

Countering Iranian Maritime Aggression

Jonathan Ruhe
Director of Foreign Policy

Ari Cicurel
Assistant Director of Foreign Policy

Iran is becoming increasingly aggressive at sea. Its seizures of three international tankers and harassment of a fourth tanker in the last month mark at least the 40th episode of Iranian maritime aggression in two years—aggression that neither the United States nor its partners have responded to with credible deterrent efforts.

To be sure, protecting global commerce is a collective responsibility. U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) has pushed full steam ahead to build out military capabilities and partnerships to keep regional waters safe. Although greater capabilities are still needed—especially autonomous sensors that can quickly detect Iran’s preferred tactic of using fast attack craft—the major challenges to responding to and deterring Iran’s maritime threat are now political. The United States must exhibit determination in using force to stop Iran’s illegal seizures of commercial tankers and leadership in encouraging international and regional partners to contribute more resources to existing multilateral maritime security mechanisms. Without it, America’s partners are unlikely to take on a greater share of regional security, as demonstrated by the withdrawal of United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) from participation in the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF).

What Happened?

- In early April, the United States took control of oil cargo [aboard](#) the *Suez Rajan*, a Greek-operated tanker allegedly [carrying](#) Iranian oil originally bound for China that had been idle in Singapore. The seizure of oil under U.S. sanctions was legally carried out in cooperation with the vessel’s owner.
- From April 27 to May 10, Iran retaliated by [seizing](#) three oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz and adjoining Gulf of Oman, and redirecting them to waters or anchorages along the Iranian coast.
 - » On April 27, the Iran Navy seized the [Advantage Sweet](#) in the Strait of Hormuz. The ship is a Marshall Islands-flagged, Turkish-operated, Chinese-owned oil tanker carrying Kuwaiti crude oil for U.S. energy firm Chevron Corp.

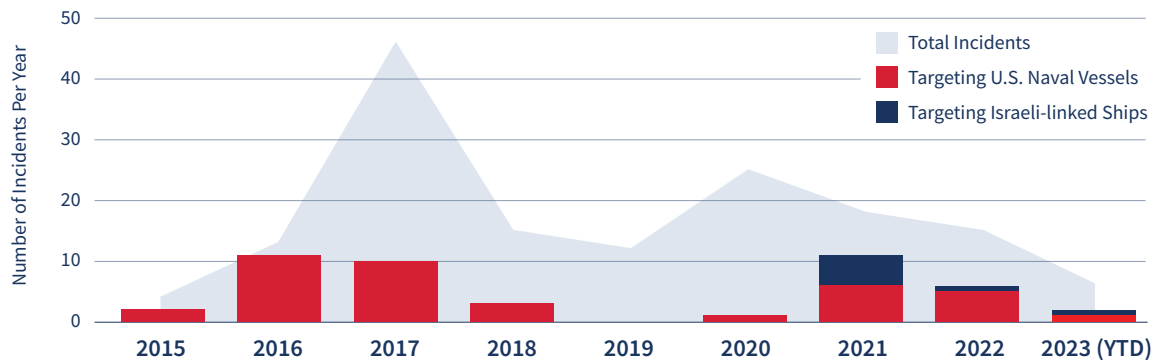
- » On May 3, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Navy seized the Panama-flagged oil tanker [Niovi](#) while passing through the Strait of Hormuz. The ship contained nearly 2 million barrels of oil belonging to Oman-based Nimr International and Turkey-based ASB Group affiliate Baslam Nakliya. This ship was headed from Dubai and was bound for Fujairah.
- » On May 12, Iran seized the 10,000-ton Panama-flagged oil tanker [Purity](#). The ship has been owned since 2012 by Sun Ocean Shipping based in Hong Kong. The Iranian government claimed this ship belonged to Iranian owners and was being returned to Iranian control.
- » On June 4, three IRGC fast-attack craft with armed troops aboard unsafely approached a [fourth merchant vessel](#), the Marshall Islands-flagged bulk carrier *Venture*, as it transited the Strait of Hormuz. The IRGC vessels reportedly departed shortly thereafter, and the *Venture* continued its transit, as U.S. Fifth Fleet responded to the *Venture*'s distress call by dispatching a guided-missile destroyer (DDG) and patrol aircraft accompanied by a UK Royal Navy frigate to monitor the scene.”
- On May 12, NAVCENT [announced](#) that U.S. Fifth Fleet and partner nations would increase the number of ships and aircraft patrolling the Strait of Hormuz to deter further Iranian seizures.
 - » That [same day](#), the Pentagon said the United States also “will seek to increase coordination and interoperability of the International Maritime Security Construct ... in the Strait of Hormuz.”
 - » After Iran-backed groups killed a U.S. contractor in Syria in March, the Pentagon revealed on April 9 that it had [deployed](#) the USS *Florida*, an *Ohio*-class submarine (SSGN) capable of carrying up to 154 Tomahawk cruise missiles, to the Arabian Gulf.
 - » In mid-April, the U.S. Navy [sailed](#) its first unmanned surface vessel (USV) through the Strait of Hormuz, accompanied by two U.S. Coast Guard cutters.
 - » On May 19, the head of NAVCENT and the U.S. Fifth Fleet, VADM Brad Cooper, [transited](#) the Strait of Hormuz aboard the *Arleigh Burke*-class guided-missile destroyer USS *Paul Hamilton* with the chiefs of the British and French navies in the Middle East, accompanied by the British frigate HMS *Lancaster* and a U.S. Navy P-8 Poseidon maritime reconnaissance and patrol aircraft.
 - Three IRGC fast attack craft and an Iranian drone shadowed the U.S.-led forces as they transited the Strait of Hormuz.
 - » On May 22, the U.S. Navy [announced](#) the launch of Task Force CTF 154, which will focus on training regional navies to “improve operational capabilities to enhance maritime security” across the entire region, according to a press release from NAVCENT.
 - » After a [Wall Street Journal report](#) on May 30 indicated the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) was pressuring the United States to do more in response to the Iranian tanker seizures, Emirati officials downplayed that report but revealed that two months prior it had [stopped participating](#) in the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), a 38-nation partnership based at NAVCENT headquarters in Bahrain.

- On June 3, the commander of Iran’s Navy [announced](#) the country would form a joint naval alliance with U.S. regional partners, including Saudi Arabia, U.A.E., Qatar, Bahrain, and Iraq. However, none of those countries confirmed the existence of the partnership, putting doubts on the validity of the Iranian commander’s claim.

Why Is It Important?

- Despite ongoing U.S.-led efforts to improve integration and strengthen regional naval forces, Washington has sent insufficient political signals it is willing to engage in the Middle East, and America’s regional partners have not contributed enough to maritime security in their backyard. U.S. partners will only do more if Washington sends political signals that they will not have to do so alone and risk Tehran’s wrath.
 - » Fueled by and compounding these issues, the recent shift among Gulf nations to a more risk-averse approach toward Iran will likely encourage Tehran to initiate further aggressive activities with the objective of increasing its regional influence at the expense of the United States and its partners.
- Middle Eastern waterways are vital to global commerce. While America’s regional partners have resisted becoming overtly involved in counter-Iran coalitions or contributing naval assets to this mission, they do place high value on ensuring the free flow of commerce.
 - » Roughly 20% of global petroleum liquids consumption flows through the Strait of Hormuz, [one-tenth](#) of total seaborne-traded oil travels through the Bab al-Mandeb, and the Suez Canal carries approximately [12% of global trade](#), with 1.74 million barrels of crude oil per day.
 - » In 2021, the MV *Ever Given* blocked the Suez Canal for six days, delaying an [estimated \\$9.6 billion](#) of trade through the waterway each day.
- However, the United States and its regional partners have undermined deterrence against Iran by conspicuously avoiding a forceful response to any of the more than forty incidences of Iranian naval aggression in the Middle East since 2021—including at least two separate incidences, in [May 2022](#) and April-May 2023, in which it seized multiple ships in retaliation for U.S. confiscation of a single ship carrying Iranian oil cargos.
 - » Iranian seizures of ships or cargo often are not publicized, making it possible there are more incidents of Iranian aggression than reported in open sources.
 - » Over this same period, Iran also has repeatedly sailed dangerously close to U.S. naval ships, [attempted](#) to steal American unmanned surface vessels, repeatedly violated a UN [embargo](#) by proliferating weaponry to its Houthi proxies in Yemen, and [illegally detained](#) and [attacked commercial ships](#) sailing in international [waters](#)—including a July 2021 drone strike that [killed](#) two crewmen aboard a Japanese-owned tanker in the Gulf of Oman.
 - » Similarly, despite Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin’s March 28 testimony that “there have been about 83 such attacks by Iranian proxies on U.S. forces in Syria in the past two years alone,” the United States has launched only four limited strikes against these groups.

Major Incidents of Iranian Naval Harassment and Attacks Against U.S., Partner, and Commercial Vessels in the Middle East



- In the face of this persistent Iranian aggression, NAVCENT in Bahrain leads several multinational initiatives that face persistent resource constraints—particularly intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets—as well as difficulties integrating capabilities and intelligence effectively from among their various members.
 - » The CMF focuses on freedom of navigation, counterpiracy, counternarcotics, and other illicit activity at sea. Members have a shared maritime domain common operating picture (COP) of Iranian and other threats through CMF’s Combined Enterprise Regional Information Exchange (CENTRIX).
 - However, there are gaps in the COP due to insufficient maritime- and air-based sensors to provide persistent coverage throughout all Middle Eastern waters, including the Arabian Gulf.
 - CTF 154, the fifth task force under the auspices of the CMF, is the latest in a series of U.S. efforts toward better regional integration. CTF 154 can have a more expansive role than the CMF’s other task forces, which focus on a specific waterway or problem within the region.
 - The U.A.E.’s withdrawal from participation in CMF activities came as its neighbor Saudi Arabia restored diplomatic relations with Iran through a China-brokered deal and could incentivize further Iranian aggression that seeks to break U.S.-led coalitions in the region. Both Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. have expressed concerns that the United States has not [rapidly responded](#) to Iran-backed attacks against them by deploying or providing a sufficient number of air defense capabilities.
 - » The International Maritime Security Construct’s (IMSC) specific mission is to deter and defeat Iranian aggression against commercial shipping in the Arabian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, Gulf of Oman, Gulf of Aden, and southern Red Sea.
 - Yet, its capacity to respond is hindered by its small membership. The only Middle Eastern participants are Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the U.A.E. Other members include the United States, the United Kingdom, Albania, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, and Seychelles.

- » Since being launched in September 2021, [Task Force 59](#) has boosted maritime domain awareness by using unmanned surface vessels (USV), and has promoted U.S.-Israel [cooperation](#) on the use of unmanned systems and artificial intelligence (AI) to support vessel boarding operations.
 - NAVCENT’s [goal](#) is to have “100 unmanned surface vessels available for patrol in waters around the Arabian Peninsula by the end of the summer of 2023... with a majority of the systems coming from our international and regional partners,” according to VADM Brad Cooper.
 - By using unmanned platforms that require little to no refueling, Task Force 59 is able to deploy persistent ISR, but only over limited stretches of the maritime domain, since more platforms are needed to establish a comprehensive picture of Middle Eastern waters.
 - While Task Force 59 focuses on deploying much-needed USV capabilities for persistent surveillance, the lack of armed platforms inhibits task force units from engaging hostile Iranian vessels—as seen in Iran’s [temporary capture](#) of several platforms in recent months.
- » These U.S.-led initiatives must deal with U.S. resource [shortages](#) in the Middle East, as competing threats in the Indo-Pacific and Europe contribute to a “reduction in the footprint of traditional ISR capabilities in the region,” according to AFCENT commander Lt. Gen. Alexus Grynkewich.
- » Given that forces constituting these coalitions often struggle to counter swarming Iranian fast attack craft, which can rapidly disrupt shipping across Middle Eastern waters, there is a growing need for more expansive deployments of capabilities to detect, deter, and respond to such threats.
- While the United States is the partner of choice for the U.A.E. and other Gulf states, they need clear signals that Washington will remain engaged in the Middle East and provide them the platforms they need to take on a greater share of protecting regional security.
 - » Absent strong U.S. commitments to continuously provide necessary military capabilities, regional partners will continue to court Russia, China, and Iran to the detriment of their own security and regional stability. Strong U.S. leadership can diminish partner hedging with adversaries.
 - » Though Iran’s recent declaration of its own regional naval alliance “defies reason,” as U.S. Fifth Fleet [noted](#), such statements underscore Tehran’s readiness to fill any perceived U.S. vacuum in the region and try to exploit the resulting uneasiness of America’s partners.
- Recently announced U.S. enhancements to regional force deployments, as well as expanded U.S.-led exercises, are salutary steps to counter and deter further Iranian maritime aggression but will remain insufficient in the absence of more forceful U.S. and partner action at sea.
 - » In March, fifty nations, including Israel, and international organizations from around the world [participated](#) in the U.S.-led International Maritime Exercise (IMX) and Cutlass Express (CE) combined training exercises in Middle Eastern waters. The global interest in these drills—greater than in any regional air- or ground-based exercises—indicated significant international concern about the Middle East’s maritime security in the face of persistent Iranian threats.

- Participants included Abraham Accords members Israel, U.A.E, Bahrain, and Morocco, as well as Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia.
- » The U.S. Fifth Fleet and Israel recently completed [Digital Shield](#), a four-day exercise in the Gulf of Aqaba on May 11 that focused on AI and unmanned systems. Task Force 59 and a MANTAS Devil Ray T-38 USV participated.
- Reflecting these various shortcomings and challenges, recent bipartisan initiatives in Congress aim to bolster U.S. action against Iran’s maritime aggression:
 - » On April 27, a [bipartisan letter](#) from twelve senators expressed concerns that—for more than a year—the Biden administration has not enforced U.S. sanctions by seizing Iranian oil shipments.
 - » The following day, the members of the bipartisan Senate and House Abraham Accords Caucuses [introduced](#) the Maritime Architecture and Response to International Terrorism in the Middle East ([MARITIME](#)) Act, inspired by [JINSA’s 2022 report on the Abraham Accords](#), which would require the Department of Defense “to develop a Middle East integrated maritime domain awareness and interdiction capability.”
- Iran has a long history of resorting to naval aggression, including during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. As the U.S. experience from this “tanker war” demonstrates, deterring Iranian naval aggression requires a forceful, persistent, and integrated response from the United States and its regional partners.
 - » During the Iran-Iraq War, the United States sought to prevent Iranian small-boat attacks on commercial shipping through [Operation Earnest Will](#) to reflag Kuwaiti oil tankers sailing through the Persian Gulf. However, Iran continued to attack ships after they were escorted, as well as vessels that were not part of the reflagging. It was not until the United States adopted a [more aggressive policy](#) on its use of force that Iran changed its behavior.
 - After a series of tit-for-tat attacks, the United States launched *Operation Praying Mantis* in April 1988, during which it sank an Iranian missile boat, frigate, and a small boat, as well as damaging several other vessels, effectively ending Iran’s naval mining and reinforcing the perception that the United States would enter the war on behalf of Iraq. The USS *Vincennes* accidentally downing an Iranian Airbus passenger aircraft also contributed to Tehran’s decision to end the war.
 - However, reflagging ships would require significantly greater U.S. political will for engagement in the Middle East and would be difficult to sustain over the long-term because of the required operational intensity.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- The United States should be prepared to hold Iran accountable for its aggression while also encouraging its regional partners to contribute more naval assets for coalition efforts that secure the free flow of commerce at sea.

- As part of the Pentagon’s recently-announced [decision](#) to “bolster our defensive posture in the Gulf,” NAVCENT should expand maritime security cooperation focused on securing global shipping lanes by building the capacity of its regional partners in the Arabian Gulf, in particular Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E, as well as other nations such as the United Kingdom and France that are active in the region.
 - » The United States and U.A.E. have been negotiating a written [strategic agreement](#) for at least a year that would strengthen U.S. security assurances to the Emirates. President Biden’s public, personal investment in this effort would significantly improve the likelihood of success.
 - » NAVCENT, along with senior Department of Defense and State officials, should encourage the U.A.E. to renew participation with the CMF and seek to assuage concerns about blowback from Iran by publicly committing to bolster Emirati defensive capabilities.
 - » Broader U.S. efforts in the region should include deployment and provision of additional USVs, not only with ISR capabilities but also with weapons systems to deter further Iranian aggression. Such tangible signals of U.S. leadership and preparation will be crucial to strengthening coalition efforts and burden-sharing to counter Iranian threats to the entire region.
 - » Concomitantly, NAVCENT should increase freedom of navigation exercises in the Arabian Gulf.
- The Pentagon should improve the quantity and quality of maritime sensors to the Middle East, including deploying or selling sensors that can attach to offshore oil rigs, as well as providing more unmanned systems to Task Force 59 to provide greater domain awareness and readiness by enabling faster response times. It is crucial to have both a large number of sensors in the region and for the United States and partners to be able to communicate intelligence data rapidly and reliably.
- Building on the recent progress outlined in [JINSA’s latest report](#) on developing an integrated air and missile defense (IAMD) network in the region, the Biden administration and Congress should similarly push for America’s partners to strengthen integration of their maritime capabilities.
- The Department of Defense should [explore](#) where Israel’s capabilities as a world leader in unmanned and AI technologies could integrate into the CMF, specifically Combined Task Force (CTF) 152 for Arabian Gulf security and CTF 153 for Red Sea security, as well as the IMSC and the new CTF 154 for training regional navies.
- As JINSA has argued, the Biden administration should begin restoring deterrence and readiness against Iran’s threats to Middle East stability by declaring an end to fruitless nuclear negotiations with Tehran and adopt a [Plan B](#) of credible and comprehensive pressure, including bolstering U.S. and partner capabilities in the region and stringently enforcing sanctions on Iran, including those targeting oil sales and weapons proliferation.
 - » While Iran has recently largely avoided harassing American ships, the United States does not need to concede escalation dominance to Tehran and can instead pressure the regime with additional and more strictly enforced sanctions, including further seizures of oil cargos and illicit weapons transfers.