

# Tanker Attack Was Imaginary, but US Says Iran Did It

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

BREAKING OVERNIGHT  
OIL TANKERS ATTACKED  
SAUDI ARABIA CLAIMS SHIP HEADING TO US SABOTAGED

- ABC News on-screen headline, May 13, 2019

BREAKING OVERNIGHT  
SAUDI OIL TANKERS ATTACKED  
ENERGY MINISTER SAYS SHIPS WERE TARGETED IN "SABOTAGE ATTACK"

-CBS News on-screen headline, May 13, 2019

These network stories are examples of fake news at its most dangerous, when it plays into the dishonest manipulations of an administration beating the drums for a war against Iran that has no reasonable basis. Not only do the networks and mainstream media generally fail to question the administration's rush to war, they also fail to do basic journalism by independently confirming whether a particular story is true or not.

The story of the "oil tanker attacks" appears to have been mostly or entirely false, as any news organization [could have known from the start](#) by exercising basic skepticism. Or the story could have been [pimped as terrorism, as Debka.com](#) did, asserting on May 13 that: "A special unit of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards marine force carried out the sabotage on 4 Saudi oil tankers outside Fujairah port." No evidence, anonymous sources only, and wrong number of Saudi tankers.

The first report of something happening in or near the emirate of Fujairah in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) came from the Lebanon-based Al Mayadeen TV, saying that seven to ten oil tankers were burning in the port of Fujairah on the Gulf of Oman (outside the Strait of Hormuz leading to the Persian Gulf). There is no evidence that any tankers were burning there. Available satellite images show no smoke, explosions, or anything else to support the claim of an accident or an attack.

A few hours later, a new story surfaced. On May 12 at 7:38 pm, the UAE foreign ministry issued a statement carried by the state news agency WAM with the headline: "Four commercial ships subjected to sabotage operations near UAE territorial waters, no fatalities or injuries reported." The [report in its entirety](#) offered little detail:

ABU DHABI, 12th May, 2019 (WAM) — Four commercial ships were subjected to sabotage operations today, 12th May, near UAE territorial waters in the Gulf of Oman, east of Fujairah, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International

Cooperation, MOFAIC, has announced.

The Ministry said that the concerned authorities have taken all necessary measures, and are investigating the incident in cooperation with local and international bodies.

It said that there had been no injuries or fatalities on board the vessels and that there had been no spillage of harmful chemicals or fuel.

The MOFAIC statement said that the carrying out acts of sabotage on commercial and civilian vessels and threatening the safety and lives of those on board is a serious development. It called on the international community to assume its responsibilities to prevent such actions by parties attempting to undermine maritime traffic safety and security.

The Ministry also described as 'baseless and unfounded' rumours earlier today, 12th May, of incidents taking place within the Port of Fujairah, saying that operations within the port were under way as normal, without any interruption.

There's not much here. What sort of "sabotage operations" occurred? Who carried them out? What damage was there, if any? Who were the four ships? When was the sabotage discovered? What's really going on here, if anything?

The next day the Saudi Press Agency chimed in with a [statement from the Minister of Energy](#) that "confirmed that ... two Saudi oil tankers were subjected to a sabotage attack in the exclusive economic zone of the United Arab Emirates, off the coast of the Emirate of Fujairah." The minister claimed structural damage to the two tankers but did not make them available for inspection. [Satellite and surface images showed no damage](#) to either tanker.

[That's about all that was known](#) on May 13 as ABC News went on the air acting as if the story was factually clear and larger than supported by any evidence. The lead-in to the story was [flush with news-hype and propaganda technique](#): "we begin with that attack overseas on Saudi ships and oil tankers. One about to head to the U.S. This comes in the wake of that warning about threats from Iran." Fundamentally dishonest. There were two Saudi tankers, no Saudi "ships." The other two tankers were from the UAE and Norway. There was no certainty that there was any attack (and there still isn't). Saying that one tanker was about to head to the US was not only irrelevant, but provocative. It was on its way to Saudi Arabia to load oil bound for the US (according to the Saudis). Putting the misreported "attack" in the context of "that warning about threats from Iran" is pure propagandistic parroting of US government scare-mongering.

But that was just the lead-in to veteran reporter Martha Raddatz - surely she'd bring some sane perspective to bear, right? Wrong. She made it worse, talking in a tone suitable for a "they-just-attacked-Pearl-Harbor" report. Somberly treating the alleged attack as a matter of fact, Raddatz framed it with a conclusion supported by no evidence whatsoever:

This comes at an extremely tense time in the region with the U.S. warning just days ago that Iran or its proxies could be targeting maritime traffic in the oil rich Persian Gulf region. Although we do not know who carried out this morning's attack on these ships, we know four were sabotaged off the coast in the Persian Gulf and it caused significant structural damage to two Saudi oil tankers. One of the Saudi ships was on its way to pick up Saudi oil for delivery to the U.S. Last week the U.S. urgently dispatched a carrier strike group, B-52

bombers and Patriot missile battery to the region after it said there were unspecified threats to American forces in the region. Iran's news agency this morning saying the dispatch of the warships was to exaggerate the shadow of war and frighten the Iranian people. But this is a very dangerous development.

Could Sarah Huckabee Sanders have said it better?

Posing as a journalist, Martha Raddatz ratchets up the Trump administration's scare campaign based on nothing more than fear tactics. The four ships that were supposedly attacked were in the Gulf of Oman off the coast of the UAE. Almost all the rest of what Raddatz reports as "fact" comes from government press releases.

And that's not the most shameful part for ABC News. Worse than botching facts large and small is the willingness of such mainstream media players to team up with elements of the US government seeking war with Iran at almost any cost.

[CBS News coverage](#) was little better, not only putting the action in the Persian Gulf, but upping the number of ships "attacked" to six. CBS did manage a small saving grace, concluding: "Whatever the case, the tensions here have only risen since President Trump withdrew from the 2015 nuclear deal, brokered between Iran and world powers."

Well, yes, THAT is the crux of the mess. The US unilaterally tries to pull out of a multilateral international agreement that all other parties say is working and we're supposed to take the US seriously? Seriously? At this point, any reporter who accepts a government press release as authoritative should be summarily fired. At this point, that is inexcusable malpractice. Iran has abided by the nuclear deal, all the inspectors affirm that. The other signatories - China, Russia, GB, France, Germany, and the EU - all affirm that. But they don't stand up to the US effectively. They allow the US to bully them into joining the American economic warfare against Iran.

Over the next several days after it broke, the "oil tankers attacked" story slowly collapsed. [Fact-based skepticism](#) started to catch up with the official story. The UAE kept reporters from getting too close to the ships, [which showed no serious damage](#). An anonymous US official blamed Iran, based on no evidence. US military officials in the Persian Gulf region stopped answering questions about whatever it was, referring questioners to the White House.

At this point, if the oil tanker attacks were either a warmongering hoax or false flag operation, it's not going to have the same success as the sinking of the battleship Maine in Havana Harbor in 1898 or the provocations of US warships in the Tonkin Gulf in 1964. There's even an off-chance that [a suspicious Congress](#) and an even more suspicious public will manage to slow the rush to war, or even stop it. There are signs of some increased media wariness, also known as detachment. Perhaps the most hopeful signs are the [leaked anonymous stories](#) that the president really, really doesn't want to go to war, which of course he doesn't have to if he doesn't want to, if he knows what he wants.

Another leaked story had it that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and [National Security Advisor John Bolton](#) are confident that they can lead Trump by the nose into the war they want with Iran and that Trump's too stupid to understand what they're up to. If Trump sees that, it might give peace a chance.

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*Featured image: Oil tankers pass through the Strait of Hormuz in 2018. Hamad I Mohammed / Reuters file*

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