

'Not Us'

While the tension level has continued to rise between the US and Iran, a curious claim has been circulating among both my Iranian and European contacts.

This remains a persistent position held in a maelstrom of rumors surrounding the rapidly collapsing situation surrounding events in the Persian Gulf.

However, despite its unusual visibility and acceptance among my network of contacts, I have been unable to verify (or for that matter refute) its validity from any other sources.

This all began shortly after the early morning May 12 attack on four vessels (three being oil tankers) off Fujairah. Two of these vessels – the Amjad and the Al Marzoqah – are Saudi oil tankers. A third is the United Arab Emirates (UAE) flagged bunker (fueling) vessel A. Michel, while the fourth is the Norwegian tanker Andrea Victory.

One of the seven emirates comprising the UAE, the port at Fujairah is a main bunkering center some 85 miles southeast of the strategic Strait of Hormuz.

I was awakened shortly after the attack with a curt two-word email from an Iranian contact. It simply said, "Not us."

Another read quickly surfaced. Now, I hasten to add here at the outset that I have been unable to verify this explanation from any source other than those advancing it. These, in turn, include sources in Iran, the UAE, Iraq, and Europe. But these folks are also known to be opposed to, or upset with, the US policy position against Iran.

This is a read that has been unusually consistent. And there are an unusually large number of contacts suggesting the same thing. This latter matter, however, may simply be a function of "blowback." One suggests an explanation that is then filtered through others. When this occurs, there are a number of apparent separate references but in actuality only one essential "source" for the claim.

I have found other individuals mouthing the same argument. But none of these is coming from what I would term a more objective viewpoint. On the other hand, there is nobody in my network who has categorically discounted the position. I have compared notes with journalist contacts working in the region for Reuters and Aljazeera. They have also been unable to confirm or deny the argument.

All of this, of course, can also be a “red herring,” reflecting a classic example of the D&D (denial and deception) widely practiced during the Cold War. “A” does something and then deflects attention, in the process spreading hints along the way pinning it on “B.”

OK, with what I hope are clear disclosures of all disclaimers up front, this is the position being advanced. As of Friday (May 17), eight separate individuals have maintained to me the following.

R2, Et Tu?

The attack on the four ships was perpetuated by a UAE-based entity operating on behalf of US interests. The attacks were planned to incriminate Iran but were careful to inflict damage without causing casualties.

Further, the same “active agent” is mentioned by each of the eight contacts (although, remember, we may be dealing here with one source moving through multiple blowback venues). That entity is identified as Abu Dhabi Reflex Response (usually referred to as R2). This is a company established in 2010 specializing in intelligence, security, counterterrorism and counter-revolutionary activities. When founded, the company was 51% controlled by the UAE and 49% by a consortium established by Erik Prince, of Blackwater and Trump campaign-Russia Seychelles meeting fame (Prince is also the brother of the current US Secretary of Education).

What had been the Prince consortium position in R2 was subsequently folded into Constellis Holdings, following a 2014 merger of Blackwater descendent Academi and several other entities that were part of the Constellis Group.

Blackwater Security, best known for its Iraqi War security operations, changed its name to Blackwater Worldwide in 2008, following a corporate restructuring became Xe Services in 2009, and finally changed to Academi in 2010. By that time, Prince had stepped down as CEO with a continuing (though unspecified) ownership stake while the core of the company was acquired by a group of private investors with heavy connections to both Bush administrations.

R2 continues to be controlled by the Emirates, while the minority ownership position is housed somewhere in the corporate layers of Constellis.

The May 12 incident managed to increase tensions, prompt a spike in crude oil prices, and brought the security of the strategic Strait of Hormuz under scrutiny. However, there was no attempt to interdict shipments through the strait itself.

The object was to heighten support for increased US military deployments already committed to the Persian Gulf while increasing pressure on European allies to support US sanctions against Iran.

The other signatories to JCPOA – France, Germany and the EU, along with Russia and China – are under a 60-day time limit from Teheran to come up with ways to offset the renewal of US sanctions, or Iran will depart from the agreement entirely.

JCPOA (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) is the accord signed in 2015 whereby Iran agrees to forego nuclear development having weapons implications for 15 years in return for the phasing out of Western sanctions.

Trump unilaterally pulled the US out of the treaty in 2018, a move that has been roundly criticized by all the other participants. Since Wednesday (May 16), the UK, France, China, and Russia have urged the US to move cautiously from this point.

The refrain I am hearing from everybody squares with my own view. We are now in an environment in which mistakes and overreactions could start actual military hostilities. I only somewhat tongue-in-cheek suggested to a colleague on Friday that all parties be sent copies of Barbara Tuchman's 1962 classic *The Guns of August*. As with World War I (Tuchman's focus), global conflicts can certainly result from mistaken, misunderstood, or self-serving interpretations of intel.

DNK Thesis Tanked?

Two other weekend developments are relevant here. The first provides a possible contrary view of what happened. According to a May 17 release of a report filed days earlier by the Norwegian Mutual War Risks Insurance Association (DNK), the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) navy is "highly likely" to have "facilitated" attacks.

The DNK report, on the other hand, remains highly speculative. The only concrete evidence in the Norwegian position involves shrapnel found after the attack on the *Andrea Victory* judged to be "similar" to that found in drone boats used previously by Iranian Houthis allies off Yemen.

On May 18, I asked an Iranian contact knowledgeable in such matters to comment. He had three specific reactions. First, the DNK theory involves underwater, not surface vessel, drones launched to collide with the vessels. Houthis have no such weapons.

Second, the contact says analysis of the shrapnel itself is highly suspect. “The shards emerging from the attacks on other of the vessels involved also show below water line detonation.” He added, “This is not Iranian ordinance,” and suggested this may be an attempt to tie the tanker attack with the drone attack the next day at two pumping stations on the Saudi East-West Pipeline. That latter attack had been claimed by the Houthis.

Third, if ICRG had initiated the confrontation, the patrol boats would have used their standard issue limited-range surface-to-surface missiles.

The other major development also occurred on May 18 and may be a signal that the region is more interested in the threat level than it is over who actually hit the tankers.

Bahrain ordered all citizens to leave Iran and Iraq. This tiny country juts out into the Persian Gulf and is connected to the oil producing Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia by a causeway. The US Fifth Fleet is also based there.

Bahrain has been one of my bellwethers in the region for years. It has a Sunni ruling family but a Shiite majority population. Iran has fomented unrest there as a way of putting pressure on the Saudis.

And the beat goes on.

About the Author



Dr. Kent Moors is an internationally recognized expert in oil and natural gas policy, risk management, emerging market economic development, and market risk assessment.

He serves as an advisor to the highest levels of 27 countries, including the U.S., Russian, Kazakh, Chinese, Iraqi, and Kurdish governments, to the governors of several U.S. states, and to the premiers of two Canadian provinces. He's served as a consultant to private companies, financial institutions and law firms in 29 countries, and has appeared more than 2,300 times as a featured radio-and-television commentator. He appears regularly on ABC, BBC, Bloomberg TV, CBS, CNBC, CNN, NBC, Russian RTV, and the Fox Business Network.

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