



PolicyWatch 2224

Iran's Evolving Maritime Presence

[Michael Eisenstadt](#) and [Alon Paz](#)

Also available in [العربية](#)

March 13, 2014

The growing capabilities of Iran's navy will enhance the country's soft power and its peacetime reach, while providing an alternative means of supplying the "axis of resistance" if traditional means of civilian transport become untenable.

On March 6, Israeli naval forces in the Red Sea seized a Panamanian-flagged vessel, the *Klos C*, carrying arms -- including long-range Syrian-made M-302 rockets -- destined for Palestinian militants in Gaza. The month before, a two-ship Iranian naval flotilla set out on a much advertised cruise that would, it is claimed, for the first time take Iranian ships around Africa and into the Atlantic Ocean. These two events illustrate the role maritime activities play in Iran's growing ability to project influence far from its shores, and how the Iranian navy has emerged, in the words of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, as a "strategic force" on the high seas.

The Growing Importance of the Maritime Arena

Iran's naval forces -- like the rest of its armed forces -- are divided into two organizations: the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) and the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN). The IRGCN's combat fleet consists of hundreds of small boats, several dozen torpedo boats and fast-attack craft armed with antiship missiles, and a number of midget submarines. These forces are trained and organized for naval unconventional warfare and access-denial missions in the Persian Gulf. The IRIN's combat fleet consists of a half dozen obsolete frigates, a dozen missile-equipped patrol boats, a number of midget submarines, and three large diesel submarines that operate outside the Gulf in support of Iran's maritime access-denial strategy. Both forces also possess air assets for reconnaissance and strike missions.

Iran's large fleet of almost 200 merchant vessels -- 115 owned by the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (and its subsidiaries) and 74 by the National Iranian Tanker Company -- sometimes functions as an auxiliary arm of the navy. These vessels may be used for sensitive covert missions, such as the smuggling of restricted materials and technologies

needed for Iran's missile and nuclear programs, and the export of oil in violation of international sanctions. And Iran will sometimes use foreign merchant vessels to transfer arms to foreign proxies and allies, often unbeknownst to the ships' owners and crews. Such merchant vessels, effectively serving as an "outsourced" arm of Iran's naval forces, have included the *Karine-A* (2002), *Monchegorsk* (2009), *Francop* (2009), *Victoria* (2011), and most recently the *Klos C*.

In recent years, the IRIN has taken the first steps toward becoming a small seagoing navy capable of "out of area" operations, such as: (1) showing the flag far from Iran's shores; (2) establishing a maritime forward line of defense and bases of operation well beyond the Strait of Hormuz; (3) patrolling Iran's sea lines of communication; and (4) providing an additional layer of connectivity in an emerging, dispersed global network of strategic "partners" and "places" (i.e., staging areas) that enable Iran to project influence and power. While the IRIN remains a small force with a limited ability to operate on the high seas, these missions will increasingly shape Iran's maritime future.

Naval diplomacy. The majority of exercises conducted by the IRGCN and IRIN showcase the two organizations' claimed ability to control the Persian Gulf and to close the Strait of Hormuz -- the latter being a core pillar of Iran's deterrent. But in recent years, Iran has sent elements of the IRIN to "show the flag" and engage in naval diplomacy through a series of port calls overseas, to enhance its soft power, and to demonstrate its capacity for "out of area" operations from the Bab al-Mandab Strait in the west to the Strait of Hormuz in the north to the Strait of Malacca in the east.

Thus, Iranian naval vessels have made port calls (in some cases, on multiple occasions) in the Persian Gulf (Qatar and Oman), the Indian Ocean (Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka), the Horn of Africa and Red Sea (Sudan, Djibouti, and Saudi Arabia), the eastern Mediterranean (Syria), Russia -- by elements of Iran's Caspian fleet -- and China.. These visits support Iran's efforts to portray itself as a rising power and emerging actor on the world stage.

Forward defense, forward operations. For Iran, the principal threat of attack comes from the sea -- in the form of U.S. carrier strike groups operating in the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman and U.S. bombers staging out of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. Consistent with Iran's efforts to create a layered defense as part of its access-denial strategy in the Persian Gulf, the Islamic Republic has been working to enhance its ability to detect and interdict naval threats as far away as possible from the Strait of Hormuz and to counter possible U.S. "outside in" approaches using the Gulf of Oman as a springboard for operations inside the Persian Gulf. To this end, its naval forces have been increasingly active in recent years in the Gulf of Oman, Arabian Sea, and Indian Ocean.

Likewise, Iran and Syria have been working together to threaten U.S. interests in the eastern Mediterranean by transferring advanced arms (such as C-802 and Yakhont antiship missiles) to Hezbollah -- which is developing a rudimentary maritime strike capability that may someday threaten the U.S. Aegis destroyers that constitute the seaborne leg of NATO's missile defense architecture there. And Iran has been strengthening naval cooperation with Russia, which it sees as a potential partner in efforts to limit and constrain U.S. influence. Russian warships have made at least two port calls at Bandar Abbas since December 2012. The refueling and logistical services available there could facilitate Russian operations in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, and the transit of ships between the Pacific fleet and the eastern Mediterranean.

Sea lines of communication. Nearly all of Iran's oil and gas exports pass through the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean on their way to market. Likewise, nearly all of Iran's imports pass around the Horn of Africa or through the Indian Ocean en route to the Persian Gulf. The security of these sea-lanes is essential to Iran's economic well-being. This is why IRIN commander Rear Adm. Habibollah Sayyari has asserted that Iran has "strategic interests at sea" and "need[s] to be capable of providing... security not only in the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Aden, the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, but also throughout the high seas around the globe."

Thus, elements of the IRIN have been operating in the Gulf of Aden since November 2008, when it first sent warships to conduct counterpiracy patrols in response to the seizure of an Iranian cargo ship by Somali pirates, and have been increasingly active in the Indian Ocean. Iran's navy currently lacks sufficient numbers to secure Iran's sea lines of communication, and its presence in the Indian Ocean is largely symbolic, but these activities provide it with valuable experience and familiarity with the operating environment that it can build on in the future.

Connecting "partners" and "places." Since its inception, the Islamic Republic of Iran has sought to expand its influence throughout the Middle East and beyond by forming a web of alliances with like-minded states, nonstate actors, and sympathizers in Shiite communities around the world. Its alliance with Hezbollah and Syria formed the backbone of this "axis of resistance," which has subsequently come to include Palestinian groups such as Islamic Jihad and Hamas and Iraqi special groups. Iran has been the main source of arms for these groups and has led the logistical effort required to supply them. It has developed sea, air, and overland supply routes for this purpose, and has used Syria and Sudan as regional supply hubs. The relatively recent development of a rudimentary IRIN "out of area" operational capability provides an additional layer of redundancy and resilience to this network, if interdiction efforts by Israel and other countries render alternative means of transport untenable.

Policy Recommendations

Iran's evolving maritime capabilities necessitate a multifaceted response from the United States and its allies:

Information activities. Tehran hopes that naval diplomacy will bolster the country's image as a rising power. Accordingly, the United States and its allies should note the rather modest nature of Iran's recent maritime achievements -- after all, Phoenician ships plied the Atlantic three millennia ago -- and that patrolling one's lines of communication is not the same as securing them. They should also underscore the fact that recent Iranian arms transfers violate UN Security Council Resolutions 1747, 1803, and 1929.

Intelligence sharing and capacity building. The United States should enhance intelligence-sharing and capacity-building efforts with coast guards, port authorities, and customs services around the world, in order to prevent states like Iran (and North Korea) from using civilian ports to transfer arms and explosives. Ports and cargo carriers that do not exercise due diligence in this regard should be shunned and penalized.

Legal authorities. The United States and its allies should fully use existing authorities under UN Security Council Resolutions 1747, 1803, and 1929 to prevent Iran from violating

these resolutions by transferring arms and explosives by sea, air, and land. Washington should work with its allies to seek additional legal authorities where existing authorities are inadequate.

Finally, the United States and its allies must not allow ongoing nuclear negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran to hinder efforts to halt Iranian violations of UN Security Council resolutions and to arm violent extremist groups. If Iran is not willing to halt such proscribed, destabilizing activities, neither should the United States and its allies halt their efforts to disrupt them. The latter have a compelling interest to do so, and they have a raft of UN Security Council resolutions and international law on their side.

Michael Eisenstadt directs the Military and Security Studies Program at The Washington Institute. Lt. Col. Alon Paz, Israel Defense Forces, is a Visiting Military Fellow at the Institute.