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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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By Chris Marsden
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Royal Marines seize Iranian tanker under orders from US

Britain's seizure of an Iranian supertanker carrying 2 million barrels of oil is an act of piracy and a major escalation in tensions that threaten to spiral out of control. It was carried out at the behest of the United States as part of the campaign of military provocations and economic sabotage against Tehran.

A detachment of nearly 30 British troops including Marines from 42 Commando raided the tanker, Grace 1, together with police from Gibraltar, the rocky outcrop seized by Britain following the War of the Spanish Succession under the 1713 Peace of Utrecht that is strategically placed to control access to the Mediterranean Sea.

The UK said it had seized the ship to prevent Iran breaching sanctions against Syria.



Royal Marines during live fire drills in 2012 [Credit: LA(Phot) Jason Ballard/MOD]

The military operation in the early hours of Thursday morning involved a descent by ropes from a Wildcat helicopter and boarding from a speedboat. Grace 1 was travelling through the strait of Gibraltar. It was identified by Lloyd's List as having begun its journey from Iran and was controlled by Russian Titan Shipping, a subsidiary of TNC Gulf in Dubai. Iran has since declared ownership.

The 28 crew members were mostly Indian nationals.

Lloyds List says it is the first tanker carrying Iranian oil to head for Europe this year. It represents a significant loss to a country hit by comprehensive US sanctions and more targeted economic penalties by the European Union. In April 2018, Iran shipped 2.5 million barrels per day, which fell to around 300,000 barrels per day in June this year, according to *Al Jazeera*. Other sources claim that Iran is now exporting only 200,000 bpd and needs to ship at least 600,000 to avoid economic meltdown.

Tehran responded by summoning Britain's ambassador to its foreign ministry to explain what it described as an "illegal seizure." An Iranian statement "called for the immediate release of the oil tanker, given that it has been seized at the request of the US, based on the information currently available."

The most significant comment came from Mohsen Rezai, a former head of Iran's Revolutionary Guard and a member of a council that advises the Supreme Leader,

Ayatollah Khamenei. He said Iran would respond to bullies “without hesitation.” He warned in a tweet, “If Britain does not release the Iranian oil tanker, it is the authorities’ duty to seize a British oil tanker.”

UK Ambassador Rob Macaire reiterated the British position that the vessel had been seized at the request of the “Gibraltarian authorities to enforce sanctions against the regime of Bashar al-Assad.” The Ministry of Defence also insisted that British troops acted under the direction of the Gibraltar police.

Fabian Picardo, Gibraltar’s chief minister, added that “we have reason to believe that the Grace 1 was carrying its shipment of crude oil to the Banyas refinery in Syria ... the property of an entity that is subject to European Union sanctions against Syria.”

This is both a transparent and stupid lie. Gibraltar, population 30,000 plus, is as capable of acting independently as a mouse in a cage.

Spain’s acting foreign minister, Josep Borrell, said Gibraltar had seized Grace 1 in response to a request from the US to Britain. *El Pais* reported that Borrell, from the Socialist Party (PSOE) said the US intelligence implied that the supertanker was in British territorial waters. Madrid will now formally complain of a British incursion into Spanish waters, with Borrell, the EU’s nominee for High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, stating, “We are analysing the circumstances and seeing how they affect our sovereignty.”

Donald Trump’s national security adviser, John Bolton, tweeted, “Excellent news: UK has detained the supertanker Grace I laden with Iranian oil bound for Syria in violation of EU sanctions. America & our allies will continue to prevent regimes in Tehran & Damascus from profiting off this illicit trade.”

It is difficult to gauge how significant the UK/Spanish row is, given the constant tensions over Gibraltar and the degree to which Spain would ever wish to clash with the US. Moreover, a Spanish diplomatic source said, “Spain didn’t want to interfere because the issue was compliance with European Union sanctions.”

Nevertheless, Britain is acting in its chosen role as America’s most loyal imperialist military ally—a stance made more imperative by the deadline for the UK exiting the EU in October.

This is certainly the first time that any EU member state has seized an Iranian tanker at sea and the EU has thus far been seeking to keep alive the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of

Action (JCPOA), reached between Tehran, the US, China, Russia, Britain, France and Germany, limiting the country's uranium stockpile to 300 kilograms, after Trump withdrew US backing last year.

The deal is in grave difficulties, with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani warning Wednesday that Tehran would respond to US aggression pushing the Middle East to the brink of war by boosting its uranium enrichment to "any amount that we want" after July 7.

Rouhani said that Iran had removed the core of the Arak reactor and filled it with cement in January 2016, but if the remaining signatories to the 2015 accord did not defy the US and operate according to "the programme and timeframe of all the commitments you've given us, we will return the Arak reactor to its previous condition."

Iran would reduce its stockpile of enriched uranium only if Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China honoured their pledges.

The UK is clearly seeking to stiffen EU resolve to confront Iran on behalf of Washington. Gibraltar's Picardo stated that he had "written this morning to the Presidents of the European Commission and Council, setting out the details of the sanctions which we have enforced," while British diplomatic sources told *El Pais* that they are convinced Madrid and London are working towards the same goal of ensuring that EU sanctions against Syria are respected: "It was done in observance of international law, and we have no doubt whatsoever that the government of Spain also supports the sanctions regime, even though we admit that both governments still have a pending dispute over the territory of Gibraltar."

The EU's executive declined to comment Thursday, saying that implementing sanctions was a matter for the member states.

Whatever the level of disagreements between the US and Europe, the danger of war continues to grow. And no imperialist power can be entrusted with the task of opposing it. Europe's "caution" is nothing more than a reflection of its military weakness against the US and fear that it will be side-lined in the oil-rich Middle East. But its response will be to seek to strengthen its hand against Washington and Wall Street—ultimately by rearmament and the creation of an EU army. A catastrophic war in the Middle East brings with it the danger of world war. It can be stopped only by the independent social and political intervention of the working class.