

## Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

### The mysteries of the Red Sea

*A Libyan freighter was probably responsible for the mining, but the question persists: why?*

**I**t all began on July 9, when the Soviet freighter Knud Jespersen was suddenly hit by an explosion at the mouth of the Gulf of Suez. It has continued ever since, with no fewer than 18 other vessels of various nationalities damaged. Some were in the Red Sea itself, others close to the small strategic strait of Bab el Mandeb between Djibouti and South Yemen.

Still, there is a mystery as to the actual cause of the explosions—and why whoever did this did it.

To begin with, between July 27 and 28, six vessels were hit. The Egyptian authorities announced that these ships seemed to have struck sea-mines. On July 29, the terrorist group Al Jihad al Islami claimed responsibility for the mining in a phone call to Agence France Presse, announcing that 189 mines had been sowed by "Islamic frogmen operating from Egyptian territory" to prove that "Islamic Jihad [Holy War] will remain the strongest." This raised a few eyebrows and many more questions. By Aug. 11, the Egyptian authorities were pointing at both Iran and Libya.

While the Iranians were quick to deny any responsibility, the Qaddafi government met the accusations with complete silence. The Egyptians, indeed, argued that Libya was "more guilty" than Iran.

As a result, the Red Sea is now facing the biggest naval military deployment it has seen since World War II. France and Britain arrived first with eight minesweepers and support-ships. The United States dispatched the

U.S.S. Shreveport with four HD-53 Sea Stallion mine-sweeper helicopters. On Aug. 21, Italian foreign minister Giulio Andreotti of Italy announced in parliament that after having "consulted with Moscow," he had agreed to send four vessels.

In *Pravda* and *Tass*, the Soviets were quick to denounce the United States as responsible for the mining, "as a pretext to expand its own military operations in the region." This denunciation picked up some support among Gulf newspapers, who appear to have overlooked the fact that the mining also gave Moscow a pretext to expand its military operations. On Aug. 20, two Soviet minesweepers appeared off the coast of South Yemen. On Aug. 23, the helicopter-carrier Leningrad and two cruisers crossed into the Suez Canal toward the Red Sea.

On Aug. 22, it was announced that the Libyan freighter Ghat had been impounded in the French port of Marseilles. The Ghat, which had gone through the Suez Canal July 6 on the way to the port of Assab in Ethiopia, was denounced by Egyptian military authorities as one of the ships, or perhaps *the* ship, which had laid the mines. Indeed, the Ghat's behavior was strange: While it generally took four days for the round-trip to Assab, the Ghat had taken 17 days. Furthermore, instead of anchoring in the port of Assab directly, it had anchored far from any maritime activity, then traveled through the Red Sea, passing through the Suez Canal 10 days later.

On Aug. 17, it arrived in Marseilles and was thoroughly searched by French custom officers. They found nothing—except that, somehow, between passing through the Suez Canal and arriving in Marseilles, the crew of the Ghat had changed; its captain was now a Pakistani; the sailors were West Germans.

That the Libyans are capable of such an action is beyond doubt. However, this doesn't answer the question of why. The theory that the Red Sea was mined in answer to Iraq's blockade of Kharg Island by Iran's friend, Qaddafi, seems too simple to be true. Theories of all kinds are circulating now in Cairo and elsewhere as to the true culprit and reasons. Some say it was a Soviet exercise to test the speed with which Washington could react to such a crisis, and its technical capability to sweep mines. If so Moscow is certainly comforted, unfortunately.

However, the mining has had two complementary results. First, it has been proven that no single power alone can secure navigation of the Red Sea. Calls for an international conference involving the United States, the Soviet Union, and other powers have already been put forward, not least from Italy's Andreotti, one of Qaddafi's, and Moscow's, best friends in the West.

Second, the present military deployment involves the risk at any time of direct confrontation between Eastern and Western vessels, in which case the Red Sea and the canal might be blocked, blocking oil supply delivery to primarily Western Europe. This prospect might certainly appeal to Moscow and Libya.

But is this really the aim of the mining, or is the aim a more practical one: to prevent Western military vessels from passing through the Red Sea, in the event of a major crisis in the region.