

Iran's game

BY GWYNNE DYER

The evidence is far from conclusive, but on balance Iran probably was behind the attacks on four oil tankers in the Gulf last month and two more last Thursday. That attacks carefully avoided human casualties, so if they were Iranian, what was the goal?

If it was Iran, the answer is obvious. Iran would be reminding the United States that it may be utterly out-matched militarily, but it can do great damage to the tankers that carry one-third of the world's internationally traded oil through the Strait of Hormuz.

After the U.S. tightened its sanctions last month in an attempt to destroy all of Iran's foreign trade, including the oil exports which are its economy's lifeblood, Iran declared that if it could not export its oil, no other country (in the Gulf) would be allowed to export theirs. Other economies would be hurt too.

But maybe the current pinprick attacks on tankers are just a general warning not to push Iran too hard. They would still be dangerous, because people could get killed and the situation could easily spin out of control. But the opposite hypothesis ? that the attacks are a 'false flag' operation ? is much more frightening, because it would mean somebody is really trying to start a war.

Who would be flying the 'false flag'? The leading candidates are Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the two Arab countries that are doing their best to push the United States into a war against Iran on their behalf. Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu would also love to see the U.S. attack Iran, but one doubts that Israel's de facto Arab allies would want Israeli special forces operating on their territory.

Which brings us to the weirder part of the story. All six tankers that have been attacked sailed from ports in Saudi Arabia or the UAE. The attacks have all reportedly been carried out using limpet mines, which cling to ships' hulls by magnetic force but have to be placed by hand. That means they were probably placed while the ships were in port.

It's almost impossible to place a limpet mine once a ship is underway. Other boats cannot come close enough without being spotted, and swimmers (including scuba divers) cannot keep up. So is security in Saudi and UAE ports so lax, even after the first attacks in May, that foreign agents can plant limpet mines on tankers before they sail?

It's very puzzling, and even the aerial video 'evidence' of a small Iranian boat allegedly removing an unexploded limpet mine from one of the tankers makes little sense. Limpet mines are generally fitted with 'anti-handling devices' (i.e. they explode when you try to remove them), and yet everybody on that boat crowded onto the bow as if to get as close to the explosion as possible.

The United States is even harder to read. Donald Trump certainly doesn't want a war. He just wanted to destroy the treaty, signed in 2016 by Iran, the U.S., the UK, France, Germany, Russia and China, that put Iran's nuclear programs under strict international controls for the next fifteen years.

That's only natural, because the treaty was Barack Obama's greatest diplomatic achievement and Trump is dedicated to destroying his legacy. But beyond that, what did Trump want? Probably just a Kim-style 'summit' with Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Having created the crisis, Trump could then triumphantly 'resolve' it and bask in what he imagines to be the world's admiration and gratitude. He is a man of simple desires.

Unfortunately, his two chief representatives in the ground, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Adviser John Bolton, probably do want a war with Iran. They would never say that, but they spin every bit of data in as anti-Iran a direction as possible. That includes, of course, their analysis of who is behind these attacks.

Nevertheless, we should hope that they are right and that Iran is behind the attacks, because that would be a stupid but quite genuine attempt to stave off a full-scale war. If it's a Saudi and UAE false-flag operation, with or without the tacit collaboration of Bolton and Pompeo, then the region is really headed for war