similar statement saying: "We believe this attack was deliberate, targeted, and a clear violation of international law by Iran. The UK is working with our international partners on a concerted response to this unacceptable attack".¹⁴

The attack on a Saudi commercial vessel

A hostile attempt by the Iran-backed Houthis to attack a Saudi commercial vessel with a drone has been thwarted on July 29, 2021, the Arab Coalition confirmed in a statement. The exact location of the incident was not immediately confirmed, though it is likely to have occurred in the southern Red Sea near the Bab al-Mandab. No casualties were immediately reported. Though no group has formally claimed responsibility for the attempted attack, Al-Houthi rebels are almost certainly behind the assault.¹⁵

Saudi authorities regularly condemn Al-Houthi activities in the Red Sea as a threat to navigation and global trade. Commercial and military ships have previously come under attack off the coast of Yemen as an extension of the continuing conflict in that country.

The July 29 incident occurred soon after an Israeli-linked oil tanker was attacked by drones off the coast of Oman, the incidents do not immediately appear to be related.

Summary

Tensions in the region have been rising in recent months, with Iran and Israel repeatedly accusing each other of attacking ships. The attack on the Israeli oil tanker was apparently the latest salvo in a maritime shadow war between Iran and Israel. The latest incident is seen as a significant escalation with its human casualties.

Three new elements can be pointed out in Iran's attack on the Israeli oil tanker:

- For the first time, drones were used to attack Israel's naval target.
- For the first time, Iran is responding to an Israeli attack on Iranian target in Syria by hitting an Israeli vessel.

- For the first time there are casualties from the crew of the Israeli vessel as a result of the Iranian attack.

Israel's foreign minister, Yair Lapid, claimed on July 30, 2021, that "Iran isn't just an Israeli problem but is an exporter of terrorism, destruction and instability that hurt all of us."

The same day, Arab Coalition said in a statement that "The Iran-backed Houthis along with their Iranian support continues to threaten global shipping marine routes. Our efforts have contributed to securing the freedom of navigation and the safety of ships transiting through the Bab al-Mandeb Strait."¹⁶

The attack on the Saudi ship occurred soon after an Israeli-linked oil tanker was attacked by drones off the coast of Oman. It is not clear if the timing of the attacks was coordinated by the Iranians or coincidental but both attacks were part of an Iranian strategy of using naval terrorism to advance the interests of Iran and its allies.

Israel's Prime minister Bennett said on August 1, 2021 that "Iran endangers not only Israel, but also harms global interests, namely freedom of navigation and international trade." Israel demanded a harsh response from the international community to make it clear to the Iranian regime that they have made a grave mistake ...*We, (Israel) in any case, know how to convey the message to Iran in our own ways,*" he added.¹⁷

Notes

¹ Two crew members killed in attack on Israeli ship off Oman coast, Al Arabiya, July 30, 2021.

² Iran TV report says attack on "Israeli ship" was revenge for Syria raid, The Jerusalem Post, July 31, 2021.

³ Israel Pushes for UN Action Against Iran Over Deadly Ship Attack, Asharq Al Awsat, July 31, 2021.

⁴ Israeli Officials Say Iran Is Behind Deadly Attack on Oil Tanker, The New York Times, July 30, 2021.

⁵ US Navy has boarded attacked Israeli tanker, USS Reagan accompanying ship, July 30, 2021.

⁶ Israeli Officials Say Iran Is Behind Deadly Attack on Oil Tanker, The New York Times, July 30, 2021.

⁷ Lisa Barrington, Jonathan Saul, Dan Williams, Israel blames Iran for attack on tanker off Oman that killed two, Reuters, July 31, 2021.

⁸ Israel blames Iran for fatal drone strike on oil tanker after Tehran denies responsibility, The Washington Post, August 1, 2021.

⁹ Lisa Barrington, Jonathan Saul, Dan Williams, Israel blames Iran for attack on tanker off Oman that killed two, Reuters, July 31, 2021.

¹⁰ Israel Pushes for UN Action Against Iran Over Deadly Ship Attack, Asharq Al Awsat, July 31, 2021.

¹¹ Israel blames Iran for fatal drone strike on oil tanker after Tehran denies responsibility, The Washington Post, August 1, 2021.

¹² Iran TV report says attack on “Israeli ship” was revenge for Syria raid, The Jerusalem Post, July 31, 2021.

¹³ US Carries Out Consultations on ‘Appropriate Response’ after Attack on Tanker, Asharq Al Awsat, August 1, 2021.

¹⁴ US Carries Out Consultations on ‘Appropriate Response’ after Attack on Tanker, Asharq Al Awsat, August 1, 2021.

¹⁵ Arab Coalition thwarts ‘hostile Houthi attempt’ to attack Saudi commercial ship, Al Arabiya, July 30, 2021.

¹⁶ Coalition Intercepts Drone Attack on Saudi Commercial Vessel, Asharq Al Awsat, July 30, 2021.

¹⁷ Israel blames Iran for fatal drone strike on oil tanker after Tehran denies responsibility, The Washington Post, August 1, 2021.