

Iran Tries to Steal U.S. Maritime Drone

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Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) made the brazen attempt to capture a U.S. unmanned surface vessel (USV) overnight on August 29. Another example of Iran's increased regional aggression against U.S. targets, this marks the first time Iran targeted Task Force 59, the U.S. Fifth Fleet's unmanned systems initiative. Though the IRGC vessel quickly released the American Saildrone Explorer once approached by a U.S. patrol ship and helicopter, this represents a pattern of Iranian aggression that will only exacerbate if the U.S. fails to respond with force and instead continues to negotiate a nuclear deal. The United States should quickly pivot toward a Plan B policy for Iran that includes consistent and forceful military action alongside its regional partners to deter Iranian aggression.

What Happened?

- At 11:00pm on August 29, U.S. forces in international waters saw an Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Navy support ship, the Shahid Baziar, unlawfully [towing a U.S.-operated Saildrone Explorer](#) unmanned naval surface vessel (USV), with the intent to steal the high-tech maritime drone. According to U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT), the USS Thunderbolt, a Cyclone-class patrol ship operating nearby, responded immediately, and the U.S. Fifth Fleet positioned a MH-60S Sea Hawk Helicopter above the drone.
 - » After the U.S. response, the Iranian vessel disconnected a towing line from the Saildrone Explorer and left the area four hours later.
 - » The Saildrone Explorer is a twenty-three-foot-long, sixteen-foot-tall USV that uses wind power for propulsion and carries solar-powered sensors to collect data above and below the surface. The Fifth Fleet [began operating](#) the USVs in the Gulf on January 27.
- Gen. Michael “Erik” Kurilla, Commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), [released a statement](#) through CENTCOM, saying, “The professionalism and competence of the crew of the USS Thunderbolt prevented Iran from this illegal action. This incident once again demonstrates Iran's continued destabilizing, illegal, and unprofessional activity in the Middle East.”

- Vice Adm. Brad Cooper, commander of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, U.S. Fifth Fleet, and Combined Maritime Forces, also [released a statement](#) saying that the “IRGCN’s actions were flagrant, unwarranted and inconsistent with the behavior of a professional maritime force.” The U.S. Navy also released a [video](#) of the IRGC vessel attempting to steal the Sairdron Explorer.

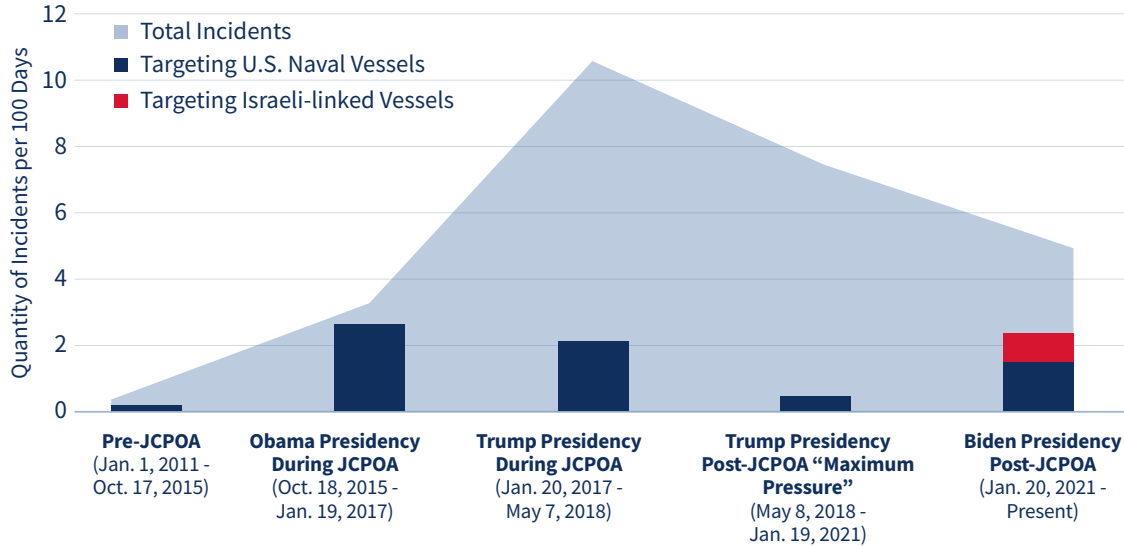


Photos of illegal towing of Sairdron Explorer. *Photos by: US Navy Photo*

Why Is It Important?

- Iran has an established [history](#) of using aggression to exert pressure on the United States and its partners. This incident marks the continuation of a wave of Iranian-linked attacks on U.S. forces that began on August 15 as Iran seeks to push the United States to accept its demands for a [nuclear deal](#), although this is the first recent act of aggression at sea.
 - » On August 15, Iranian-backed militias fired at least two drones at U.S. troops located at the Tanf Garrison in Syria and at least two rockets at American service members stationed at Deir ez-Zor, Syria. These groups again fired at least four rockets on U.S. troops at Deir ez-Zor on August 24.
- Iran’s attempt to capture the USV marks the first time that Iran has targeted the Fifth Fleet’s unmanned systems initiative, Task Force 59, since it [launched](#) last year.
 - » Past incidents include fast-attack watercraft [harassing](#) U.S. Naval vessels and the illegal [seizure](#) of shipping vessels, as well as the rapidly increasing frequency of drone attacks from Iran and its proxies in 2021, including an [attack](#) against the MT Mercer Street on July 29, 2021 that killed 2 crewmembers.
 - » Iran’s behavior indicates it views the maritime domain as a venue for it to test American resolve, specifically while the Biden administration conducts nuclear deal negotiations with Iran.
 - In 2022, Iran has conducted twelve incidents of maritime harassment, including three against U.S. naval vessels. In 2021, Iran engaged in eighteen such incidents, with six targeting the United States and five against Israel.

Frequency of Iran-linked Maritime Aggression Against the United States and Israel by Nuclear Deal Status



Includes major incidents of maritime aggression that received public reporting.

- Iran has a history of capturing U.S. and other nation’s unmanned vehicles and copying their designs to create their own platforms. If Iran had succeeded at stealing the Sairdrone Explorer, it could have enhanced their understanding of U.S. surveillance gathering and enabled them to replicate the USV’s sensor capabilities.
 - » On December 5, 2011, Iran [downed a U.S. RQ-170 Sentinel](#) unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), which it has since copied into its Saegheh and Simorgh UAVs.
 - » Iran’s Shahed-129 UAV, which it has reportedly [recently transferred to Russia](#), is a copy of the U.S. MQ-1 Predator and Israeli Hermes UAV, both of which Iran has captured.
 - » Though the Sairdrone Explorer [doesn’t store](#) classified information, it is equipped with valuable technology such as sensors, radars, and cameras.
- The Biden administration has been reluctant to respond to Iranian aggression with force while nuclear deal negotiations are underway, fearing that a strong response would diminish any remaining chances of reaching a deal.
 - » After Iranian-backed militias targeted U.S. forces in Syria on August 15, Biden waited to order [airstrikes against those groups’](#) infrastructure until more than a week later, on August 24.
 - » After the militias launched retaliatory fire, the United States conducted additional airstrikes later on August 24 and August 25. The United States avoided targeting and killing militants until after the retaliatory fire on August 24 injured three U.S. troops.
- On September 8, 2021, the United States Fifth Fleet based in Bahrain announced the creation of Task Force 59 “to put more systems out in the maritime domain above, on and below the sea,” [according](#) to the fleet’s commander Vice Adm. Brad Cooper. The task force can provide greater flexibility, coverage, and capacity to detect, prevent, and respond to Iranian maritime aggression.

- » Unmanned surface vessels minimize the risks to American personnel, allowing them to operate more freely than crewed ships as Iran conducts unsafe naval maneuvers designed to harass and dissuade ships from traveling in international waterways.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- The United States should clarify to Tehran, the IRGC, and Iranian naval captains that the United States will not let provocative naval or drone activities become the norm.
 - » This should include a strong commitment to upholding global norms of travel in international waterways and maintaining a consistent level of freedom of navigation voyages alongside regional partners.
- The Biden administration should halt nuclear negotiations with Tehran, especially while the Iranian military continues to harass and endanger the lives of American service members, hinder safe passage through international waterways, and fuel regional conflicts by smuggling advanced arms to its terrorist proxies.
- The Biden administration should encourage Israel's inclusion in the [International Maritime Security Construct](#) (IMSC), which has escorted ships in the Gulf since 2019, while ensuring that joining does not restrict its freedom of action against the Iranians.
- In coordination with its partners, the United States should adopt a comprehensive Plan B Iran policy to defend against and deter Iranian aggression, including naval attacks through:
 - » Fully leveraging international law in defending U.S. forces and maritime traffic, as existing rules of engagement (ROE) permit much more forceful responses to Iranian naval forces' demonstrated hostile intent than the current U.S. restraint suggests, including disabling fire and deadly force;
 - » Consistent, forceful military responses against the perpetrators of attacks;
 - » Increasing the scope of naval activities around the Arabian Peninsula via the IMSC;
 - The United States and the United Kingdom should devote more maritime vessels to the IMSC and seek to expand its membership, which currently also includes Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Albania, Estonia, Lithuania, and Romania;
 - » More comprehensive, frequent, and visible U.S. military exercises with Israel and Arab partners focused on addressing Iranian naval attacks using drones, missiles and mines;
 - » Leading an effort among its partners to establish a [regional](#) missile defense and shared early-warning network, which JINSA has [recommended](#) since 2018;
 - » Joint research and development efforts to improve existing air defenses and create new land- and sea-based counter-drone systems;
- Israel's Iron Dome system has a sea-based variant that the Pentagon should acquire.