

Reliant Mermaid Naval Exercise: Increasing the Peacetime Role of Navies

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Brief Analysis

Last week, between January 9 and 13, surface units from the American, Turkish, and Israeli navies conducted Reliant Mermaid, a biannual humanitarian assistance exercise in the eastern Mediterranean. At the same time, a massive and real humanitarian assistance operation is being conducted mainly by the U.S. Navy to rush aid to tsunami survivors along the Sumatran coast. In the case of natural and environmental disasters such as the recent tsunami, navies are of utmost importance to save lives and deliver relief. In this regard, Reliant Mermaid is a rare example of humanitarian cooperation between the United States and Turkey and Israel, the two democracies in the Middle East. How did Reliant Mermaid come about so successfully? What does its success tell us about the role of navies in humanitarian cooperation efforts and the realm of public diplomacy?

Background

Reliant Mermaid was started in January 1998 as an initiative to bolster peacetime cooperation and interoperability between the U.S., Turkish, and Israeli navies. Since then, Reliant Mermaid has met twice a year for four- to fourteen-day periods, alternatively on the approaches to the Turkish and Israeli coasts of the east Mediterranean.

Mission and regional implications. The exercise's aim is to develop methods and procedures for search and rescue operations as well as coordination within and between naval and naval-air units of the three nations.

As a humanitarian assistance exercise, Reliant Mermaid does not involve use of firepower or conceptualization of action against a fourth party. As a cooperation platform initiated at the height of the Turkish-Israeli rapprochement, Reliant Mermaid is one of the most visible symbols of the partnership between Jerusalem and Ankara, an alliance that emerged with Washington's full support. The exercise, though, is not exclusionary. Since the beginning of the exercise, invitations have been extended to Arab and European nations in the Mediterranean and beyond to send observers to Reliant Mermaid. Typically, observers keep an eye on the exercise events and report their findings and recommendations to their respective countries. Accordingly, Arab states such as Jordan, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Tunisia, Morocco, and Oman, although often skeptical about the exercise, have sent observers to take part in Reliant Mermaid, while some European nations, such as Germany, France, and Greece, have had their naval attachés in the region observe the exercise.

Reliant Mermaid January 2005. This year's first exercise, hosted by the Israeli Navy, took place in international waters off the coast of Israel. One frigate and one support vessel from the U.S. Navy, two frigates from the Turkish Navy, and three corvettes from the Israeli Navy took part in this exercise, accounting for the highest number of participant units since its inception. In addition, naval patrol aircraft and helicopters from both the U.S. and Israeli navies provided air surveillance support, which can be vitally important for search and rescue missions. In sum, more than 1,500 people took part in this exercise, proving the dedication of the United States, Turkey, and Israel to use of military power for humanitarian purposes.

U.S.-Turkish, Turkish-Israeli Naval Cooperation: The Bigger Picture

The relationship between the Turkish and U.S. navies dates back to almost a century ago when the U.S. Navy assigned a Navy captain as advisor to Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II. Bilateral naval cooperation was anchored by Turkey's entry into NATO in 1952. The U.S. Navy's disaster relief effort after the devastating 1999 earthquake in Turkey, whose epicenter was in the Marmara Sea, near the headquarters of the Turkish naval fleet in Golcuk, was a more recent milestone in this relationship. Currently, the Turkish Navy is the most powerful ally of the U.S. Navy in the east Mediterranean and despite the fallout from the war in Iraq, naval cooperation between the two countries remains strong.

As a parallel to overall military cooperation (see [PeaceWatch no. 236 \(templateC05.php?CID=1927\)](#)), the Turkish and Israeli naval relationship is also flourishing. Both countries maintain naval attachés in each other's capital and have conducted mutual port visits by naval vessels. The main limiting factor in the relationship, and even a limiting factor between the U.S. and Israeli navies, is that compared to the U.S. Navy, a global armada, and the Turkish Navy, a major Mediterranean power, the Israeli Navy is a relatively limited-scope force with a focus on coast guard operations.

Navy as an Element of Public Diplomacy

After the Cold War, navies started to play an increasingly important role in peacetime activities. With regard to mobility, functionality, and sustainability, navies differ from other military branches. Any nation with the capacity can send its naval units to virtually any location on the world seas -- right up to the territorial waters of another nation -- and still not challenge that nation's sovereignty. In addition, most naval formations are self-sustainable. A naval task force could be deployed anywhere on the open seas for months, and the only item the crew would miss would be fresh lettuce. This is not the case for the army or the air force.

Triggered by the devastatingly destructive earthquake and following tsunami, the first days of 2005 have witnessed a historic moment as the U.S. Navy launched an enormous effort to help the people of Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country in the world, to deliver aid to survivors. The relief effort involves about 13,000 U.S. personnel, mostly naval units, twenty-one ships, forty-six helicopters, and twenty-nine other aircraft.

This is a historic moment because it could potentially turn things around for Washington at a time when the U.S. public image in the Middle East and much of the Muslim world is facing speedy erosion. As John Lewis Gaddis stated in his latest Foreign Affairs article, "from nearly universal sympathy in the weeks after September 11, Americans within a year and a half found their country widely regarded as an international pariah." In this regard, the U.S. Navy provides a valuable tool with which to regain confidence and appreciation of the world community for the United States.

Interestingly, the U.S. Navy's efforts seem already to have been productive. As sympathy for America seemed to be surging in Indonesia during Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz's visit there over the past weekend, the United States and Indonesia said they would reestablish bilateral military ties, which were cut off after the U.S. Senate imposed a ban on military relations with Indonesia in the wake of Jakarta's 1999 bloody crackdown in East

Timor.

Reliant Mermaid: Enhancing Political Ties and Better Public Diplomacy

Reliant Mermaid holds the following promises for the United States, the U.S.-Turkish-Israeli relationship, and the Mediterranean region.

The exercise has indeed met its challenge. In December 2001, for example, U.S. and Israeli vessels simultaneously responded to a genuine near-disaster at sea, evacuating eighty-four oil rig personnel from a platform that had broken free in a storm and gone adrift thirty miles off Israel's coast during the fourth Reliant Mermaid.

Second, military-to-military relations are an important aspect of international relations. Further strengthening naval cooperation between the United States, Turkey, and Israel is a sure way of enhancing their political ties, especially at a time when the U.S.-Turkish relationship is reeling from the events of the past two years.

Third, Reliant Mermaid plays an invaluable role as a confidence building measure as well as a tool for enhancing interoperability between different nations in preparation for likely catastrophes. In this sense, broadening the scope of this exercise to the entire Mediterranean Sea with the hope that more countries will participate is a good way of preparing better for likely catastrophes in the Mediterranean while promoting regional stability.

Last but not least, as an active player in Reliant Mermaid and tsunami relief operations, the U.S. Navy seems capable not only of saving thousands of lives but also of restoring America's image, which has been heavily distorted by the recent events.

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