Is the “Shadow War” between Iran and Israel Spiraling?

On July 29, according to the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO, a unit of the British Navy), there was an attack in the Arabian Sea on the oil tanker Mercer Street, associated with Israeli billionaire Eyal Ofer, killing two crew members, one British and one Romanian. The incident occurred northeast of Masirah Island of Oman about 300 kilometers southeast of the Sultanate’s capital Muscat. Several drones carried out the attack.

The news website Al-Alam quoted unofficial sources as saying that the attack on the Mercer Street oil tanker in the Gulf of Oman, in which two crew members were killed, could be revenge for the deaths of two “resistance fighters” in the Israeli Air Force attack on Syria’s Al-Dabaa military airport and Al-Qusayr district in western part of Homs Governorate on the night of July 22.

According to a July 31 statement by Jalina Porter, Principal Deputy Spokesperson at the US Department of State, the United States cannot confirm Iran’s involvement in the attack on the Israeli tanker in the northern Indian Ocean. Nevertheless, the British media connect this incident with the increased tensions in the region between Iran and Israel, which, in particular, had already previously been marked by a series of attacks on merchant ships of the two countries.

It is worth noting that on April 6, the Iranian ship Saviz was attacked with mines off the coast of Djibouti in the Red Sea. The ship sustained minor damage, and no crew members were injured. The Times of Israel admitted Israel’s involvement in the attack on the Iranian ship. On April 25, Major General Mohammad Hossein Bagheri, Iran’s Chief
of Staff, threatened to retaliate against Israel, following an Iranian oil tanker was attacked off the coast of Syria, killing three people on the merchant ship: a tanker carrying oil to Syria was attacked near Port of Banias. It was attacked by a drone launched from Lebanese territorial waters.

In March, The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) presented its analysis of conflicts with Iranian and Israeli maritime vessels over the recent period. Thus, the publication claimed that Israel has been carrying out covert strikes against Iranian ships and other ships carrying the Islamic Republic’s cargo since 2019. Examples were given of Israeli attacks using mines and other weapons on at least 12 Iranian ships bound for Syria, most of which carried Iranian oil. It was also pointed out that some of the alleged Israeli strikes in the Red Sea and other Middle Eastern waters were aimed at allegedly Iranian-linked arms shipments. The ships were not sunk due to the attacks, but at least two ships had to return urgently to Iran.

In February and March, there were reports of Iranian attacks on Israeli merchant ships in the Arabian Sea, confirming an escalating confrontation between Iran and Israel. Thus, according to Israeli media reports, on February 26 in the Gulf of Oman, there was an explosion on the container ship MV Helios Ray, sailing under the Bahamian flag but belonging to Israel. The military-political leadership of the Jewish state immediately accused Iran of attacking the ship. Tehran, in turn, categorically denied the accusations.

On March 25, the Liberian-flagged Israeli container ship Lori was hit by a missile in the Arabian Sea but continued its journey from Tanzania to India because the damage was minor. No one on board the ship was injured. The ship is owned by XT Management, based in the Israeli Port of Haifa.

On April 13, an Israeli-owned ship called the Hyperion Ray, sailing under the Bahamian flag but owned by an Israeli company that supplies cars, was attacked off the coast of the Emirate of Fujairah. There was no information about casualties on board or the extent of damage caused to the ship. The incident took place on the second day after Iran blamed Israel for the April 11 explosion at one of the key nuclear facilities of the Islamic Republic - Natanz centrifuge facility (Isfahan province).

These incidents at sea clearly demonstrate the ongoing conflict in the so-called “shadow zone” between Israel and Iran. According to several experts, such operations are coercive and, at the same time, ambiguous. The “authorship” is difficult to determine with a high degree of accuracy. They are undertaken by actors attempting to revise the regional order while remaining below the threshold to justify a military response from the other side. Experts believe that operations in the “shadow zone” are becoming a central component of the strategy of both Israel and Iran.

They have recently become active against the backdrop of covert operations of the long-standing confrontation between the intelligence services of Israel and Iran and is no small matter of war. After all, the undeclared military operations of the Israeli secret services against Iranian nuclear facilities, nuclear scientists, politicians, and Iranian military leaders with numerous sabotage, subversions, and murders, became undeclared military operations of recent years. Just look at the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, Iranian major general and a commander of the Quds Force or Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, a leading Iranian nuclear physicist, by the Israeli intelligence services in January 2020!

All such actions by the Israeli secret services, of course, could not remain unpunished, as the official authorities of the Islamic Republic have repeatedly warned Israel. However, Tehran wisely did not carry out the earlier threat of a missile strike against Israel, but showed its commitment to their policy of “an eye for an eye” with little bloodshed. In this way, Tehran is forced to accept the rules of the game imposed on it by Israel, thanks to whose efforts terrorism and assassinations of political and important public figures are unfortunately becoming the norm in relations with Iran.

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