

U.S. Sees State Actor Behind Oil Tanker Attacks in Gulf Region



An attack on two oil tankers near the entrance to the Persian Gulf was likely done by a state actor, according to a U.S. official, heightening tensions over a potential military confrontation between the U.S. and Iran. Oil prices surged.

The incidents on Thursday, including an assault on a Japanese-operated vessel, were the second in a month to hit ships near the Strait of Hormuz chokepoint, through which about 40% of the world's seaborne oil travels. They come as Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, a rare ally of both Donald Trump and Iranian leaders, visits Tehran in an effort to ease tensions.

A U.S. official said the government is confident it knows which country is responsible but declined to give more details. U.S. and Saudi officials have suggested they think Iran was behind a previous attack last month on ships in the region.

“Even in the absence of ironclad evidence, the U.S. and its allies will point the finger at Iran,” said Fawaz A. Gerges, professor of Middle Eastern politics at the London School of Economics. “These incidents are a bad omen because they point to a calculated escalation that tells us both sides are hunkering down.”



The Front Altair vessel.

Source: AP Photo

The Trump administration said it was evaluating reports of an attack on ships in the Gulf of Oman and will “continue to assess the situation,” White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders said in an email.

The prospects of a conflict have spiked since the Trump administration tightened its sanctions on Iranian oil exports in early May. Trump last year abandoned the 2015 deal that was meant to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear bomb and reimposed sanctions in a bid to force the Islamic Republic to rein in its military program and proxy militias.

Facing economic catastrophe, Iran has threatened to retreat from the accord itself unless European parties throw it a lifeline. Its supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, told Abe on Thursday that his country would not repeat the “bitter experience” of talks with the U.S.

High-Stakes Diplomacy

The Bahrain-based Fifth Fleet said it received two separate distress signals at 6:12 a.m. and about 7:00 a.m. local time. "U.S. Navy ships are in the area and are rendering assistance," Commander Josh Frey, a spokesman, said. He couldn't confirm reports that one of the vessels was struck by a torpedo. Iran said it has rescued 44 sailors.

The manager of one tanker, the Norwegian-owned Front Altair, said it was sailing in international waters when it was damaged by an explosion, and that the incident is being treated as a "hostile attack." The ship had loaded a cargo of naphtha in Abu Dhabi and was bound for Taiwan, a company official said.

2 tankers have been damaged in a suspected attack near the Persian Gulf.

The area is a waterway for about 35% of the world's oil transport

A distress call over VHF radio from the Front Altair said the ship was "under attack and on fire," said Donald MacLeod, a navigation officer on a vessel about 45 miles away on the Oman Sea. "They had to abandon ship."

Kokuka Sangyo, the Japanese operator of the other ship, said it was attacked twice, three hours apart, forcing the crew to evacuate. The tanker was carrying 25,000 tons of methanol from Saudi Arabia to Asia. Japanese public broadcaster NHK, citing Kokuka Sangyo's chief executive officer, said the ship was hit by a shell.

Brent oil crude soared as much as 4.5% and was trading at \$61.77 a barrel at 3:32 p.m. in London. Stocks in Saudi Arabia and Dubai were down.

The incidents come a day after Iran-backed rebels in Yemen

fired a missile at a Saudi airport, wounding 26 people. The projectile crashed into the arrivals hall, damaging ceilings and windows and causing a fire, though the airport was able to keep functioning with only two flights canceled. Houthi rebels last month hit oil infrastructure hundreds of kilometers inside Saudi Arabia, forcing it to temporarily close an oil pipeline.

Iran distanced itself from any attack.

“Iran is concerned by the suspicious events around commercial tankers related to Japan,” Foreign Ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi, was quoted as saying on Fars news agency. “We see this as going against efforts from within the region and beyond to reduce tensions.”

Oil tankers last became a target in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea during the so-called “Tanker War” in the 1980s – a sideshow of the Iran-Iraq conflict. Between 1981 and 1988, a total of 451 ships suffered some sort of attack in the region from Iraqi or Iranian forces, according to a report from the U.S. Naval Institute.