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IRANIAN MARITIME ORIENTATIONS: OBJECTIVES, CHALLENGES, AND SCOPE OF INFLUENCE

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Abstract

Several indications point to Iran's intensification of its maritime activities beyond the boundaries of traditional movement. This comes in the context of heightened tensions between Iran and regional and international powers, coupled with extensive US pressure to curb Iran's oil exports and foreign trade. The study addresses several questions, most prominently about the extent of change in the Iranian naval strategy, the impact of this on Iran's ability to achieve its objectives and handle rising challenges. The study discusses the status and strategic objectives of the Iranian navy, Iran's maritime capabilities and potential, the activities and movements of the Iranian navy, and challenges and the extent of the Iranian navy's effectiveness.

Keywords: *Iranian navy, maritime capabilities, and strategic objectives*

Introduction

Iran has intensified its maritime activities over the past years. There have been some remarkable changes to the rules of engagement and deployment beyond the decades-long traditional areas of operations. Of course, these changes are attributed to important shifts in Iran's military doctrine in general and its maritime doctrine in particular — to address regional and international developments.

A primary change was the openness provided to Tehran after it signed the nuclear deal in 2015. Iran grasped this new opportunity to extend its clout, which contributed to the resumption of pressure and sanctions after the United States withdrew from the deal in 2018 and implemented its maximum pressure campaign to change Tehran's behavior. The aforementioned developments — in their radical and most open aspect— reflect the importance of Iran's naval force, either as a potent force to support Tehran's regional project or as a necessary force to confront the pressures and challenges it faces.

The study argues that Iran's maritime operations significantly increased when pressures and sanctions mounted against it. However, despite the intense nature of its maritime operations, wide deployments and movements, their impact has been limited. It is in Iran's interest to ensure that there is an adequate balance of power in the region in light of the challenges it faces and the levers it possesses. Tehran lacks the ability and capacity to turn the existing conflict with regional and international actors in its favor or mitigate the ramifications of sanctions and isolation that it is experiencing.

In light of the aforementioned, this study discusses the scope of Iran's maritime operations and their effectiveness through four principal axes: the Iranian navy: status and strategic objectives, naval capabilities, Iranian maritime orientations and operations, finally challenges and scope of the effectiveness.

1. The Iranian Navy: Status and Strategic Objectives

The Iranian navy has held considerable significance in Tehran's defense strategy. It has been assigned with protecting the country's strategic, economic, and military assets along the coastline extending throughout the Arabian Gulf, the Sea of Oman and the northern parts overlooking the Caspian Sea. The aforementioned is based on the following:

1.1 The Position of the Iranian Navy in Tehran's Defense Strategy

The rapid developments during the first eight years after the 1979 revolution played an integral role in shaping the features of the Iranian navy; determining its reality and approaches. A key change was the end of the military doctrine espoused under the Pahlavi government and a new military doctrine was defined for the military establishment — especially the Iranian navy. In

the aftermath of the revolution, all Iranian military establishments were restructured — including the navy — with the Pahlavi designated military commanders sacked and replaced with revolutionary commanders who lacked military and leadership capabilities to perform their jobs well. These revolutionary commanders served during the first years of the eight-year Iran-Iraq War. This war had the biggest impact on the reality of the Iranian navy along with the blunders of the political leadership which contributed to its restructuring. The Iranian navy's limitations were exposed in the face of Iraq's military superiority during the Iran-Iraq War. The Iranian navy, back then, failed to implement Western naval strategies which had been previously adopted during Iran's monarchical era. To counter Iraq's mounting firepower on multiple fronts, the Iranian navy resorted to enhance its capacity in crafting alternative strategies and tactics — given the fact that Iran was unable to strengthen its navy and other military departments with weapons. Therefore, Iran's military operational capacity declined and the country was further handicapped by Western sanctions that prevented the supply of much-needed spare parts.

The Iranian leadership realized that it must act to plug the gap and the glaring decline in the navy's performance. Hence, it established the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) with its different branches including a navy, whose operational capacity was equivalent to the country's regular naval forces, following a decision by Khomeini in the mid-1980s. Khomeini granted unrestricted powers to the IRGC to manage the situation on the battlefield and permitted it to use the various available national resources to tip the war scale in Iran's favor. This contributed to changing to an extent the balance of power between Iran and Iraq. It was entrusted with carrying out several operations against vessels in what became known as the Tanker War. Iran laid mines in the waters of the Gulf and targeted civilian and military ships sailing through the Arabian Gulf or heading southwards towards the Strait of Hormuz. But this strategy caused Iran to incur a host of naval and logistical losses contributing to a dent in the country's naval hardware system.

Following the end of the Iraq-Iran War, and in response to Tehran's growing hostility towards the West, it faced tough sanctions and international isolation, and the intensive presence of foreign forces on its border. To shore up its regional and international projects, Iran worked to rearrange and strengthen its naval units at different levels via distributing zones and operational missions to both the IRGC and the regular navy in green and blue waters. In addition, Iran worked to develop its missile program and adapt some naval weapons using conventional methods at a low cost such as armed speedboats. Iran's naval forces were given huge significance by the Iranian leadership due to the navy's contribution in supporting the country's defense system. Due to

the limited ability to secure sophisticated technology from abroad because of the sanctions on Tehran, the Iranian navy sought to secure warships and boats by manufacturing them domestically. The military commanders restructured and redistributed naval operations between the IRGC and the regular navy to create some sort of balance between them. This included creating a unified operational missions headquarters in Bandar Abbas overlooking the Arabian Gulf.⁽¹⁾ Recently, Iran has renovated several warships and frigates and carried out drills with its allies; a drill was held by Iran, China and Russia in 2019.

1.2 Iran's Naval Forces and the Benefits of Its Geographical Location

Iran's strategic location is of significant importance, as it overlooks the most vital waterways in the world. This impacted the Iranian leadership's decision-making with them wanting to enhance the country's maritime capabilities and the latter quickly turned into one of the most important pillars of Tehran's deterrence strategy in the face of the growing threats and challenges and the first line of defending its vital spheres of influence.

Iran's naval forces provide security for the country's strategic points in the Caspian Sea, the Arabian Gulf, and the Gulf of Oman. The naval forces are designated to protect 2,800 square kilometers of Iranian coastline.⁽²⁾ Iran overlooks the oil-rich Arabian Gulf, and has nearly 1,000 square kilometers of coastline overlooking it and it extends to the north — passing through the Strait of Hormuz to the Sea of Oman. Iran also has maritime islands scattered across the Arabian Gulf and near the strategic waterways where ships and tankers pass. The aforementioned increased the importance of Iran's naval forces in light of critical geostrategic and geopolitical considerations. Therefore, overlooking the Arabian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz is considered the most salient strategic advantage afforded by Iran's unique geographical location — given the fact that the Arabian Gulf is at the center of global attention. This is because the world depends on oil and gas supplies, and their importance is mounting amid the discovery of new oil reserves and the Gulf is seeing heightened traffic with more oil tankers entering than ever before.

1.3 Strategic Objectives

The most important Iranian strategic objectives include the following:

- Coping with regional domination schemes: Iran has great ambitions and old Persian inclinations for dominance and expansionism, reflected in the occupation of the three Emirati islands in the Arabian Gulf, in addition to its regional projects in Syria, Yemen and Lebanon, which require a navy that is supportive of implementing the aforementioned aspirations. Hence, the navy serves Iran's strategy in the region.

The Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei referred to Iran's naval forces as a "strategic force," which helps one understand their importance in the country's

deterrence doctrine. This term is a clear expression of Iran's ambitions to dominate and expand in the high seas. Furthermore, the supreme leader suggested that Iran's naval forces intimidated other countries — in reference to the United States and Israel.⁽³⁾ The Iranian military top brass also echoed the same message as Khamenei. Iranian navy Commander Habibollah Sayyari asserted that Iran's operations in international waters was to safeguard the interests of his country. He also highlighted Iran's efforts to intensify its maritime operations and protect its national interests in the northern part of the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden.⁽⁴⁾ Iran claims that the Iranian navy had been present on the high seas long before the existence of countries like the United States — which projects itself as a major world power⁽⁵⁾— and that Iranians had been sailing on the high seas 100 years before the birth of Christ.⁽⁶⁾

In addition to protecting Iranian interests — through the maritime defense of its coasts — Iran's naval forces provide logistical and intelligence support to Tehran's militias in the region. The IRGC uses both civilian and military vessels in the Red Sea to transfer shipments of weapons and missiles to its proxies fighting in Syria. In addition, Iran's naval presence in the region supports reconnaissance and espionage missions. This was confirmed by the incident involving the Iranian ship *Safer*, which maintained a presence in the Red Sea and was targeted by Israel. The Iranian navy seeks to secure a geographical leverage in addition to expanding its maritime outreach and ability to forecast potential scenarios in case disputes flare up with Tehran's foes. Moreover, it aims to develop the capacity to assess situations and measure reactions to its moves from the countries overlooking the Red Sea or the countries deemed very important to it such as Israel or the Mediterranean countries. The Iranian naval forces have enhanced their presence in the Atlantic Ocean, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean in light of the need to protect Iran's oil and commercial tankers heading to Latin America, Syria and Lebanon — two countries overlooking the Mediterranean coast.

■ **Balancing pressures and securing some sort of naval deterrence:** The Iranian naval forces seek to protect Iran's interests and national security via expanding their maritime presence in a wide range of waters to help overcome the country's isolation and economic blockade. Tehran also seeks to achieve some sort of political and military balance and send a message to its foes that it is capable of resorting to harsher options and acting in multiple arenas in regions of high strategic importance. Iran also seeks to maintain levers and engage in trade-offs with all international actors in case the latter's threats escalate or there is a move towards military confrontation. Iran also needs this naval might to exert pressure on regional countries seeking to bring its expansionist schemes and subversive roles such as the support provided to its militias in Yemen, Syria and Lebanon to a halt.

Iranian navy Commander Admiral Habibollah Sayyari has reiterated the importance of providing security, not only in the Arabian Gulf, but also in the Gulf of Aden, the Indian Ocean, and the Red Sea. He views this as a priority for Iran and having a presence on the eastern coast of Africa enhances its maritime role. Iran is attempting to build a network of relationships and alliances in the Middle East as a whole to serve its regional project and to maintain and protect its interests. Thus, it has developed maritime supply corridors on the eastern coast of Africa — acting as regional logistical hubs.⁽⁷⁾

■ **Countering the isolation and circumventing sanctions:** The Iranian navy plays an extremely important role in circumventing US sanctions. It helps in smuggling oil by evading international protocols. This is done through a host of tactics such as stopping signals of tracking tankers, replacing shipments halfway, camouflaging the identity of Iranian oil tankers through changing the names of ships, raising flags of other countries and turning off tracking systems to avoid satellite detection.⁽⁸⁾ In addition, the naval forces assist in stockpiling Iranian oil at sea to circumvent sanctions and indirectly help in selling it.⁽⁹⁾ It was announced by TankerTrackers.com — a website focusing on tracking oil tankers — in 2020 that an Iranian tanker carrying 20 million barrels of gas condensates unloaded at Puerto José in Venezuela. The online service on Twitter posted that the Iranian tanker had likely shut down the automatic identification system (AIS) along the voyage to Venezuela after it sailed near the coast of South Africa. Reports also indicated that the Iranian tanker had its basic specifications removed and renamed.⁽¹⁰⁾

■ **Securing some sort of military balance of power with the United States and other Western powers:** Iran's principal focus is on maritime cooperation with Russia and China to achieve its security aspirations in the region. Tehran uses the cooperation to support its position amid external threats as well as the hostile alliances in the Gulf waters such as the US-led coalition to protect navigation in the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz and the European initiative which was also launched for this purpose. The aforementioned moves were taken following Iranian threats to the freedom of navigation in the Arabian Gulf after the United States refused to extend waivers for certain countries to import Iranian oil in early May 2019.⁽¹¹⁾ Iran may find amid shifts in international relations and US pressures on China and Russia an opportunity to boost its partnership with these two countries — especially China which is considered the biggest international actor in the region and is ready to move the standoff with the United States outside its borders in what is known as “offshore balancing.”⁽¹²⁾ Here, we should point to Iran's strategic partnership agreement with China, the naval drills the two countries conducted with the participation of Russia in recent years, the last of which was in February 2021. Hence, the interests of the two countries converge and the agreement is the

main pillar in the two countries' maritime strategy and an indispensable expression of China's giant project to connect the world's continents via its Belt and Road Initiative, which passes through areas vital to Tehran's clout. Russia may join them at some point in the future.

In general, the Iranian naval forces are considered critical to safeguard Iranian interests. They are also an important option to shore up Iran's policies in the face of challenges and threats from countries like the United States and its allies.

2. Capabilities of the Iranian Navy

The Iranian naval forces consist of nearly 48,000 sailors.⁽¹³⁾ Several specialized military colleges — as well as institutes and training centers — carry out the mission of military education. For the naval forces of the regular army, Imam Khomeini Naval University of Nowshahr is considered to be the place designated for graduating naval officers. Several other naval centers are also responsible for graduating naval officers as well. As for the IRGC's naval forces, Imam Hossein University is the academy responsible for graduating its officers. The Iranian naval headquarters and affiliated training centers are also tasked with graduating servicemen among their cadets.

The naval forces consist of mostly outdated vessels acquired in the pre-revolutionary era. But the naval forces have exerted huge efforts to upgrade them and secure their spare parts through their military factories. They also managed to manufacture several military boats. Table 1 lists the Iranian navy's equipment, while Table 2 lists Iran's naval bases.

Table 1: The Iranian Navy's Equipment

Category	Number
Frigates	5
Mine flails	10
Patrol boats	230
Submarines	33
Destroyers	3

Category	Number
Boats	398
Total	679

Source: “Capabilities of the Iranian Navy,” *Sputnik*, December 27, 2019, accessed September 11, 2021, <https://cutt.us/wtOhI>. [Persian].

Table 2: Iranian Naval Bases

Bases in the Arabian Gulf and the Sea of Oman	Bases in the Caspian Sea
Bandar Abbas Base	Anzali Base
Bushehr Base	Nowshahr Base
Khorramshahr Base	
Bases established on islands	
Farsi Island Base	
Larak Island Base	
Abu Musa Base	
Siri Island Base	

Source: “Capabilities of the Iranian Navy,” *Sputnik*, September 10, 2016, , <https://cutt.us/wtOhI>. [Persian].

The Iranian navy depends on a host of weapons considered to be the bedrock of the country’s naval doctrine and the principles of engagement in conflict. They include combat ships, supply ships, speedboats, drones, naval missiles, and naval mines. This is in addition to creating a suitable environment to boost naval defenses, such as creating zones to prevent giant ships from entering as well as using covers for camouflage and preparing operationally for military confrontations. To create a balance between the relatively poor capabilities of the navy and the various threats facing the country, the Iranian naval forces embarked on pursuing the following:

2.1 Depending on Speedboats to Tackle the Weapons Gap

Iranian speedboats are considered one of the most effective weapons and strategic pillars of the IRGC naval forces. They are part of the IRGC’s naval doctrine as they are an effective operational tool in the Arabian Gulf and

the Strait of Hormuz. Iran has paid attention to speedboats due to a host of considerations, including securing a “balance of weaponry,” and stepping up naval combat capabilities. They are also preferred because of their high speed and maneuverability and the various military and combat equipment which can be supplied to these boats. Finally, there is a low cost in manufacturing speedboats. Setting in motion the aforementioned speedboats created an operational edge for Iran in the Arabian Gulf — especially given that the geographical layout of the Gulf enabled them to carry out their operations and missions swiftly and with ease.

Iran developed and armed the old speedboats it purchased from China and North Korea, especially the Peykaap-class (IPS-16 and IPS-18) known as the Zolfaghar speedboats,⁽¹⁴⁾ and the Chinese (C-14)-class speedboats known as Azarakhsh. In addition, Iran has modified civilian vessels into military boats, arming them with artillery and missile launchers such as Seraj-1; a military racingboat.⁽¹⁵⁾

When it comes to the weapons with which ships and boats are equipped, Iran has depended on indigenously developed Chinese anti-ship missiles.⁽¹⁶⁾ The Zolfaghar boats were equipped with Kowsar anti-ship missiles and a radar system with a range extending to 25 kilometers⁽¹⁷⁾ in addition to two 12.7 millimeter guns. The boats Ashoura, Azarakhsh and Seraj were equipped with DShK machine guns and Chinese 107 millimeter rocket launchers.

Iranian speedboats have undergone important developments, including their modification to turn them into remote-controlled suicide speedboats, some that can be filled with explosives. The country tested for the first time the Ya Mahdi suicide boat during the Great Prophet Maneuvers 5 in 2010.⁽¹⁸⁾ Furthermore, Iran has added the mission of launching torpedoes from its speedboats. The IRGC naval forces announced in 2015 the commissioning of the Zulfaqar semi-submersible torpedo boat — capable of launching missiles and torpedoes. It indicated that the boat is capable of carrying a 324 millimeter, 4-meter-long torpedo, missiles with a 20-kilometer range, and two Kowsar anti-ship missiles.⁽¹⁹⁾

Iran’s speedboats have a record of carrying out provocative activities and harassing naval vessels in the Arabian Gulf waters — primarily vessels belonging to the US Fifth Fleet or military and civilian vessels sailing in Gulf waters. Such provocations have sparked tensions and have prompted fiery remarks between the United States and Iran. Former US President Donald Trump decided to destroy any Iranian boats that approached US vessels in the Gulf in 2020 — a response that came after Iranian boats on multiple occasions approached six US vessels that were on a monitoring mission in the northern part of the Gulf.⁽²⁰⁾

2.2 Naval Mines as an Option to Threaten the Gulf’s Maritime Security

Iran is betting on the use of naval mines and introducing them in navy-on-

navy confrontations in the Arabian Gulf region in case the course of events lead to military confrontations or the blockage of the Strait of Hormuz.

Iran possesses several Russian and Chinese mines and it uses speedboats and surface ships to plant them. It is believed that Iran planted between 2,000 to 5,000 mines — weighing 300 kilograms each.⁽²¹⁾ The Iranian navy has MDM-4 and EM-52⁽²²⁾ wired and bottom mines as well as homegrown mines known as Sadaf developed by the country's naval research authority or Limpet mines

Historical incidents have proven that Iran resorted to using naval mines in confrontations — including the operation carried out by the IRGC — which laid some mines near Farsi Island in the Arabian Gulf — which resulted in an explosion that hit the US oil tanker SS Bridgeton in 1987 or the explosion that hit the US frigate Samuel Roberts in 1988, which collided into an Iranian mine.⁽²³⁾

Iran's naval mines remain a source of danger and a growing threat that undermines maritime security in the Arabian Gulf, the Sea of Oman, and the Red Sea. The US Central Command in 2019 revealed the details of the targeting of the Japanese oil tanker, Kokuka Courageous, by an Iranian Limpet mine.⁽²⁴⁾

The Arab Coalition to Support Legitimacy in Yemen has made efforts to remove the mines laid by the Houthi militia backed by Iran in the Red Sea.

2.3 Ballistic and Mobile Missiles as a Deterrent Force

Iran's naval missile arsenal consists of coastal defense missiles and anti-ship naval ballistic missiles. The aforementioned are considered to be among Iran's major military and naval capabilities. They are introduced as major elements of the Iranian navy, missiles for offensive and defensive deterrence and primary options in the face of naval confrontation. They are of importance given that their ranges are between 25 kilometers and 300 kilometers. The weight of their warheads ranges between 29 kilograms and 315 kilograms — with the possibility of arming speedboats with these different missiles. Iran's naval missile arsenal strengthened after the country inked multiple missile deals with China during different periods. It also secured franchises to manufacture some missiles domestically, especially the C-801 and C-701 missiles and developed them into different classes, known as Noor 1 and Noor 2, Ghader, Ghadir, Zafar and Kowsar 1 and Kowsar 2.

A leading domestically reengineered missile is the Noor missile — an upgraded version of the Chinese missile C-802, which can be launched from fixed coastal launchers or from Iranian boats. Also, There is the Ghader missile, which is an upgraded version of Noor missile and the Raad (Thunder) missile, developed from the Russian missile Silkworm.

Iran's navy witnessed a pronounced development in its capabilities after including naval ballistic missiles on the list of anti-ship missiles. Iran commissioned the Khalij Fars missile, one of the most important missiles

which the Iranian naval forces depend on when facing hostile warships. The missile's range is nearly 300 kilometers.⁽²⁵⁾

2.4 Submarines to Assert Naval Superiority

The Iranian navy depends on a number of submarines. —with various armament systems and sizes. They are of Russian and North Korean origin which Iran acquired during the era of the former royal navy. They included the North Korean Ghadir-class submarines — or during the post-revolutionary period, especially from Russia during the period from 1992 to 1997.⁽²⁶⁾ The submarines are known as Tariq, Yunus and Noah — developed originally from the Russian-made Kilo-class submarines.⁽²⁷⁾ The three Russian variant submarines are the first line of defending the Sea of Oman. They run on diesel and electricity — with a displacement that reaches 3,950 tons during submerging.⁽²⁸⁾ They are distinguished by their capability to lay mines and the possibility to be equipped with torpedoes.

They are also equipped with the air-independent propulsion (AIP) system installed for submarines.⁽²⁹⁾

As to the indigenously developed Fateh submarine — compared with the other Iranian submarines — it is equipped with 533 millimeter torpedoes, cruise missiles and the capacity to operate in waters distant from the Iranian coasts. The Iranian navy also possesses 10 Ghadir-class light submarines capable of operating in the shallow waters of the Arabian Gulf.⁽³⁰⁾

2.5 Drones as a Force of Aerial Threat

The project to develop drones is considered to be a key manufacturing priority in Iran. Inserting drones to be part of the Iranian navy's arsenal has provided it with a relative edge — especially in regard to aerial reconnaissance missions and repelling hostile naval moves in the Arabian Gulf. Drones are supplied with some domestically developed missiles and bombs.

Given the fact that drones have been inserted into the Iranian navy's arsenal — along with other naval weaponry — units dedicated to drones have been created on the shores of the regions overlooking the Arabian Gulf — making them hotbeds and launching pads for drones.

The program of manufacturing Iranian drones has seen a qualitative transformation after the shooting down of the US drone "RQ-170 Sentinel" in 2011. Iran embarked on developing it and taking advantage of its technology. Iran produced multiple variants from it known as Saegheh and Thunderbolt.

A primary Iranian drone is the Ababil-3 designed for reconnaissance missions, gathering information by capturing images and monitoring maritime movements.

In April 2019, the IRGC published images showing the US jet carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower (CVN-69) in the Arabian Gulf waters — an image taken by the Ababil-3.⁽³¹⁾ There are also other Iranian drones such as Saegheh, which

is modeled on the US drone RQ-170, a drone that carries out reconnaissance and aerial monitoring missions. It was commissioned in 2014. Saegheh underwent further upgrade, and the upgraded version of the drone was commissioned in 2016 under the name Thunderbolt. It was equipped with four launchers for the indigenously developed Sadid glide bombs.⁽³²⁾

However, despite the intensive production of drones in Iran, their involvement in naval drills and engaging various industrial sectors in this endeavor — primarily the Quds Aviation Industry Company — Iran's drone program faces some strategic weaknesses. The Defense and Strategic Studies Magazine published in the summer of 2018 an article in which it indicated that the distribution of designing, manufacturing and production between different Iranian bodies negatively impacted the scale of drone production in the country. In addition, Iranian drones have performed poorly, particularly when carrying out missions in distant regions.⁽³³⁾

3. Activities and Movements of the Iranian Navy

Iran has chosen the path of resistance, confrontation, deterrence and empowering its domestic economy. Hence, the Iranian navy was required to mitigate the impact of sanctions, break isolation, import strategic materials, and facilitate the flow of the country's exports. This is in addition to creating a balance of power in the region, and supporting the strategy of forward defense through assisting proxy militias backed by Iran. In this context, several naval activities and movements surfaced, notably including the following:

3.1 Intensive Naval Deployment in the Arabian Gulf and Attempting to Control the Strait of Hormuz

The stature of the Iranian navy and its strategic position increased after expanding the scope of its military presence on the coasts overlooking the Arabian Gulf and the islands scattered there—that are of much significant strategic importance, especially the occupied Emirati islands. Iran embarked on establishing military bases, intensifying its possession of missile and defense systems, and assigning more operational, logistical and support missions to its frigates and speedboats.

Iran is attempting to impose its control over the most important strait on the planet: the Strait of Hormuz. It is seeking to exercise absolute sovereignty over this critical choke point, given its strategic location as the most significant passage for global energy. Iran has long threatened to close down the strait as an option in case a war is waged against it — making the strait a strategic lever that could be used as a bargaining chip and a deterrent card to avert global powers from carrying out any military strikes against Iran. Iran has pursued calculated escalation to influence the position of the United States which has put excessive pressure on it. By this, Iran aims to develop an environment for

counter-pressure, to force the United States to change its policies or transmit the message that by targeting Tehran, this will lead to heightened tensions and regional and international instability.

In this context, Iran hinted at its ability to threaten regional security and stability on several occasions — in response to US economic sanctions or military threats — using the pressure lever of regional security⁽³⁴⁾ through clandestine attacks, without plainly accepting responsibility for any of them.⁽³⁵⁾

Table 3 indicates some of the escalations and attacks that Iran has been accused of instigating. These were on the rise in 2019.

Table 3: Iranian Maritime Attacks in the Region

Date	Incident
May 12, 2019	Washington and regional countries accused Iran of targeting four commercial ships at Fujairah port in the UAE.
May 14, 2019	Houthi drones bombed two oil pumping stations in Saudi Arabia, sparking a fire that was controlled after causing minimal damage to one of the pumping stations. However, the attack never disrupted oil production or exports.
June 13, 2019	Iran accused of being behind an attack on two oil tankers in the Sea of Oman.
June 20, 2019	Iran shot down a US reconnaissance drone.
July 10, 2019	Three Iranian vessels attempted to block the passage of the British Heritage, a British commercial ship in the Strait of Hormuz.

Date	Incident
July 15, 2019	The CIA announced that the IRGC seized M/I RIAH, a Panama-flagged tanker, which is believed to be owned by the UAE. But the latter denied ownership of the tanker.
July 18, 2019	Washington declared that the US destroyer Boxer destroyed an Iranian drone in the Strait of Hormuz after it threatened the US vessel. But Iran denied losing any of its drones.
July 19, 2019	The IRGC seized the British tanker Stena Impero and Mesdar — both run by the UK. The Mesdar was allowed to leave after receiving a warning from the Iranian authorities.
July 20, 2019	The IRGC forces Masdar oil tanker — operated by an Algerian firm — to change its course towards Iranian territorial waters after it was en route to pass through the Strait of Hormuz.
September 14, 2019	Houthis claimed responsibility for a drone attack against two Saudi oil facilities in Abqaiq-Khuras.

Source: *Annual Strategic Report 2019* (Riyadh: The International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah), 2019), 119-120.

3.2 Intensifying Its Military Naval Presence in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden

Iran's maritime objectives extend to having a naval presence beyond its maritime boundaries — with the aim of establishing a presence and influence in the sphere of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, which is second to the Strait of Hormuz in terms of providing strategic depth for Tehran. The Red Sea is the most important strategic control point because it is a passage for oil, a conduit for the passage of essential trade and the flow of military might between the Mediterranean, the Black Sea and the Atlantic Ocean and between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean.⁽³⁶⁾

It is also one of the shipping routes that Iran uses to support its militias in Syria and Yemen. Iran also has boosted its naval and military presence at important sea corridors and strategic straits — as well as on the main trade routes. Iran uses the card of regional stability and global oil supplies in case it is blocked from exporting its oil due to US sanctions.⁽³⁷⁾ Former Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani hinted at threatening the security of the Red Sea — a threat that came one day after the Houthi militia targeted Saudi oil tankers in the Strait of Bab al-Mandab near the Yemeni coast.⁽³⁸⁾

3.3 Creating a Naval Fleet to Operate Beyond Domestic Maritime Borders and Sailing in High Seas

Under its maritime strategy, Iran saw that it was important to create a fleet that operates outside its traditional maritime scope, and to reflect the power of the country. In addition, it aimed for a fleet that operates on the open oceans, turns into a forward line for defending the country, establishes connections with its operation bases outside the Strait of Hormuz as well as at various maritime points — making it a force for influence and flexibility. In line with this approach was the opening of Chabahar port on the southern coast overlooking the Gulf of Oman. It is an alternative port for Iranian trade, away from the Arabian Gulf. This opening was to prepare Iran for any escalation that might impact its trade exchange. Iran believes that this port will be a point of contact with its networks and alliances that extend along the African coasts. Former Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, at the inauguration ceremony of the port, said that it enjoys a strategic location that “allows the connection of the African and Asian coasts to Central Asia via an overland road and railroad between the north and south — which is being developed by Iran along its eastern borders with Pakistan and Afghanistan.”⁽³⁹⁾

The multiple challenges faced by Iran’s naval forces made it imperative to adapt their development and operational plans to respond to the growing challenges they face through: restructuring the whole navy (the naval forces of the regular army and that of the IRGC) and announcing their intent to send vessels on the high seas. Tehran ushered in a phase of restructuring its naval forces and adopting the strategy of deployment beyond its maritime boundaries dubbed “Return to the Sea,” according to Sayyari in November 2016. “We are building two naval zones and three naval bases on the Makran coast,” he said. “This is in line with our policy of making a return to the sea,” he added. Sayyari also shed light on Iranian plans to equip Iranian naval forces with locally manufactured ground-to ground missiles, drones with a capacity to be launched from the sea, interception radars — as well as with submarines. It is not the first time that Sayyari has pointed to Iran’s maritime objectives beyond its immediate “regional waters.” He had said, “Our naval fleets will, in the near future, circle Africa and cross the Atlantic.” He also

pointed to East Asian waters as well. For Iran to achieve this end, it is making visits and carrying out joint naval drills with Asian and African countries.⁽⁴⁰⁾

3.4 Placing Pressure on US Military Presence in the Region

Iranian boats harassing US military vessels passing through the Arabian Gulf has increased recently. Nearly 30 harassment operations were recorded against vessels passing through the Strait of Hormuz by Iranian missile boats in 2016. The harassments continued through 2017⁽⁴¹⁾ as well as in 2018, 2019 and 2020. Definitely, the United States closely follows the growth of Iran's naval capabilities. The US Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) issued a report, forecasting that by the time the arms embargo is lifted in 2020, Iran's naval forces will significantly boost their fleet after Tehran is allowed to purchase new naval vessels.⁽⁴²⁾

Iranian military leaders have continued to threaten US bases and interests in the Arabian Gulf region.⁽⁴³⁾ US reports indicated that Iran has deployed a range of anti-ship missiles in the region overlooking the Strait of Hormuz.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Iranian boats also harassed US warships in the Arabian Gulf. Iran threatened to target US commercial ships in the Arabian Gulf and the Sea of Oman, in case any Iranian oil tankers faced US attacks in the Caribbean.

In the same context, the IRGC established a new mockup jet carrier off Iran's southern coast to carry out potential drills using live ammunition. This decoy plane carrier was previously used in February 2015 during a military drill dubbed "The Great Prophet IX." This operation indicates that the IRGC was preparing to sink a mockup carrier — similar to the one it carried out in 2015.

The maritime dispute between Iran and its foes, especially the United States, escalated after the latter seized Iranian oil tankers that were bound for Venezuela, and confiscated what was aboard the vessels. The UK also seized the Iranian oil tanker *Grace 1* in July 2019 at the Strait of Gibraltar. Moreover, Israel targeted a number of Iranian oil tankers in 2021 in the Mediterranean on their way to Syria. US national security agencies followed in June 2021 the movements of two Iranian vessels — the Iranian modern frigate *Sahand* and the former oil tanker *Makran* which has been turned into a floating base. Iranian authorities said that the latter will reassert Iran's presence in the Atlantic Ocean and at the international level.⁽⁴⁵⁾

3.5 Intensifying Military Drills With Russia and China in the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Gulf

Iran-China maritime cooperation has taken a new turn since 2012 when Tehran sent its first naval group to Beijing⁽⁴⁶⁾ for training. Cooperation between the two sides has grown to include carrying out a host of joint drills, some of which involved Russia. Aspects of this cooperation have increased in recent

years. Iran participated in four-day joint naval drills on December 27, 2019 in the Gulf of Oman near the Iranian coast and the Arabian Gulf — with the participation of China and Russia. This was the first time in which Moscow and Beijing sent warships to carry out naval drills with Iranian forces in the Indian Ocean. The countries involved agreed to hold more drills early in 2022.⁽⁴⁷⁾

4. Challenges and Scope of Effectiveness

The Iranian navy is facing a host of challenges at the organizational and defense levels. The most important are as follows:

4.1 Dualism and the Dispute Between the Regular Army and the IRGC

Due to a host of reasons related to the persuasions and principles of the revolution, Iran granted preferences to the IRGC and its nascent navy to play a critical role and lead the military strategy. This was evident when the IRGC overtook most of Iran's critical military zones in the Arabian Gulf — along with supervising the naval missile arsenal and establishing the country's coastal naval headquarters. Furthermore, Iran allocated special military budgets to the IRGC that are far higher than those allocated to the regular army's navy, which retained a role in the blue seas — a role that was considered to be temporary until the IRGC's navy was capable of performing it. The most remarkable sign was the restructuring of the two naval forces — the regular army and the IRGC — as an initial step to achieve a state of tactical and strategic balance in 2010. In that year, the central command of the IRGC's navy was moved to Bandar Abbas besides the army's command headquarters as well as the announcement by the then-chief of the IRGC Ali Fadavi that the naval industries would also be moved to the same place.⁽⁴⁸⁾

Following the aforementioned moves, the IRGC was qualified to play more strategic roles, redefining the initial defense lines and deploying alongside the regular army's navy. This comes after the IRGC announced commissioning the vessel *Shahid Roudaki* deep in the blue seas in 2020.

It is a roll-on/roll-off commercial ship which was transformed into a warship armed with a host of speedboats and surface-to-surface cruise missiles. It was equipped with the *Sevom Khordad* (3rd Khordad) air defense system to ensure protection.⁽⁴⁹⁾

Based on the foregoing, it is clear that the distribution of the scope of work of the IRGC's naval forces, partnering with the regular army's navy — which took over the role of operating in the blue waters following the years of war, allocating generous budgets to the IRGC's navy and the dualism of missions between the two branches aim to establish some sort of integration between them to enable the IRGC to acquire comprehensive maritime capabilities in the near and distant maritime zones.

4.2 Operational Efficiency and Indigenous Development

The outmoded weapons of the Iranian navy and the flaws within the balance of power equation in the region led Iran to resort to depending on alternative domestic options. They included activating the role of domestic manufacturing industries that took over the modernization and development of the country's outdated naval vessels by depending on reengineering weapons or turning civilian vessels into military ones. In spite of these attempts, the vessels were unable to meet the requirements that warships should have such as capabilities to engage in military confrontations. They were not on par with new scientific or technological advancements.

Another glaring weakness was the lack of trained staff with relevant experience. This was apparent at the industrialization centers or in the military teams working aboard different naval vessels. Their handling of the command-and-control systems was poor. The aforementioned impacted the performance of Iran's naval forces and contributed to recurrent accidents during drills. This was the result of installing ill-matched spare parts/weapons in the combat and technical systems which weakened operational efficiency.

There are a host of additional factors that have contributed to lowering the efficiency of naval weapons, such as the following:

■ **Maritime geographical challenges:** As much as Iran's geography has granted its naval forces opportunities, its strategic location has also generated a host of challenges. They include the intensive presence of major world powers near Iran's maritime boundaries, heavy military deployments, specifically in the Arabian Gulf and in the northern part of the Indian Ocean, reaching up to the Red Sea, Bab al-Mandab, the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea.

■ **Poor combat preparations:** The production of locally manufactured weapons and spare parts for Iranian frigates and some modifications to some Western-made frigates — which Iran secured in the pre-revolutionary period and some defense and missile systems purchased from its allies, especially China — has caused a mismatch in weapons systems, curbing their effectiveness. Iranian frigates are still suffering from poor air defense systems and are incapable of countering aerial attacks. For example, Iran has suspended the use of the air defense system Seacat fitted onto its Alvand-class frigate due to its poor performance.⁽⁵⁰⁾ Iran has focused on boosting its offensive capabilities through replacing Sea Killer Mk2 — a five-round missile installed on the Alvand-class frigate — with the four-round Chinese missiles (C-802).⁽⁵¹⁾ The past few years have seen several maritime incidents at the maritime zones in the Arabian Gulf, the Sea of Oman, and the Caspian Sea.

In the span of five years, Iran has lost its most prominent vessels on which it depended to implement its maritime strategy, and which also provided logistical support to its frigates that remain operational or need upgrading. Among

these incidents was the Damavand destroyer crashing into the breakwater in the Caspian Sea — leading it to completely sink in 2018. The reasons behind the incident, according to analysts, included the lack of technical know-how and preparation, as well as the vessel's inability to withstand different weather conditions in a narrow marine zone.⁽⁵²⁾ In addition, there was the friendly fire incident that destroyed the support vessel Konarak when an anti-ship missile was launched from the frigate Jamaran during a military drill in the region of Bandar-e-Jask and Chabahar in 2020. The aforementioned incidents reveal the extent of the haphazardness in Iran's rules of engagement and the evident weaknesses of the command and control systems.

■ **Technical problems:** On the technical front, the biggest challenge to the Iranian naval forces was their engines. The Iranian navy has been unable to purchase them. Countries have abstained from providing Iran with the necessary engines to install them on its ships or to carry out maintenance to them. Iran has sought to secure engines from some countries, but Germany turned down an Iranian request to provide it with two engines for the Jamaran destroyer — a move that prompted Tehran to turn to other countries. However, its requests were met with delays and procrastination, especially from France. Iranian sources have yet to confirm the delivery of a shipment that Tehran requested from Paris.⁽⁵³⁾ As a result, Iran has responded to Western refusals to its requests by arguing that the required engines will be used for civilian purposes exclusively.

Iran has carried out some local maintenance to its vessels' engines, especially at ISOIPCO complex specializing in manufacturing and developing Iranian ships. But the incidents from which Iranian vessels have suffered and the mounting problems related to them have exposed their real standing. Furthermore, among these instances was the burning and sinking of the supply ship Kharg near Bandar-e-Jask port overlooking the Gulf of Oman after suffering a blaze that the firefighters failed to control. It is believed that the fire was caused by an explosion in the ship's boilers.⁽⁵⁴⁾ This was mostly likely due to a glitch in the maintenance work that was carried out by the ISOICO complex to the already aging boilers. The Iranian navy is also facing growing obstacles related to securing maintenance parts for its most important vessels and the evident prolonging of development operations and the naval projects that Tehran launches continuously. The number of submarines and warships that need modernization and maintenance to bring them back into service is increasing. A report issued by Intel. Lap research institute — which sheds light on Iran's actual naval capabilities — indicates that the essential vessels have been taken out of operational service, especially the submarines⁽⁵⁵⁾

3.3 Deterrence and Regional and International Confrontation of Iran's Naval Deployments

The international and regional hunting down of Iran's maritime activities contributes to curbing its clout and ability to move freely. In addition, an international coalition could be formed to counter Iran's regional behavior and stand up to Tehran's role in the region. There is no doubt that this will impact Iran's capabilities in remoter spheres as well as its ability to secure the necessary resources to maintain its maritime presence on the scale needed. The United States has retaken the initiative to counter Iran's maritime activities through standing up to the increasing provocations by Tehran's naval forces. This is evidenced by the role of the US Marine Forces in countering Iranian maritime movements — especially off the Yemeni coast, in the Gulf of Aden and in the Arabian Gulf.

3.4 Limited Effectiveness in Achieving Set Strategic Objectives

As a whole, the attempts to develop the Iranian naval forces were not effective in terms of weaponry strength or military strategy given the various political and economic variables. At the level of the Arabian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, Iran's naval forces' effectiveness is confined — in the narrow scope of the region — to the use of speedboats and naval missile launchers. It has little to no naval operational effectiveness in the regional and international seas.

A key impediment is the scant number of naval vessels. The Iranian navy has no more than five main vessels. The aforementioned hinder Iran's naval combat preparedness or its ability to navigate in the free waters, given that strategic naval strength depends on the swiftness of all units to respond to crises and threats.⁽⁵⁶⁾

In addition, Iranian strategic considerations require naval bases on the coasts of friendly and allied countries. to secure the logistical needs of naval vessels and boost the range of outreach.⁽⁵⁷⁾

Conclusion

In light of Iran's maritime orientations and the objectives and challenges the navy faces in fulfilling the tasks assigned to it by the Iranian leadership to protect the country's strategic interests and advance its standing, there are several difficulties and technical problems which impede it from executing its tasks. In general, we can conclude the following: First, the speedboats, naval missiles, naval mines, drones, and shallow water submarines represent the most salient pillars of Iran's naval forces. Second, the heavy deployment of the Iranian navy in the Arabian Gulf and the Red Sea and the naval displays of strength on the high seas in light of modest military capabilities is a lever with scant deterrent effect. Third, despite the efforts made by Iran to modernize its naval fleet including its frigates, warships and submarines, it has failed to plug

the gap in its essential naval vessels. Fourth, in light of developing military information and technology and the surge in the level of threats, it is hard for the Iranian navy to achieve its ambitions on the high seas and dominate regionally. This is because of its outdated weapons, the harsh economic situation at home, the decline in oil prices globally, and the international sanctions. These factors will further slowdown the manufacturing of weapons and hold back the efficiency of Iran's naval forces.

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