

Research department

Policy paper

**Iranian aggression in the maritime space:
meanings and consequences**



Iran's recent takeover of two oil tankers in a week indicates that its aggressive and destabilizing behavior in the maritime domain has not abated. This could foreshadow a move by Iran to resume its 2019 pattern of maritime aggression, where it was responsible for several attacks and seizures of oil tankers and vessels in international waters, specifically targeting the central shipping lane of the Straits of Hormuz.

On April 27, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) seized an oil tanker flying the flag of the Marshall Islands, owned by a Turkish company, in the international waters of the Gulf of Oman. On May 3rd, the IRGC's navy took over a Greek owned oil tanker sailing with the flag of Panama while crossing the Strait of Hormuz.

Iran's naval activity seems to convey several messages to the United States and its allies. First, Iran will not tolerate any hindrance to the transfer of oil to and from its territory and will respond to any such attempts. Second, in its maritime activity in both the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea region, Iran attempts to deter its enemies without incurring any costs for its aggression. Thirdly, Iran may be seeking leverage to prepare for a possible "incentive" for the United States and other powers to resume negotiations for a nuclear agreement and sign a favorable nuclear deal.

Israel's Defense Minister, Yoav Gallant, recently disclosed that **Iran has been converting civilian merchant ships into military vessels to establish "floating terror bases."** These converted ships, ranging from tens to hundreds of

thousands of tons in size, are designed to house various combat capabilities, including aircraft, missiles, offensive systems, and advanced intelligence. Iran's objective is to create forward bases for conducting acts of terrorism in distant areas, far from its own borders.



Iran's floating IRGC bases camouflaged as commercial vessels, as disclosed by Israeli Defense Minister

This aggressive move by Iran signifies its intention to expand and persist in targeting U.S forces and Israel across multiple fronts, including the naval domain. By utilizing these terrorist ships, Iran gains the ability to launch simultaneous attacks against Israel or American and Israeli targets from different locations, frequently changing directions and employing various methods of warfare. These methods may involve the use of UAVs, missiles, helicopters, commando fighters, as well as small and agile ships.

A timeline of Iranian aggression in the maritime space

Starting in 2019, several months after the Trump administration announced the United States' withdrawal from the nuclear agreement signed with Iran

(JCPOA), Tehran embarked on a campaign of aggression against commercial vessels in the Persian Gulf and Red Sea regions. This was carried out **either directly or through its proxies.**

In May 2019, Iran used sea mines to attack two Saudi oil tankers, as well as additional oil tankers from Norway and the United Arab Emirates near the port of Fujairah in the UAE. In June of the same year, Iran attacked a Japanese and Norwegian oil tanker with sea mines in the Strait of Hormuz. In July 2019, Iran seized two British and Liberian oil tankers, holding the crew hostage for approximately two months. During the same month, the IRGC seized an Iraqi oil tanker in the Persian Gulf, claiming that it was smuggling Iranian fuel.

In July 2020, Iran seized the MT "Gulf Sky" oil tanker, which was confiscated by the United States and transferred to the United Arab Emirates after the U.S. claimed that it was operated by the IRGC and involved in smuggling Iranian oil. In January 2021, Iran took over a South Korean oil tanker, followed by another tanker with a Panamanian flag in August of the same year and a Vietnamese oil tanker in October. In May 2022, two Greek oil tankers were seized by Iran in the Persian Gulf.

Iran also carried out military attacks on cargo ships and oil tankers. In November 2020, a Greek-owned oil tanker was hit while moored at the port of Al-Shoqiak in Saudi Arabia by a sea mine. In December of the same year, an oil tanker was hit while docked in the

Saudi port of Jeddah by an explosive boat activated remotely, allegedly by the Houthis.

Moreover, Iran has also targeted Israeli-owned and managed ships in the maritime space. In April 2021, an Israeli-owned ship was attacked near the port of Al-Fujairah in the UAE. In July of the same year, Iran attacked a Japanese-owned and Israeli-managed cargo ship with a UAV, resulting in the deaths of two crew members. The same month, a cargo ship that was previously partly Israeli-owned was attacked in the northern Indian Ocean. In November 2022, a partially Israeli-owned tanker was hit by a UAV near Oman.

The response to Iranian aggression in the maritime space

Despite Iran's aggressive behavior in the maritime space, disrupting the navigation of ships and goods in international waters, and causing harm to human life and property, **the United States has not responded decisively.** Instead, Washington has sent aircraft carriers and ships close to the Persian Gulf as a deterrent. However, this response has not stopped Iran's attacks on vessels in the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. The lack of a strong American response is particularly puzzling given that the IRGC frequently provoke and disrupt the activities of the American Navy in the region. Dating back to January 2016, the IRGC Navy capture of two American warships including ten sailors, humiliating them

and the entire US Navy, has not been met with any American response.

In contrast, Israel has not only responded to Iranian aggression in the maritime space but also reportedly **initiated secret operations** to restrict Iran's smuggling of oil and weapons to Syria and Lebanon. These operations, according to foreign publications, included commando sabotage operations against ships associated with Iran.



Suggestions for addressing Iranian aggression in the maritime domain

The lack of a decisive response from the US to Iranian aggression in the maritime space, in particular around the Persian Gulf, has weakened its deterrent effect and signaled Iran that it could continue disrupting shipping and causing damage. This is particularly troubling given Iran's involvement in Russia's war in Ukraine, which highlights the need for a stronger US stance against Iranian aggression.

To strengthen deterrence against Iran and potentially bring them back to the negotiating table for a nuclear agreement, the US should increase its response to Iranian aggression. This could also allow for stricter demands

to be placed on Iran in any future agreement.

Several options are available to the US, including seizing Iranian ships smuggling oil to Syria, conducting cyber operations against Iranian vessels and ports, and conducting covert operations with Israel against Iran's oil and weapons shipments. In Syria, the US should respond forcefully to all rocket attacks against American targets by Shiite militias, and hold their commanders and operators accountable.

If Iran is not held accountable for their aggression, they will consider it a green light to continue to intensify their activities, both at sea and in Syria.

This paper was authored by Dr. Omer Dostri, a specialist in defense strategy, military, and national security. He has served as a research assistant at the Center for Middle East Studies at Ariel University, the Institute for National Security Studies, and the Yuval Ne'eman Workshop for Science, Technology and Security at Tel Aviv University.

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