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U.K. and Iran Take Turns Flexing Muscle Over Strait of Hormuz

The Royal Navy has now begun escorting Great Britain's oil tankers through the Strait of Hormuz. In response, Iran has "tested" a new medium-range missile, the *Shahab 3*, which traveled over 1,000 km but reportedly did not threaten any ongoing shipping in the region.

Great Britain and Iran are both upping the ante in the ongoing oil tanker dispute between the nations. Last week, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) seized the British-flagged oil tanker *Stena Impero* for allegedly "disregarding the established procedures that require all entries to be made through the northern pass."



The real reason, as Iran announced earlier, was that the tanker was seized in retaliation for [Great Britain seizing the Iranian tanker *Grace 1*](#) off the coast of Gibraltar on July 4. At the time, a top advisor to Iranian leader Ayatollah Khamenei, Mohsen Rezaei, tweeted, "If Britain does not release the Iranian oil tanker, it is the authorities' duty to seize a British oil tanker."

The *Grace 1* was suspected of attempting to deliver oil to Syria in violation of EU sanctions. Its disposition is now in the hands of the courts in Gibraltar. On Wednesday, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani appeared to suggest that they would release the *Stena Impero* once the *Grace 1* was released.

Saying that he did not want continued "tensions with some European countries," Hassan told his cabinet, "if they [Britain] are committed to international frameworks and abandon some actions, including what they did in Gibraltar, they will see a proper response from Iran."

Instead, brand new U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson decided to send the Royal Navy. The order came just hours after Johnson assumed his new office. "The Royal Navy has been tasked to accompany British-flagged ships through the Strait of Hormuz, either individually or in groups, should sufficient notice be given of their passage," said a government spokesman.

"Freedom of navigation is crucial for the global trading system and world economy, and we will do all we can do to defend it."

The [HMS *Montrose*](#), a Duke Class frigate, has already reported to the region to begin that mission. It is expected to be joined by the destroyer HMS *Duncan* and various support ships, possibly including submarines. The British contingent will be busy as it is reported that as many as 15-30 British-flagged vessels traverse the Strait of Hormuz on any given day. The Royal Navy is expected to organize convoys to make protection of the ships simpler.

Meanwhile, as tensions rise over the Strait of Hormuz, it's probably not a coincidence Iran chose this time to test its new medium-range missile. Supposedly, Iran tested the *Shahab 3* in an effort to improve



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the weapon's "range and accuracy." While Iran currently has no missiles that can reach the United States, Israel and Europe are well within range of Iranian medium-range ballistic and cruise missiles.

The missile, which was fired from southern Iran to a deserted area near Tehran, is a clear signal that Iran fully intends to defend itself if attacked. It may also signal that the rogue nation is capable of striking first should they feel backed into a corner.

The firing of the missile seems like a provocative action, although Iran's foreign minister insists that the country is not seeking confrontation — only respect. "It is very important for Boris Johnson as he enters 10 Downing Street to understand that Iran does not seek confrontation, that Iran wants normal relations based on mutual respect," said Mohammad Javad Zarif.

But the decision to send one's naval assets to operate in another country's territorial waters can also be seen as provocative, even threatening. The United States has proposed that a coalition of nations send naval assets to the region to see that shipping in the region is not harassed. It's no wonder Iran is nervous.

The remaining signatories to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (aka the Iran Nuclear Deal) are scheduled to meet in Vienna on Sunday to see if there's any way the deal can be salvaged. With all the sabre-rattling going on right now, that seems unlikely.

The firing of the missile should be a reminder that desperate people sometimes do desperate things. U.S. sanctions have weakened Iran's economy, and having the navies of other nations operating near their territory is a ding to their pride. Now, seems like a good time for President Trump to attempt some diplomacy with Iran, as he's done with Kim Jong-un of North Korea.

Image: Oleksii Liskonih via iStock / Getty Images Plus

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