

Israel, Iran and the West

by Hugh Fitzgerald

Both the U.S. and the U.K. have announced that they are convinced Iran attacked the Israeli-linked ship, the MV Mercer Street, in the Gulf of Oman. The British Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, [Israel Hayom](#), August 1, 2021:

Israel is very concerned by the Iranian attack on a ship partially owned by Israeli businessman Eyal Ofer because it was an unprecedented event: This was the first time Iran openly retaliated for activities attributed to Israel in Syria from its own territory.

The Iranian attack included the launch of two armed Shahed suicide drones capable of reaching a distance of 1,500 kilometers (around 930 miles). These drones were launched by the Revolutionary Guards' Air Force from Iranian soil. While the first drone caused minimal damage, the second resulted in the deaths of two crewmembers, one British and one Romanian.

The death of a British sailor has concentrated minds at 10 Downing Street and Whitehall, and made for coverage of the MV Mercer Street attack in the British press that, unusually, has been completely sympathetic to Israel.

The Iranian attack appears to have been in response to a strike in northern Syria attributed to Israel last week. Several members of the Revolutionary Guards' elite Quds force were killed in this attack, which targeted the transfer of advanced weapons. As is its habit, Israel did not officially take responsibility for the attack, yet Iran appears to have decided to try and create a new equation in its wake. Instead of responding from Syrian soil through the use of its

emissaries as they have done in the past, they chose to respond directly from Iran.

This shift is indicative of a number of things. Iran apparently believes it lacks the ability to respond effectively from Syria. The Quds force is also finding it difficult to maintain power in Syria ever since its late commander Qassem Soleimani's was assassinated by US forces last year. As a result, others in the Revolutionary Guards, in this instance the air force that operates attack drones, are taking the Quds Force's place in offensive activities outside Iran.

Iran does not have in Syria the kind of armaments – drones – it can avail itself of at home. Furthermore, Iran chose to hit an Israeli maritime target in the Gulf of Oman, one much closer to Iran itself than to Iranian bases in Syria. It thus made sense to launch this attack from Iran.

In addition, Iran does not believe it can exact a price from Israel on Israeli soil or in the surrounding area and that is why it is operating in areas it finds more convenient, in this case near Oman. Iran has identified the maritime field as Israel's soft underbelly because these ships sail far from Israel's shores and lack effective military protection.

Israeli ships in the Gulf of Oman, or in the Indian Ocean, are far from the protection that Israeli planes provide closer to home. And Israel's naval forces are the weakest part of its military. It thus makes sense for Iran to attack Israeli merchant vessels (or that it mistakenly thinks are Israeli vessels), as it did with the MV Mercer Street, which lack protection from attacks by air.

Most importantly, Iran feels confident enough to launch drones from its soil, something it has already done in the past, including in the attack on Saudi oil facilities in

September 2019, and assumes it will not be made to pay a significant price for doing so.

From Iran's standpoint, such an operation necessitates an ongoing process involving authorization from the most senior authorities in Tehran.

The Iranians have likely collected intelligence on a number of ships and monitored them closely, choosing to attack the ship they believed was most vulnerable. The fact that two drones were launched is evidence of the Iranians' ability to monitor and control the drones in real time, although Iran likely did not plan to kill any crewmembers onboard.

The killing of two crew members, even if inadvertent, has put the Iranian attack in a whole new category of aggression. And the fact that one of the dead was a British citizen has had the effect of angering the British, both the people and the government, and provoking an unusual feeling of solidarity with Israel.

This is where Israel's opportunity lies. Iran may have identified the ship as "Israeli" because of the citizenship of its owners, but for all intents and purposes, this was a Japanese-owned ship sailing under a Liberian flag. Iran may claim Israel was the first to engage in maritime terror when it attacked various ships carrying out its work but the difference is clear: While the activities attributed to Israel targeted the smuggling of weapons and illegal oil, Iran is harming commercial ships solely for their indirect and sometimes nonexistent ties to Israeli businesspeople.

Iran chose the wrong target. The MV Mercer Street was a commercial vessel, carrying civilian cargo, while the Iranian ships Israel has been attacking off the coast of Lebanon have been carrying oil and weapons to Hezbollah, a recognized terror group.

The MV Mercer Street may have been managed by an Israeli company, but it was Japanese-owned and Liberian-flagged. The attack on that vessel, with its tenuous Israeli connection makes Iran look like a potential menace to commercial navigation in general.

Israel would be wise to use all of the diplomatic tools at its disposal to put the spotlight on Tehran. This provides Israel with a rare opportunity. Ahead of the signing-in of the new and radical President-elect Ebrahim Raisi in Tehran and with nuclear talks in Vienna at a dead end, the attacks should be leveraged to exert international pressure on Tehran.

Iran has attacked a commercial vessel that was carrying only non-military cargo and was not even owned by Israel. This attack should be held up by Israel's ambassador at the U.N. as an example of Iran's wanton aggression on the high seas, and the colossal failure of its intelligence, that makes the country a menace not only to Israeli vessels, but to those of other states – that might be mistaken for Israeli ships – as well.

At the same time, Israel must consolidate a clear policy on how it intends to respond should Iran continue these attacks. It must not accept the creation of a new deterrence equation in which everything Israeli or with ties to Israel around the globe becomes a target for attack, nor should it accept any limitations the Iranians try to impose on the air force's offensive operations against their weapons smuggling in Syria.

Israel will, of course, respond to Iran's attack on the cargo vessel in a way that inflicts real pain. Defense Minister Benny Gantz said that Israel will do so "in the time and place and way" of its choosing.

Possibly Israel will choose a traditional settling of accounts, with bombs away or drones, but rather, Israel's cyberwarfare is likely to scare the Iranians silly. They remember, of course, the Stuxnet computer worm that in 2010 caused about 1,000 Iranian centrifuges to speed up so fast that they destroyed themselves. On May 9, 2020, shipping traffic at Iran's bustling Shahid Rajaei port terminal came to an abrupt and inexplicable halt. An Israeli cyberattack was responsible; there was "utter chaos" and "total disarray" at the port, with ships at the port, and trucks on land both backed up for many days. More recently, an Israeli cyberattack caused chaos in Iran's national railway system.

Israel should synchronize this new policy with our friends in the West. In recent days, Europeans have sounded increasingly assertive due to Iran's refraining from rejoining the nuclear accord. Some in Europe have even agreed in closed talks that additional sanctions should be imposed on Tehran. It goes without saying then that Israel should exert all the pressure possible on the US administration to enlist its support as well. Obviously, this will be the central focus of US President Joe Biden's first meeting with Prime Minister Naftali Bennett later this month.

Iran's outrageous behavior at the negotiations in Vienna, where it continues to press for total capitulation, has infuriated the Europeans, and the Bidenites, including even Robert Malley, have lately been expressing their own about the Iranians' willingness to return to the 2015 Iran deal. And meanwhile, the IAEA keeps discovering that Iran has been hiding nuclear sites from its investigators.

What might make a deep impression on Iran, and cause it to curb its misbehavior, is not one but three separate attacks by Israel, designed to remind Tehran of what Israel is capable. One such attack could consist of a drone swarm on Iranian ships in the Gulf of Oman (showing Iran how far Israeli

drones, launched possibly from the U.A.E., can reach). The second would be the assassination of some Hezbollah or IRGC commander in Syria or Lebanon, reminding Iran of Israel's past success in this line, in killing five of Iran's most important nuclear scientists. The third would be another act of cyberwarfare, akin to that which caused "total chaos" at the Shahid Rajaei terminal at the port of Bandar Abbas in 2020, backing up cargo ships at sea and trucks on land, snarling traffic for days . Targets of cyberwarfare could include electric grids, water purification plants, transportation (the national railway line), petrochemical plants, missile sites, and nuclear facilities at Natanz and Fordow. This three-pronged attack would show the Iranians just how vulnerable they are, and in so many different ways, to Israeli attacks. Such attacks, so damaging and so various – accompanied by a well-publicized threat from Jerusalem of "much more to come" if Iran should be rash enough to respond – will likely leave the Iranians chastened, and less inclined to continue the unequal contest of tit-for-tat with Israel. That should buy time for Israel and the West to figure out how to give material support to the Iranians inside Iran who have been bravely demonstrating, in ever larger numbers, against the regime, as they demand "death to Khamenei" and "no to Palestine, no to Lebanon.