

War in All But Name as US State Department Offers Bribes to Pirates

If at first you don't succeed, spread some money around. The *Financial Times* reports that the US State Department is offering cash bribes to captains of Iranian ships if they sail those ships into ports where the US government can seize them.

The offers are funded from a "Rewards for Justice" program authorizing payouts of up to \$15 million for "counter-terrorism" purposes. It's not about counter-terrorism, though. It's about doubling down on US President Donald Trump's decision to violate the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, usually called the "Iran Nuclear Deal."

The other parties to the deal — especially France, the UK, and Germany — don't want to let the deal go, but also don't want to enrage Trump by violating the unilateral sanctions he's imposed on Iran. The Iranians, on the other hand, have made it clear that unless those other countries find ways to deliver meaningful sanctions relief, they're abandoning the deal too. They've started taking concrete steps in that direction.

On July 4 — Independence Day in the United States — members of the United Kingdom's Royal Marines boarded an Iranian oil tanker, the *Grace 1*, off the coast of Gibraltar. They seized ship, crew, and cargo in an act of open piracy.

The pretext for the seizure was that selling oil to Syria violates European Union sanctions. But neither Iran nor Syria are EU member states, and the tanker was taken in international "transit passage" waters. That's like giving a speeding ticket to a driver in Hungary for violating Kazakhstan's speed limits.

Spain's foreign minister, Josep Borrell, plausibly asserted that the seizure was requested by the US government. The ship was released after Iran agreed that the oil would not go to Syria (its whereabouts and destination remain unknown as of this writing).

In the meantime, a US court had issued a seizure warrant — for an Iranian vessel, carrying Iranian oil, to a non-US destination, clearly outside any reasonable definition of US jurisdiction. And the Iranians had hijacked a British-flagged tanker in the Strait of Hormuz in reprisal for the taking of *Grace 1*.

So now the US State Department is reduced to simple bribery in its attempts to clean up after Trump's 2016 campaign promise to get the US out of the "nuclear deal."

Under the deal, the Iranians went beyond their obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty to "end" a nuclear weapons program which the US intelligence community didn't even believe existed. All they got out of it was some relief from sanctions that should never

have been imposed, and the return of some money stolen by the US government decades ago. All the US got out of it was an empty propaganda victory.

But electoral politics required Trump to throw even that tiny trophy away. He had to either promise foreign policy belligerence SOMEWHERE or risk establishment mockery as a peacenik. Enter the Israeli lobby and Sheldon Adelson's millions. Iran drew the short straw.

So did we. This is war in all but name and only likely to escalate as Election 2020 draws nigh.