



Written by [James Murphy](#) on July 6, 2019

Iranian Official Threatens to React in Kind to British Seizure of Oil Tanker

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An already tense situation in the Middle East is made worse by the British seizure of an Iranian tanker that may have been headed to Syria.



On July 4th, British Royal Marines executed a daring nighttime raid and captured an Iranian oil tanker that may have been headed for Syria in violation of both U.S. and EU sanctions. Thirty marines landed a helicopter on the moving ship, seized control of the vessel, and handed it over to officials from Gibraltar, a British overseas territory on the southern tip of the Iberian Peninsula.

The tanker *Grace 1* was detained after having taken the long way, around Africa, instead of simply sailing around the Arabian Peninsula and up through the Suez Canal. Gibraltar officials believe the circuitous route was an attempt to hide the true destination of the tanker.

The 28 crew members of the tanker — mostly Indian, Pakistani, and Ukrainian nationals — are being questioned as witnesses and not as suspects, according to authorities in Gibraltar.

The Iranian government, already being squeezed by increased U.S. sanctions on selling its oil, is displeased to say the least. It referred to the seizure of *Grace 1* as an act of “piracy” and [summoned the British ambassador](#) in order to voice “its very strong objection to this illegal and unacceptable seizure” of its ship.

The U.K. Foreign Office quickly dismissed claims of piracy as “nonsense.”

And at least one senior advisor to Iranian leader Ayatollah Khamenei is threatening to respond in kind to the seizure. Mohsen Rezaei, the secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council, is saying that Iran should respond to what it considers as bullying behavior by Great Britain, without hesitation. If the tanker is not released immediately, Rezaei believes that Iran should respond in kind as soon as possible.

In a tweet, Rezaei said, “If Britain does not release the Iranian oil tanker, it is the authorities’ duty to seize a British oil tanker.”

Officials in Gibraltar believe there is solid evidence that the tanker was carrying Iranian crude oil to the Syrian port of Tartous. The *Grace 1* was originally held for a 72-hour inspection but on Friday officials in Gibraltar were granted an extension up to 14 days because there were grounds to believe the tanker was guilty of breaking sanctions prohibiting the sale of crude oil to Syria.

The seizure of the *Grace 1* adds to an already-tense situation between Iran and Western nations including the United States. Last month, the United States [very nearly launched a missile strike](#) on Iran in response to the downing of a U.S. surveillance drone over the Strait of Hormuz. And earlier this week, Iran announced that it had [exceeded the 300 kg cap](#) on the production of low-enriched uranium



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in response to what it saw as Europe's failure to abide by its commitment to keep Iranian trade safe under the terms of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as the Iran Nuclear Deal.

The EU has officially banned the sale of crude oil to Syria since 2011, but this is the first time any of its nations have seized a tanker suspected of transporting oil to Syria. The Iranians also believe that the British are acting by proxy on behalf of the United States.

According to Al Jazeera, Iran doesn't believe it is violating any international sanctions. "They don't recognize the EU sanctions on the Syrian government as legitimate because they have not been endorsed by the United Nations," said Al Jazeera reporter Dorsa Jabbari.

Fair enough, but if that's the case and Iran isn't hiding anything, why take the long route around the Cape of Good Hope instead of the more direct route around the Arabian Peninsula?

U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton called the detaining of the tanker "excellent news."

"America and its allies will continue to prevent regimes in Tehran and Damascus from profiting off this illicit trade," Bolton added.

President Trump, while not mentioning the tanker incident specifically, repeated a warning to the Iranians. "We'll see what happens with Iran. Iran has to be very, very careful," the president told reporters at the White House.

Certainly, Iran must be careful. But so does the president.

The last thing the president needs during a reelection campaign (or any other time, for that matter) is an unpopular foreign war. With war-hawk John Bolton in his ear, Trump very nearly launched an attack on Iran in response to the downing of an unmanned drone. A new war at this time has the potential to destroy what has become — despite what the mainstream media say — a very popular presidency.

Trump is famous for his "carrot and stick" approach with North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un. With U.S. and now European sanctions making Iran observably desperate, perhaps it's time for a little more carrot and a little less stick when dealing the Islamic Republic.

Photo of Royal Marine patrol boat aside the Grace 1 oil tanker: AP Images



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