

Iran's Response to Britain's Tanker Seizure

by [Farzin Nadimi \(/experts/farzin-nadimi\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Farzin Nadimi \(/experts/farzin-nadimi\)](#)

Farzin Nadimi, an associate fellow with The Washington Institute, is a Washington-based analyst specializing in the security and defense affairs of Iran and the Persian Gulf region.



Brief Analysis

Recent Iranian rhetoric and actions point to further retaliation, but taking that route may lead to the same strategic miscalculations and international intervention that cost the country so dearly in the 1980s.

On July 4, British Royal Marines took control of the *Grace 1*, a fully laden Panamanian-flagged super tanker suspected of carrying crude oil from Iran to Syria's Baniyas refinery in defiance of European Union sanctions against the Assad regime. They used a helicopter to board the 330-meter, 300,000-ton ship in the middle of the night. Iran's reaction reveals much about its potential response options against Western interests—and the limitations thereof.

INITIAL RESPONSE

Tehran reacted angrily to the seizure, with President Hassan Rouhani and other civilian and military officials threatening to respond in kind at the Strait of Hormuz if the tanker was not released promptly. Some even called for banning British vessels from the strait altogether, while the Iranian parliament introduced legislation that could lead to a tolling system for ships of certain nationalities—an unlawful discriminatory measure.

On July 8, Defense Minister Amir Hatami called the seizure an act of piracy. A day later, Armed Forces General Staff chairman Mohammad Bagheri promised to retaliate at the right time and place, and in line with the “direct, transparent, and brave” operation that shot down an American drone on June 20. He also reiterated Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's strategy of “no to negotiations, and no to war,” describing it as “active resistance” and implying that Iran's armed forces have been directed to unmistakably demonstrate their deterrent power. Another proponent of open-ended resistance is Gen. Hossein Salami, who advocated the notion for years and is now in a position to implement it as head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). On June 18, he stated that victory is closer

than ever because that the enemy is tired and reluctant.

Iran made good on its threat of active resistance on July 10, when five IRGC speedboats attempted to stop the tanker *British Heritage* while it was transiting the outbound section of a traffic separation zone that lies mostly in Iran's Persian Gulf waters leading to the Strait of Hormuz. Although the effort was thwarted by a shadowing British warship operating out of Bahrain, there are other British tankers in the Fujairah anchorage and elsewhere that are still vulnerable to sabotage operations.

IRAN'S PERCEIVED ADVANTAGES

The IRGC believes it holds a distinct geographical advantage in carrying out this strategy. From its point of view, Iran dominates the northern and eastern portions of the Persian Gulf and the entire Strait of Hormuz, one of the busiest shipping routes in the world with as many as fifteen oil tankers passing through every day (including three to four super tankers).

Tehran also believes that its actions are legally permissible. The regime claims control over maritime traffic through Iranian waters and includes the Strait of Hormuz in this definition, despite it being designated as an international strait under the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Although Iran is a conditional signatory to UNCLOS, it never ratified the document, and its own maritime law does not recognize international straits. Under Article 24 of UNCLOS, a coastal state can temporarily suspend innocent passage in specific areas of its territorial seas for security reasons, but not in a discriminatory fashion against specific states. More important, this provision does not apply to international straits (paragraph 2 of Article 45).

CHARTING IRAN'S NEXT MOVE

Iran has not yet responded to British overtures for releasing *Grace 1* in exchange for promises that it will not head for Syria. Apparently, Tehran does not want to establish that precedent.

Following the IRGC's failed intercept of the *British Heritage* and London's decision to arrest the Indian captain and chief officer of the *Grace 1*, Iran can be expected to take further action, even amid diplomatic outreach efforts such as Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif's visit to New York this week. A more forceful attempt at seizing a British-linked ship would be the first option, but Iran might decide to launch covert operations against such vessels as well, or even against British business assets and support services in the region's energy market. For example, BP currently has major investments in Bahrain, Iraq, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, while Saudi Aramco recently rewarded another British company with co-development rights in the Marjan offshore oil field (notably, Iran owns part of this field).

Tehran might also ask its Houthi friends in Yemen to harass commercial shipping in the Bab al-Mandab Strait, using both Iranian-supplied equipment and intelligence gained using the *Saviz* floating armory ship anchored north of the strait. There is precedent for such operations: last year, IRGC general Nasser Shabani claimed that Iran had ordered the July 24 Houthi attack against a Saudi super tanker, possibly using an explosive-laden boat.

Meanwhile, senior cleric Kazem Sedighi threatened the British with a "powerful slap" on July 12; he then reminded his listeners how Iranian missiles landed near American frontline positions in Syria's Deir al-Zour province last October. If the IRGC aims to fulfill this prophecy, it could fire ballistic or cruise missiles near HMS Jufair, the British Royal Navy base in northeast Bahrain. It might also release sea mines or suspicious-looking objects in waters approaching the base.

The specific forces involved in such operations would vary depending on location, since the IRGC Navy has five districts in the Persian Gulf. A potential ship seizure would most likely occur at the western approaches to the Strait of Hormuz, which lies within the IRGCN's 5th District (as in the latest case). This area is home to an elite unit called

the Aba-Abdullah Special Operations Brigade (aka Sepah Navy Special Force, or SNSF), commanded by Sadegh Amooie. They operate out of Faror Island, located twenty-four kilometers from the Iranian coast, 200 kilometers from the center of the Strait of Hormuz, and 138 kilometers from Dubai. This was the unit that landed on the mockup of a U.S. aircraft carrier in dramatic fashion during the 2015 Great Prophet 9 naval exercise.

The IRGC could also use one or two of its five naval Mi-171 helicopters to land a boarding party on a targeted tanker similar to how the British seized the *Grace 1*. Given their lack of night flying capability, they would almost certainly conduct any such operation in daylight, probably during the cooler early morning hours.

Whatever happens next, the failed *British Heritage* operation indicates that Tehran and the IRGC may not be concerned about catalyzing the formation of a Western-led coalition to protect regional shipping. Although this would be in line with the regime's behavior during the 1980s, such a posture ignores the **historical lessons from that period (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/past-u.s.-iran-confrontations-hold-lessons-for-current-crisis>)**.

Prior to Operation Earnest Will in 1987, Tehran escalated the situation in the Persian Gulf by ordering the IRGCN to confront Western navies there amid the Iran-Iraq War. This decision backfired, giving Western governments justification for deeper involvement. Iran's shipping attacks had little effect on the "Tanker War," the protracted conflict with Iraq, or global oil markets. They did, however, escalate the confrontation with Western military forces, culminating in a major naval defeat at the hands of the U.S. Navy in 1988. Iran will arguably be much better prepared and equipped this time around, and able to inflict more short-term costs on Western countries and their allies, but the end result might not be very different.

CONCLUSION

To deter Iran from escalation, various actors should maintain a strong multinational naval presence in the area and empower it to intervene on behalf of freedom of navigation in the region's strategic waterways. Such protective measures should include strengthening defenses against cruise and ballistic missiles, as well as hardening critical infrastructure **against Iranian cyberattacks (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-crisis-moves-into-cyberspace>)**. Officials should also urge Iran to take concrete steps (including legislative) toward recognizing the Strait of Hormuz as an international strait.

Perhaps most important, Iranian leaders should be made to understand that taking a belligerent stance in these vital waterways would seriously harm their own economy and national interests, as happened in the late 1980s when attacks on nonbelligerent shipping contributed to internationalization of the conflict with Iraq. The IRGC is attempting to depict these historical deeds as instrumental to strategic success, and Western countries are understandably bracing for further tanker attacks, perhaps involving greater damage. Yet those past deeds were in fact very costly at a time when Iran's most important national interests were at stake, and that would no doubt be the case again today.

Farzin Nadimi is an associate fellow with The Washington Institute, specializing in the security and defense affairs of Iran and the Gulf region. ❖

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