

US Confirms It Seized Nearly 1 Million Barrels of Iranian Oil Allegedly En Route to China

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By [Mimi Nguyen Ly](#)

Global Research, September 13, 2023

[The Epoch Times](#) 11 September 2023

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

Theme: [Oil and Energy](#)

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The U.S. government has confirmed that it seized nearly a million barrels of crude oil from Iran that was allegedly bound for China.

The Justice Department (DOJ) confirmed on Sept. 8 that in April, the United States seized a shipment of crude oil from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a designated foreign terrorist organization.

In confirming the confiscation, the department also announced its first criminal resolution involving the illicit sale and transport of Iranian oil, which is a violation of U.S. sanctions.

"This is the first-ever criminal resolution involving a company that violated sanctions by facilitating the illicit sale and transport of Iranian oil and comes in concert with a successful seizure of over 980,000 barrels of contraband crude oil," the [announcement](#) reads.

US Seizes Sanctioned Oil

Unsealed court documents show that in April, the United States seized from the tanker Suez Rajan contraband cargo that was allegedly being sold by the IRGC to China.

On April 19, the vessel's owner, Suez Rajan Ltd., pleaded guilty to conspiring to violate the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) in smuggling the sanctioned Iranian crude oil. Under a plea agreement, the company agreed to pay a \$2.4 million fine and face three years of corporate probation.

Greek shipper Empire Navigation, the operating company of the Suez Rajan, agreed to

cooperate and transport the Iranian oil to the United States at its own expense, a task that has since been completed.

“The contraband cargo is now the subject of a civil forfeiture action in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia,” the DOJ stated. “The United States’ forfeiture complaint alleges that the oil aboard the vessel is subject to forfeiture based on U.S. terrorism and money laundering statutes.”

Hiding Oil’s Origin

The U.S. Treasury has stated that Iran’s oil smuggling revenue supports the Quds Force, an elite unit within the IRGC that operates across the Middle East.

The complaint accuses several groups linked to Iran’s IRGC and the Quds Force of secretly selling and shipping Iranian oil to China.

The prosecution relied on satellite images, as well as documents, to allege that the Suez Rajan attempted to disguise its acquisition of Iranian crude oil from one tanker by falsely claiming that it received the oil from a different tanker.

They allegedly hid the oil’s origin through methods including ship-to-ship transfers, as well as masking the locations and identities of the vessels involved via false reporting and false documents.

The complaint also alleged that the vessel’s charterer used the U.S. financial system to facilitate the transportation of the oil.

The court documents allege that “profits from oil sales support the IRGC’s full range of malign activities, including the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery, support for terrorism and both domestic and international human rights abuses,” according to the DOJ.

For months, the tanker sat in the South China Sea near Singapore’s northeast coast, before sailing for the Texas coast. The vessel transferred its cargo to another tanker, which released its oil in Houston in recent days.

At the time, U.S. authorities wouldn’t confirm that they were seizing the cargo or that the vessel was en route to the United States. But the DOJ on Sept. 8 confirmed that the U.S. government had seized the oil.

Iran Seizes Tankers

Shortly after the Suez Rajan headed to the United States, Iran seized two tankers in late April—the [Advantage Sweet](#), flying the Marshall Islands flag and heading toward the United States in the Gulf of Oman, and the [Niovi](#), owned by Greece traveling to the United Arab Emirates’s Fujairah from Dubai. In response, the U.S. Navy condemned Iran for its “continued harassment of vessels and interference with navigational rights in regional waters.”

The U.S. military in early July stated that it [stopped two more Iranian attempts](#) to seize commercial tankers in the Gulf of Oman.

That same month, the top commander of the IRGC's naval arm threatened further action against anyone offloading the Suez Rajan with Iranian state media linking the recent seizures to the cargo's fate.

Late on Sept. 6, the United States updated its warning to shippers traveling through the Middle East.

“Commercial vessels transiting through the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, and Gulf of Oman continue to be illegally boarded and detained or seized by Iranian forces,” the warning reads.

With the world's fourth-largest reserves of oil, Iran is highly dependent on oil revenue. But sanctions have restricted its ability to pump at anywhere near capacity since 2018.

This year, Iranian oil exports have mostly been above 1 million barrels per day despite U.S. sanctions, according to the commodity data firm Kpler. In May and June, it went above 1.5 million barrels per day, with figures in August sitting at 1.4 million barrels daily, Kpler's data show. China is believed to be a major buyer of Iranian oil, likely at a significant discount.

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The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Mimi Nguyen Ly covers U.S. and world news.

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