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What Right Has Britain to Seize an Iranian Tanker Off Spain?



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“We have reason to believe that the Grace 1 was carrying its shipment of crude oil to the Banyas Refinery in Syria. That refinery is the property of an entity that is subject to European Union sanctions against Syria.”

– Fabian Picardo, chief minister of Gibraltar

“[Praise for Gibraltar and the British marines] for this bold move to enforce Syria sanctions [that deny] valuable resources” to the Syrian government.

– British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt On Twitter

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The EU has banned the sale of oil to Syria. Very well, but what has that to do with Iran, or its sales of oil to Syria? Tomasz Wlostowski, a lawyer who specializes in EU regulations, says there is no legal basis in EU sanctions law to take such action.)

– Tomasz Wlostowski on Twitter

What gives the UK the right to seize on July 4 an Iranian oil tanker in Spanish territorial waters, force it to Gibraltar, interrogate its four-man (non-Iranian) crew, and arrest its captain and chief officer?

Why, the request of the U.S. of course.

The Spanish government has stated that the British marines and Gibraltar port authority operated at the behest of Washington, after Trump threatened then called off airstrikes against the Islamic Republic. (Gibraltar authorities deny this.) The piratical act was naturally denounced by Iran, which threatens to seize a British tanker if London does not return its vessel. The Brits respond that they might return the ship if given assurances it was not headed to Syria; indeed, Foreign Minister Hunt had a “constructive” phone call with his Iranian counterpart Javad Zarif.

Iran for its part denies that the ship was heading to Syria, but what if it was? What is wrong with any country selling oil to Syria, whose government is recognized by many large powerful countries and needs oil to recover from its horrific civil conflict?

The EU has slapped sanctions on Syria since the Arab Spring protests and outbreak of war in Syria in 2011, in compliance with the U.S. decision to effect regime change through aid to armed rebels, and a concerted U.S.-Israeli campaign to isolate Damascus. The premise is that the U.S. determines a government’s legitimacy; when it withdraws it, Europe must go along.

And when Europe tells Iran it must not sell oil to Syria, Iran must go along. Despite Iran’s extraordinary patience in the face of Trump’s provocations, its determination to stick to the JCPOA, its willingness to discuss with France some changes to the deal, it remains a pariah in Washington’s eyes.

Despite the fact that Trump himself is deplored by world leaders generally and the U.S. has lost prestige in the world since his election, Britain still does its bidding. The British ambassador to Washington has been obliged to quit his post after the leaking of

diplomatic cables accusing Trump of ineptness and incompetence, but still, London marches almost lock-step with Washington in foreign policy.

Britain might have told Washington: “We don’t have any right to seize a commercial vessel in foreign waters engaging in legal activities. And why would we want to cooperate with you in exacerbating tensions with Iran?” Instead the British Marines act as Trump’s buccaneers.

The U.S. press does not problematize the ship seizure itself. It reports on attempts to “violate sanctions” as though the sanctions are themselves proper and worthy of observance. China, Russia, India, South Africa, many countries do not sanction Syria or buy the U.S. interpretation of Syrian realities. It is not the “international community” that wants to punish Syria, or cut its ties to Iran. It is the U.S., which seems of late to be testing its lingering clout with its allies.

The UK was on board the Iraq War-based-on-lies, but has not committed to a U.S.-Israeli-Saudi war on Iran. Perhaps the favor of the tanker seizure was designed to deepen London’s involvement in the U.S.’s long-term regime-change projects in both Iran and Syria. As Trump tries to woo the UK away from Europe, the “special relationship” acquires new meaning, even as an ambassador departs for candidly noting the Trump administration’s ineptness. The seizure looks to me like a loyalty statement. Britain remains the U.S.’s poodle.

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