



Iran Conducts Naval Drills as U.S. Prepares Marine Deployment on Commercial Ships

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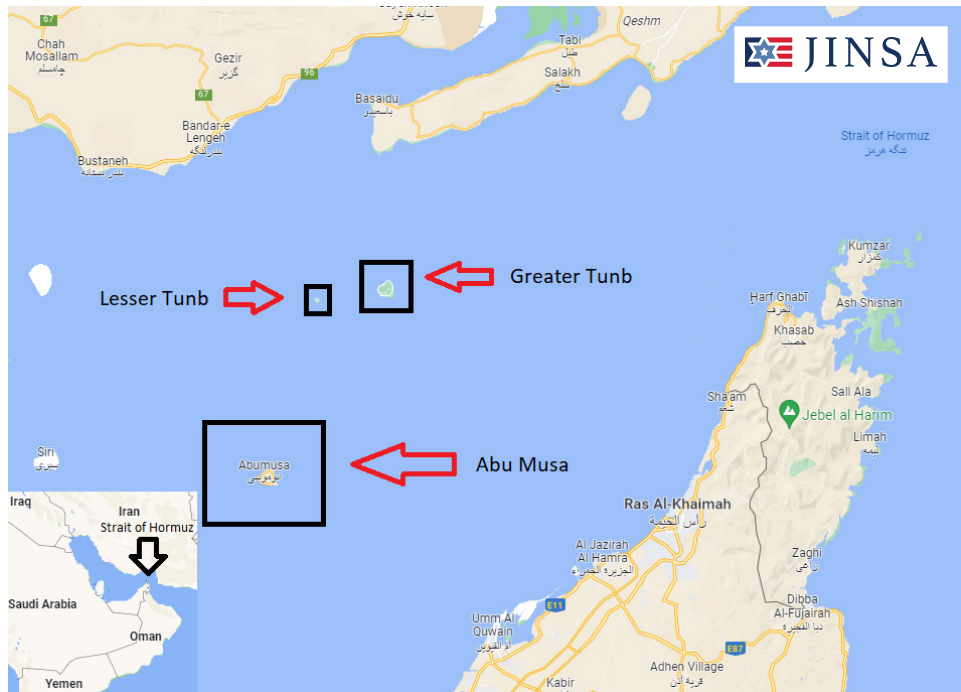
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The United States reportedly is planning to deploy Marines aboard commercial vessels in vital Middle Eastern waterways amid Tehran's escalating maritime aggression in the area, including recent drills by Iranian naval forces on and around contested islands near the Strait of Hormuz. The lack of credible U.S. deterrence thus far has emboldened Iran to increase its naval harassment in the region and led U.S. partners to rethink their cooperation with the United States over concerns that Washington is not committed to upholding regional stability. The move to protect commercial ships, if implemented with a clear willingness to use force when necessary, together with other recent enhancements to U.S. force posture around the Gulf, are important and much-needed steps by the Biden administration to address Iran's threats to global commerce and vital U.S. security partners. Given the history of Iran's aggression, Tehran is likely to conduct further attacks to test the seriousness of this U.S. commitment. The United States must be prepared to respond forcefully against likely further Iranian provocations while also working concertedly with regional partners to improve and integrate their own maritime security capabilities.

What Happened?

- On August 2, Iran [announced](#) that it had conducted drills on the contested Abu Musa Island in the Arabian Gulf and directly off the island's coast. The U.A.E. claims the island, along with the nearby Greater Tunb and Lesser Tunb islands, all of which Iran controls.
 - » Footage from the drills [revealed](#) that Iran deployed and trained with ballistic missiles, as well as missile defense systems, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), unmanned surface vessels (USVs), fast attack craft, large numbers of troops, and other capabilities, to threaten shipping in the area.
- In response to a spate of illegal Iranian seizures of oil tankers preceding the drills, Pentagon officials are [reportedly](#) considering placing Marines on commercial vessels traversing the Gulf. This is part of a larger U.S. force buildup in the region, which has included the deployment of A-10, F-16, and F-35 combat aircraft as well as [over 3,000 Marines](#).

- » While the initiative has not received final approval from President Biden, it reportedly has support among senior Pentagon officials. According to a [U.S. official](#), “[w]e have a cohort on the ground,” and the “policy decision has pretty much been made.”
- » Marines have already arrived in Bahrain, with other personnel set to arrive on U.S. warships. According to a U.S. official, Marines have been [training](#) to protect ships in 20-person teams.

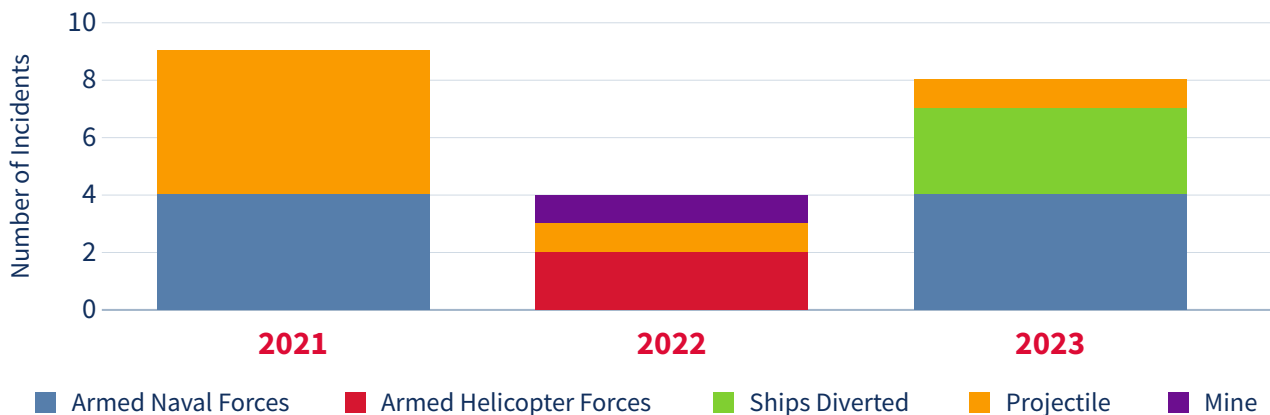


Why Is It Important?

- Recent U.S. Navy efforts to disrupt Iranian seizures of oil tankers and the [ongoing buildup](#) of U.S. forces are tangible signals of concern about Iran’s long-escalating threats at sea. The United States must be prepared to use these deployments to respond forcefully to further Iranian maritime aggression. This will be crucial for rebuilding U.S. deterrence, convincing America’s regional partners to contribute more substantially and better integrate their efforts in U.S.-led maritime security cooperation, and reducing their incentives to seek better [relationships](#) with China, Iran, and Russia in the absence of credible U.S. leadership.
- Iran has long used Abu Musa Island for a range of malign activities, and it could exploit the island’s strategic location to increase its threats to commercial and military vessels [transiting](#) the Gulf.
 - » Abu Musa Island and the Tunbs are less than 100 miles from the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow chokepoint through which roughly 20 percent of global petroleum exports, over 30 percent of global natural gas exports, and many U.S. and partner naval vessels [pass](#).
 - » According to U.S. defense officials, Iran [repeatedly](#) uses signal jammers on the islands to interfere with commercial vessels’ GPS, causing them to unintentionally transit into Iranian waters and thereby provide Tehran a [pretense](#) for seizing them.

- Iran also uses these jammers to [camouflage](#) its own naval warships as civilian vessels in order to [attack](#) commercial ships with limpet mines and drones, among other illicit activities.
- » Given the islands' proximity to the Strait of Hormuz, such actions lend credibility to Tehran's oft-repeated threats to [close](#) the Strait in retaliation for U.S. or Israeli military action against Iran.
- Though the U.A.E. [claims](#) the islands and has long sought adjudication via the International Court of Justice, Iran has occupied the islands militarily since 1971. It continues to use threats and force to maintain its claims to the island chain and has [rejected](#) efforts to bring about a diplomatic resolution.
 - » Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian [stated](#) in early July regarding the islands that Iran "won't back down on the sovereignty and unity of Iranian territories."
- The recent drills on and around the islands are the latest of more than [forty incidents](#) of Iran-linked harassment and attacks against commercial and naval vessels in Middle Eastern waters since 2021.
 - » Of the twenty-one incidents involving commercial vessels since the start of 2021, eight involved armed naval forces boarding the vessel, at least two involved armed troops boarding via helicopter, and three involved Iranian ships diverting the vessel to Iranian waters, typically by swarming the vessels with multiple fast attack watercraft. Iran also used projectiles or other explosive devices to attack ten vessels, and a mine struck one tanker in the Strait of Hormuz.

Types of Iranian Seizures and Attacks on International Commercial Vessels Since 2021



- » Iran has already targeted eight commercial vessels this year, one shy of the total for all of 2021 and double last year's total. This has included the resumption of armed Iranian naval forces forcibly boarding commercial vessels and Iranian ships swarming vessels to divert them to Iranian waters.
- Since April, Iran's escalating maritime aggression in the Gulf [includes](#) four illegal [seizures](#) of commercial tankers and four more attempted seizures disrupted by U.S. and partner navies.

Iranian Commercial Vessel Seizures and U.S. Naval Action in the Gulf in 2023



- **FEBRUARY 10:** Iranian drones targeted the Liberian-flagged, Israeli-owned *Campo Square* oil tanker in the Arabian Sea.
- **MARCH:** The U.A.E. left the U.S.-led CMF coalition. The decision became public knowledge at the end of May.
- **APRIL 16:** Iran claimed to have seized a vessel carrying 1.5 million liters of smuggled fuel.
- **APRIL 19:** NAVCENT announced that an unmanned surface vessel from the U.S. 5th Fleet had transited the Strait of Hormuz with two U.S. Coast Guard cutters.
- **APRIL 21:** U.S. Army Soldiers conducted training with Sailors and Marines aboard the Expeditionary Sea Base USS *Lewis B. Puller* in the Arabian Gulf.
- **APRIL 27:** U.S. A-10 aircraft and forces from the U.A.E. and France conducted an air operations exercise supporting maritime surface warfare.
- **APRIL 27:** IRGC forces seized the *Advantage Sweet*, a Chinese-owned, Turkish-managed, and Marshall Islands-flagged oil tanker in international waters by fast-roping onto the ship from a helicopter.
- **MAY 3:** A dozen IRGC Navy small boats swarmed the *Niovi*, a Greek-owned and Panamanian-flagged oil tanker in the Strait of Hormuz.
- **MAY 10:** The IRGC Navy and Iranian Intelligence Ministry seized the *Purity*, a Panamanian-flagged oil tanker, in the northern Strait of Hormuz.
- **MAY 19:** NAVCENT Commander VADM Brad Cooper and the British and French Middle East-based naval commanders sailed on the USS *Paul Hamilton*, an *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyer, through the Strait of Hormuz to signal their commitment to keeping international waterways open.
- **JUNE 4:** U.S. and British Navy ships responded to a distress call from the Marshall Islands-flagged *Venture*, a merchant ship, after it was harassed by Iranian vessels.
- **JUNE 5:** U.S. and British Navy ships rescued the Marshall Islands-flagged *Suez Rajan* oil tanker after Iranian vessels harassed it.
- **JULY 5:** Iranian vessels attacked—including by firing upon—the Marshall Islands-flagged *TRF Moss* and the Chevron-managed, Bahamian-flagged *Richmond Voyager* oil tankers until the U.S. Navy intervened to save the vessels.
- **JULY 6:** The IRGC Navy seized the *Nada II* chemical tanker, which it accused of being used for smuggling.
- **JULY 27:** Bahraini, British, and U.S. personnel conducted a joint patrol exercise through the Strait of Hormuz involving a U.S. Navy P-8A Poseidon aircraft.
- **JULY 28:** Marines with the 26th MEU/Bataan ARG's Maritime Special Purpose Force, responsible for maritime interdiction, forward deployed to Bahrain.
- **AUGUST 6-8:** CENTCOM Commander GEN Michael "Erik" Kurilla and NAVCENT Commander VADM Brad Cooper transited the Strait of Hormuz aboard the *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyer USS *Thomas Hudner*, along with an unmanned surface vessel, and visited the U.A.E.

● **SUCCESSFUL IRANIAN SEIZURES**

● **INTERRUPTED IRANIAN SEIZURES**

● **U.S. NAVAL ACTION/DEPLOYMENTS**

● **COALITION WITHDRAWAL**

- U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) leads several multinational partnerships to secure Middle Eastern waters, but until recently these have been hamstrung, both by American reticence to reliably and effectively respond to repeated Iranian provocations, and by an observable lack of U.S. capabilities and [deployments](#) to credibly deter or prevent further aggression by Tehran's forces.
 - » The Biden administration [deployed](#) a Marine expeditionary unit (MEU), a guided missile destroyer, and A-10, F-16, and F-35 combat aircraft to the region, but only after four successful and four unsuccessful Iranian seizures between April-July.
 - » Moreover, these deployments come after a conspicuous lull in U.S. naval presence in the region, most notably the [absence](#) of any MEU in the region since November 2021.
- Deploying Marines aboard commercial vessels could deter Iranian seizures and could protect those vessels if deterrence fails. Yet, U.S. officials need to determine how they will deploy those forces on the numerous ships transiting Gulf waters and articulate clear rules of engagement that enable American service members to protect the life, limb, and property of those ships with force.
 - » Since Iranian forces transitioning from an Iranian ship or [fast-roping](#) from a helicopter to the commercial vessel are at risk, and since it is more difficult and dangerous to retake a ship once Iran controls it, the ideal operational period to deter or interrupt an Iranian ship seizure attempt is before Iranian forces board the vessel or divert it to Iranian waters.
 - » Iranian ships often carry anti-ship missiles that Marines, likely carrying small arms, will not be capable of operating against.
 - » Iran could also seize ships by diverting them to its waters without boarding them, making Marines on commercial vessels subject to the decision-making of that vessel's captain and potentially creating opportunities for U.S. military personnel to be held in Iranian waters.
 - » The United States will need the permission of the private companies that own the commercial tankers as well as the regional governments to deploy the U.S. service members.
 - » U.S. officials will also need to determine whether Marines will travel on all commercial vessels sailing in dangerous waters or deploy on a random number of ships to make it unclear to Iran whether it will face U.S. military forces.
 - NAVCENT has previously rehearsed temporarily deploying U.S. service members on commercial vessels so that they are only onboard in the most dangerous areas where Iran is likely to attempt a seizure. Marines could board the vessels in the Arabian Sea before they transit into the Gulf, disembark once inside the Gulf, and then reverse the process by traveling on ships exiting the Gulf.
- Credible U.S. military pledges to respond to Iranian aggression have previously compelled changes in Iranian regime behavior, including its threats to the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf.

- » When Iran threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz in 2011-12, the Obama administration [declared](#) this a “red line,” assembled three carrier strike groups, and sent one through the Strait. In response, Iranian officials downplayed their initial threats to close the Strait.
- » During the Iran-Iraq War, the U.S. initiated Operation Earnest Will, during which U.S. Navy warships reflagged and escorted Kuwaiti oil tankers through the Gulf. However, it was not until after the United States used force against the Iranian ships engaged in aggressive activity through Operation Praying Mantis that Iran stopped seizing and attacking ships.
- The United States has not placed military security teams on commercial vessels since the Naval Armed Guard Service protected ships from German U-boat attacks during World War II.
 - » Placing Marines on commercial ships would significantly enhance America’s commitment to securing vital maritime traffic, especially in light of the fact that the United States did not place U.S. military personnel on commercial ships during Operation Earnest Will.
- At the same time, regional maritime security is a collective responsibility and, in tandem with more visible and forceful U.S. steps, America’s partners must commit to more effective and integrated cooperation to help defend Middle Eastern waters. As part of concretely signaling its own continued commitment to regional leadership and security, Washington should provide partners with the necessary platforms and other capabilities to enable such burden-sharing.
 - » Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. have expressed alarm that the United States did not [deploy](#) or provide sufficient air and missile defenses after recent Iran-backed [attacks](#) against them.
 - These Iranian threats and the relatively muted U.S. response to them prompted the U.A.E. to seek security assurances from China and pursue rapprochement with Tehran.
 - In March, the U.A.E. formally [stopped](#) taking part in the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), a U.S.-led task force focused on countering maritime threats in the Gulf and Red Sea.
 - » In April, U.S. intelligence sources [revealed](#) China was constructing a secret military facility at a port in Abu Dhabi along the Arabian Gulf, and in late July, China’s defense ministry [announced](#) it would conduct bilateral drills with the U.A.E. in Xinjiang sometime in August.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- To balance the deterrence and protection benefits against the risk of Iran capturing U.S. forces and further undermining U.S. credibility, the Pentagon should deploy Marines aboard commercial vessels and ensure they have clear rules of engagement and command authorities that allow them to respond forcefully against Iranian naval aggression.

- » This should include using sufficient preemptive force to prevent Iranian vessels from seizing, diverting, or in any other way impairing the free flow of travel through international waters.
- » With Iran also likely to attempt to harass and divert commercial vessels without putting its forces on-board, NAVCENT should be prepared to assist Marines on those ships by utilizing its recent enhancements of aerial and naval force presence in the region.
- » NAVCENT will need to support the Marines aboard civilian ships with communications equipment, UAVs, and USVs for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) to identify possible threats and, potentially, extraction capabilities.
- » In keeping with the clear [commitment](#) in its 2022 National Security Strategy to “not allow foreign or regional powers to jeopardize freedom of navigation through the Middle East’s waterways,” and in tandem with its deployments to the region, the Biden administration should state unequivocally that the United States will disrupt any further Iranian maritime aggression.
- » Furthering the Pentagon’s [effort](#) to “bolster our defensive posture in the Gulf,” NAVCENT should help build the capacity of its regional partners, in particular Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E., and conduct additional U.S.-led maritime exercises designed to counter Iranian ship seizures, as JINSA previously argued in a [NatSec Brief](#) in June.
 - President Biden’s public, personal engagement could help finalize the written [strategic agreement](#) that the United States and U.A.E. have been negotiating for at least a year, which would strengthen U.S. security assurances to the Emirates.
- As part of its diplomatic initiative, the United States should use formal and informal mechanisms to encourage the U.A.E. to participate in initiatives like NAVCENT’s Task Force 59, an initiative to increase maritime domain awareness in the Gulf by deploying more unmanned vessels and sensors.
 - » Task Force 59 is specifically designed for interoperability, it already [operates](#) out of hubs in Bahrain and Jordan, and its units have trained alongside Israel. Thus, Emirati participation could help pave the way for other regional partners to participate in the task force’s operations.
 - » Similarly, NAVCENT should [explore](#) how Israel’s capabilities as a world leader in unmanned and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies could expand the capabilities of coalition efforts to deter and protect against Iranian threats to commercial shipping.
 - » Task Force 59 should expand its partnership with Israel, which has already led to [cooperation](#) on the use of unmanned systems and AI to support vessel boarding operations.
- NAVCENT should also explore methods for integrating Israel into the CMF, specifically Combined Task Force (CTF) 152 for Gulf security, CTF 153 for Red Sea security, and the new CTF 154 for training regional navies to better secure vital regional waterways.

- » NAVCENT should also explore how Israeli capabilities could benefit the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC), whose 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.
- Supplementing the progress detailed in JINSA's [report](#) on developing an integrated air and missile defense (IAMD) network in the Middle East, the Biden administration and Congress should similarly push for U.S. partners to integrate their maritime capabilities further.
- An important step forward would be the integration of more regional navies, including the U.A.E. Navy, into NAVCENT's nascent intelligence-fusion cell, which already involves officials from Saudi Arabia and Israel.