

## ATTACK ON THE USS STARK

# U.S. role in gulf designed to upset Iranian plans, expert says

L.A. Times/Washington Post Service

WASHINGTON — The State Department's top Middle East expert, outlining and defending the administration's embattled policy in the Persian Gulf, said yesterday that the United States was ready to protect Kuwaiti oil tankers to upset Iranian plans to dominate the region.

The policy also is intended to preserve free navigation in international waters, and avoid what could be a ruinous surge in oil prices, Assistant Secretary of State Richard W. Murphy said.

While conceding that it could result in armed clashes between the United States and Iran, Murphy said, the plan "protects our economic, our political and our strategic interests."

Murphy said Iran was trying to intimidate Kuwait, a tiny Arab state that has provided up to \$40 billion in economic assistance to Iraq in the nearly 7-year-old gulf war.

But he said the potential consequences go far beyond Kuwait.

"Iran is trying to use the oil weapon to threaten the lifelines of the states in the gulf," Murphy said. "It is focusing at this time on Kuwait. If it is successful, it would employ the same strategy on the other states."

If Iran's strategy succeeds, he said, "it would lead to actual or psychological interruption [of oil supplies], causing a major surge in oil prices, global inflation and recession, including in the United States, with adverse security and political ramifications for the West as happened in 1973" when Arab oil producers imposed an embargo on shipments to the United States and Western Europe.

"The intimidation that we are watching directed primarily against Kuwait today ... is part of Iran's hegemonistic plans for the gulf," Murphy said.

The United States and Kuwait reached agreement in principle several weeks ago to register 11 Kuwaiti supertankers as U.S.-flag vessels that would be entitled to protection by the U.S. Navy.

Officials said the deal would be completed as soon as the Coast Guard finished inspecting the ships and they comply with U.S. safety and crew rules.

A spokesman for Santa Fe International, a Kuwaiti-owned energy company based in Alhambra, Calif., said Kerr Steamship Co. of Baltimore would act as U.S. agent for the 11 vessels of the Kuwaiti Oil Tanker Co. that would be transferred to U.S. registry for operation under the U.S. flag. A Delaware corporation, the Chesapeake Shipping Co. of Wilmington, would hold title to the fleet.

Despite their registry, the newly U.S.-flagged ships will not carry U.S. crews, only U.S. masters.

"The maritime unions are pretty unhappy about this," said a Maritime Administration official who spoke on condition he not be identified. "But it's hard to put pressure on them because they are serving European and Far Eastern ports only, not touching any U.S. territory."

Asked about the potential need for increased naval force in the Persian Gulf to protect the new U.S.-flag tankers, a Pentagon spokesman who asked to remain anonymous expressed doubt that an aircraft carrier would have to be stationed

in the Arabian Sea outside the gulf to provide air cover.

"Under the new rules of engagement," the spokesman said of the orders to fire at any aircraft or surface vessel that appears hostile, "there won't be any more night operations by Iraqi planes. And we don't think the Iranians would risk any of their decreasing numbers of planes or their remaining naval force in an attack on U.S. vessels."

Aside from the anticipated U.S. escorts, Kuwait already has leased three Soviet-owned tankers that are plying the gulf under the protecting guns of Soviet naval ships. Presumably, if the deal with Washington falls through, the Kuwaiti government might turn to Moscow to protect additional Kuwaiti ships.

Murphy said it was in the vital interest of the United States to limit Soviet influence in the gulf region, adding that most of the Arab states in the area shared that view. "The gulf states are very much aware of long-term Soviet intentions and have no interest in opening up the gulf to the Soviet Union," he said.

"It would be a major strategic defeat for a country hostile to us, such as the Soviets or such as Iran is at this time, to increase its power and influence [in the region]," Murphy added. "We are very conscious of the Soviets willingness to step in and help protect shipping in the gulf in order to gain a strategic foothold in that area."

Murphy said there were about eight to 10 U.S.-flag ships in the gulf every month, each moving with U.S. naval escorts.

He conceded it was possible Iran might attack Kuwaiti ships flying the U.S. flag or their U.S. Navy es-

cort vessels because "we can't be totally sure of anything, where Iran is concerned."

But Murphy said it was unlikely Iran would risk a military confrontation with the United States, noting that "Iran has never attacked a U.S. ship in the gulf."

He remarked that Iran was having enough trouble in its war with Iraq without picking a second war with the United States. However, when a reporter asked if an Iranian attack on a U.S. ship would mean war, Murphy said only: "The United

States has no intention of provoking a war with Iran."

The Kuwaiti merchant fleet, according to U.S. Coast Guard records, totals 71 ships, of which 34 are tankers and the remainder dry cargo carriers. Its 22 supertankers make up the heart of the merchant fleet. Nongovernment experts said the oil carried by Kuwaiti ships is produced primarily in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Those experts said Kuwaiti ships do not carry Iraqi oil.

"Kuwait is the main conduit for a lot of materials going into Iraq," said

Shireen Hunter of Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies. "Some Soviet-made weaponry goes through Kuwaiti ports and then overland to Iraq."

Murphy said Kuwait was the only nation to ask for U.S. naval protection. He said any requests from other nations would be considered on their merits.

According to the London-based Lloyd's Register of Shipping, 355 ships have been attacked in the Persian Gulf since September 1980.