



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on July 23, 2019

Britain and Iran Confront Each Other in Persian Gulf

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Tensions are building between Great Britain and Iran as the U.K.-based *Guardian* reports that British ships operating in the Persian Gulf have been put on “the highest state of alert” as British officials fear that U.K.-flagged commercial vessels are vulnerable to attack by Iranian gunboats.



On July 19, Iran’s Revolutionary Guard launched a gunboat and helicopter raid on the U.K.-registered *Stena Impero*. The Iranians claimed the tanker had turned off its tracker and ignored warnings.

The HMS *Montrose* was dispatched while the *Stena Impero* was in Omani waters, but the frigate arrived too late to help — after the tanker had entered the Strait of Hormuz.

Another British oil tanker, the *Mesdar*, was also intercepted by the Iranians and forced towards Iranian territory in what appeared to be a coordinated attack.

However, the *Montrose* was successful in preventing the interception of another British ship. The *Guardian* quoted the U.K.’s Ministry of Defence statement about that incident: “Contrary to international law, three Iranian vessels attempted to impede the passage of a commercial vessel, *British Heritage*, through the strait of Hormuz.”

HMS *Montrose* was “forced to position herself between the Iranian vessels and *British Heritage* and issue verbal warnings to the Iranian vessels, which then turned away,” the statement said. “We are concerned by this action and continue to urge the Iranian authorities to de-escalate the situation in the region.”

British Heritage had been scheduled to load a shipment of oil in Basra, Iraq, but abruptly turned round on the advice of the British government.

A defense source told Britain’s *Times* that the Iranians appeared to be taking a “very aggressive stance” and were seen as having been “ready to engage” HMS *Montrose*.

As tensions escalated, Javad Zarif, Iran’s foreign minister, ratcheted up the war of words with Britain, tweeting:

“Unlike the piracy in the Strait of Gibraltar, our action in the Persian Gulf is to uphold international maritime rules.

“As I said in NY, it is IRAN that guarantees the security of the Persian Gulf & the Strait of Hormuz.

“UK must cease being an accessory to #EconomicTerrorism of the US.”

Zarif’s reference to “the piracy in the Strait of Gibraltar” referred to the July 4 seizure of the Panama-flagged vessel *Grace 1* by British troops in Gibraltar’s waters.



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“We have reason to believe that the *Grace 1* was carrying its shipment of crude oil to the Baniyas Refinery in Syria,” explained Gibraltar’s Chief Minister, Fabian Picardo.

“That refinery is the property of an entity that is subject to European Union sanctions against Syria. We have detained the vessel and its cargo.”

The EU has imposed a series of sanctions against 277 Syrian officials including government ministers, alleging their role in the “violent repression” of civilians.

The EU also introduced an embargo on Syrian oil and a strict freeze on Syrian bank assets within the EU.

The United States has also had tense moments with Iran and came close to military conflict last month, when Iran shot down a U.S. drone. President Trump ordered retaliatory airstrikes, only to call them off at the last minute.

Photo: AP Images

Warren Mass has served The New American since its launch in 1985 in several capacities, including marketing, editing, and writing. Since retiring from the staff several years ago, he has been a regular contributor to the magazine. Warren writes from Texas and can be reached at wmass@thenewamerican.com.

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