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## The Strait of Hormuz: al-Qaeda's Newest Jihad Zone?

Malcolm Nance

After the July 28 explosion alongside the Japanese oil tanker *M. Star* in the Strait of Hormuz (SOH) initial speculation was that it had struck a derelict sea mine from the 1991 Iraq war, encountered a rogue wave from an earthquake in Iran or had a collision with a whale or submarine. Pundits and even some counter-terror observers, particularly those in the Gulf States, spent an inordinate amount of time attempting to explain it away with any possibility except the most obvious one - terrorism. That can no longer be ignored.

When news of the incident broke caution was called for in the region as to assigning a specific cause and terrorism was specifically rejected as likely.

Here in the UAE, skepticism is the preferred form of denial and critics of the suicide boat theory are being given strong voice. The very mention of the possibility of terrorism originating in or near the United Arab Emirates is met with hushes and alternative explanations, hence the whale, wave and submarine theories. The “T” word (Terrorism) is not welcome in public or political discourse. Some political pundits claim that conventional war with Iran is a greater threat to the Strait. That may be true solely in relation to Iran’s nuclear ambitions, but a wave of successful al-Qaeda suicide attacks could destabilize the markets in a way that rising tensions with Iran cannot.



Strait of Hormuz

However, on 6 August the UAE Coast Guard confirmed a terrorist act was indeed the cause of the blast. Homemade explosive residue was found on the hull of the ship from a speedboat that had exploded nearby. It was the first definitive physical evidence that a terrorist group, most likely al-Qaeda, intended to send a message: the 40% of the world’s oil that transits through the SOH is now fair game. To ignore the matter any further places not only other vessels at risk, but the global economy as well.

Why should the incident be attributed to terror and not another cause? For one, a sea mine that had dislodged and drifted into the Strait of Hormuz after 19 years underwater would more likely have come ashore in Qatar, the Western UAE or Oman’s Musandam peninsula rather than enter the narrow channel. Second, a large contact mine such as the Saddam era Iraqi LGM-45 or the

Iranian M-08 would not only pierce the double hull of the tanker but also set the ship rapidly ablaze. Other classes of mine such as the bottom laying Italian Manta, also dropped in large numbers by Iraq, were swept clean by 1992 and do not drift.

Damage to the *M. Star* also indicates a nearby surface explosion. I have personally experienced what it is like to strike an LGM-45 on a 20,000 ton helicopter carrier. The hull damage from a sea mine would have been a 25x25 foot hole, blazing oil and copious flooding below or at the waterline. This tanker suffered a dent mainly above the waterline. Additionally, railings on the main deck broke off, a life boat three decks above was sent flying and watertight windows and doors were dislodged. This kind of damage can only occur be done by massive blast pressure near the detonation spot that vectored upwards. Most telling, there was no major damage below the waterline. Collision with a whale, a rogue tidal wave or even a small ship/submarine, such as the collision between the submarine USS Newport News and the Japanese merchant M/V Mogamigawa in 2007 leaves enormous attendant damage and evidence of the damaging effect.



*M. Star Damage – Emirates News Service*

The UAE believes a small explosive boat was the culprit. It was most likely a small boat full of uncontained homemade explosives launched from a dhow or other mother ship. Why a mother ship? Because a small craft laden with 200-300 lbs of explosives would find it extremely difficult to transit the coastal waters of the Indian Ocean. The mission would be easily endangered from swamping by ocean waves, running out of petrol from the long transit or being identified as an unusual craft operating at night by the Omani or Emirati Coast Guard. A support vessel, like a motorized dhow or a small fishing boat would not be noticed, could launch a Zodiac surreptitiously and provide a platform to video tape the attack and exfiltrate assisting operatives. It should be noted that a crewman on the *M. Star* also witnessed a flashing light on the horizon just before the explosion. This may have been a signal from a mother ship to the bomber to overtake the tanker and finish the job.

Though speculative, the most probable scenario is that a leased fishing dhow or private speed boat towed a Zodiac along the eastern fjords of the Musandam peninsula and launched the bomber near the first passing tanker coming from the west. At 00:30 hours the suicide boat would have seen the bridge and navigation lights of the *M. Star*, but the fact that the small craft appears to have struck the starboard stern indicates that the bomber had little experience adjusting to the speed of the ship and had to overtake from the rear in choppy seas. At midnight in the SOH there was no way for a small craft to identify a specific vessel apart from its class. It just happened to be the Japanese tanker *M. Star*.

This brings us to the question of who would plan and execute a plot to leave a tanker burning 2 million gallons of oil at the exit of a globally strategic energy artery? All signs point to al-Qaeda

on the Arabian Peninsula. This incident seems to indicate al-Qaeda's preferred method of maritime attack.

If it is al-Qaeda the attack on the *M. Star* could be just the latest in a series of maritime terror operations that started in February 2000. They have attempted or successfully struck ships three times in Yemen against the *USS Sullivans*, the *USS Cole* and the *MV Limburg*. The modus operandi is equally identical - a suicide terrorist driving a Zodiac boat full of homemade explosives which then explodes alongside a victim vessel. The *Limburg* attack in 2002 signaled al-Qaeda's shift away from directly attacking warships, which only achieved symbolic terror value, to targeting economic transport. It has also been evidenced in Iraq where three high speed suicide boats of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) attempted to blow up the Basra oil terminal in 2004. Since the demise of the Sri Lankan Tamil Tigers terrorists applied suicide boat tactics are almost exclusively al-Qaeda's domain.

Despite dubious claims from a group calling itself the Abdullah Azzam Brigades the tactics, techniques, procedures and geographical location again suggests an AQAP cell operating temporarily in the UAE or Oman.

Experts agree that the Abdullah Azzam Brigades is just a cover name attributed to the terrorist cells that have conducted attacks in Egypt, Lebanon and the Arabian Peninsula. However, most attacks attributed to this cover name, though technically and geographically distinct, did lead back to al-Qaeda affiliates and suspects. Even the notorious Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi's al-Qaeda in Iraq used this name in 2005 when they missed two US warships docked in Aqabah Jordan and Eliat, Israel with 107mm rockets smuggled from Iraq.

So why should we believe any al-Qaeda claim? One factually challenged statement and a video with images of an alleged suicide bomber with a photo of the wrong tanker may be good propaganda but the claim is not a disqualifying factor.

Though al-Qaeda's maritime attacks of the last decade have been eclipsed by the Somali pirates the Strait of Hormuz incident should not be discounted or ignored. Maritime terror strikes remain part of al-Qaeda's long term strategy to economically damage the West. By attacking the oil tankers al-Qaeda can introduce instability into the markets in an effort to further damage America's global influence.

Since as early as 2001 Osama Bin Laden has stated that America's greatest vulnerability is its poor capacity to suffer sustained economic uncertainty and that it would be his highest priority. He also stated that the 9/11 attacks were intended to inject that uncertainty into the world markets and bog America down in a slow bleed Afghan insurgency. The results of that strategy, and its unplanned sister war in Iraq, are plain for all to see. With the United States now in a weakened economic state, and the limitations of our combat capacity laid bare by bin Laden's asymmetric warfare plan, an al-Qaeda attack on the choke point of the global economy was almost predictably inevitable.

By choosing a target of international significance such as an oil tanker in the volatile Strait of Hormuz, bin Laden tried to send a message that arterial lines of energy to the entire developing world can and will be threatened by even just one of his most devoted non-state actors.

Despite AQAP being sensitive to the security capabilities of the UAE and Oman, history indicates they will most likely try again. Next time they may use one or more larger vessels with much more explosive capacity. Despite commitments to stepped up patrols in the SOH, by the Emiratis, Omanis, Iranians and the US Fifth Fleet, it would be extremely hard to detect and interdict small craft operating close to the shipping lanes at night.

Like most al-Qaeda attacks, this attempt was a bold, though amateurish attempt to raise the cost of oil to further destabilize a badly bruised American and European stock markets. Nothing more, nothing less. Should a future attack leave the spectacular image of a burning oil tanker on our TV screens their message will come through loud and clear.

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