

Iran Applies Maximum Power to Annual IRGC Naval Exercise

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Brief Analysis

Coming soon after Western naval redeployments in the Gulf and explosions at sensitive Iranian sites, the recent drills illustrate the regime's eagerness to reassert its deterrence by showing off new weapons and capabilities.

On the early morning of July 27, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) and Aerospace Force kicked off Iran's fourteenth Great Prophet naval drills (GP-14) by firing ballistic and antiship missiles and staging a swarm attack against a mockup of an American aircraft carrier. Some of the ballistic missiles were fired into Persian Gulf waters in the general direction of two regional air bases with significant coalition military presence: al-Udeid in Qatar and al-Dhafra in the United Arab Emirates. Early U.S. detection of those seemingly deliberate splashdown launches sent coalition personnel into shelters, highlighting the defiant and risky strategic mindset that characterized the exercise as a whole.

CALCULATED LOCATION AND TIMING

According to an IRGCN communique and other evidence, the exercise was confined to the Persian Gulf and the western side of the Strait of Hormuz, avoiding the jurisdiction of the national Islamic Republic of Iran Navy. This was probably done in part to minimize the chance of friendly fire incidents following a fatal IRIN drill on May 10, when a frigate accidentally struck the support vessel *Konarak* with a missile in the Gulf of Oman.

Contrary to initial reports, there is no indication that the IRGCN gave mariners advance notice of an imminent live-fire drill within the highly congested Hormuz and Persian Gulf shipping lanes. Indeed, giving little or no warning is Iran's usual practice with such drills, apparently in order to increase their dramatic effect and deliberately undermine the safety of navigation in the region. In the lead-up to GP-14, no notice was carried by the Iranian Ports and Maritime Organization website, the U.S. National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency database, NAVAREA IX, the Middle East Navigation Aids Service, or the U.S. Maritime Administration list, which typically warn mariners of heightened Iranian naval activity in the area.

Various reports indicate that GP-14 was either rushed or delayed, but in any event it was launched with almost no prior publicity. The timing of this annual exercise is not confined to any particular season or calendar schedule—rather, it depends more on political and strategic factors. In this case, the decision to go ahead with GP-14 and reuse a repaired American carrier mockup was likely linked to the USS *Nimitz* carrier strike group's arrival in the northern Arabian Sea on July 24. (*Nimitz* was relieving the USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower* of its seven-month duty; the latter carrier and its escorts are now back in the United States.)

On July 26, international media noticed Iranian forces relocating their mockup—a crude 60 percent scale model of the *Nimitz* itself—from its anchorage off Bandar Abbas to waters southeast of Hormuz Island. Reports speculated that the move was made in anticipation of a new live-fire exercise. The mockup was originally “commissioned” in 2015 to be targeted with missiles and torpedoes during the GP-9 drills that February, but it refused to sink and was repaired four years later, just in time for the uptick in tensions seen throughout 2020.

SINKING THE (FAKE) NIMITZ

Once the carrier mockup was towed fifty kilometers into position just north of the Strait of Hormuz shipping lanes, it was attacked with a Nasr antiship missile fired from a modified Bell JetRanger helicopter. The Nasr's cumbersome loading procedure and the civilian-rated JetRanger's unsuitability for demanding antiship operations suggest that this part of the drill was either a test program or just for show. In any event, [overhead drone video \(https://www.iribnews.ir/files/fa/news/1399/5/7/5123883_616.mp4\)](https://www.iribnews.ir/files/fa/news/1399/5/7/5123883_616.mp4) showed the missile causing limited damage when it impacted the hull above the waterline near the superstructure (see still image below).



(/sites/default/files/imports/7168abc591aa151a4966935ae7ee8f3c.jpeg)

Source: Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB)

In addition, drones dropped three small-diameter bombs onto the carrier deck, destroying three F/A-18 fighter jet mockups, while **missile boats** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-signals-a-toughened-stance-by-adding-to-its-naval-arsenal>) and shore batteries fired a few more short-range antiship missiles at the vessel. In the end, the mockup appeared to succumb to its wounds; it was later photographed listing to its port side and sinking not far from the entrance of Bandar Abbas harbor, probably after a failed nighttime attempt at running it aground. Given the twenty-five-meter depth of the seafloor at that location and the mockup's forty-meter-wide beam, part of the wreck remained jutting out of the water and will pose a serious navigational hazard unless further action is taken to salvage it.

MILITARY SIGNIFICANCE

GP-14 was choreographed in large part to impress foreign and regional rivals while enhancing Iran's deterrence, which the regime seemed to believe **was still tarnished** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-irgc-post-soleimani-political-and-security-implications-at-home-and-abr>) following the targeted killing of senior IRGC commander Qasem Soleimani in January and the **more recent spate of mysterious explosions** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-might-iran-respond-to-foreign-sabotage>) at the Natanz centrifuge assembly plant and other Iranian sites. Despite the symbolic/strategic focus, however, the exercise also carried a few noteworthy tactical implications.

First, Iran claimed an anti-radiation version of its Fateh surface-to-surface missile, called Hormuz, was used to home in on a replica of the TPY-2, the sophisticated American long-range radar associated with the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense system (THAAD) currently deployed to several locations in the Gulf region. State-controlled media outlets broadcast a video to prove it, though **the footage does not definitively show** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JtRlelCKPKY>) whether the target was a working THAAD simulator destroyed by an actual anti-radiation homing missile (see still image below).



(/sites/default/files/imports/iran-

fateh-
missile-
thaad-
drill-
POL3362-
634x441.jpg)

Source: IRIB

Second, videos and photographs published during GP-14 showed what looked like slant-firing of a new type of surface-to-surface missile launched from sealed cylindrical canisters deployed in shallow trenches and covered with thin dirt and/or camouflaged material (see photo). There is no visual

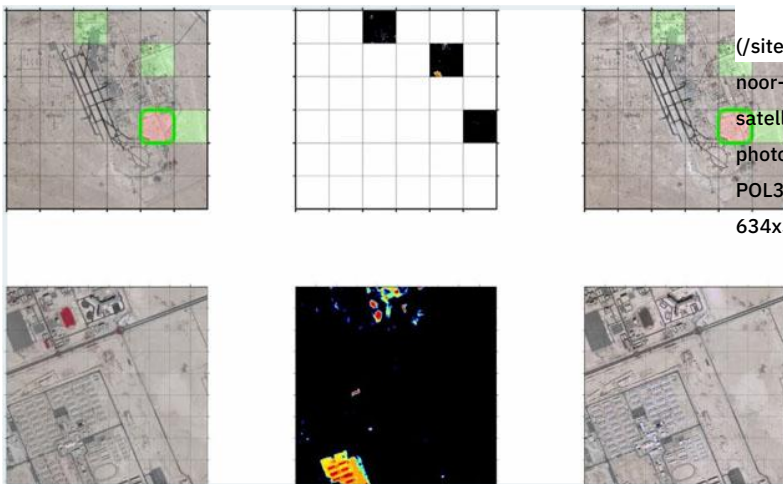
indication of a support network near the launch spots.



(/sites/default/files/imports/0eae5775c55babe79433bc451d520d1c.jpeg)

Source: Fars News Agency

Third, the IRGC claimed that the GP drill area was for the first time “monitored” by its new Noor imaging satellite, launched on April 22. The Noor’s capabilities have been faked before—imagery it supposedly captured of al-Udeid Air Base was later shown to have been copied from Google Earth. Yet some of the images released during GP-14 suggest it has multispectral capability with limited intelligence usage:



(/sites/default/files/imports/iran-noor-satellite-photos-POL3362-634x388.jpg)

Source: Fars News Agency

Fourth, Sukhoi Su-22 jets from the IRGC Aerospace Force (usually based in Shiraz 500 kilometers northwest of the Strait of Hormuz) test-dropped the 660 kilogram Yassin glide bomb against naval targets during the exercise. With a claimed range between 50 and 100 kilometers, the GPS-guided Yassin could give Iranian aircraft some degree of standoff range when attempting to attack coalition naval vessels beyond the aircraft’s 1,100 kilometer combat radius. Similarly, the IRGC used an Su-22 to test an air-launched version of the Fajr-4 guided ballistic missile back in May. If successfully guided to its target, this weapon could pose a threat to high-value coalition assets in the Arabian Sea.

(/sites/default/files/imports/iran-yassin-bomb-POL3362-634x441.jpg)



Source: IRIB

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the serious safety and security risks of conducting unannounced live-fire missile drills in the middle of a major international shipping route, GP-14 also showed Iran’s continued defiance in the face of pressure, as well as its growing capability to seriously disrupt freedom of navigation (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-asymmetric-naval-response-to-maximum-pressure>) in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz. Iranian military commanders argue that the Islamic Republic is simply pursuing a defensive strategy using offensive operational tactics. Yet this claim offers no solace given the regime’s unaltered, zero-sum grand strategy of ejecting the United States from the Middle East and undermining America’s Gulf partners.

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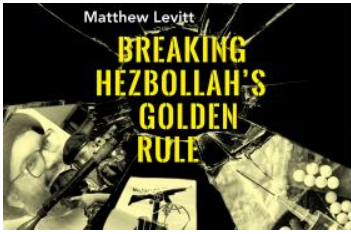
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