



Unusual Admission by Senior Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps Officer: Iran Was Involved in a Houthi Missile Attack on Saudi Oil Tankers Dr. Raz Zimmt

August 21, 2018

Executive Summary

On August 7, 2018, the Iranian Fars News Agency published an interview with a senior Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) commander, **Nasser Shabani**. During the interview, Shabani stated that **Iran ordered the Houthi rebels in Yemen to target the two Saudi oil tankers in the Bab al-Mandeb Straits on July 25, 2018**. “We told the Yemenis to hit the two Saudi tankers and they did,” Shabani was quoted as saying. This is an **extraordinary statement, probably uttered absentmindedly, which relates to accusations that Saudi Arabia and the West previously leveled at Iran about its involvement in the attack on the Saudi oil tankers**. Following the outcry engendered by the statement, the Fars agency and the IRGC spokesman rushed to deny the statement made by Shabani, claiming it was reported in a partial and incorrect manner.

► Nasser Shabani is an IRGC officer who served in various command positions since the 1980s, including the Deputy IRGC Commander in Tehran, and the Deputy Commander of the Imam Hossein Preparatory Officer Academy of the IRGC (a position in which he served at least until June 2018). These positions indicate that **Shabani is well-connected within the IRGC and give credence to his statement concerning the Iranian order to the Houthi rebels to target the Saudi oil tankers. His statement provided further proof of Iran’s direct involvement in the war in Yemen and the increased support Iran provides to the Houthi rebels.**



Nasser Shabani

(the website of the Supreme Leader of Iran, January 24, 2013).

► Shabani's statement was published against the backdrop of **explicit threats to attack Iranian oil tankers in the Red Sea that appeared in Iranian media**. Hossein Shariatmadari, the editor of the hardline Kayhan daily **explicitly called on the Houthi rebels to strike Saudi oil tankers in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea in response to the ongoing Saudi-led strikes on Yemen** (December 12, 2017). In addition, the attack can be seen in the broader context to U.S.-Iran relations. The attack **occurred when Iranian officials were issuing threats to halt the export of oil from the Gulf and close the Hormuz Straits**, if Iranian oil exports are harmed as a result of the re-imposition of economic sanctions on it. **In this context, it is possible that the targeting of the Saudi oil tankers reflects an Iranian intention to send a deterrent message concerning the security of maritime navigation and oil exports from the Persian Gulf.**

The Attack on the Saudi Oil Tankers in Hudaydah: Main Events.

► **On July 25, 2018, Yemen's Houthi rebels, who are supported by Iran, attacked two Saudi oil tankers that were sailing in the Red Sea. The attack occurred west of Hudaydah, a strategic port city that has been under Houthi control since 2014.** In recent months, the Houthi rebels have fought to maintain their hold on Hudaydah against a combined assault of Yemeni government forces backed by the Arab Coalition, which is led by Saudi Arabia. **Most of the humanitarian assistance to Yemen passes through this port city. According to intelligence assessments, most Iranian material support to the Houthis also enters through this port.**

► One of the tankers, which carried oil shipments from Saudi Arabia to Egypt, was hit, apparently with a C-802 anti-ship cruise missile. The damage to the tanker was not significant, and it continued to the Saudi port in Jizan, accompanied by a Saudi warship. The Houthis claimed responsibility for the attack, but alleged that it targeted a Saudi warship (Reuters, July 25, 2018). Following the incident, Saudi Arabia announced that it will halt all oil shipments through the Red Sea, until sailing through it will be safe again. **Senior Saudi officials accused Iran, claiming that it is the one arming the Houthis with missiles that are then used to fire at naval and ground Saudi targets.**



**The Saudi tanker hit by the Houthis
(al-Arabiya, July 25, 2018).**

Iranian Response to the Attack on the Oil Tankers

► As in previous cases when Houthi rebels fired at Saudi targets, **Iran denied any involvement in the incident.** The Chairman of the Majlis' National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh, claimed that **there is not a single missile belonging to Iran in the Bab al-Mandeb Straits or the Red Sea.** He argued that those firing missiles at the Saudis are groups that know that their future will be destroyed if an "island of stability," meaning Iran, will become unstable. According to him, these groups (implicitly, the Houthi rebels in Yemen) speak the same language as the Saudis. However, those groups know that the Saudis will not spare their lives, property or children. Therefore, they (the Houthis) feel belonging with Iran and not the Saudi regime (Mehr, July 29, 2018).

The Unusual Statement of the Senior IRGC Officer and Iranian Denials

On August 7, 2018, the Fars News Agency published an interview with a **senior IRGC commander, Nasser Shabani, in which he claimed that Iran was the one that ordered the Houthi rebels in Yemen to target the two Saudi oil tankers in the Bab al-Mandeb Straits on July 25, 2018.** “We told the Yemenis to hit the two Saudi tankers and they did,” Shabani was quoted as saying. The senior officer also stated that **Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen are Iran’s rear depth in the region.** Shortly after the publication of the report, the news agency removed the section of the interview in which Shabani admitted that the IRGC ordered the Houthis to fire on the Saudi tankers.



The highlighted section in red: “We told the Yemenis to hit the two Saudi tankers and they did” was removed from the updated version published by Fars

► Due to the uproar caused by the publication of the original report on social media and by several Arab and Western media outlets, **the Fars News Agency published a clarification stating that the statement of the senior officer was unintentionally misreported.** The clarification stated that the officer, in fact, denied the claims made in the West about Iranian orders to the Houthis to target the two Saudi tankers. Instead, the agency alleged, the officer emphasized that “the spiritual offspring of the [Islamic] Revolution” in the region are capable of carrying out such actions by themselves. According to Fars, the clarification was published to prevent “the reactionary media” from exploiting the matter, after a screenshot of the original report was widely shared on social media.

► **The Spokesman of the IRGC, Ramazan Sharif**, also rushed to deny the report and stated that Shabani's statements were **reported in a partial and incorrect manner**. He added that the senior officer no longer serves in any official capacity in the IRGC (Tasnim, August 7, 2018).

What weight does Nasser Shabani's statement carry? Since the early 1980s, Nasser Shabani served in various command positions in the IRGC. Among other roles, Shabani served (apparently until recently) as the Deputy Commander of the IRGC (Sarollah) headquarters in Tehran and Deputy Commander of the Imam Hossein Preparatory Officer Academy of the IRGC, a position he held (according to Iranian media reporting) at least until June 2018. **These various posts indicate that Shabani is well-connected within the IRGC and familiarity with Iranian strategy. This gives credence to his statement, which provides further proof of Iran's direct involvement in the war in Yemen and the increased support Iran provides to the Houthi rebels.**

Appendix

Iranian Involvement in the Attack on the Saudi Oil Tankers

The attack on the Saudi oil tankers in July 2018 **occurred when Iranian officials were issuing threats to halt the export of oil from the Gulf and close the Hormuz Straits, if Iranian oil exports are harmed as a result of the re-imposition of economic sanctions against it.** Therefore, it is possible that the targeting of the Saudi oil tankers **reflects an Iranian intention to send a deterrent message concerning the security of maritime navigation and oil exports from the Persian Gulf.**

► It is worth mentioning that in recent months, Iranian media featured **explicit threats to target Saudi oil tankers in the Red Sea.** On December 12, 2017, **Hossein Shariatmadari, the Editor of the hardline Kayhan daily, called on the Houthis in Yemen to attack Saudi oil tankers in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea in response to the ongoing Saudi strikes in Yemen.** In a meeting with students, Shariatmadari stated that the only way to respond to strikes in Yemen was to attack the oil tankers of the countries comprising the Arab Coalition fighting in Yemen. Shariatmadari declared that Ansar Allah (the Houthi rebels) must attack Saudi oil tankers because the value of the lives of millions of children, women and the other oppressed people in Yemen is much higher than the value of oil tankers, and this is the lowest price that Saudi Arabia and its allies must pay (Tasnim, December 12, 2017). Prior to this, on November 5, 2017, Kayhan praised the Houthi missile attack on the Saudi airport in Riyadh and threatened that Dubai and Abu Dhabi will be the next targets.



“The firing of a missile by Ansar Allah [the Houthi rebels] toward Riyadh, the next target – Dubai” (Kayhan front-page, November 5, 2017)

► Despite the denial of the original report, the admission of the IRGC officer concerning Iranian involvement in the Houthi attack on the Saudi tankers **provides further proof to Iran’s direct involvement in the Yemen conflict and the growing assistance on its part to the Houthi rebels.** Exploiting the ongoing civil war in Yemen, Iran has expanded its involvement there through the IRGC. Iran perceives Yemen as an important arena for its activities, as part of its regional policy that aims to establish ground and naval presence in countries and ports along the shores of the Red Sea, which control the maritime traffic from the Persian Gulf to the Middle East and Europe. In addition, Iran views Yemen, and in particular its northern region that borders on Saudi Arabia, as a useful arena for subversive actions against Saudi Arabia, Iran’s central political-religious rival in the Middle East.

► **Akin to its involvement in other arenas in the region, Iran is executing its strategy in Yemen through proxies that receive financing, training and advanced equipment and weaponry.** In recent years, in an effort led by the Qods Force of the IRGC, Iran provided assistance to the Houthi rebels who adhere to the Shi’ite-Zaydi school in Yemen. On July 23, 2013, the Yemeni Coastal Guard and Yemeni security forces took over a ship sailing under the name “Jihan 1,” which transported weaponry, explosives and military equipment, some of it Iranian-made, from Iran to the Houthi rebels in northern Yemen. In the statement of the Yemen News Agency (February 2, 2013), Yemeni government officials alleged that the ship was handed over in Iran to eight Yemeni crew members to sail it to Yemen’s shores. According to American officials, the captured weaponry was manufactured in Iran and the

smuggling pattern that was detected matched previous smuggling incidents of Iranian materiel from Iran to Yemen (The New York Times, January 28, 2013).

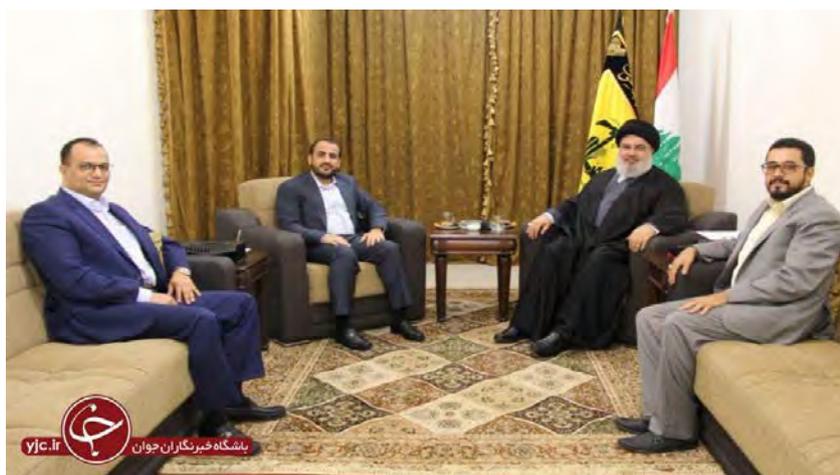


**Military equipment and weaponry captured aboard the “Jihan 1” Ship.
(yemensaeed.com; sabanews.net, February 7, 2013).**

- ▶ The military and political gains of the Shi’ite Houthis in Yemen led Saudi Arabia, which traditionally avoided direct military involvement beyond its borders, to change its policy. In March 2015, Saudi Arabia launched the “Operation Decisive Storm” in Yemen, which included air-strikes intended to displace the Houthis from territories they have taken over, due to fears of a Shi’ite takeover of the Gulf of Aden and the Bab al-Mandeb Straits. The Iranian regime vociferously condemned the Saudi attacks in Yemen and demanded that Saudi Arabia immediately halt military activities in the country.
- ▶ The crisis in Yemen provided Iran with new opportunities to expand its influence. The embargo that Saudi Arabia imposed on Yemen, in addition to the international inspections on Iranian aid shipments transported by sea to Yemen, have limited Tehran’s ability to dispatch assistance to the country, but **despite these restrictions, Iran has persisted in its efforts to provide materiel to the Houthi rebels.** In recent years, warships of the U.S., France, Australia and Saudi Arabia, which are maintaining the maritime embargo on Yemen, captured a number of vessels carrying weaponry sent from Iran to the Houthi rebels. On September 26, 2015, the forces of the Arab Coalition fighting in Yemen captured an Iranian boat with weapons apparently en route to the Houthi rebels in Yemen. The boat, which according to its manifest was designated as a fishing boat, was stopped in the Arabian Sea near the shores of Oman. According to the Arab Coalition, the vessel was inspected by Iranian border customs, and therefore Tehran knew about its content. According to the reports, 14

Iranian citizens were present on the boat, along with large quantities of weaponry, including shells, anti-tank missiles and other weapons systems.

► Over the past year, **sources in Yemen reported about increasing Iranian efforts to transport advanced weaponry to the Houthi rebels to assist them in the campaign against the Saudi-led coalition.** Among other things, Iran provided the Houthis with anti-ship missiles, remotely operated explosive-laden boats, unmanned aerial vehicles and equipment for intelligence gathering. Iran is also providing the Houthis with military guidance through IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah advisers.



A meeting between a delegation headed by the Spokesman of Ansar Allah, Muhammad Ab al-Salam, with the Secretary General of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, in August 2018. (yjc.ir, August 18, 2018).

► **In parallel, strikes on vessels belonging to Saudi Arabia and other countries along Yemen's shores have increased.** Since 2016, civilian vessels used by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have been targeted. **Saudi Arabia repeatedly accused Iran** as the responsible party for providing missiles to the Houthis. These missiles have also hit targets inside Saudi Arabia's borders. On March 25, 2018, Riyadh stated that they hold Iran responsible for the launch of seven missiles by the Houthi rebels in Yemen toward its territory. In a letter to the United Nations' Security Council, Saudi Arabia demanded that Iran be held accountable for providing the ballistic missiles to the Houthis. The Spokesman of the Saudi-led Coalition, Turki al-Malki, warned that Saudi Arabia reserves the right to retaliate against Iran "at the appropriate times and place." At a press conference, the spokesman presented debris of missiles that were launched toward Saudi Arabia, and missiles captured by the Coalition before reaching Yemen, as proof to Iranian involvement in providing missiles to the Houthi rebels (Reuters, March 26, 2018; Fars, March 27, 2018).