



The New Rules of the Game:

Unfolding the targeting of an Israeli oil tanker in the Arabian Sea

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On Friday, July 30, Iran targeted the Mercer Street oil tanker in the Northern Arabian Sea off the Omani port of Duqm, which was on its way from Dar es Salaam in Tanzania to Fujairah in the UAE, killing two crew members: a British and a Romanian.

The Israeli ship was attacked by one or more drones. The attack came in two waves. The first wave was the bombing of the tanker with missiles carried by a normal drone. As the damage was limited, a larger suicide attack was launched on the dormitories of the ship's crew, with the aim of causing casualties, which actually resulted in the deaths of a British and a Romanian.

The oil tanker belongs to the London-based Zodiac Maritime company, which is part of the Zodiac company owned by Israeli businessman Eyal Ofer. This is the second attack within the month of July, as the first one took place on July 3, targeting Csav Tyndall, which is also owned by Eyal Ofer.

Perception of the main parties

The main responses of the concerned parties were as follows:

1- A direct Israeli accusation: Tel Aviv quickly accused Tehran of being involved in the attack on the oil tanker Mercer Street, in light of its involvement in similar previous incidents. Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid blamed it for the attack, which he described as 'Iranian terrorism', threatening Tehran with a harsh response.

Furthermore, during the weekly meeting of Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's government, he confirmed that Iran carried out the attack targeting the tanker, pointing to the existence of intelligence evidence of Iran's involvement in the incident. He stressed Israel's insistence on revenge against Tehran.

2- Supportive US and British positions: since the announcement of the incident, Washington confirmed that the attack was carried out by at least one drone, and this was followed by the US State Depart-

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ment confirming that Iran was behind the attack, promising Iran an appropriate imminent response.

The UK condemned the attack, and said that it is 'highly likely' that Iran carried it out, noting that the assault by Tehran was deliberate and targeted, leading to the repercussions it effected. The British and Romanian foreign ministries summoned the Iranian ambassadors over the attack.

3- Iranian official denial: the Iranian Foreign Ministry denied its involvement in the attack on the oil tanker in the Arabian Sea, describing the accusations to be false. However, the Iranian media alluded to Iran's involvement in the attack.

The new rules of the game

The recent Iranian attack revealed several remarkable shifts, which can be illustrated as follows:

1- Iran's indirect admission of the attack: although Iran officially denied having any link to the attack on the Mercer Street tanker, the Iranian "Al-Alam" news network quoted sources as saying that the attack on the tanker came in response to Israel's attack on the

Syrian Dabaa airport last week. This is an implied recognition of Iran's responsibility for carrying out the attack, which indicates Tehran's desire to convey a message to Israel that it is capable of responding to strikes and inflicting losses on Israel.

2- A change in the rules of engagement between Iran and Israel:

Iranian sources indicated that the attack on the tanker came in response to the Israeli attacks on Iranian areas of influence in Syria. Both incidents indicate Iran's desire to impose a new dimension of the escalation between the two parties.

In contrast, Israel's targeting of a military base used by Iran and its affiliated groups in Al-Qusayr, Syria, led to the killing of a member of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, and the wounding of four fighters

of the Lebanese Hezbollah, since the attacks targeted the fighters' dormitories, not just the weapons warehouses and runways at Dabaa airport.

The Iranian escalation is associated with President Raisi's desire to impose new rules regarding the speed of the Iranian response to Israel's targeting of its presence in Syria, and to confirm its ability to respond not only on land but also at sea, and to inflict human casualties, which is something Tehran had previously avoided in attacks on Israeli ships.

3- Israel vows harsh response to the attack: Since the incident, Israel has announced, through its senior officials, that it has vowed a painful response in retaliation for this attack. It also stated that the response is ready and is waiting for the zero hour to be implemented against 'marked' Iranian targets.

Despite the repeated Israeli strikes on Iranian targets in Syria this July, the Israeli government intends to respond harshly, particularly with the Bennett government's keenness to appear before internal opponents as decisive in dealing with Iran.



The Israeli army is examining a list of Iranian targets for the coming strikes, whether through unusual bombing of the locations of Iranian forces in Syria or within the Iranian territory. Three potential targets are determined within Iran: First target is an Iranian port, possibly the port of Bandar Abbas. Then comes the destruction of ships near Iranian beaches. Finally, they may target an Iranian warship, from which the marches that launched the attack are believed to have set off.

4- Internationalization of the crisis with Iran:

Since the incident, Israel has been keen to ensure that there is an international response against Iran, and not simply a single action by Israel alone. Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid stated that he had given instructions to diplomatic missions in Washington, London and the UN to take diplomatic action against Iran.

Meanwhile, Washington pledged a collective response with its allies against Iran. US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken stated, "We are in very close contact and coordination with the United Kingdom, Israel, Romania, and other countries, and there will be a collective response". Tel Aviv is intensifying efforts in that respect, given its desire to rally an international front against Iran to ensure that more pressure is

imposed on it.

Anticipated scenarios

Perhaps Israel has two main options in addressing Iranian threats, which can be illustrated as follows:

1- The escalation scenario: this path is about Israel carrying out its threats against Iran, and even working to mobilize the global community against Iran. This scenario is based on two hypotheses: the first hypothesis pertains to Tel Aviv and Washington's desire to prevent Iran from responding to the Israeli targeting of Iranian forces in Syria. The second one is relevant to the desire to send a firm message to the new Iranian president that any Iranian escalation will be matched by a greater Israeli one.

In this regard, Israel may escalate its military operations in Syria against Iran, launch attacks targeting strategic facilities within Iran, assassinate influential Iranian figures or launch cyber-attacks against Iranian facilities and interests.

2- The appeasement option: this path is based on Washington persuading Tel Aviv of the necessity of appeasement in return for Washington imposing new sanctions and further pressure on Iran. This would cause it to adjust its regional behavior, to return to negotiations in Vienna, and to agree to discuss its



regional interventions later or to agree to negotiate them in the future. Washington may also resort to imposing sanctions on Tehran’s drone and guided missile programs.

The Israeli government submitted a formal complaint to the Security Council against Iran, in an attempt to persuade the Security Council not only to condemn Tehran’s actions, but also to impose sanctions. Gilad Erdan, the Israeli Ambassador, stressed the need for the Security Council to “take all necessary measures to hold the Iranian regime fully accountable for its repeated and unrestrained gross violations of international law” .

Perhaps this scenario is unlikely to take place, since by analyzing the previous Israeli behavior, it is clear that


Israel is unlikely to refrain from responding to Iran for targeting its interests. This incident represents a test for the new Naftali Bennett government by the Israeli interior and by the opposition in the Likud. The Bennett government affirms that it adopts the consistent approach of the Israeli governments in dealing firmly with Iran.

3- ‘The half-way’ scenario: Israel may turn to combine diplomatic condemnation of Iran with the implementation of sabotage operations against Iran, albeit at a later stage, in order not to hinder its endeavors towards winning international support regarding condemning Iran’s attacks and taking measures against it. In case the Security Council’s fails to impose sanctions against Iran, Israel will find a justification to carry out retaliatory operations against Iran.


In conclusion, the war between Iran and Israel in the region has become more serious, as it directly threatens the flow of navigation and trade in the region and jeopardizes its security and stability, particularly since it seems that the shadow war between Iran and Israel will continue.

ABOUT FARAS

Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS) is an independent think tank founded on April 4, 2014 in Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. FARAS seeks to enrich public dialogue, support decision-making and enhance academic research pertaining to future trends that currently constitute a real problem in the Middle East region. In light of instability and unpredictability, the overarching goal of FARAS is to help ward off future shocks regarding these developments.

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