

Israeli ambassador to the US leaving post after Netanyahu petition rejected  
by Hunter Lovell  
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Israel's ambassador to the United States Ron Dermer will leave his post in September after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's request to extend him was rejected.

The Israeli Civil Service Commission denied Netanyahu's petition to keep the ambassador in office because of the upcoming elections in September when Israel is expected to elect members to its legislative body, according to Israel's Channel 12 news station.

The move comes just one day after Dermer made headlines when he said Israel would allow Democratic Reps. Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar into the country despite their open support of the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement against Israel.

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"Out of respect for the U.S. Congress and the great alliance between Israel and America, we would not deny entry to any member of Congress into Israel," Dermer said at the time.

Dermer will leave his position after six years as Israel's envoy to Washington. He was appointed in 2013 after serving as Netanyahu's senior adviser to Mitt Romney's presidential campaign in 2012.

The ambassador had an unsteady relationship with former President Barack Obama's administration, specifically with national security adviser Susan Rice.

Axios reported last year that Netanyahu chose to extend Dermer's term by one year in an unprecedented move. The prime minister made a decision within his Cabinet in March 2017 to lengthen the ambassador's term from four to five years, which he said was necessary to maintain "continuity" with the U.S. since President Trump had just taken office.

Dermer is widely considered Netanyahu's closest adviser outside of his immediate family.

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Takeover of British tanker (Photo: AFP)

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New audio shows UK could not prevent Iran takeover of tanker

British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt says the government plans to spell out its response in a briefing to Parliament on Monday. Officials have said a military response is extremely unlikely and Britain has taken steps to bolster its diplomatic efforts.

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The release Sunday of an audio recording has shed new light on the seizure of a British-flagged tanker at the hands of Iran's Revolutionary Guard as tensions flare in the strategic Strait of Hormuz.

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The audio released by maritime security risk firm Dryad Global shows that a British frigate was too far away from the targeted tanker to keep it from being diverted into an Iranian port despite U.K. efforts to keep it from being boarded.

British Tanker Stena Impro (Photo: Erwin Willemse) (Photo: Erwin Willemse)  
British Tanker Stena Impro (Photo: Erwin Willemse)

On the recording, a stern-voiced British naval officer insists that the U.K.-flagged oil tanker Hormuz even as Iranian paramilitary forces demand -- successfully -- that the vessel change course.

The audio shows how Britain's once mighty Royal Navy was unable to prevent the ship's seizure, which has been condemned by Britain and its European allies as they continue to call for a reduction of tensions in the vital waterway.

The free flow of traffic through the Strait of Hormuz is of critical importance to the world's energy supplies because one-fifth of all global crude exports pass through the narrow waterway between Iran and Oman.

In the recording, an Iranian officer can be heard telling the Stena Impero to change course, saying: "You obey, you will be safe."

"Alter your course to 360 degrees immediately, over," the Iranian officer says, adding that the ship is wanted for security reasons.

A British naval officer from the HMS Montrose frigate that was patrolling the area around the Strait of Hormuz is heard telling the Stena Impero, which had a crew of 23 on board, that its passage must be allowed.

"Sir, I reiterate that as you are conducting transit passage in a recognized international strait, under international law your passage must not be impaired, intruded, obstructed or hampered," the unidentified British officer says.

The British officer then tells an Iranian patrol boat: "Please confirm that you are not intending to violate international law by unlawfully attempting to board the MV Stena."

His words did nothing to deter the Iranians.

British officials say the HMS Montrose was roughly 60 minutes from the scene when the Iranians took control of the tanker, too far away to intervene effectively.

Takeover of British tanker  
Takeover of British tanker

Iranian officials say the seizure of the British oil tanker was a justified response to Britain's role in impounding an Iranian supertanker two weeks earlier off the coast of Gibraltar, a British overseas territory located on the southern tip of Spain.

Friday's seizure comes amid heightened tensions between the U.S. and Iran stemming from President Donald Trump's decision last year to pull the U.S. from Iran's nuclear accord with world powers and reinstate sweeping sanctions. The U.S. has also expanded its military presence in the region, while Iran has begun openly exceeding the uranium enrichment levels set in the nuclear accord to try to pressure Europe into alleviating the pain caused by the sanctions.

European nations, which are trying to save the nuclear deal and keep Iran from isolation, have tried to come up with ways to keep trading with Iran but have run smack into Trump's sanctions

British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt says the government plans to spell out its response in a briefing to Parliament on Monday. Officials have said a military response is extremely unlikely and Britain has taken steps to bolster its diplomatic efforts.

The tanker seizure comes at a ticklish time for Britain, which on Wednesday will see a new prime minister replace Theresa May. The two contenders for the job are front-runner Boris Johnson and Hunt, who has a key role in dealing with the shipping crisis.

Iranian gunmen take control of British tanker Stena Impero (Photo: EPA)  
Iranian gunmen take control of British tanker Stena Impero (Photo: EPA)  
must be allowed to sail through

British officials say they have no good military options, especially because the tanker is in a secure Iranian port with a heavy military presence. Defense minister Tobias Ellwood on Sunday reiterated calls for a tamping down of tensions.

"Well, firstly we need to try and de-escalate this," he told Sky News. "There has been a ratcheting up of tensions in the Middle East."

Ellwood called the seizure "a hostile act" but conceded that the British Royal Navy "is too small to manage our interests across the globe" and that this would be an issue for the next prime minister to handle.

Britain is adding to its military profile in the region but it does not have the naval resources that would be needed to protect all of its shipping interests.

The seizure of the British-flagged tanker is proving popular inside Iran.

In Tehran, some 160 lawmakers issued a joint statement Sunday praising the interception of the British-flagged vessel by Iran's Revolutionary Guard, which has released video of the seizure showing Iranian commandos in black ski masks and fatigues rappelling from a helicopter onto the vessel.

Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif used the opening session of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) forum in Venezuela on Saturday to blast U.S. foreign policy under Trump.

"A new wave of extreme one-sided adventurism from the United States is the main theme and the challenge that we all face in one way or another," he said. "It's threatening peace and stability all around the world in different ways."

At the same time, Britain is gaining support among its traditional European allies. Germany's foreign minister warned Iran that its seizure of commercial vessels is contributing to an "escalation spiral" that could lead to war.

Foreign Minister Heiko Maas was quoted Sunday in the Bild newspaper as saying the seizure of the British tanker and the temporary detention of another has made the situation in the Gulf "a lot more serious and dangerous than it has been." He said European efforts are focused on keeping diplomatic channels open with "voices of reason" despite the challenges involved.

Iran: UK must rein in 'political forces' amid tensions over seized tanker  
Britain said planning sanctions on Tehran in aftermath of seizure of British-operated tanker; all 23 crew of vessel are safe, Iranian TV says; Stena Bulk, the ship's Sweden-based owner, says it is preparing a formal request to visit the crew  
Reuters|Published: 07.21.19 , 10:48

DUBAI - Iran's envoy to Britain on Sunday urged the UK to contain "domestic political forces" which he said wanted to escalate tension between the two countries amid the capture of a British-flagged tanker in the Gulf by Iran.

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Britain has denounced Iran's seizure of the oil tanker in the Gulf on Friday as a "hostile act," rejecting Tehran's explanation that it had seized the vessel because it had been involved in an accident.

The British-flagged Stena Impero seized by Iran (Photo: AP)  
The British-flagged Stena Impero seized by Iran (Photo: AP)

"UK government should contain those domestic political forces who want to escalate existing tension between Iran and the UK well beyond the issue of ships. This is quite dangerous and unwise at a sensitive time in the region," Hamid Baeidinejad tweeted.

"Iran however is firm and ready for different scenarios."

The crew of the British-flagged Stena Impero tanker seized by Iran's Revolutionary Guards are all safe, the head of the Ports and Maritime Organization of Iran in Hormozgan Province told state TV earlier Sunday.

"All 23 crew members aboard the ship are safe and in good health in Bandar Abbas port," Allahmorad Afifipour said.

Bandar Abbas port (Photo: AP)

Bandar Abbas port (Photo: AP)

Stena Bulk, the vessel's Sweden-based owners, said on Saturday they were preparing a formal request to visit the crew, who are from India, Latvia, the Philippines and Russia.

Stena said in a statement that Iran had asked that a formal request be made for the visit.

Britain, a party to Iran's 2015 multinational nuclear deal, is planning to target Iran with sanctions in the aftermath of the tanker seizure, the Daily Telegraph newspaper reported on Saturday.

The seizure follows weeks of threats from Tehran to retaliate for Britain's seizure of the Iranian tanker Grace 1 near Gibraltar on July 4 which it suspected was violating sanctions on Syria.

Quoting Afifipour, Iran's Far news agency said Saturday that the detained tanker was in an accident with an Iranian fishing boat and ignored its distress call.

Iranian footage purporting to show the capture of the British-flagged ship

Iranian footage purporting to show the capture of the British-flagged ship

"It got involved in an accident with an Iranian fishing boat... When the boat sent a distress call, the British-flagged ship ignored it," Afifipour told Fars.

"The tanker is now at Iran's Bandar Abbas port and all its 23 crew members will remain on the ship until the probe is over," he said.

The Stena Impero was taken to Bandar Abbas on Friday night by the Revolutionary Guards naval forces and the investigation into the accident began on Saturday, Afifipour said, according to Fars.

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Britain said earlier it was urgently seeking information about the tanker, which had been heading to a port in Saudi Arabia and suddenly changed course after passing through the strait at the mouth of the Gulf.