

US-Iran tensions over seizure of cargo vessel

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The US Navy deployed the guided-missile destroyer USS Farragut and several warplanes to the Strait of Hormuz in response to the seizure of a cargo vessel by Iranian ships, according to a Pentagon statement Tuesday.

A squadron of warships from Iran's Revolutionary Guards (IRG) seized the Marshall Islands-based cargo ship Maersk Tigris while it was traveling through the Strait of Hormuz Tuesday, from Saudi Arabia en route to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The Iranian ships fired warning shots across the ship's bow, before forcing the vessel to dock at the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas north of the Strait, where Iranian marines boarded and detained more than 30 crew members.

The incident represents a "provocative" move by Iran, a Pentagon spokesman said.

The US State Department said the seized ship was sailing along an "internationally recognized maritime route" and was protected by "innocent passage" maritime laws, which authorize commercial vessels to pass through nationally controlled waters.

At this time, it remains "unlikely" that US forces will move into Iranian waters or airspace, a Pentagon spokesman reassured reporters. Nonetheless, the US Navy is rushing forces to the area in preparation to "respond promptly to incidents in which US and other partner nation commercial vessels are harassed or threatened," an unnamed Defense Department source told *USA Today*.

Initial reports from leading Iranian and Saudi news outlets described the cargo ship as a "US vessel." Iran's state-linked Fars media agency reported that the IRG forces seized a "US cargo ship" for "trespassing" in Iranian territorial waters.

US government statements immediately denied that the vessel was American, and US media have emphasized that the Maersk Tigris flies the flag of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, which was governed

by the US-controlled Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands until receiving formal sovereignty from Washington in 1986.

The captured cargo vessel is owned by a Danish shipping conglomerate that organizes some 10 percent of world sea freight. The company operating the vessel claims that the cargo ship was taken without apparent reason, and that the crew members have been held without communications thus far.

"We don't have any indication why we were halted. It's exceptional and we look at it with great concern," the shipping company said in an official statement.

Tuesday evening, major US media revealed that the seizure of the ship was preceded by an April 24 incident in which Iranian patrol boats allegedly surrounded and menaced a "US-flagged cargo vessel," the Maersk Kensington, off the coast of Oman.

A pamphlet by Keith Jones

The seizure comes in the context of a marked intensification of the Saudi-led Arab coalition's punishing air campaign against Yemen, and the deployment of US warships off the coast of Yemen to block alleged Iranian efforts to resupply Houthi rebels who are in control of most of the western half of the country.

Saudi warplanes bombed an airport in Yemen's capital at Sanaa Tuesday, reportedly in an effort to block an Iranian supply plane from landing. The raid rendered the Sanaa airstrip unusable, forcing the alleged Iranian plane to divert at the last minute.

Saudi bombs landed on the airstrip just after planes from Doctors Without Borders and the International Migration Organization had landed laden with humanitarian packages.

Beginning Sunday, the Saudi-led coalition has launched what observers say has been the most ferocious barrage of air attacks since the bombing campaign began on March 26. The escalation comes

despite promises last week that the bombardment was winding down.



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