

Danger Zone

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

Reporting from the USS Abraham Lincoln in waters near Iran, Simon Henderson describes why the carrier strike groups in the Persian Gulf are an awesome reminder of U.S. military might. View a [slideshow of photos \(http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/03/27/uss_lincoln_strait_of_hormuz#0\)](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/03/27/uss_lincoln_strait_of_hormuz#0) from his time aboard the supercarrier.

U.S. President Barack Obama recently said that "all elements of American power" remain on the table to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. The USS Abraham Lincoln -- a nearly 100,000-ton supercarrier with a crew of around 4,800 and 50-plus aircraft -- is one of these elements. Steaming just 30 miles off the coast of Iran while launching F/A-18 Hornet strike aircraft, it is one of the most visibly impressive demonstrations of American military might.

If strategic power can be measured in decibels, the flight operations of a U.S. Navy aircraft carrier must rank at the top. Even if one wears earplugs as well as ear protectors, the noise on the flight deck is overwhelming. Depending on the aircraft type and the payload it is carrying, each F/A-18 is catapulted off either at full power or with the additional fiery blast of afterburners. Similarly on landing, the throttles are opened in case the aircraft's hook does not catch on one of the four arrestor wires stretched across the deck. An aircraft that misses is labeled a "bolter" and has only yards to once again become airborne and fly round for another attempt. In several hours of watching, there were few "bolters." Most pilots caught their target, the third wire.

The Lincoln has two squadrons of F/A-18C Hornets and two of the more advanced, two-seater F/A-18E/F Super Hornets, known as "Rhinos." Both types can perform ground strike as well as air-to-air roles. In addition, there were several EA-6B Prowlers, electronic warfare aircraft designed to detect and jam enemy radars, and an E-2C Hawkeye, with its giant circular radar, providing early-warning detection.

To the layperson and probably also the expert, it is hard to find the appropriate word to describe the potential of a carrier like the Lincoln. Superlatives like "incredible," "extraordinary," and "impressive" fall short. Put in simpler terms, it is, well, awesome.

The carrier, in a blurb handed out to visitors like myself, defines its mission as "to provide a credible, sustainable, independent forward presence and conventional deterrence in peacetime." (Emphasis in the original.)

With the carrier minutes from Iranian airspace, the term "forward presence" could be summed up, less diplomatically, as being "in your face." I can't speak for "credible" -- the question is perhaps best directed to Tehran -- but "sustainable" seems right, at least in terms of apparent effortlessness. And though "independent," the USS Abraham Lincoln is not alone. Carrier Strike Group 9, of which the Lincoln is the flagship, includes the air-defense cruiser USS Cape St. George and the destroyers USS Momsen and USS Sterett. In the haze, the outline of the British Royal Navy's newest warship, the HMS Daring, was also visible. Somewhere, but not discussed, was at least one U.S. submarine.

Along with another carrier strike group, led by the USS Carl Vinson, these ships make up the U.S. 5th Fleet. The size of the fleet is always in flux -- a carrier group departs as another arrives. There is usually a few days or weeks of overlap. At the moment, perhaps because Washington wants to emphasize support for its regional allies and apply pressure on Iran, the overlap seems longer than usual.

There is no U.S. naval dockyard in the region like, say, at Norfolk, Virginia. The home ports of the ships are back in the United States, though the headquarters of the fleet is the troubled island of Bahrain, where Shiite protesters are at odds with the Sunni ruling family. The 5th Fleet's headquarters -- its "Naval Support Activity" moniker deliberately avoids the word "base" -- is not a local issue, as U.S. personnel keep a low profile and any visiting ship moors well out of sight at a distant jetty.

The Lincoln was operating in a narrow "box" of international waters between the Arab Gulf states and Iran, though a casual observer would probably regard the location as being on the Iranian side of the Persian Gulf. The "box" lies north of the small Iranian island of Farsi and parallel to the Iranian coast opposite the city of Bushehr, where Iran's sole civil nuclear power reactor is located.

If I hadn't asked about the position of the carrier, nobody would have told me. When I asked the pilot who was preparing to fly me to the Lincoln in a propeller-driven C-2 Greyhound, known as the "COD" (for "carrier onboard delivery"), his reply was: "That's classified." Sitting trussed up uncomfortably, wearing a life jacket and a cranial helmet, and facing backward in the COD's cargo bay, I calculated from the rays of the sun shining in via two very small windows that we were heading, if anything, northwest from Bahrain. If we had flown east, the carrier would have been near the Strait of Hormuz, the choke point for shipping at the opening of the Gulf through which some 20 percent of the world's traded oil flows daily.

The U.S. Navy welcomes "distinguished visitors" to its carriers and handles such guests with accomplished ease. Along with a colleague, we made the pitch that such a trip would aid our understanding of issues like regional security and the export of energy from the region, which has more than half the world's oil reserves and a third of its natural gas. The narrative we heard from Rear Adm. Troy Shoemaker, the commander of the strike group, and U.S. 5th Fleet commander Vice Adm. Mark Fox was not different from the recent public remarks of U.S. officials.

There is almost daily communication, in one form or another, with the Iranian Navy, whether it's about the return of rescued fishermen from sinking vessels or the announcement of upcoming exercises. Still, there is considerable caution: A motorized dhow, adapted from the local style of sailing boat once used for fishing and pearl diving, steered a parallel course for some of the time during flight operations, probably monitoring (a more polite term for "spying on") the Lincoln. Helicopters from the carrier maintain an outer perimeter so that boats do not come close -- a cautionary measure to deter the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which employs small boats and has practiced "swarm" tactics.

Another potential threat to the U.S. Navy is Iran's use of mines, which it employed to disrupt shipping during its 1980-1988 war with Iraq. A March 15 Wall Street Journal article reported that the United States was doubling its minesweeping ships in the Persian Gulf to eight, implying that present capabilities were inadequate. Journalists who

were recently embedded on a U.S. destroyer were briefed on the positions of Iranian land-based cruise missiles, which, like mines, theoretically, can threaten much of the Gulf, especially the well-defined inward and outward shipping lanes in the Strait of Hormuz. The United States and its allies can probably counter such threats within days, but the Lincoln's purpose is to deter the Iranians from even attempting any aggressive move.

Of course, an acid test is whether Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei finds the destructive powers of Carrier Strike Group 9 as impressive as those aboard its warships. We don't know what he is being told about the USS Abraham Lincoln and the USS Carl Vinson, currently operating outside the Strait of Hormuz in a "box" off Pakistan, in support of the international war effort in Afghanistan.

It is doubtful that anyone in Tehran will have told Khamenei about the motto of the USS Abraham Lincoln: "Shall not perish." The theme of President Lincoln's Gettysburg Address imbues the ship: "Government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the Earth." Representative democracy in this part of the Middle East is more than a bit elusive, though, with exceptions, most governments rule with the will of the people. And both the peoples and the conservative Arab states on the southern side of the Gulf are fearful of Iran's influence and apparent desire for hegemony.

Such arguments probably mean little to Khamenei, a lifelong hater of the United States who seems determined to make the permanent establishment of Islamic rule his legacy. So in the absence of an appeal to his sense of decency, the Lincoln represents an appeal to his instinct for survival. One is tempted to suggest that he should put on a pair of earphones, turn up the volume, and search "top gun intro" on YouTube.

The quietness of those first two minutes of Top Gun had previously struck me as strange, but I now realize it captures absolutely the muffled preparations for the next "cycle" of a carrier's air operations. Of course, in real life, there is no sudden rock music as the takeoffs begin, but otherwise, in terms of youthful enthusiasm of Tom Cruise-types, Top Gun's introductory four minutes captures exactly this element of American power. The mullahs in Iran should sit up and take notice.

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