

SPECIAL REPORTS

Israelis conducting covert maritime operations in Persian Gulf

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Chinese and Japanese intelligence agencies, which closely monitor events in the Persian Gulf due to the dependence of both countries on oil from the region, report that Israeli Navy commandos have recently been active in creating maritime incidents in the Gulf that could be blamed on Iran.

The five incidents that have Israel under the scrutiny of the intelligence services of China and Japan, the world's second and third largest economic powers, respectively, are the "robbery" attacks on four merchant ships off Basra, Iraq on August 8 and the July 28 explosion on the Japanese supertanker *MV M. Star* in the strategic Strait of Hormuz.

Last month, the Israeli Navy deployed older U-209 and newer U-212 Dolphin-class diesel submarines, obtained from Germany, to the Persian Gulf. The submarines are known to have on board a number of Shayetet 13 naval commando squadrons trained to carry out sabotage against sea and shore targets.

On August 17, Japan's NHK news network reported that the Voyage Data Recorder radar on board the *M. Stars* spotted a small boat engaged in "suspicious movements" shortly before an explosion damaged the ship's hull and injured one seaman. On August 4, a virtual unknown group called the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, said to be linked to "Al Qaeda," claimed responsibility for the attack, but intelligence sources scoffed at the notion that such a group could have carried out such a stealth-like attack.

Japanese intelligence believes what damaged the *M. Star* was an underwater remotely-piloted drone, similar to the airborne variety used extensively by the United States and Israel in the Middle East.

On August 8, men armed with AK-47s boarded and robbed four ships off Iraq's port of Umm Qasr. The ships were the *MV Armenia*, flagged in Antigua and Barbuda; the *MV Crystal Wave*, flagged in North Korea; the *MV Sana Star*, flagged in Syria; and the U.S.-flagged *MV Sagamore*, owned by Sealift, Inc. and contracted to the U.S. Department of Defense under the Voluntary Intermodel Sealift Agreement (VISA) to support military "contingency operations." The *Sagamore* is also under contract to supply "freight services" to Iraq under a U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) contract.

It is believed by Asian intelligence sources that the *Sagamore* was boarded by Israeli commandos for American complicity deniability purposes to mask the true targets for the attack: the Antigua-flagged Armenian ship and the North Korean and Syrian ships. Iran is currently under a sanctions regime by the UN, US, and European Union over its nuclear program and it is believed by intelligence sources that the three non-US vessels were part of a covert inspection program carried out by the Israeli commandos in the Gulf.

Iraq authorities put out a report that two of the attackers of the *Sagamore* were arrested while the rest "fled to Iranian waters." Iraqi officials also described the incident as a "petty crime."

The operation against the *Armenia* was not Israel's first covert operation against an Antigua-flagged ship. On November 4, 2009, Israeli commandos in the eastern Mediterranean near Cyprus seized the Antigua-flagged and German-owned *MV Francop* and found weapons said to be bound from the Egyptian port of Damietta for Syria, where they were allegedly were to be transported to Hezbollah in Lebanon. The weapons were reported to have been shipped from Iran to Egypt. Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah denied any links to the weapons found on board the *Francop*. Suspiciously, some of the old mortar shells on board the *Francop* were manufactured in Israel by Soltam Corporation. The shells were painted to make them look new.

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