

Middle Eastern politics & society

Iran seizes two Greek oil tankers in Strait of Hormuz

Capture of vessels in world's busiest shipping lane set to add to pressure on price of oil



In April the Russian-flagged Pegasus was stopped in Greek waters for carrying sanctioned Iranian crude © Thanassis Stavrakis/AP

Harry Dempsey and **David Sheppard** in London and **Najmeh Bozorgmehr** in Tehran
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Iran has seized two Greek oil tankers in one of the world's busiest shipping lanes in apparent retaliation for the capture of a Russian-flagged tanker loaded with Iranian oil last month.

Iranian forces boarded the Prudent Warrior, a Greek-owned vessel, on Friday afternoon, in the Strait of Hormuz using a helicopter and a pair of speedboats in each case, according to the manager of one of the ships.

Iran's Revolutionary Guards confirmed in a statement that its "naval forces seized the two Greek tankers in the Gulf waters today due to their violations [of maritime rules]". The second vessel is believed to be the Delta Poseidon.

The seizure of two Greek-flagged tankers is likely to cause consternation in the oil market and the maritime industry, with oil prices already close to \$120 a barrel. Greece is a shipping powerhouse with almost a quarter of all supertankers owned by Greek companies, according to Lloyd's List.

The confirmation of the seizure comes as talks between Tehran and global powers over Iran's nuclear ambitions have stalled in recent months, raising tensions across

over Iran's nuclear ambitions have stalled in recent months, raising tensions across the Middle East.

George Vakirtzis, chief executive of Polembros Shipping, which operates the Prudent Warrior, said the ship was seized in international waters before being directed towards the Iranian coast by authorities. Vakirtzis said that his vessel was bound for the US with crude loaded at Basrah in Iraq.

“We lost all communication about 2 o'clock local time and tried to talk to the vessel repeatedly with no answer. We asked other vessels in the same area to give us the position of the vessel. They told us that a helicopter and two speedboats had reached our vessel,” he told the Financial Times. “It's a seizure and a diplomatic situation and we're in the middle,” he added.

Delta Tankers, the operator of the Delta Poseidon, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The Greek foreign ministry described the seizure of the tankers as “acts of piracy”.

Last month Athens seized the Russian-flagged Pegas oil tanker — subsequently renamed Lana — for carrying sanctioned Iranian crude. US authorities are reported to have this week taken the Iranian crude from the tanker.

Iran summoned the Greek charge d'affaires to Tehran on Wednesday condemning what it called “piracy” by Athens. On Friday Tehran also called on Switzerland — which runs the US interests section in Iran — to complain about the seizure of the Iranian tanker and to convey “strong objections” to the Americans.

In 2019 Iran seized a British-flagged oil tanker shortly after the UK stopped an Iranian vessel in Gibraltar that was carrying crude to Syria. The British-flagged Stena Impero was held in Iran for two months before its release.

The Strait of Hormuz, the narrow strategic waterway separating Iran from the Gulf states, is one of the world's most important shipping lanes for crude. Approximately a third of all seaborne oil cargoes pass through each day, according to the US Energy Information Administration.

Talks over the revival of the 2015 nuclear pact, which former US president Donald Trump abandoned in 2018, have stalled. Western powers want Iran to radically reverse its nuclear programme in return for the US rejoining the pact and lifting a swath of sanctions against its economy, including oil exports.

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Western diplomats say the main hurdle is the designation of the Revolutionary Guards and its Quds forces as terrorists. Iran wants the designation lifted. It has also made clear it will continue to support militias across the Middle East.

Additional reporting by Eleni Varvitsioti in Athens

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