

# Politics Threaten Iran's Mediterranean Naval Ambitions

by [Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

Feb 17, 2011

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program.



Brief Analysis

---

## The attempted passage through the Suez Canal of two Iranian warships en route to an unprecedented Mediterranean deployment demonstrates the potential constraints on Iranian efforts to realize its Great Power ambitions.

The attempted passage through the Suez Canal of two Iranian warships en route to an unprecedented Mediterranean deployment -- a controversial move that Israeli foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman called a "provocation" and which has led to a spike in oil prices -- demonstrates the potential constraints on Iranian efforts to realize its Great Power ambitions. Although this would be the first visit of Iranian warships to the Mediterranean since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, it remains unclear whether the Iranian ships will ultimately be permitted to transit the canal.

The two Iranian warships -- the aging frigate *Alvand* and the replenishment ship *Kharq* (a large fleet oiler) -- are former British warships that were sold to Iran under the Shah.

The Mediterranean deployment, first announced by Iran on January 23, is part of a broader effort by an increasingly assertive Iran to play a greater role in the region and to project Iranian influence through more active naval diplomacy.

To this end, Iranian naval vessels have made a series of port calls in the Indian Ocean and Red Sea region since October 2010 in order to "show the flag," including visits to Oman, Sri Lanka, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia.

Iran has also been conducting more frequent "out of area" deployments in recent years as part of its efforts to create a viable "blue water" navy. It has been operating in the Gulf of Aden since November 2008, when it first sent warships to conduct antipiracy patrols in response to the seizure of an Iranian cargo ship by Somali pirates. And in January 2011, Iranian navy commander Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari urged the Islamic Republic to initiate a continuous presence in the northern parts of the Indian Ocean as well. The deployment to the Mediterranean would further extend the Iranian navy's area of operations.

According to Lieberman, the Iranian flotilla was expected to make a port call in Syria, and perhaps base there during its stay in the Mediterranean. The planned deployment is likely intended to achieve several objectives:

- *Propaganda*: to show the flag, to display Iran's military prowess, and -- as senior navy officers have repeatedly emphasized -- to demonstrate the futility of efforts to isolate and contain Iran;
- *Power projection*: to intimidate Israel and to respond to the reported deployment of Israeli naval vessels to the Persian Gulf region;
- *Intelligence gathering*: to gather information about operational conditions in the eastern Mediterranean as well as Israeli and U.S. military activities in that area -- perhaps to include the activities of U.S. Aegis ships deployed as part of NATO defenses against Iranian missiles (though this information could perhaps be obtained more effectively by other means);
- *Training*: to gain experience operating for extended periods far from Iranian waters.

The Iranian warships would, however, have little operational value in the event of a conflict. Operating alone, without the possibility of rapid reinforcement, they would be quickly dispatched to the bottom of the Mediterranean by the U.S. or Israeli navies.

By and large, although the intended significance of the deployment is largely symbolic -- an expression of Iranian power and reach -- the jeopardized deployment demonstrates the degree to which Iranian ambitions are potentially put at risk by the Islamic Republic's isolation and policies.

Iran's planned Mediterranean naval sortie, however, should be seen as a sign of things to come -- a foretaste of the kind of more active and assertive role that a "nuclear" Iran will attempt to play in the Middle East and beyond in the coming years.

*Michael Eisenstadt is director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program.* ♦

---

## RECOMMENDED

### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)



### ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

#### [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

### TOPICS

Gulf & Energy Policy (/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy)

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)