

A Close Encounter of the Propaganda Kind in the Gulf

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Brief Analysis

Despite more structured international maritime security measures, a recent encounter between Iranian and U.S. naval forces reiterated the potential for miscalculation, especially under a more assertive government in Tehran.

On November 3, one day before the anniversary of the 1979 U.S. embassy seizure in Tehran, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy released [a statement \(http://www.irna.ir/news/84528561\)](http://www.irna.ir/news/84528561) and heavily edited [video footage \(https://www.iribnews.ir/fa/news/3266715/%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D9%88%DB%8C%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%AF-%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%B1%D9%88%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1%DB%8C%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C-%D8%B3%D9%BE%D8%A7%D9%87-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A2%D9%85%D8%B1%DB%8C%DA%A9%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C\)](https://www.iribnews.ir/fa/news/3266715/%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D9%88%DB%8C%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%AF-%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%B1%D9%88%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1%DB%8C%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C-%D8%B3%D9%BE%D8%A7%D9%87-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A2%D9%85%D8%B1%DB%8C%DA%A9%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C) of a close encounter between Iranian and American vessels. Reportedly filmed October 24 in international waters off the Gulf of Oman south of Iran's Jask naval base, the video shows the IRGCN command ship *Shahid Mohammad Nazeri*, the support ship *Shahid Siavoshi*, and a large number of armed speedboats swarming near several U.S. vessels: the Navy destroyers USS *Michael Murphy* (DDG-112) and USS *The Sullivans* (DDG-68), and three of the Coast Guard's Sentinel-class fast-response cutters. According to the Iranian narrative, the IRGCN warded off the American ships while its special forces boarded and commandeered a tanker and seized Iranian crude oil that the U.S. Navy "had illegally transferred to it from another tanker." The reported destination of the ship—a Vietnamese-flagged 107,123-ton crude carrier named *Sothys*—was the Omani port of Sohar, about 170 kilometers southwest of Jask.

Pentagon spokesman Adm. John Kirby immediately dismissed the story as bogus. According to military sources consulted by USNI News, the destroyers were investigating “a suspected crime” when IRGC forces approached them. Although the footage shows Iranian and American vessels operating in close proximity and occasionally cutting each other’s course, it remains unclear whether the *Sothys* had sent any distress signal, and why two U.S. destroyers jointly responded to “monitor” a situation that is no longer a rare occurrence in the Persian Gulf region.

Iranian state television **later offered** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUTBPGpvaKY>) a different version of the story, claiming that the seizure was an act of asset recovery in response to a past incident. According to this narrative, U.S. forces disrupted an Iranian ship-to-ship transfer involving *Sothys* “several months ago,” which supposedly allowed the tanker to escape with Iran’s unpaid cargo: 750,000 barrels of oil. Tehran claimed that the disruption was intentional and related to enforcement of U.S. sanctions against Iran. According to tanker tracking agencies, however, the Vietnamese ship was simply returning a cargo of rejected Iranian crude oil from China. (In October, Iran reportedly exported about 1.1 million barrels per day of crude oil, about half of which went to China.)

Iran claims the showdown ended after several hours when the American vessels retreated; U.S. officials disputed that explanation but did not elaborate. In any case, the footage seems to show the U.S. vessels leaving the scene, and Iran did in fact seize the tanker and its cargo—*Sothys* was taken to waters north of Qeshm Island, and the crude was offloaded to *Rima*, another hijacked tanker formerly known as *Gulf Sky*. *Sothys* was released on November 10. After the incident, IRGC commander Gen. Hossein Salami declared that U.S. sanctions had been roundly defeated.

What the Video Reveals

Disputed backstories aside, the contents of the video itself are instructive. A mix of high-resolution overhead drone footage and imagery from the Iranian command ship, the video shows what appeared to be a tense encounter in international waters. The parties managed to avoid escalation, with the U.S. side taking particular care in that regard. Yet as in other encounters this year, the IRGCN showed increased focus and boldness. Its armed boats approached U.S. warships very closely, encircling and blocking them while gunmen pointed their weapons. During similar incidents in April and May, fast-attack craft crossed the path of Coast Guard cutters at close range, spurring the U.S. vessels to fire warning shots. Notably, each of these incidents happened when Iran and the West were reportedly poised to resume nuclear talks.

Iran’s conduct in the October 24 incident also appeared to be carefully laid out and controlled through the chain of command in Jask and Bandar Abbas, judging by the nature of the overhead drone footage and the shots showing an IRGCN command post monitoring the situation. On November 12, IRGCN chief Adm. Alireza Tangsiri stated that Iran had planned the operation with a potentially major confrontation with the U.S. in mind.

Implications for Maritime Security

The U.S. Navy currently participates with six other countries in the International Maritime Security Construct and its operational arm, Coalition Task Force (CTF) Sentinel, in addition to the larger Combined Maritime Forces, which consist of CTF-150, CTF-151, and CT-152. One of the main missions of these task forces is to ensure freedom of navigation in U.S. Central Command’s area of responsibility, which includes international waters where IRGC forces have reportedly been involved in various tanker hijackings.

According to tracking websites, Iran seized the tanker *Winsome* this June after it received oil from another vessel, the *Oman Pride*, in Sohar. In July 2020, Iran seized the tanker *Gulf Sky* in Emirati waters, renamed it *Rima*, and added it to the IRGC “ghost fleet” of **over 142 opaquely owned and operated ships** (<https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/blog/stop-hop-ii-ghost-armada-grows>). Each such incident raises the chances of Western naval assets getting caught up in confrontations with the IRGC.

In another notable incident in August 2020, the U.S. Navy seized more than 1 million barrels of Iranian gasoline with the assistance of other partners. Bound for Venezuela aboard four tankers, the cargo was reportedly seized “near the Strait of Hormuz” under a warrant issued by a U.S. district court against the IRGC and the Venezuelan government. Rather than using military force or physically impounding the ships, authorities persuaded the ship owners and captains to hand over their cargo to U.S. custody. At the time, Iran denied any link to the tankers and their cargo; later, however, it mounted an unsuccessful attempt to seize other passing tankers in retaliation.

In the future, increasing allied use of [unmanned AI-enabled platforms](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-navy-task-force-aims-deter-iran-unmanned-systems) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-navy-task-force-aims-deter-iran-unmanned-systems>) could mitigate the human risks inherent in such operations. Yet these platforms would need to be used persistently and aggressively to have the desired effects of increasing deterrence and [denying Iran deniability](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/do-aircraft-carriers-deter-iran) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/do-aircraft-carriers-deter-iran>). Moreover, plans would need to be made in case Iran starts to take such assets out.

Conclusion

Maritime incidents over the past year have shown the IRGC operating with increased boldness in the Gulf region despite the presence of international maritime coalitions. The mixed outcomes of these incidents also illustrate how they are shaped by the level of U.S. determination in facing them. Therefore, the United States needs to review its rules of engagement if it wants to achieve consistency and maintain a safe and credible military presence in the region.

For example, the USS *Essex* amphibious group and land-based air assets were within range of the October 24 incident, but it is unclear if the United States was prepared to use them as part of an overwhelming response if the situation got out of hand. Such uncertainty could affect U.S. credibility among adversaries and allies alike—a risky prospect if the United States gets more caught up in Iran’s complex and murky sanctions-busting activities.

The United States also needs to proactively inform the public about Gulf military encounters like the October 24 incident—otherwise Iran can claim propaganda wins by releasing distorted versions of the story that further its objective of delegitimizing and ousting the Western naval presence. This is an information war the United States cannot afford to lose. As tensions continue rising to potentially dangerous levels, the U.S. government and military need a consistent policy for who leads the messaging, and how this messaging reaches Iran.

Finally, as the United States continues its customary assertion of freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz as an international waterway, Tehran should be pressed to clarify its past legislation pertaining to the strait and the wider Persian Gulf. Of particular importance are those instances where Iranian laws [conflict with](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/clarifying-freedom-navigation-gulf) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/clarifying-freedom-navigation-gulf>) international maritime rules such as the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

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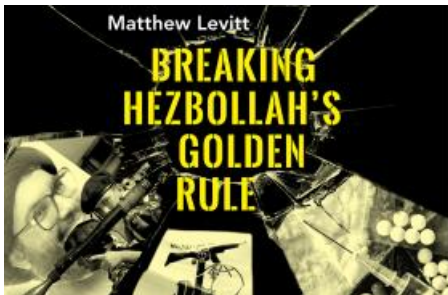
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