

US, UK and Israel threaten Iran after lethal drone attack on Israeli-operated ship

Jean Shaoul
4 August 2021

A drone attack on an oil tanker in the Indian Ocean off the coast of Oman July 29 killed a Briton and a Romanian. It has provoked a belligerent response from Washington, London and Tel Aviv who have blamed Iran for the attack, heightening tensions between Tehran and the imperialist powers and increasing the likelihood of a military confrontation.

The MV Mercer Street, enroute from Dar es Salaam in Tanzania to Fujairah in the United Arab Emirates with no cargo, was carrying a Liberian flag of convenience. Owned by a Japanese company, it is managed by the London-based Zodiac Maritime, in which Eyal Ofer—from a family of Israeli shipping magnates—has a stake.

After a first drone attack, the ship's Romanian captain and the British chief security officer sounded the alert, went to the command bridge, and were hit by a second drone that killed them both. The attack is apparently the first in a spate of attacks on shipping in or near the Persian Gulf, a vital trade route and a choke point for crude oil exports from the resource-rich region, that has resulted in a loss of life.

On Sunday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Washington was “confident that Iran conducted this attack,” apparently after intelligence sent by Israeli officials linking Tehran to the strike, although he presented no evidence to back up his claim. It was, he said, one in a series of attacks by Iran over many months and that he was not sure it was ‘anything new or augurs anything one way or another for the new government.’

He added that such actions “threaten freedom of navigation through this crucial waterway, international shipping and commerce and the lives of those on the vessels involved.”

He emphasised, ‘We are in very close contact in coordination with the United Kingdom, Israel, Romania, and other countries. And there will be there will be a collective response’ to the attack.

UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab released a statement condemning the attack and saying the UK believed it is ‘highly likely’ that Iran carried it out. Britain believed the

attack “was deliberate, targeted, and a clear violation of international law by Iran.” He threatened, “Iran must end such attacks, and vessels must be allowed to navigate freely in accordance with international law,” adding, “The UK is working with our international partners on a concerted response to this unacceptable attack.”

The UK Foreign Office said that since February, there had been at least three other attacks on Israel-linked ships in the region and claimed that Iran was “almost certainly responsible” for attacks on two vessels that caused little damage in the Gulf of Oman in 2019. The attacks took place a year after President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the 2015 nuclear accord with Tehran and imposed a “maximum pressure” sanctions campaign that has led to soaring poverty rates in Iran and stymied the country's attempts to obtain vital medical supplies to combat an accelerating spread of the coronavirus.

Israel had earlier blamed Iran for the attack. Newly installed Prime Minister Naftali Bennett warned that Israel was capable of acting against Iran, with or without Blinken's “collective response,” saying that ‘Iran knows the price that we exact when someone threatens our security.’

While his government was working to ensure international support, Bennett insisted, ‘But meanwhile, we also know how to act alone. The Iranians must understand that it's not possible to sit calmly in Tehran and set the whole Middle East on fire. That is over.’

The US, UK and Israeli threats are supposedly based on intelligence gathered and shared by the three countries. Last week, Britain's *Sky News* reported on leaked intelligence documents, purportedly created by Intelligence Group 13, a unit belonging to Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corp, dubbed, “Iran's secret cyber files.” The files, extensively discussed in a *Ha'aretz* article, reportedly revealed Iran's efforts to find ways, based on openly available information, to use cyberattacks to target vessels and cargo ships, for example by causing their fuel pumps to malfunction and explode—although sources claimed they were probably more for defensive than offensive purposes.

Tehran rejected Israel's claims, with Iran's foreign ministry warning Israel, "If you sow the wind, you reap the whirlwind". However, Reuters cited unnamed sources as reporting that Iran's state-owned Arabic-language television network *Al-Alam*, had said the attack on the ship was a response to a suspected Israeli attack on Dabaa airport in Syria. That attack on July 22, one of hundreds of Israeli strikes against Iran-linked military targets during the 10 year-long proxy war for regime change in Syria, killed two people linked to the Iranian "axis of resistance," implying pro-Iranian groups such as Lebanon's Hezbollah.

The attack on MV Mercer Street comes amid heightened tensions between Israel and Iran and takes place after a long-running, covert offensive by Israel's naval, air, security and intelligence forces against Iran. This has included assassinations of key nuclear scientists, theft of documents, attacks on its main uranium enrichment site at Natanz and explosions at crucial infrastructure facilities.

In March, the *Wall Street Journal*, citing US officials, revealed that Israel had in the previous two and a half years attacked at least a dozen ships bound for Syria. Most were carrying Iranian oil, while some were carrying weaponry to Tehran's allies in Syria, including Hezbollah.

According to *Ha'aretz*, around 20 Iranian tankers were sabotaged but not sunk, with an estimated loss to Al Quds, Hezbollah and the Shi'ite militias of \$500,000 over two and a half years. These attacks, which damaged but deliberately avoided sinking the vessels, were for the dual purpose of disrupting Iran's supply of oil to Syria and choking off the revenue stream that paid the Shi'ite militias and Hezbollah supporting the Syrian regime forces. The newspaper confirmed earlier Syrian and Iranian claims about an explosion on an Iranian tanker in the Red Sea in late 2019.

The leaks to the *Journal*, like the leaks to the *New York Times* in April about Israel's mining of the cargo ship MV Saviz—owned by the state-linked Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines, in the Red Sea—are believed to have come from officials opposed to Israel's efforts to torpedo the talks in Vienna aimed at restoring the nuclear accord with Iran and isolating China. Once the covert naval war became public, Iran had no option but to open its own naval offensive targeting merchant boats linked, however tenuously, to Israel.

The attack on MV Mercer Street comes as the talks in Vienna have paused until after today's inauguration of President Ebrahim Raisi. While the Iranian delegation had originally expressed optimism that outstanding obstacles could be resolved, the Biden administration has thus far insisted that Iran roll back its increases in enrichment and stockpiles of uranium built up in response to Washington's unilateral abrogation of the agreement and illegal

reimposition of sanctions. Washington is reportedly pressing Tehran for further concessions on its conventional missile programme as well as demanding it surrenders its influence in the broader Middle East, bowing to the US quest for hegemony.

No less a factor in the mounting tensions is the political crisis in Israel. While Israeli politicians routinely tout Iran's nuclear programme, which Tehran insists is for civilian purposes only, as an existential threat to the Zionist state, the greatest danger to the interests of the country's capitalist ruling class comes from within. Last May saw widespread and unprecedented demonstrations and a general strike by Israel's Palestinian citizens in opposition to the criminal assault on Gaza, the lethal crackdowns on Palestinians worshipping at the al-Aqsa Mosque compound and the "ethnic cleansing" of Palestinian residents in Sheikh Jarrah, Silwan and other neighbourhoods in East Jerusalem.

The Palestinians won small but significant support from Jewish Israelis, who like the Palestinians in the occupied territories and in Israel, face increasing poverty while a handful of families that control the economy grow ever richer. It is the fear on the part of Israel's plutocrats of a unified opposition to its rule by Israeli Palestinians, who make up 20 percent of the population, and the Jewish working class, as was seen in recent struggles by health care and social care workers, that has driven Israel's rabid nationalism and anti-Arab chauvinism as well as its efforts to divert growing social tensions outward through unrelenting militarism.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)