

The Runway and the Hull

Two strikes, two gates, and what honest reporting still owes the people inside.

By Aryeh Leib Thorne Toren

This morning we wrote about a hull with a name. The tanker On Peace (IMO 9893204) was hit off Oman's Musandam coast on Tuesday, and India said 12 of its 19 crew were injured. We wrote that a ship is people. This week added a runway, and the rule has not changed.

Saudi Arabia's General Authority of Civil Aviation says attacks on Abha International Airport and on King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh, on Tuesday and Wednesday, 6 and 7 October, killed three people and wounded 36. The authority did not say who fired. The Houthis did: their military spokesman claimed ballistic missiles and drones. The Houthis have also declared Saudi airspace a "theatre of military operations" and warned international airlines to stop flying into the kingdom. That is their declaration, not a line on any map. A warning to airlines lands on travellers, and it should be reported as exactly what it is.

Then came talk of reinforcements. Reuters and Axios, citing US officials, reported that Syria was weighing military help for the Saudis. Damascus answered on Wednesday. A presidential media adviser called reports of a Saudi request for Syrian troops "a lie," and Syria's Foreign Media Department said its policy is "stability, peace and cooperation, not opening new fronts." The reports are on the record, and so is the denial. Neither is a deployment.

At 22:00 Israel time on Wednesday, 7 October (1900 UTC), UKMTO, the Royal Navy office that logs attacks on merchant ships, recorded a tanker struck by multiple projectiles 51 nautical miles north of Madinat ash Shamal, Qatar. It is the tanker identified by maritime security firm Vanguard as ACERS (IMO 9301902), an oil and chemical tanker the BBC reports is flagged in Antigua and Barbuda. UKMTO reported casualties. Another security firm, Clearwater, says all crew are safe. No one has claimed the attack. EOS Risk Group told the BBC it was the first reported strike on a ship this far west of the Strait of Hormuz since 9 September.

Three things follow.

First, a runway is people too. Abha and Riyadh are civilian airports, and the three who died were civilians. A war that reaches a civilian airport has reached the people in it, whatever banner the launcher flies.

Second, a claim is not a line, and neither is a denial. A declared "theatre of operations" is a threat until it becomes an event. A reported deployment is a report until troops move. A denial is a statement. Each should be written at its own weight, no heavier and no lighter.

Third, an unnamed attacker is not an unknown cost. We do not know who fired at that tanker, and we will not guess. We do know a crew was aboard, and that two accounts of their condition do not yet agree. Saying so plainly is part of the job.

The Torah opens with an act of separation. "And G-d saw the light, that it was good, and G-d divided between the light and the darkness" (Bereishit 1:4). Creation begins by telling one thing from another. Our smaller share of that work is to keep what is confirmed apart from what is claimed, and both apart from what we would like to be true.

May the L-rd heal the wounded of Abha and Riyadh, comfort the families of the three who were killed, and guard the crews of both tankers, and all who go down to the sea in ships.

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