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Iranian – Israeli Drone Warfare, Diplomacy and the Alberta Connection

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Military Operations

On 24 April 2021, the Iranian-flagged VLCC [very large crude carrier] *Arman 114* was offloading its product to the smaller Lebanese-flagged *Wisdom* for transshipment onshore to one of Syria's larger refineries north of the Syrian port city of Baniyas.¹ Syria obtains much of its crude oil from Iran. At this time, the *Wisdom* was struck with ordnance allegedly delivered by a drone.² Three personnel were killed. This incident followed an earlier attack on two Israeli tankers in the Gulf of Oman.³



Fig. 1: Syria's SANA news agency released photo of a tanker [*Wisdom*] burning off Syria's coast (Reuters: SANA).¹

On 29 July 2021, the Liberian flagged *MV Mercer Street* was northeast of Masirah Island, off Oman and beyond Oman's 12 NM territorial waters when it was struck by a drone from the Iranian armed forces. Two personnel were killed. The ship is owned by Japanese nationals but "...managed by Zodiac Maritime, an international management company led by Israeli shipping magnate, Eyal Ofer ... The drone exploded into its super structure [following] an unsuccessful attempted drone attack earlier in the day ... The US military has long noted Iran has drones that operate by flying into targets and exploding on impact."⁴



Fig. 2: *Mercer Street* off Cape Town, South Africa (2016)¹

Diplomatic Practice

As recently as mid-June 2021, Iran noted that the US may soon relax its sanctions on the shipment of Iranian oil, continuing an earlier trend. "Iran [had] agreed in 2015 to curbs on its uranium enrichment program, a possible pathway to nuclear weapons, in return for the lifting of international sanctions. Trump abandoned

¹ TankersTrackers.com (24 April 2021) <https://twitter.com/tankertrackers/status/1386075609265213445?lang=en>.

² Marine Link, *Oil Tanker Hit by Suspected Drone Attack Off Syria* (26 April 2021) <https://www.marinelink.com/news/oil-tanker-hit-suspected-drone-attack-off-487159>.

³ The Media Line Staff, *Iran's Military Chief Threatens Israel After Attack on Oil Tanker*, The Media Line (25 April 2021) <https://themedialine.org/headlines/irans-military-chief-threatens-israel-after-drone-attack-on-oil-tanker/>.

⁴ Jonny Hallam, Kareem El Damanhoury, Barbara Starr and Sheena McKenzie, *Deadly drone attack on tanker escalates Iran-Israel maritime tensions*, CNN (31 July 2021) <https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/31/middleeast/iran-israel-tanker-attack-drone-oman-intl/index.html>.

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the agreement three years later, calling it flawed to Iran's advantage, and reimposed harsh sanctions that hammered Iran's economy.⁵

On the other hand, “the U.S. is considering tighter sanctions on Iranian oil sales to China as a way to encourage Tehran to conclude a nuclear deal and raise the costs of abandoning stalled negotiations ... One plan being drafted would choke off Iran’s swelling crude-oil sales to China, the country’s main client, through fresh sanctions targeting the shipping networks that help export an estimated one million barrels a day and bring critical revenue to Iran.”⁶



Fig. 3: Map showing Syria and its access to the sea, and Oman⁷

These incidents comport with the Wall Street Journal’s June 2021 headline. “Armed Low-Cost Drones, Made by Turkey, Reshape Battlefields and Geopolitics; Missile-equipped drones built with affordable digital technology helped turn the tide against Russian-backed forces in Syria, Libya and Azerbaijan.”⁸

⁵ Humeyra Pamuk and Parisa Hafezi, *Iran says U.S. to lift oil sanctions, Germany cautious on matter*, Reuters (23 June 2021) <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-official-says-us-has-agreed-lift-oil-shipping-sanctions-2021-06-23/>.

⁶ Benoit Faucon and Ian Talley, *U.S. Weighs New Sanctions on Iran’s Oil Sales to China if Nuclear Talks Fail*, U.S. negotiators have been working with international partners to revive the 2015 deal limiting Tehran’s nuclear program Wall Street Journal 19 July 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-weighs-new-sanctions-on-irans-oil-sales-to-china-if-nuclear-talks-fail-11626692402>.

⁷ © ArmyNow.

⁸ James Marson and Brett Forrest, “Armed Low-Cost Drones, Made by Turkey, Reshape Battlefields and Geopolitics; Missile-equipped drones built with affordable digital technology helped turn the tide against Russian-backed forces

The Alberta Connection

Taken together, these applications of drone technology introduce critical topics across the full spectrum of related military and civilian arts and sciences, international law and diplomatic practice, among others. They will be discussed at the forthcoming symposium on drone operations, co-sponsored by the Edmonton United Services Institute, 700 Wing RCAF Association and the Royal Alberta United Services Institute.

The symposium is scheduled for Saturday, 23 October 2021, both in-situ at the Alberta Aviation Museum (Edmonton) and on Zoom. Speakers will present in person and online, and both audiences will hear all speakers. RAUSI is providing at least two speakers, Bruce MacDonnell, P. Eng., and Joe Howard PhD (international law), as well as technical expertise in communications. More details will follow very soon.