

The IRGC States Its Case for Escalation Against the United States, Britain, and Saudi Arabia

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Nov 26, 2019

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Brief Analysis

As its concerns about domestic dissent and Western naval activity grow, Tehran may once again try to divert attention from the unrest at home by launching attacks abroad.

This week, Iranian clerics and military officials ramped up their rhetoric against foreign “enemies,” accusing them of waging a “street world war” against Tehran amid [public protests over gasoline policy](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/khameneis-domestic-and-foreign-response-options-to-the-protests>) and a subsequent regime crackdown. On November 25, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commander Maj. Gen. Hossein Salami threatened the United States, Britain, and Saudi Arabia with severe punishment if they cross Iran’s redlines. He also warned that the IRGC’s patience is not limitless, and that any foreign provocation will spur a potent reaction at a time and place of its choosing. Three days earlier, the commander of the Khatam al-Anbia Central Headquarters, Maj. Gen. Gholam Ali Rashid, told Washington to avoid any actions in the Persian Gulf region or Strait of Hormuz that could put American military personnel “at great risk,” declaring that words alone—including backdoor messages—“will not be enough to prevent a war” next time hostilities break out.

MILITARY MANEUVERS

General Rashid’s threats were particularly notable because they came while he was observing air defense drills in Semnan province. Although the Harim-e Velayat exercise is an annual affair conducted deep inside central Iran, this year’s edition was apparently designed to simulate the combined operational area of the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, and Gulf of Oman. Asset deployment patterns reportedly mimicked existing arrangements in those theaters, with an emphasis on honing Iran’s offensive and defensive capabilities over the strait (perhaps out of a

belief that whoever controls the air ultimately controls the battlespace).

Meanwhile, the USS *Abraham Lincoln* carrier strike group sailed through the strait for a port call in Bahrain on November 19. This was the carrier's first trip into the Gulf since May; previously, it had opted to remain in the northern Arabian Sea, at a safer yet still effective operational range from Iran. The ship's deployment has been extended until its replacement, USS *Harry S. Truman*, finishes repairs and is ready to sail. The U.S. Navy's proximity led General Salami to threaten the "enemy" and its aircraft carriers with "bone-crushing" precision-guided missile strikes. He later called the Hormuz transit a failed attempt to show support for the gasoline protests.

IRGC officials may be equally nervous about Operation Sentinel, a new multilateral maritime security initiative in the Gulf. Established under the auspices of the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC), the operation commenced on November 7. It is led by the United States and currently includes Albania, Australia, Bahrain, Britain, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

Several other European countries, including Denmark, Italy, and Spain, have expressed interest in joining a separate French-led maritime initiative, though only the Netherlands has announced that it will formally sign on. The mission's operational center was inaugurated on November 24, with monitoring forces based out of Camp de la Paix in Abu Dhabi. No reports of major friction with Iranian naval units have emerged so far, including with the IRGC forces that claim control over the Strait of Hormuz. This relative quiet may seem surprising given that Iran's recent "Hormuz Peace Endeavor" (aka HOPE) has failed to convince any regional countries that they should consider Gulf security arrangements with Tehran under the current circumstances. Yet the quiet could be short-lived if hardliners continue to face major pressure at home.

RALLYING DISENCHANTED YOUTHS

Even as the regime tries to build up its confidence and capabilities in order to counter foreign adversaries and further its regional ambitions, it faces greater challenges from its own people. Now entering its fifth decade, the Islamic Republic is grappling with a common paradox: how to pass the mantle of revolutionary commitments to the next generation. More than half of Iran's current population was not yet born at the time of the 1979 revolution. Khamenei knows he must rely on this generation for what he calls his "Second Step" project, but serious questions have emerged about their loyalty—particularly now that young, working-class Iranians are playing a lead role in the protests.

In the same line, it was surprising to hear an IRGC spokesman take an unusually hopeless tone toward the next generation in a November 25 interview. Speaking on state television, Lt. Gen. Ramazan Sharif harshly criticized the disaffected Iranian youths who have chanted pro-monarchy slogans and used fiercely anti-regime language at recent demonstrations, calling them "traitors."

This generational divergence will only get wider over time, perhaps spurring the frustrated hardline establishment to instigate a controllable crisis just to charge up the youths with religious and nationalist zeal. In their view, that may be the best way of changing the ideological status quo that facilitated the current protests. The regime has used this tactic in the past, particularly during the Iran-Iraq War, and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei may be employing it again today. In a November 3 speech before an audience of students, he reiterated his uncompromising "no negotiations" framework for Iranian politicians to follow in dealing with Washington. Although the anti-American tenor of his remarks was in line with the typical regime rhetoric issued around the anniversary of the 1979 hostage crisis, the IRGC's concurrent military threats and posturing raise the risk that Tehran's words will become deed.

CONCLUSION

As seen in the Iranian-attributed rocket attack against north Israel on November 20, the regime seems to be hardening its resolve to hit back at those countries it believes are threatening its regional ambitions and hold on

power. September's highly successful, largely unanswered attack on Saudi Aramco facilities gave the IRGC and conservative leadership a similar jolt of confidence. Accordingly, one can expect Tehran to embark on its next significant regional adventure soon. And given the serious challenges it faces at home, the regime may be less concerned about avoiding direct confrontation with the United States or Israel this time around.

Possible Iranian actions in the near term include:

- Confronting U.S. naval assets transiting the Persian Gulf
- Conducting covert operations to disrupt international maritime traffic in various theaters, perhaps even as far away as the Strait of Malacca
- Repeating the large-scale drone/missile tactics used in the Aramco attack, only this time targeting some other type of critical facility (e.g., a water desalination plant)
- Launching a high-profile terrorist or cyber operation, e.g., against the airline industry or a population center.

Rather than being a slave to events, Tehran likely wants to choose the time and place of any such response, so the international community cannot let its guard down even when the Gulf theater seems to quiet down. The potential for escalation is particularly high now that Western maritime security operations are steaming ahead and Iran's HOPE plan has sunk.

Going forward, the United States should continue showing support to its Gulf allies by maintaining potent military forces in the region and moving them around to emphasize their presence. If the *Lincoln* carrier group is ordered back home, a replacement carrier group should be sent with an overlapping deployment, to leave no room for misinterpretation.

Iran's domestic problems will not dissipate anytime soon, as evident in the worsening violence against protestors and dissidents, the complete Internet blackout, and the plethora of negative economic indicators that will not be solved by simple gasoline rationing. Despite Tehran's attempt to pin these problems on outside powers, the people will continue to blame the regime. Therefore, the IRGC and other hardline factions can be expected to issue even angrier threats and adopt more violent tactics in the coming weeks, both at home and further afield.

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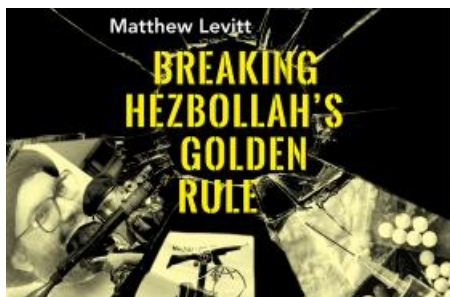
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