

# Iran's Aggressive Naval Intercepts Serve Foreign and Domestic Purposes

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Brief Analysis

**The IRGC will likely continue using such incidents as a way to signal its domestic rivals, justify its large budget, and meet other goals, so Washington should remain vigilant and consider seeking an official channel for emergency communications.**

**T**he strategic Strait of Hormuz has once again been the scene of close encounters between U.S. Navy vessels and speedboats from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN), leaving observers to guess at the motivations behind the Iranian moves. The multiple incidents that occurred this week raised the risk of miscalculation in a sovereignly cramped part of the world.

On August 23-24, several IRGCN speedboats aggressively approached American warships as the latter were reportedly transiting international waters in or approaching the Strait of Hormuz in accordance with maritime law. On each occasion, the Iranians conducted what the U.S. Navy called "unsafe intercepts," crossing the bows of the American ships at high speed and close range without any attempt to establish radio contact. In at least one of the incidents, they even reportedly uncovered their weapons. During yet another incident on August 25, the USS *Squall* fired several warning shots well in front of the Iranian boats to warn them off.

These events are only the latest example of provocative encounters between American and Iranian naval forces in the Persian Gulf -- especially by the IRGCN, which is much more prone to such behavior than Iran's regular navy. It is certainly not a new thing for IRGCN boats to harass Western and American ships crossing the strait. They have also made it a habit to conduct surprise live rocket fire exercises in proximity to U.S. Navy vessels in the international waters of the Persian Gulf, most recently on August 15 according to *Defense News*.

The nature and timing of the latest incidents provide some clues about the intentions of the IRGC's high-risk behavior. In particular, the provocations may have a domestic political dimension, aimed at those within President Hassan Rouhani's government who advocate better relations with the West. The IRGC is closely aligned with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's hardline circle and frequently takes actions in accordance with his spoken or unspoken policies.

During an April 16 appearance before U.S. service members in the United Arab Emirates, Defense Secretary Ash Carter characterized America's military role in the Gulf as "part of the system of deterrents and countering Iran's malign influence in the region." IRGCN admiral Ali Fadavi responded to those words on August 11 -- according to the IRGC-affiliated Fars News Agency, he took them as both a sign of American weakness and an opportunity to lash out at domestic rivals: "That statement shows the U.S. and its allies have not been able to deter us in the region...[T]his is a very important revelation because it shows they are still on the defensive...But while the IRGCN has been on the forefront of the confrontation with the Americans in the past thirty years, there are people in our own country who fail to believe in the potential of such power. This is a huge injustice to the Islamic Republic and its people. Those people seek entente with the Satan while ignoring the power of the Islamic Revolution and the vulnerability of our enemies."

Fadavi made similar remarks on July 26, reiterating the good-versus-evil nature of the U.S.-Iranian confrontation, according to Tasnim News. He has been more vocal in general recently, in an apparent attempt to re-rationalize the United States as the main enemy despite the (narrow) diplomatic window opened by the Rouhani-brokered nuclear deal.

Such a mindset may help the IRGCN justify its recent naval provocations, casting them as Iran's primary means of curbing U.S. naval movements near its territorial waters. The hardliners might also need to refresh their confrontation with America in order to justify the substantial budgetary allocations they receive each year for operational and R&D purposes. Another possibility is that the regime hopes to stimulate global oil markets by causing problems in the Gulf; for example, Reuters reported yesterday that oil prices rose by 1 percent as a direct result of this week's incidents.

Whatever the case, the IRGC needs to understand that if Iran is to alleviate the international pressures and other constrictions that are still hampering its long-term economic and diplomatic progress, it will need to behave more responsibly and adhere to a more professional and nonconfrontational stance in the Persian Gulf region. In the meantime, observers should not be surprised if the naval harassment continues in the coming weeks. Washington should therefore be especially vigilant, and perhaps seek a direct means of communication with Iranian authorities during such incidents. While diplomatic lines of communication such as the one between Secretary of State John Kerry and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif are useful in defusing potential escalation in the region, Washington needs a more reliable emergency communication channel that can stand the test of time.

*Farzin Nadimi is a Washington-based analyst specializing in the security and defense affairs of Iran and the Persian Gulf region. ❖*

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