

OCTOBER 2011

COMMANDER JOSHUA HIMES, U.S. NAVY

## MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT I

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# IRAN'S TWO NAVIES

A MATURING MARITIME STRATEGY



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*Photo Credit: U.S. Navy Seaman Kyle Taylor, an operations specialist, observes passing ships through the “Big Eyes” during sunset aboard the amphibious dock landing ship USS Whidbey Island (LSD 41) while under way in the Mediterranean Sea June 13, 2011. The Whidbey Island was deployed as part of the Bataan Amphibious Ready Group to support maritime security operations and theater security cooperation efforts in the U.S. 6th Fleet area of responsibility. (DoD photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Martin Cuaron, U.S. Navy/Released)*

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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His prior joint tours include serving as a watch officer and executive assistant to the commander at the Joint Analysis Center in Molesworth, England, the operations officer and systems integration management officer at the Joint Forces Intelligence Command, and as collections watch officer at the Joint Intelligence Center, Pacific. His operational tours have been with Carrier Airwing 11 embarked aboard USS *Abraham Lincoln* and USS *Kitty Hawk*, and Carrier Strike Group 12, embarked aboard USS *Enterprise*. He has conducted multiple deployments in support of Operations Allied Force, Enduring and Iraqi Freedom.

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## **ABOUT THE INSTITUTE**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Arab Spring has fomented increasing uncertainty in the Middle East, a circumstance in which Iran's regional intentions are of increasing concern. U.S. attempts to isolate the regime are driven by concerns over Iran's nuclear program, the enduring energy chokepoint at the Strait of Hormuz, and Iran's export of radical Shi'a militancy through proxy groups across the region, particularly as it affects Iraq, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon.

Tehran has historically used its naval forces to send strategic signals and project its foreign policy ambitions and priorities. The regime views its naval resources as its most visible counterforce to U.S. and allied operations off Iran's shores and the best prepared of Iran's military services to conduct conventional military operations.

Prior to the fall of the Shah, the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN) was Iran's preeminent naval force and served to secure the country's maritime borders. Following the Iranian Revolution, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini built an armed force to protect the gains from the revolution as he distrusted the conventional armed forces and doubted their loyalty. In so doing, he created the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) to guard the regime's maritime interests. The IRIN was forced to share the waters of the Gulf with the newly-created naval arm of the Revolutionary Guard.

The IRIN and IRGCN's shared responsibility for the waters of the Gulf was confusing, not only for the two services, but also for those with whom they came into contact. In 2007, Tehran initiated a maritime reorganization that redefined duties and reassigned operational areas of both the IRIN and IRGCN, clarifying the roles and responsibilities of Iran's two navies. Although they had traditionally shared operations in the Caspian Sea, Persian Gulf, and Gulf of Oman, this change split the IRIN and IRGCN areas of responsibility, and ultimately, their missions.

The rise of the IRGCN since the naval reorganization in 2007 mirrors the larger rise of the Revolutionary Guard from the guardians of clerical rule to an increasingly dominant role as the shadow government of Iran. The IRGCN retains its strong asymmetric approach and has invested heavily in enhancing its speed, mass, and lethality to strengthen its deterrent value in the Gulf. Armed with new, more lethal, high-speed small boats, and potentially complemented by expanding supporting capabilities such as extended range coastal radars, 'smart' anti-ship ballistic missiles, and even IRGCN-operated submarines, the IRGCN's power has increased significantly since assuming responsibility for defending the Persian Gulf in 2007. Now, almost 25 years after its creation, the IRGCN has assumed full responsibility for the Persian Gulf, relegating the IRIN to a more conventional deterrent role in the region.

The IRIN surface fleet, on the other hand, remains anchored by the same platforms that formed the core of the Shah's Navy in the 1970s. Despite its antiquated surface fleet, the IRIN has managed to perform operations as far away as the Red Sea and Eastern Mediterranean over the last three years, and it continues to incrementally modernize. It has also emphasized development of its asymmetric assets, investing heavily in subsurface and anti-ship missile capabilities.

This maritime reorganization began just as leadership of the Revolutionary Guard was given to General Mohamad Ali Jafari in September 2007. He is credited with refining Iranian leadership thinking on asymmetric warfare, providing innovative defense strategies, and addressing the soft power threats from the West that Tehran most fears, likely one of the primary catalysts of the maritime reorganization. In fact, the leaders of the IRGCN, Defense Ministry, and IRIN have all been reappointed since 2007 and share the Supreme Leader's emphasis on asymmetric strategy and tactics. They have taken this philosophy to heart as they seek to modernize and equip their respective fleets.

Naval foreign acquisition and domestic production trends since 2007 reflect a strategy that emphasizes this asymmetric philosophy. Iran's leadership clearly understands the need for self-reliance in light of international sanctions and pressure brought to bear on traditional military trading partners. Iran has stated it is now self-

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sufficient in the production of naval armaments, missiles, and torpedoes; in early 2010 Iran produced a new corvette line, accelerated small submarine production, and in September 2011 announced plans to build an aircraft carrier.

Senior IRIN and IRGCN commanders have emphasized that the realignment of existing bases and the creation of new bases will create a line of defense to prevent potential threats, namely U.S. and allied naval strike groups, from reaching the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf. This reorganization does more than just extend Iran's defensive depth along the southeastern coast; it reflects a significant change in strategy and sets forth a vision in which Iran's Navy has regional relevance far beyond its shores. The IRIN commander, Admiral Habibollah Sayyari, repeatedly cites the Supreme Leader's directive to expand the IRIN's reach as a critical underpinning to Iran's 2025 outlook, framing Iran's regional prominence and prosperity as contingent on naval expansion and development. Sayyari emphasizes that Iran intends to influence the strategic maritime triangle that extends from the Bab-al Mandeb strait at the southern end of the Red Sea to the Strait of Hormuz and even across the Indian Ocean to the Strait of Malacca. With 2025 as a target date to meet the Supreme Leader's strategic guidance, the IRIN has significant time to continue the fleet modernization, procurement, and diplomatic outreach needed to support its desired capability level.

This report's findings are as follows:

- In 2007 Iranian naval forces underwent a reorganization in which the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN) and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN), which had previously shared duties and water space, were separated. The reorganization reflected a change in the regime's perceived role for its naval forces, revealing Iran's growing regional aspirations.
- This reorganization reflects Iranian leaders' focus on a strategic triangle that extends from the Bab al-Mandeb between Djibouti and Saudi Arabia, across the Arabian Sea to the Strait of Hormuz, and across the Indian Ocean to the Malacca Strait. This area encompasses strategic maritime commerce routes that Iran deems essential to securing the future of its economic sector.
- Under the new structure, the IRIN will patrol the Caspian Sea, the Gulf of Oman, and the area from Bandar Abbas, near the Strait of Hormuz, to Pasa Bandar, near Pakistan. This shift involves establishing new bases in the area, and utilizing existing capitol ships as well as submarines. Currently the IRIN consists of approximately 200 ships and 18,000 personnel. While many of its surface ships hail from the Shah's era, recent subsurface and cruise missile procurement, as well as a growing domestic production capacity have increased its capabilities.
- Meanwhile, the IRGCN has been constituted as a coastal defense force largely focused on asymmetric and mobile combat capabilities in the Persian Gulf. Larger than the IRIN, the IRGCN consists of 20,000 personnel and anywhere from hundreds to several thousand ships and small crafts. Recent development has expanded the IRGCN's capabilities, equipping it with fast attack boats, torpedoes, and anti-ship cruise missiles.
- IRIN capabilities include the Russian *Kilo* class submarine (three units in hand, three expected as early as 2015) and the *Ghadir/Yono* class mini-sub (eleven units in hand, nine more expected over the next two to three years), which has been domestically produced at increasing rates over recent years. The *Kilo*, primarily designed for anti-sub or anti-ship warfare, is fairly easy to track, while the *Ghadir*-class subs are difficult to track, though they remain less formidable in terms of combat power. Perhaps more importantly, media reports indicate the possible development of a new mid-sized submarine that could present a hybrid threat if it proves to be suitably powerful and similarly difficult to track. Development of the IRIN's surface ships continues at barely above replacement rate.

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- ▶ The IRGCN has remained focused on adding and upgrading its inventory of high-speed vessels with missile and torpedo capabilities. Recent additions include twelve modern *Peykaap/Tir* class small boats, a domestic production line for *Bladerunner* vessels, and at least twelve *Bavar 2* stealth flying boats. Development programs seek to increase the top speed of existing craft from 55 knots to 80-85 knots, along with increasing balance and maneuverability designed to enable cruise-missile and torpedo capabilities.
- ▶ Additional cross-naval developments include anti-ship ballistic missiles (range 250-300km), radars (range 500km), coastal radar (range 300km), and ship-borne radar (range 60km). Iran has also increased its stockpiles of C-802 anti-ship missiles, which appear to have been reverse engineered from Chinese models and then domestically reproduced. These developments have continued despite increasing sanctions.
- ▶ The reorganization of the navy's maritime footprint appears to be aimed at exerting short-term soft power influence with a long-term goal of primacy in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean. High-level military exchanges and joint-operations with Qatar, Djibouti, Oman, and Turkey, as well as numerous statements alluding to the possibility of joint-action with the Gulf Cooperation Council, highlight this goal.

The IRIN surface fleet, on the other hand, remains anchored by the same platforms that formed the core of the Shah's Navy in the 1970s. Despite its antiquated surface fleet, the IRIN has managed to perform operations as far away as the Gulf of Aden over the last three years, and it continues to incrementally modernize. It has also emphasized development of its asymmetric assets, investing heavily in subsurface and anti-ship missile capabilities.

- ▶ Enhance U.S. regional maritime partnerships and build upon existing maritime cooperation to contain any regional Iranian soft power influence—such as economic, diplomatic, or otherwise strategic, non-military combat initiatives—and to offset IRGCN modernization and expansion.
- ▶ Adjust contingency planning, training scenarios, and operating patterns to reflect Iran's evolving maritime strategy.
- ▶ Build an in-depth Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) examination of Iran's navies to evaluate reorganization progress in infrastructure and domestic manufacturing.
- ▶ Consider the utility of engagement with the IRIN as a conduit to Tehran.







## IRAN'S TWO NAVIES

### A MATURING MARITIME STRATEGY

By Commander Joshua Himes, U.S. Navy

*“The track record of our navy goes back 700 to 800 years. On the day that our ships left the ports of the Persian Gulf and set sail out to the far reaches of Asia, these other countries—which today share a highly regarded reputation across the seas—did not even exist. Given our nation’s experience, capabilities and our youths’ skillful fingertips, why should we remain so far behind?”*

— IRIN Commander, Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari, August 2010<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

U.S.-Iranian relations have grown increasingly tense in 2011, following several years in which military conflicts on both of Iran’s borders absorbed a great deal of U.S. planning, operations, and policy focus. During this time, Tehran has focused aggressively on expanding its naval operational range and lethality. Iran’s leadership views its navy as its most strategic service among its conventional armed forces and the best prepared of Iran’s military services to conduct conventional military operations. In this context, Iran’s naval infrastructure and deployment provide some context for Iran’s broader foreign policy and military regional ambitions.<sup>2</sup>

In 2007, the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN) and Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) began a reorganization that redefined their respective missions and responsibilities. Although the two navies have traditionally shared operations in the Caspian Sea, Persian Gulf, and Gulf of Oman, this reorganization split the IRIN and IRGCN areas of responsibility and ultimately, their mission focus.

The split and changed missions of Iran’s two navies extends Iran’s defensive depth along the southeastern coast and reflects a significant shift in strategy, setting forth a vision in which Iran’s navy has broader regional relevance. The Iranian regime recently laid out an economic development plan, “Vision 2025,” through which Iran would rise to be the region’s most economically developed economy.<sup>3</sup> Sayyari, IRIN’s Commander, repeatedly cites the Supreme Leader’s directive to expand the IRIN’s reach as a critical underpinning to Iran’s 2025 outlook, framing Iran’s regional prominence and prosperity as contingent on naval expansion and development.<sup>4</sup> Sayyari also emphasizes

Iran’s intent to influence the strategic triangle that defines the maritime commerce routes and extends from the Bab-al Mandeb to the Strait of Hormuz and even across the Indian Ocean to the Malacca Strait.

This restructuring, along with associated platform upgrades and new facilities, has refocused Iran’s naval strategy. Sayyari claims that new IRIN bases will extend from Bandar Abbas, near the Strait of Hormuz, to Pasa Bandar, adjacent to Pakistan, by 2015.<sup>5</sup> Senior IRIN and IRGCN commanders have emphasized that the realignment of existing bases and the creation of new bases will create a line of defense to prevent potential threats, namely U.S. and allied naval strike groups, from reaching the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf.

Since 2007, Tehran has worked actively to further enhance the capacity of Iran’s two navies and the influential role they play in the region. The regime’s use of its navies to expand Iran’s regional influence underlies its overall strategic calculus and will impact U.S. and allied naval operations and planning in the region for years to come. Iran has historically exaggerated its military capabilities, which makes comprehensive monitoring of Iranian statements, acquisitions, and activities all the more important. History suggests that, although Iran’s leaders may exaggerate their current capabilities in order to encourage the outsider’s perception of Iran’s regional dominance, their overstated capabilities are often later realized. Thus, though Tehran’s claims are not always corroborated by outside sources in the open-source, American policymakers should infer that these statements project Iran’s vision for force capability and adjust U.S. strategic and regional policy accordingly.

## IRAN'S NAVAL REORGANIZATION

### *Background*

Prior to the fall of the Shah in early 1979, the IRIN was Iran's preeminent naval force and served to secure the nation's maritime borders. There were plans in the 1970s to create a greater blue-water force as part of an effort to project an expanded regional presence, but the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the subsequent Iran-Iraq War shattered that vision.

In April 1979, shortly after the Iranian Revolution's ouster of the Shah and the founding of the Islamic Republic, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini established the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC). Khomeini instituted the IRGC to "guard the Revolution and its achievements" because he distrusted the conventional armed forces and doubted their loyalty.<sup>6</sup> Following the revolution, the IRIN was forced to share the waters of the Gulf with the newly created naval arm of the Revolutionary Guard Corps, which was established in September 1985 as an independent entity alongside the IRIN.<sup>7</sup>

The IRGCN played a crucial role in the Iran-Iraq War and used its experience in this conflict to refine its asymmetric maritime strategy. The IRGCN's unconventional vision was hardened during a series of destructive hostilities in the 1980s. During the Tanker War in 1984, Iranian and Iraqi tankers targeted each other and neutral ships, destroying an estimated 564 commercial vessels and killing approximately 430 civilians.<sup>8</sup> In Operation Praying Mantis in April 18, 1988, U.S. naval forces retaliated against Iranian naval resources after the USS *Samuel B. Roberts* was damaged by an Iranian mine. The operation damaged Iranian navy and intelligence infrastructure, destroying three Iranian speedboats, one frigate, and one gunboat.<sup>9</sup>

The type of naval warfare the IRGCN experienced during these formative years was far different from the experience of the IRIN, causing friction between the services. The two navies' lack of cohesion was evident even during the Iran-Iraq War as the IRGCN did not cooperate with the IRIN's attempts to bring its activities under the control of the regular military. Nonetheless, the unconventional approach of the IRGCN was favored by leadership in Tehran as a more useful weapon.<sup>10</sup> By 2011, almost twenty-five years after its creation, the IRGCN has assumed full responsibility for the Persian Gulf, relegating the IRIN to project extended deterrence and diplomatic engagement outside the Strait of Hormuz.

### *Maritime Reorganization*

Iran's naval reorganization restructured the geographic areas of responsibility for the IRIN and IRGCN and led to the openings of new bases and movement of assets to align with their new geographic responsibilities.<sup>11</sup> Instead of both services patrolling the same waters, the IRIN were granted ownership of the Caspian Sea and the Gulf of Oman, leaving the Persian Gulf to the IRGCN, albeit with some overlap of assets and roles in the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>12</sup>

This reorganization allowed the larger and more capable blue-water platforms of the IRIN to operate outside the limited confines of the Gulf, providing Iran with greater regional leverage. It also added complexity and depth to Iranian maritime defense, allowing them to use the Gulf of Oman to employ surface, subsurface, and cruise missile defenses along the southeastern coast well beyond the Strait of Hormuz. The reorganization also enhanced decentralized command and control (C2) architecture by simplifying IRIN and IRGCN waterspace management, likely mitigating a serious C2 vulnerability that a potential adversary could exploit in combat. Ultimately, it gave the IRGCN primacy in the Gulf, a constricted area that amplifies the natural benefits of a small, fast, unconventional force operating in its own backyard.

Although these changes reflected logical military goals, they also highlighted the growing political influence of the Revolutionary Guard. The timing of this reorganization, initiated on the heels of a significant shake-up in IRGC leadership in 2007, suggests that Tehran—under increased pressure internationally and domestically—needed to consolidate its most zealous assets in critical areas to guard the clerical regime against perceived threats from the West.

### *The Islamic Republic of Iran Navy*

Made up of approximately 200 ships and 18,000 personnel, the IRIN's surface combatant capability remains anchored by many of the same platforms that formed the core of the Shah's Navy in the 1970s.<sup>13</sup> Following the conflicts of the 1980s, the IRIN invested heavily in its subsurface and cruise missile inventories with the procurement of numerous modern anti-ship cruise missiles as well as three Russian *Kilo* class submarines, to the detriment of its fleet of surface ships. Due to limited domestic repair and overhaul facilities, the IRIN has faced readiness and endurance challenges, but domestic production capability appears to be improving.<sup>14</sup>

Despite maintenance challenges, in 2008 the IRIN initiated patrols in the Gulf of Aden, well outside its traditional Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman operating areas. The IRIN maintained this increased operational tempo, despite widespread doubts of its logistical and materiel readiness.

When describing the IRIN's mission, Sayyari often emphasizes the strategic force mission directed by Supreme Leader Khomeini. In a speech at Tehran University's Friday Prayers on Iran's Navy Day on November 26, 2010, he highlighted improvements to the IRIN, stressing the optimization of combat, surface, and aviation units; modernization of equipment aboard new surface and subsurface platforms; and the execution of exercises corresponding to threats.<sup>15</sup> He also stated that the IRIN eventually aims to be self-sufficient in producing its own equipment, a capability that has grown since 2007.<sup>16</sup>

#### *Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy*

Since 2007, the size of the IRGCN has surpassed that of the IRIN, growing to approximately 20,000 personnel. Inventory estimates range widely from hundreds to several thousand ships and small crafts.<sup>17</sup> The IRGCN has established a coastal defense brigade structure to manage anti-ship missile elements. As part of its asymmetric and flexible construct, the IRGCN developed a C2 structure that rewards aggressive, independent-minded subordinates.<sup>18</sup>

The rise of the IRGCN mirrors the larger rise of the Revolutionary Guard from its role as the guardian of clerical rule to a dominant role as the shadow government of Iran.<sup>19</sup> Clerical leadership in Iran has grown increasingly reliant on the IRGC to defend against internal pressure for political and economic reform and external pressure aimed at deterring Iran's nuclear program.

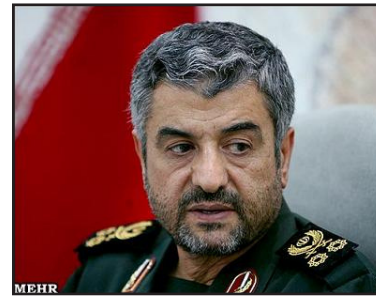
In July 2008, then-IRGCN Commander Habibollah Safaari promoted the IRGCN as the "protector of the world's energy jugular through the Strait of Hormuz."<sup>20</sup> At the 17<sup>th</sup> Annual IRGC Naval Symposium in June 2010, the commander of the IRGCN, Rear Admiral Ali Fadavi, provided his thoughts on the IRGCN's goals.<sup>21</sup> He emphasized the ways the IRGCN has sought to modernize in order to adjust to perceived changes in the political, military, and security arenas over the past few years.

## LEADERSHIP AND STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE

The statements of Iran's senior military leaders since 2007 provide insights into Iran's strategic maritime vision. Although IRIN and IRGCN leaders often include somewhat exaggerated claims, they often clarify the regime's goals and reflect how changes directed by the 2025 Vision have shaped the maritime strategic trajectory. A brief biographical review of senior IRGC and IRIN leadership since 2007 helps contextualize Iran's maritime changes observed over the last four years.

### IRGC Commander, General Mohamad Ali Jafari

*"For a long time, the enemy has realized the vulnerability of the presence of its warships in the Persian Gulf, and apparently one of its military and operational strategies is that if it wants to take any military action*



*against us, it will take these warships out of the Persian Gulf and station them near the Sea of Oman and Indian Ocean and launch operations against us from there. We are trying to increase our operational range capability and to gain access to the enemy vessels there, as well."*<sup>22</sup>

—IRGC Commander, General Mohamad Ali Jafari, April 2011

General Mohamad Ali Jafari was appointed in September 2007 to lead the Revolutionary Guard.<sup>23</sup> He is credited with refining Iran's thinking on asymmetric warfare and containing soft power threats to the regime. From 2005 to 2006, Jafari led a strategic research center that was responsible for innovative military strategies during a period when Iranian leadership was highly sensitive to perceived threats from the West.<sup>24</sup> His appointment, which coincided with the IRGC's transition from its original mission as defenders of clerical rule to its current role, likely explains the timing of the IRGCN's rise to preeminence in the Gulf.<sup>25</sup> Lending credibility to this idea, Jafari focused on the theory of asymmetric defense and unconventional warfare in his initial speech as commander.<sup>26</sup> In his speech, he expanded the concept of threats to the regime to include soft power threats of cultural and opposition movements.



### Minister of Defense, General Ahmad Vahidi

*“Equipping the country’s Naval and Armed forces with advanced and modern weaponry will bolster the stability and security of the region and play an effective role in consolidating Iran’s deterrent power.”<sup>27</sup>*

—Minister of Defense,  
General Ahmad Vahidi,  
September 2010



General Ahmad Vahidi was selected in August 2009 to serve as minister of Defense following four years as deputy minister of Defense. He rose through the ranks of the IRGC Qods Force, Iran’s primary asset for exporting the revolution.<sup>28</sup> He is one of five Iranians sought by Interpol for his alleged involvement in the 1994 bombing of a Jewish center in Buenos Aires and was implicated in the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia that killed 19 U.S. servicemen.<sup>29</sup> His selection as Defense Minister is widely considered one of many efforts by the IRGC to consolidate power and control of the country.

### IRGCN Commander, Admiral Ali Fadavi

*“The trend of modernization, equipment and change within the IRGCN will continue at a higher speed until the specified goals of increased offensive and assault capability, improved effectiveness and timeliness of response, and enhanced mobility, strength, and destruction capability of the IRGCN are attained.”<sup>30</sup>*

—IRGCN Commander, Admiral Ali Fadavi, June 2010

Admiral Ali Fadavi was appointed commander of the IRGC Navy in early 2010.<sup>31</sup> He previously led IRGCN forces near the end of the Iran-Iraq War, specifically during kinetic conflict with the U.S. Navy in which his forces sustained heavy losses. He is reputed to be a hard-liner, driven by a desire to avenge humiliation from the Iran-Iraq War and the U.S. military’s accidental 1988 downing of an Iranian jetliner. In interviews since he assumed command, he often alludes to that period of conflict and to U.S. maritime vulnerabilities. Fadavi has



specifically cited the damage to USS *Samuel B. Roberts* by an Iranian mine on April 14, 1988, and the resulting U.S. Navy attacks against Iran as an example of why larger capital ships are not useful, suggesting that he believes that the United States would not be able to tolerate a similar incident today.<sup>32</sup> He has repeatedly argued for a myriad of small but capable vessels as the key strategy to defend against larger U.S. ships. His comments often reflect his vision for defense of the Gulf: “Even small operations can produce huge effects in the strategic Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf.”<sup>33</sup> Fadavi also has a strong intelligence background, having previously served as the IRGC chief of Naval Intelligence.

### IRIN Commander, Admiral Habibollah Sayyari



*“The IRIN’s presence within the Gulf of Aden is not just aimed at combating piracy... As outlined in the directives set forth by our Supreme Leader, our strategy is to become a strategic naval force and maintain a presence in the high seas.”<sup>34</sup>*

—IRIN Commander,  
Admiral Habibollah  
Sayyari, September 2010

*“Littoral states of the Persian Gulf should certainly welcome the gesture of joint maneuvers with Iran. ... We heavily publicize that our exercises are a message of peace and friendship and we announce that we are prepared to establish regional security with our brothers from the navies of the Persian Gulf’s littoral states whom with we share a lot of joint interests. ... There is no need to have strangers present within the region because their presence is not to establish security but to ensure war and insecurity forever endures within the region.”<sup>35</sup>*

—Sayyari, October 2010

Admiral Habibollah Sayyari was appointed as the IRIN commander on August 20, 2007.<sup>36</sup> His formative years were spent with Maritime Special Operations forces, and he was injured in combat by mortar fire while supporting Iranian efforts to break the siege of Abadan in 1981. He preaches the value of the asymmetric approach, highlighting his perception of the limited value of U.S. naval assets: “Having a large spread of so much equipment has no basis because it just raises their [U.S.] vulnerability and makes them all the more of a sitting target for us.”<sup>37</sup> He has championed the IRIN’s new strategic mission following the

2007 reorganization, and he emphasizes the importance of the maritime domain in expanding Iran's influence.

## IRAN'S NAVAL PLATFORMS: ACQUISITION AND DOMESTIC PRODUCTION TRENDS

Naval foreign acquisition and domestic production trends since 2007 provide insight into the direction of Iran's two navies and reflect a strategy that emphasizes both asymmetry and self-reliance. Changes in Iran's naval order of battle since 2007 reflect how Iran has positioned its maritime assets in an attempt to build a force to support its 2025 Vision and maritime goals. Given the difficulty inherent in tracking IRGCN assets in the open-source, Iranian sources, while they may exaggerate, do reveal Iranian objectives for current and future capabilities and how the regime would like others to perceive it.<sup>38</sup>

### *IRIN Platforms & Capability*

The most compelling changes in IRIN inventory are in the subsurface and cruise missile categories. Iran has two primary submarine classes. The first is the diesel-powered, Russian-built *Kilo* class submarine. Primarily designed for anti-submarine and anti-ship warfare, the *Kilo* is roughly 70 meters long with a surface displacement of 2300 tons.<sup>39</sup> With six 533-millimeter torpedo tubes, it is capable of carrying 18 torpedoes or 24 mines.<sup>40</sup> Iran's *Kilo* SS inventory remains small with only three units and is unlikely to expand until a follow-on contract is secured with delivery of possibly three more modern (636 variant) *Kilo* or *Amur* submarines, potentially as early as 2015.<sup>41</sup> Due to their limited number and large size, Iran's *Kilo* class submarines are relatively easy to track; however, its potential arsenal—combined with the fact that it is regarded as one of the quietest submarines in the world—makes the *Kilo* a formidable asset.

Iran's other main submarine class is a mini-sub called the *Ghadir* (*Yono*), and domestic production of it has increased significantly in recent years. *Ghadir* class submarines are likely designed to support coastal or chokepoint reconnaissance in places like the Strait of Hormuz and perform tasks such as mine-laying, interdiction, and troop insertion. Displacing 100 tons, it has two 533-millimeter torpedo tubes.<sup>42</sup> With the IRIN responsible for waters outside the Strait, it is likely these assets will be used on the eastern side of the Strait and leverage the ports of Jask and Bandar Abbas for logistics support. Eleven units had been commissioned by the summer of 2011, with another

nine anticipated over the next two to three years.<sup>43</sup> Only three were in service prior to the 2007 reorganization. Recent Press reporting in the spring of 2011 indicated that the IRGCN will be the recipient of some of the new units, possibly indicating the IRGCN will continue to expand its mission and water space in the years ahead.<sup>44</sup> Given the *Ghadir*'s small size and greater inventory, U.S. efforts at targeting and tracking it are difficult; however, its combat power is significantly smaller than that of the *Kilo*. Press reports also indicate that a new submarine of approximately 500 tons will be produced.<sup>45</sup> This would be far heavier than the *Ghadir* but far less than a *Kilo*, and may present a hybrid subsurface threat in blue waters. It would be about as hard to track as the *Ghadir* but large enough to project a more significant anti-ship weapons capability, like the *Kilo*.<sup>46</sup>

This emphasis on expanding subsurface capability and increasing coastal defense cruise missile levels prevents the IRIN from simultaneously modernizing its surface fleet, forcing it to rely on antiquated core assets. Although domestic production of the *Jamaran* (*Mowj*) frigate and the addition of several upgraded *Combattante-II* (*Sina* class) frigates may provide basic life-cycle replacement for the surface fleet, there is certainly no comparable increase in capability or numbers to match growth of the subsurface, mine, fast boat, or missile inventories.<sup>47</sup> This reflects an asymmetric approach to the perceived maritime threat to Iran and perhaps assumes that the IRIN inventory, with incremental improvement, can achieve the expanded presence the IRIN seeks to project into the Gulf of Aden and Arabian Sea. Should conflict arise in the region, IRIN assets would presumably be dominated by the larger and more advanced naval platforms of the United States or other Western powers. Alternatively, with a time horizon of 2025, IRIN officials may perceive that there is more time to expand domestic production to address surface platforms than there is for the more critical deterrent capabilities brought by increased asymmetric maritime defense.

### *IRGCN Platforms & Goals*

Tracking specific numbers of IRGCN assets is substantially more challenging than tracking those of the IRIN, due to their smaller size and the fact that these assets can be housed along any piece of Iran's 1,100-kilometer shoreline.<sup>48</sup> The IRGCN has undertaken an aggressive effort to modernize and upgrade high-speed vessels in its inventory with core missile and torpedo capabilities. Since 2007, the modern Iranian fast inshore attack craft inventory has also increased

significantly.<sup>49</sup> The mid-August 2010 unveiling of twelve additional modern small boats that expand the *Peyskaap/Tir* class with torpedo and missile capabilities is a highlight of this trend.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, the IRGCN announced in August 2010 domestic production lines for *Bladerunner* high speed vessels, which will also be equipped with torpedoes or missiles and rockets, and at least twelve *Bavar 2* stealth flying boats, which could be used for reconnaissance or strike missions.<sup>51</sup>

In September 2010, IRGCN Commander Fadavi laid out his vision for acquisition and production that focuses on speed, lethality, and mass in building the IRGCN arsenal.<sup>52</sup> He contrasted the limited number of U.S. Navy ships with the hundreds at his disposal and emphasized speed and challenges inherent in tracking such vessels via radar as the key elements that allow his vessels to reach their intended target and employ either missiles or torpedoes in large numbers. Fadavi also emphasized that “large vessels do not have a place in the main organization of the IRGCN [because] choosing large vessels means that you play in the enemy’s court and under his rules.”<sup>53</sup>

Recent reports on Iran’s small boat program emphasize Iran’s plan to increase speeds from the current norm of 55 knots to speeds of 80 to 85 knots in future platforms.<sup>54</sup> Several technological advances, such as the use of polymer composites and slanted surfaces to minimize a ship’s radar signature and, by extension, U.S. detection, were highlighted in the reports. Recent reports also mentioned the development of greater balance and maneuverability to support onboard automated missile and torpedo capabilities.<sup>55</sup>

#### *IRIN-IRGCN Common Armaments*

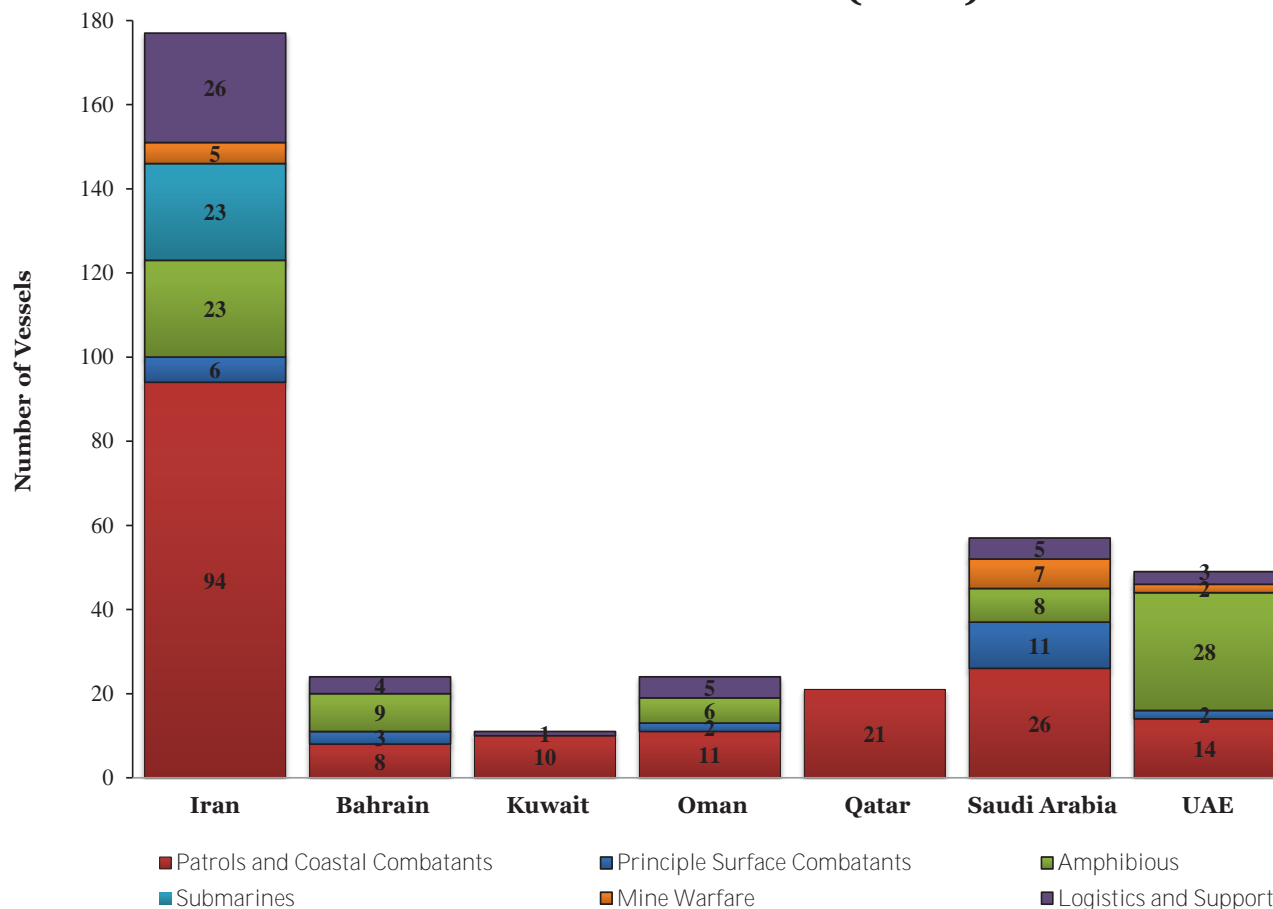
The IRIN and the IRGCN also possess a number of shared armaments. Production and import of the most lethal elements of the asymmetric arsenal (mines, torpedoes, and anti-ship missiles) are more difficult to assess. Although these assets were core elements prior to the reorganization, Iran’s emphasis on lethality and technological prowess is growing. As recently as December 2010, Sayyari commented that the IRIN has reached self-sufficiency in production of naval armaments, missiles, and torpedoes.<sup>56</sup>



MAP 1 | C-802 SACCADÉ MISSILE RANGE



### Comparative Iranian and GCC Naval Platforms (2010)



SOURCE: AMI INTERNATIONAL

In February 2011, Jafari claimed that the IRGCN would have new smart anti-ship ballistic missile with a 250- to 300-kilometer range, and that they were manufacturing radars with 500-kilometer ranges and had finished studies on developing a 300-kilometer coastal radar and 60-kilometer ship-borne radar.<sup>57</sup> This combination of improved maritime tracking with precise ballistic missile lethality could pose a far greater risk to naval units operating in the Persian Gulf and along the southeast coast of Iran and significantly expand the deterrent influence that Iran is building.

In addition, Iran has added new anti-ship cruise missiles, along with associated enhanced radar and C2 structures, to its inventory to supplement existing missile stockpiles.<sup>58</sup> Based on press images from the unveiling ceremony (and later confirmed by Western sources), the missiles appear to be variants of the C-802 anti-ship cruise missile used successfully by Lebanese Hizbollah to strike the Israeli Naval Ship Hanit, a *Saar-V* class corvette, in 2006.<sup>59</sup> The

extension of the box launcher reflects a slightly longer missile, which may indicate longer range. The use of these assets outside the Gulf would align with Sayyari’s October 2008 speech at the opening ceremony of the new IRIN naval base at Jask, a small fishing port 300 kilometers east of Bandar Abbas, in which he claimed, “A new line of defense has been established to the east of the Strait of Hormuz ... and if necessary we can prevent any enemy ship from entering the Persian Gulf.”<sup>60</sup>

#### Domestic Production

Tracking upgrades to fast attack craft, naval armaments, and missiles will become increasingly difficult as domestic production evolves and less foreign acquisition is required. Sayyari has echoed this in October 2010: “We have domestically produced all of the selected components onboard equipment that we have acquired in the past. Today, there is no need for reaching out to others because we can sustain our fleet’s presence.”<sup>61</sup> Fadavi announced on

February 6, 2011 that Iran had the capability to construct a new line of high-speed small boats (85 knots) with missile capacity starting in March 2011.<sup>62</sup>

The development of the *Jamaran* frigate and successful growth of *Ghadir* submarine production also indicate that Iran is expanding its production capability. Outside of statements by Fadavi and news reports, however, it is difficult to verify claims about Iranian domestic production and improved maintenance and refurbishment capacity through non-Iranian sources. Iran's most recent announcement, that design plans for an aircraft carrier had been approved and that work would begin shortly, is by far the most ambitious statement put forward by the regime and provides more evidence of the regime's proclivity for making grand announcements without necessarily having the wherewithal to implement them.<sup>63</sup>

It is unclear whether sanctions have impeded Iran's ability to fund its defense budget and meet its military hardware production goals. For example, in January 2011, Bushehr's provincial governor alluded to the way financial limits have affected the speed of the maritime transition as part of the reorganization. He said work in eastern Iran had been halted by the "heavy expenses associated with erecting facilities" and provided a 20-year timetable for garrisons to shift.<sup>64</sup> Although his extended timeframe may have been aimed at the Iranian public, economic constraints to building capacity in southeast Iran may be important indicators in the future.<sup>65</sup>

The Iranian defense budget has averaged around 3 percent of Iranian GDP over the past decade. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies Military Balance, since 2007, Iranian military spending has fluctuated between 2.5 percent and 3 percent, though it has declined every year during that period, most likely due to the global economic recession. Military spending in 2007 was 2.87 percent in 2007 and 2.53 percent in 2010.<sup>66</sup> Alternatively, AMI International, which evaluates international shipbuilding trends, assessed Iran's 2010 military spending to be closer to 5 percent of GDP. The AMI data, which is based on ongoing procurement efforts, projected spending to remain at 5 percent as long as sanctions and increased international pressure drive the heightened threat environment.<sup>67</sup>

## AN EXPANDING REGIONAL APPROACH

The IRIN under Sayyari is committed to expanding its footprint and has a long-term view. Iran's naval

reorganization, driven in part by the resurgence of the IRGCN but also by the Supreme Leader's geostrategic vision, enables the IRIN to operate outside the limited confines of the Gulf and harkens back to the Shah's blue-water regional maritime vision of the 1970s. Sayyari repeatedly cites the Supreme Leader's directive to expand the Navy's reach as a critical underpinning to Iran's future prosperity and has underscored this with two years of anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and a historic February 2011 deployment to Latakia, Syria.<sup>68</sup>

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*"The IRIN currently has a presence within the Gulf of Aden, the security corridor and some areas of the northern Indian Ocean. However, we plan on having a presence off the coasts of India and inside the vital Malacca Strait. The strait forms a point of the triangle in which a high percentage of the world's energy is exchanged and transferred. Ships within the Persian Gulf which set sail towards the Suez Canal and enter the Mediterranean Sea and those ships which set sail eastward, all pass through this triangle. By expanding our presence with this triangle, we will be able to completely oversee the transit of the world's energy and at that same time protect our own interests. At the same time, we will have greater deterrence power within this region when facing enemies and rivals of the Islamic Republic of Iran."*<sup>68</sup>

—IRIN Deputy for Operations, Rear Admiral Qasem

Rostamabadi, August 2010

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Iran clearly seeks to expand its primacy in the Indian Ocean as well, albeit in a 2025 framework. The IRIN presence in international waters is part of Tehran's enhanced strategic policy to "display Iran's power on an international stage," and it correlates with the regime's desire to be recognized as a regional hegemon.<sup>70</sup>

Iran is skilled, perhaps second only to North Korea, in using tactical military activity to amplify strategic messaging in order to influence regional and Western political decision-makers. The recent IRIN deployment to the Mediterranean Sea from February to March 2011 provides a useful

example.<sup>71</sup> While there may have been relevant tactical objectives for the deployment, it gave legitimacy to Sayyari and Rostamabadi's larger strategic message of the IRIN's expanding influence at a time of great uncertainty in the region.<sup>72</sup> The Mediterranean deployment concluded with a new naval cooperation agreement with Syria that Sayyari signed aboard the IRIN auxiliary *Kharg* while pierside in Latakia.<sup>73</sup> This follows December 2010 overtures with Djibouti and maritime partnership efforts with Oman in February 2011.<sup>74</sup> With the IRGCN focused on the hard-power mission of deterring and potentially defending the Persian Gulf from Western and allied threats, the IRIN is able to focus on a broader role designed to expand Iranian influence and increase its leverage in the region at the expense of the West.

Iran's public statements reflect a desire to partner with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) neighbors in the maritime domain, arguing that Iran is a more credible partner than Western nations, which it believes are responsible for the instability in the region. Iranian officials have conducted an extensive outreach campaign to make this case to those countries that may be amenable to Iran's influence. Ultimately, these efforts reflect both Iran's perception of its role as a critical regional power and its emphasis on soft power expansion to deter potential aggression. Overtures may also be designed to split the GCC block between the more amenable Oman and Qatar and the less-friendly states of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>75</sup> The timing of these deployments and agreements also coincides with the U.S. drawdown in Iraq and may represent an effort to fill a void Iran perceives to be developing. Iran's most intriguing evolving relationship may be with Djibouti following the December 2010 visit and subsequent joint military agreement. That move provides Iran influence and potential presence at the strategic Bab-al Mandeb chokepoint.<sup>76</sup>

### **IRGCN in Qatar in December 2010**

In December 2010, the IRGCN dispatched several ships to Qatar as part of an effort to expand defense ties and cooperation with its neighbor. This followed the participation of a Qatari military commander in IRGCN drills during Exercise Great Prophet 5 in April 2010.<sup>77</sup> Although the IRIN is traditionally the force used to reflect the face of the regime to its neighbors, the recent visit of IRGCN personnel and assets to Qatar reflects the increased role the IRGCN is playing within the Gulf and the importance Tehran places in trying to build external partnerships.

### **IRIN in Djibouti in December 2010**

Sayyari led a delegation to Djibouti in December 2010 under the pretext of supporting regional antipiracy efforts. Sayyari returned with agreements to support regional counter-terrorism efforts and to coordinate ship repair and maintenance functions. The Djiboutian military commander noted Iran's ability to provide naval training and safeguard of territorial waters in addition to logistics and equipment efforts.<sup>78</sup> An Iranian partnership with Djibouti would provide the Iranian Navy a much-needed forward detachment location to enable more frequent operations in the Gulf of Aden, Bab-al Mandeb Strait, Red Sea, and even the Mediterranean Sea. The agreements with Djibouti may portend a greater logistics footprint in the Gulf of Aden, enabling a larger IRIN presence in this region.<sup>79</sup>

### **IRIN in the Mediterranean in February 2011**

In an unprecedented deployment, in February 2011, the Iranian flagship *Arvand*, a corvette, and its supply ship, *Kharg*, transited the Mediterranean to Latakia, Syria before returning through the Suez Canal on March 3, 2011.<sup>80</sup> This port visit was ostensibly part of a midshipman training deployment. Israel's foreign minister labeled this deployment a "provocation," and certainly, the timing could not have been more opportunistic for Tehran as popular upheaval spread across North Africa and the Middle East.

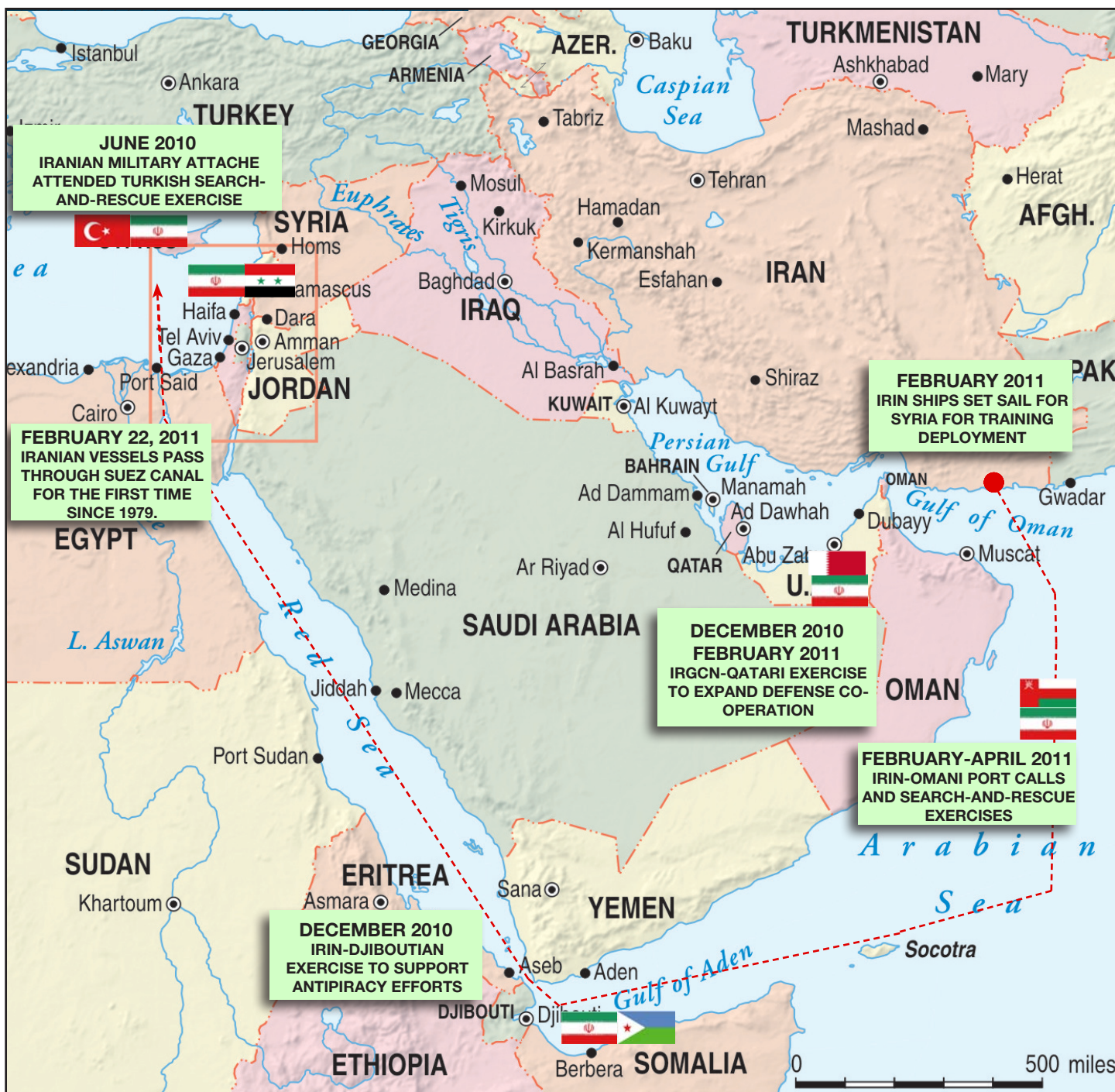
### **IRIN and Oman Joint Naval Exercises**

IRIN and Omani naval forces conducted joint exercises in December 2010 and February 2011.<sup>81</sup> Although limited to Search and Rescue (SAR) serials, it could be expanded beyond relief and rescue drills to a more tactical exercise.<sup>82</sup> This coincides with approximately eight Iranian port calls to Oman over the past two years.<sup>83</sup>

### **Open Invitation for 2011 Joint Exercises in the Gulf**

The IRGCN attempted to build off their trip to Qatar by announcing plans to conduct joint military exercises in the Gulf to establish stronger security ties and boost unity by interacting with Gulf neighbors.<sup>84</sup> This effort is clearly intended to communicate to U.S. and allied navies operating as part of the combined maritime task forces in the region that Iran can dominate the Gulf navies.<sup>85</sup> It is also intended to suggest that GCC countries are better off without the assistance of the U.S. Fifth Fleet and its allies.





MAP 2 | IRANIAN NAVY JOINT EXERCISES

**Iranian Military Observer to Turkish Search and Rescue Exercise**

Iran’s military attaché to Turkey attended a search and rescue exercise in the eastern Mediterranean on June 16, 2010 while he was in Turkey for meetings.<sup>86</sup> This was the first time Iran had sent a bystander to participate in this type of event with Turkey. At the same time Turkey did not invite Israel, previously a close ally, following a violent

altercation between Israeli commandos and Turkish civilians on a Gaza aid flotilla in May 2010.

**IRGCN Asymmetric Defense**

While the IRIN expanded its operational footprint, the IRGCN strategy remained focused on increasing its lethality and complexity in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz. In addition to aggressively expanding its

inventory of missile shooters to support existing asymmetric strategic pillars of mine warfare and coastal defense cruise missiles, the IRGCN may be expanding its strategy with the integration of subsurface assets.<sup>87</sup> It is unclear how quickly this can happen in light of training, domestic production, and personnel issues, but statements from both the IRGC and IRGCN commander give credibility to this significant step.<sup>88</sup> With the IRIN focused more on their soft power role, it is possible that *Yono* and other minisub ventures will ultimately belong to the IRGCN, leaving the IRIN to operate with *Kilo* or follow-on submarines in the blue-water environs.

### IRAN MARITIME DOMAIN IN 2025

The U.S. deterrence calculus grows more difficult as the IRGCN develops more lethal naval assets, concurrent with the development of smart anti-ship ballistic missiles, enhanced surveillance, and future asymmetric initiatives.<sup>89</sup> At a minimum, the expanding IRIN footprint and growing IRGCN arsenal should give U.S. military planners pause to reconsider long-held assumptions about Iran's tactical and strategic capabilities and depth. Although many may harbor a healthy skepticism of Iran's ability to achieve its vision of regional strength by 2025, the strides made to date are significant.

Ultimately, an Iran that has strengthened its regional position by expanded outreach and greater lethality in the Gulf will be a more challenging policy problem for U.S. strategists and a greater threat to Iran's GCC neighbors if the current lack of diplomacy between the U.S. and Iran holds. This presents both challenges and opportunities for the U.S. and its allies.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

In order to successfully deter or engage Iran, U.S. policymakers must understand what drives Tehran's underlying agenda. Indeed, Iran's calculus is more concerned with soft-power threats to the regime—both internal and external—than hard-power, external threats. Rather than challenge Western nations with its conventional capability, the regime intends to have the realigned IRIN extend Iran's regional influence. Meanwhile, enhanced IRGCN lethality is designed to strengthen Iran's defensive posture, providing greater deterrence against potential attackers. This strategic evolution complicates allied planning and the maritime environment but also provides

new opportunities for regional action and engagement.

➤ **The United States should work to enhance regional maritime partnerships and build upon existing maritime cooperation to contain any soft power Iran hopes to create with its navy and to offset IRGCN modernization.** The maritime forces of the GCC can play a valuable role in this regard, as a U.S. presence will remain limited in type and number for the foreseeable future. The smaller, more agile forces of the GCC and Pakistan provide a comparable offset to Iran's influence and order of battle. Iran routinely cites speed and numerical advantage when comparing its arsenal to the standard and fairly predictable U.S. Carrier Strike Group (CSG) offering.<sup>90</sup>

Were a CSG to enter the Strait of Hormuz with an additional ten to twelve escorts—comprised of corvettes, patrol boats, or smaller craft operated by the Saudis, Emiratis, Bahrainis, and even possibly Pakistanis—the Iranians would certainly take note. An alternative asymmetric approach would be to bolster GCC maritime littoral force capabilities, perhaps using the antipiracy mission in the Gulf of Aden as a valid justification. Although the near-term focus would be Somali piracy, any upgrade in platforms and real-world experience would disquiet Iran's defense leadership.

➤ **Adjust contingency and training scenarios to reflect Iran's evolving maritime strategy.** The growing power of the IRGC within the Iranian regime, coupled with IRGCN primacy within the Gulf, increase the likelihood of a tactical incident with strategic ramifications. The Iranian Shi'a concept of resistance as an objective is difficult to understand in a Western context. The philosophy of resistance emanates from the 1979 Revolution and reflects a bond between the government and its people against the outside world. It is also a useful strategic framework from which to justify the development of proxy militants and international support.<sup>91</sup> Iran and the IRGCN realize that direct, kinetic action is not a feasible means by which to remove U.S. influence in the region, and they have mastered the art of asymmetric resistance as a means to achieve their aims over time. If one of Iran's strategic centers of gravity relies on an image of sacrifice and resistance to gain legitimacy and resonate with Iranians and disenfranchised Muslims worldwide, it affects Iran's calculus in the maritime domain. From this perspective, the regime may calculate that it would benefit from losing a limited kinetic conflict—concurrent with a well-sequenced strategic message—turning a tactical loss into a strategic gain.



Though Iran could make a rational decision to initiate a limited kinetic strike to further its strategic aims, an alternative scenario exists. An incident could arise from having the less professional (or more fervent) IRGCN sailors overstep their commanders' intent, miscalculate at a tactical level, and set off a chain of events that could spiral into conflict. Coalition Naval Task Force (CTF) training needs to adapt as the IRGCN expands its arsenal of high-speed missile and torpedo shooters, coastal radar and missile suites, and possibly its mini-submarine force. CTFs must have the maturity and judgment to handle the increased stress brought on by multi-axis, high-speed probes while operating in the Gulf.

➤ **Adjust U.S. and allied operating patterns in the region to reflect Iran's growing capability in the Gulf.** Statements from Iranian naval leadership reflect their confidence that U.S. and allied naval assets are predictable and easy to target. Future naval deployments in the Gulf should attempt to counter this assumption by operating in ways that challenge Iran's ability to monitor and track allied assets. This could include using the smaller units of the GCC in unpredictable patterns and locations. The regional deployment of the Littoral Combat Ship (LCS), a smaller, stealthy surface combat platform that easily operates close to shore, may also provide additional flexibility in this area.

Moreover, allied navies need to refine their calculus to account for the IRIN's growing operating area. For example, Iran's defense in depth could eventually include the covert deployment of C-802 missiles in the Red Sea, delivered by an asset like *Kharg* to surrogates in Yemen or Eritrea. Although improbable today, the chaos in Yemen and future second-order effects from the Arab Spring may provide Iran with future partnership opportunities. The recent deployment of an Iranian submarine to the Red Sea could also complicate the subsurface threat in the same areas that were once considered safe passage.

➤ **Dedicate attention to evaluate the reorganization's progress in infrastructure and domestic manufacturing.** Iran has historically exaggerated its military capabilities, which makes comprehensive monitoring all the more important. Recent examples include the 2006 demonstration of the *Hoot* high-speed torpedo and the *Bavar 2* flying boat. Both of these platforms were announced during high-profile exercises but were reportedly not integrated into the Iranian force structure until much later and still may not be. Additionally, Iran infamously doctored photos from the July 2008 ballistic missile

launches to exaggerate the number of launches.<sup>92</sup> Claims in 2006 and 2007 of using an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) to overfly U.S. aircraft carriers were also discounted as Iran's footage showed aircraft that were no longer in service.<sup>93</sup>

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*"The IRIN's number one priority is the development of the country's coastline out to Chabahar port and as far as Pasa Bandar. We have several different plans for this development. [Veleyat] calls for the expansion of the IRIN through the construction and development of facilities and equipment along the coast... We plan on having a presence off the coasts of India and inside the vital Malacca Strait."<sup>93</sup> —IRIN Operations Rear Admiral Rostamabadi, October 2010*

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Nonetheless, there are elements of truth in these exaggerations that bear further examination. Iran has improved both its ballistic missile capabilities and UAV inventory, albeit on a slower timetable than claimed. This is a cautionary point in light of recent Iranian claims of smart anti-ship ballistic missiles, IRGCN expansion into submarine platforms, and out of area submarine patrols, all of which at first glance appear to exaggerate Iranian capabilities.

An accurate U.S. deterrence calculus requires a thorough and continued evaluation of Iran's domestic production capacity and its resulting self-sufficiency in naval warfare. Also relevant is an analysis of the degree to which sanctions have or have not affected Iranian defense expenditures and domestic manufacturing of naval weapons. The reorganization process must also be closely monitored. Construction and expansion of facilities at Asuluyeh in the Persian Gulf and at Jask and Chabahar in the Gulf of Oman are critical elements of a mature Iranian strategy and will be leading indicators of Iranian progress towards the regime's 2025 vision.

➤ **Consider the utility of engagement with the IRIN as a conduit to Tehran.** In order to obtain future stability, Iran may ultimately be required to play a constructive regional role. A policy of sanctions and isolation may be useful in the near-term, but Iran's geostrategic position could ultimately drive western policymakers to move beyond the

current impasse toward engagement. One implication of Iran's divergence in maritime missions and the expanding IRIN naval presence is the potential to leverage the IRIN as a means to increase communications with Iran. The Gulf of Aden counter-piracy task force (Combined Task Force 151), which started in January 2009, is one such target of opportunity for greater communication and even maritime cooperation. It has a proven track record in bringing together more than 20 nations for a common cause.<sup>95</sup> Another opportunity would be to invite the IRIN to participate in a regional international exercise. For example, Pakistan hosted *Aman 2011*, a five-day, 39-country exercise in March 2011 that was designed to address transnational threats and provide a common forum for information sharing and mutual understanding.<sup>96</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Iran's maritime strategy continues to mature. The reorganization initiated in 2007 will drive IRGCN and IRIN operations and production in the years ahead and will present new challenges to U.S. policymakers, naval leadership, and forces operating in the region. Several conclusions follow, based on the changes observed over the four years since the reorganization.

Senior IRIN and IRGCN commanders emphasize that the realignment of existing bases and the creation of new bases will form a line of defense to prevent potential threats, namely U.S. and allied naval strike groups, from reaching the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf. This reorganization does more than extend Iran's defensive depth along the southeastern coast. Indeed, it reflects a significant change in strategy and sets forth a vision in which the IRIN has regional relevance beyond its shores and provides a critical underpinning to Iran's 2025 economic outlook that defines Iran's regional prominence and prosperity as contingent on naval expansion and development.<sup>97</sup> This expansion, if realized, would ultimately carry Iran's influence to the strategic maritime triangle that defines the maritime commerce routes and extends from the Bab-al Mandeb to the Strait of Hormuz and even across the Indian Ocean to the Malacca Strait. Likewise, the threat the IRGCN poses would mature and expand, not geographically, but in terms of its deterrent capability.

Reorganization allows the larger and more capable blue-water platforms of the IRIN to operate outside the limited confines of the Gulf, providing Iran with greater regional

leverage. It also adds complexity and depth to Iranian maritime defense as Iran will be able to use the Gulf of Oman to employ surface, subsurface, and cruise missile defenses along the southeastern coast well beyond the Strait of Hormuz. Ultimately, it gives the IRGCN primacy in the Gulf, a constricted area that amplifies the natural benefits of a small, fast, unconventional force.

The IRGCN has concentrated on aggressively improving its baseline naval capabilities by building speed, lethality, and mass as the asymmetric backbone of deterrence in the Gulf. In addition to procuring and producing a faster, small boat order of battle, new platforms are designed to carry short and medium range anti-ship missiles and/or torpedoes for increased lethality.

The IRIN has been relegated primarily to a subordinate defensive role vis-à-vis the IRGCN, likely reflecting the increasing role of the Revolutionary Guard within Iranian security and politics. This simplifies Iranian maritime C2 and minimizes the overlap of redundant naval forces but leads to new concerns about IRGCN operations in the Gulf and the potential for unintended escalation of tactical incidents.

Iran has renewed its emphasis on domestic military production to meet mission needs. Both the IRIN and IRGCN have redoubled efforts to ensure platforms, weapons, and supporting command and control capabilities are produced domestically to minimize the need to rely on foreign acquisition in light of heavy sanctions and unreliable partners. Naval leaders have been quick to publicly highlight domestic production capacity as it develops.

The role of the GCC and regional allied partners will be essential in mitigating any Iranian advances in the maritime domain. The GCC provides a more symmetric force to counter IRGCN efforts in the Gulf itself, and a regional approach mitigates some of the soft power influence that the IRIN seeks by expanding its operational area.

U.S. and allied naval planners need to ensure that training, contingency planning, and operations reflect the increased sophistication of the IRGCN threat and the greater operational reach of the IRIN. Threat planning needs to account for IRIN operations in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, smart ballistic missile threats, and the IRGCN expansion into subsurface operations. Although these capabilities may be aspirational, they will eventually arrive, and it is better to prepare to prepare to confront

these capabilities now rather than once they have become operational.

Iran's growing emphasis on domestic maritime production and self-sufficiency should force regional and allied intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance efforts to broaden in scope and account for infrastructure development along the coast and domestic maritime industry stability and growth.

Eventually, Iran may be compelled to play a constructive role in the region due to its geostrategic importance. Greater cooperation with the IRIN through existing multinational initiatives could be one possible way to reduce the tension between the United States and the regime in Tehran. Alternatively, it could be a mechanism by which to fracture Iranian unity of effort.

Ultimately, the growing sophistication of IRGCN lethality, speed, and mass provides a more complex challenge in any potential future conflict. The expanding regional role of the IRIN provides Tehran a complementary naval capability that relies less on new missiles and more on influence projection and reflects a long-term vision for greater regional influence to both support economic growth and mitigate Western threats. This maturing maritime strategy will require U.S. policymakers to revisit their approach to operations in the Persian Gulf and surrounding region.





# NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Interview with IRIN Commander Sayyari, Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, Aug 2010.

<sup>2</sup> “Iran’s Naval Forces: From Guerilla Warfare to a Modern Naval Strategy,” Office of Naval Intelligence, Fall 2009.

<sup>3</sup> “Islamic Republic of Iran Outlook Plan for 2025,” Islamic Republic of Iran Ministry of Cooperatives; and “Iran 2011,” The Business Year, January 2011, describe aspects of Vision 2025.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Admiral Sayyari, Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, August 2010.

<sup>5</sup> “Iran’s Naval Forces: From Guerilla Warfare to a Modern Naval Strategy,” Office of Naval Intelligence, Fall 2009.

<sup>6</sup> David Crist, “Gulf of Conflict: A History of U.S.-Iranian Confrontation at Sea, Policy Focus #95,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2009. Their irregular status and direction to ‘guard the Revolution and its achievements’ was given a formal legal framework with the passage of the Iranian Constitution on December 3, 1979. Crist points out that IRIN commanders from 1989 to 2005 were brought over from the IRGCN.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Kaplan, “Asymmetry at Sea,” The Atlantic, October 16, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> David Crist, “Gulf of Conflict: A History of U.S.-Iranian Confrontation at Sea, Policy Focus #95,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2009.

<sup>9</sup> David Crist, “Gulf of Conflict: A History of U.S.-Iranian Confrontation at Sea, Policy Focus #95,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Fariborz Hagshenass, “Iran’s Asymmetric Naval Warfare, Policy Focus #87,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2008. Fariborz Hagshenass details the early friction between the IRIN and IRGCN.

<sup>11</sup> “Iran’s Naval Forces: From Guerilla Warfare to a Modern Naval Strategy,” Office of Naval Intelligence, Fall 2009.

<sup>12</sup> IRIN Technical Command CO, Rear Admiral Amir Rastegari, explained: “During reconnaissance patrols, the IRIN monitors all inbound units of foreign countries from the Sea of Oman and the Chabahar region up to the northern Persian Gulf and information is exchanged simultaneously. Information about the foreign units ... is drawn up by the IRIN and then once these vessels enter the Persian Gulf, their information is immediately relayed to the IRGCN for their disposal.” Fars News Agency, November 29, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> “Iran, Navy,” IHS Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment, May 5, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> See the section Acquisition and Domestic Production Trends.

<sup>15</sup> Islamic Republic News Agency, November 26, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> AMI International assessment of Iranian maritime production. “Iran Overview,” AMI International, December 2010.

<sup>17</sup> “Iran, Navy,” IHS Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment, May 5, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> This strategy, also known as mosaic defense, decentralizes the command structure and allows greater tactical autonomy by individual commanders. The March 2007 detainment of British sailors following a stand-off with IRGCN elements is a recent example in which a senior IRGCN commander in the Northern Gulf was rewarded for action, although his actions were probably not approved prior by his chain of command, as described in Washington Institute Policy Focus #95. David Crist, “Gulf of Conflict: A History of U.S.-Iranian Confrontation at Sea, Policy Focus #95,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Elliot Hen-Tov and Nathan Gonzalez, “The Militarization of Post-Khomeini Iran: Praetorianism 2.0,” The Washington Quarterly, Winter 2010.

<sup>20</sup> “Massive Numbers of IRGC Missiles and Vessels Are Ready for Direct Action at the Strait of Hormuz” [in Persian], Fars News Agency, July 8, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> “IRGC Navy has reached its highest defense capability: commander,” Tehran Times, June 22, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Fars News Agency Interview, April 22, 2011.

<sup>23</sup> “Iran changes Revolutionary Guards commander: TV,” Reuters, September 1, 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Vahid Sepehri, “Iran: New Commander Takes Over Revolutionary Guards,” Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, September 4, 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Elliot Hen-Tov and Nathan Gonzalez, “The Militarization of Post-Khomeini Iran: Praetorianism 2.0,” The Washington Quarterly, Winter 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Jafari’s statements reflected a new direction for the IRGC in 2007 and 2008 – which coincided with new IRGCN responsibilities. “Pasdaran-Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRCG),” GlobalSecurity.org, February 13, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> “Stealth flying boats join IRGC fleet,” Press TV, September 28, 2010.

<sup>28</sup> Eli Lake, “Iran defense minister a terror suspect,” The Washington Times, August 21, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> “Iran rejects as ‘baseless’ Argentina’s accusation it was involved in bombing,” Kuwait News Agency, October 3, 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Fars News Agency, June 2010.

<sup>31</sup> “Iran’s leader appoints new Navy chief,” Islamic Republic News Agency, August 20, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> David Crist, “Gulf of Conflict: A History of U.S.-Iranian Confrontation at Sea, Policy Focus #95,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2009; Jaam-e-Jam TV Network, September 2010.

<sup>33</sup> “Commander Stresses IRGC Readiness to Combat Enemy Troops in PG,” Fars News Agency, October 29, 2007.

<sup>34</sup> Fars News Agency, September 13, 2010.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Rear Admiral Sayyari, Mehr News Agency, October 19, 2010.

<sup>36</sup> “Iran’s leader appoints new Navy chief,” Iranian News Agency, August 20, 2007.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Rear Admiral Sayyari, Mehr News Agency, September 26, 2010.

<sup>38</sup> Specific order of battle figures in this and subsequent sections are derived from multiple sources to include AMI International, Jane’s Fighting Ships and World Navies, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Naval Institute Guide to Combat Fleets of the World and Global Security.org. These figures help understand production and acquisition areas of growth for Iran.

<sup>39</sup> “Russian Navy: Project 877 Kilo class, Project 636 Kilo class, Diesel-Electric Torpedo Submarine,” Federation of American Scientists, September 7, 2000.

<sup>40</sup> “Russian Navy: Project 877 Kilo class, Project 636 Kilo class, Diesel-Electric Torpedo Submarine,” Federation of American Scientists, September 7, 2000.

<sup>41</sup> “Iran Overview,” AMI International, December 2010.

<sup>42</sup> Fariborz Hagshenass, “Iran’s Asymmetric Naval Warfare, Policy Focus #87,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2008.

<sup>43</sup> “Iran – Ghadir Class Diesel-Electric Submarine (SS),” AMI International, December 2010.

<sup>44</sup> Jafari expressed the inherent value for the IRGCN of subsurface asymmetric capabilities: “Underwater is a good area (of activity) that is used by our forces but in an asymmetric and small-scale form, meaning that we are not seeking to build large and giant submarines since they are vulnerable.” Interview with General Mohamad Ali Jafari, Fars News, April 24, 2011.

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<sup>45</sup> Fariborz Hagshenas, "Iran's Asymmetric Naval Warfare, Policy Focus #87," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2008.

<sup>46</sup> The announced size is four times the tonnage of the Yono but only a fourth of a *Kilo*. This announcement may reflect a renewed focus on a mid-range *Kilo* replacement, the *Q'aem*, which appears to be based on the Russian Amur 950 class according to AMI's December 2010 "Iran Overview." "Iran Overview," AMI International, December 2010.

<sup>47</sup> The second Mowj-class corvette, *Veleyat*, is expected to be commissioned in 2012 according to AMI. A total of six units are expected by 2016, with two operating in the Caspian Sea. They will likely replace the older PF 103 and Alvand class corvettes that are currently in service. "Iran Overview," AMI International, December 2010.

<sup>48</sup> Iran's southern shoreline is 1100 km according to the CIA World Factbook.

<sup>49</sup> Based on comparing multiple Order of Battle counts of the core small boat assets (RADM Fadavi citing IPS and Bladerunner variants) that make up the modern inventory as compared to 2007 inventory.

<sup>50</sup> "Iran to Arm Own 'Bladerunner' Boats: Commander," Agence France-Presse, August 10, 2010.

<sup>51</sup> "Iran to Arm Own 'Bladerunner' Boats: Commander," Agence France-Presse, August 10, 2010; "Iran unveils squadrons of flying boats," CNN, September 28, 2010.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with RADM Fadavi, Jaam-e Jam Online, September 2010.

<sup>53</sup> "Navy commander details Iran's military capabilities," Jaam-e Jam, August 28, 2010.

<sup>54</sup> "Iran shows off 'high destruction' speed boats in war games," The Telegraph, April 22, 2010; "Iran to Mass-Produce IRGC's Fastest Speedboat," Fars News Agency, March 14, 2011.

<sup>55</sup> Mashregh News, March 2011. Mashregh News, though considered a hard-line news agency in Iran, reported in detail on the new speedboat program, which has also been reported on by multiple other sources.

<sup>56</sup> Fars News Agency, December 2010.

<sup>57</sup> "Iran mass producing smart ballistic missiles: IRGC chief," Tehran Times, February 8, 2011; "Iran to Unveil New Home-Made Ballistic Missiles Next Week," Fars News Agency, May 18, 2011; "Iranian Ballistic Missile Scores a Direct Hit on a Target Ship," Defense Update, February 8, 2011.

<sup>58</sup> Press TV coverage of Defense Minister Ahmad Vahidi and Rear Admiral Sayyari conference unveiling; Fars News Agency, January 3, 2011. Of the three sites for cruise missile systems (light, independent, and extensive) the third includes target detection, launch pads, and radar guidance systems using a single C2 center.

<sup>59</sup> John Diamond, "Trained eye can see right through box of weapons," *USA Today*, August 17, 2006.

<sup>60</sup> Hossein Aryan, "A new line of defence: Iran's naval capabilities," IHS Jane's, January 27, 2009.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with IRIN Commander Rear Admiral Sayyari, Mehr News Agency, October 19, 2010.

<sup>62</sup> Fadavi highlighted the effort to mount missile launchers among other weapons on to the domestic version of the UK Bladerunner. Islamic Republic News Agency, February 6, 2011.

<sup>63</sup> "Iran Navy to build aircraft carriers," Press TV, September 28, 2011.

<sup>64</sup> Comments to the press from Navajonob.

<sup>65</sup> The Provincial Governor may be overstating the delays involved in moving forces from Bushehr.

<sup>66</sup> "Military Balance-Iran GDP Data," International Institute for Strategic Studies,

<sup>67</sup> Data on acquisition and defense spending come primarily from AMI International and their Iran country study focused naval construction

and modernization forecasts. AMI International, Dec 2010.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Admiral Sayyari, Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, August 2010.

<sup>69</sup> Maritime Organization conference interview in August 2010 by Deputy for Operations of the IRIN, Read Admiral Rostamabadi, Port and Maritime Organization.

<sup>70</sup> Coverage of Admiral Sayyari at the welcome home ceremony for PF-103 class patrol ship NAGHDI, Fars News Agency.

<sup>71</sup> Ernesto Londono and Thomas Erdbrink, "Iran hails warships' mission in Mediterranean," *Washington Post*, February 22, 2011; Mohamed Yusri, Edmund Blair and Tim Pearce, "Iran ships to return via Suez Canal, says official," Reuters, March 2, 2011.

<sup>72</sup> Iranian press cited anti-piracy training and surveillance and reconnaissance as the missions of this deployment. The *Alvand* itself is not a significant threat, although the *Kharg* raises suspicion simply due to its logistics capacity and potential to transport weapons and materiel to Iranian surrogates in the region.

<sup>73</sup> "Iran, Syria Deepening Strategic Defense Ties," Fars News Agency, February 28, 2011.

<sup>74</sup> "Iran, Djibouti Agree on Naval Cooperation," Fars News Agency, January 11, 2011; "Iran, Oman hold joint naval drill," Xinhuanet.com, February 10, 2011; "IRI, Oman joint marine rescue maneuver starts," Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, February 9, 2011.

<sup>75</sup> Both Bahrain and Kuwait have recently expelled Iranian diplomats for espionage and the UAE remains at odds with Iran over several disputed islands.

<sup>76</sup> "Iran, Djibouti Agree on Naval Cooperation," Fars News Agency, January 11, 2011.

<sup>77</sup> Fars News Agency, January 8, 2011.

<sup>78</sup> Fars News Agency, January 11, 2011.

<sup>79</sup> "Iran, Djibouti Agree on Naval Cooperation," Fars News Agency, January 11, 2011.

<sup>80</sup> Ernesto Londono and Thomas Erdbrink, "Iran hails warships' mission in Mediterranean," *Washington Post*, February 22, 2011; Mohamed Yusri, Edmund Blair and Tim Pearce, "Iran ships to return via Suez Canal, says official," Reuters, March 2, 2011.

<sup>81</sup> "Iran, Oman hold joint naval drill," Xinhuanet.com, February 10, 2011; "IRI, Oman joint marine rescue maneuver starts," Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, February 9, 2011.

<sup>82</sup> Fars News Agency, February 11, 2011.

<sup>83</sup> Islamic Republic News Agency, January 31, 2011.

<sup>84</sup> Fars News Agency, January 8, 2011.

<sup>85</sup> There are three standing combined task forces under the auspices of the Combined Maritime Forces, a 25 nation coalition based in Bahrain. The mission is to promote peace and security across the international waters of the Middle East.

<sup>86</sup> "Iranian military attaché in turkey," Middle East Media Research Institute Blog, June 2, 2011.

<sup>87</sup> General Fadavi and Jafari have both alluded to this effort – indicating that current Yono or similar small, asymmetric submarines will be operated by the IRGCN as part of their mosaic defense.

<sup>88</sup> "Iran can terrify enemies from under sea," PressTV, April 25, 2011; "Iran Develops Mini-Subs," Middle East Newsline, April 26, 2011; "Iran to deploy new homemade submarines in southern waters: commander," Xinhua General News Service, April 17, 2011.

<sup>89</sup> Fars News Agency, February 7, 2011.

<sup>90</sup> A typical deployed CSG includes one nuclear powered aircraft carrier (CVN), three or four guided missile destroyers (DDG/CGs), a guided missile frigate (FFG), and auxiliary ships.

<sup>91</sup> Frederic Wehrey, "Danger But Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East," RAND,

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2009. Report captures the strategic caution that drives Tehran and emphasizes how ‘mosaic defense’ relies on an asymmetric philosophy rooted in nationalism, sovereignty and regime survival.

<sup>92</sup> Mike Nizza and Patrick Lyons, “In an Iranian Image, a Missile Too Many,” *The Lede Blog*, *New York Times*, July 10, 2008.

<sup>93</sup> Jahangir Arasli, “Obsolete Weapons, Unconventional Tactics, and Martyrdom Zeal: How Iran would apply its Asymmetric Naval Warfare Doctrine in a Future Conflict, Occasional Paper No. 10,” George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, April 2007.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Admiral Rostamabadi, August 2010, Port Maritime Organization.

<sup>95</sup> Commander, Combined Maritime Forces Public Affairs, “New Counter-Piracy Task Force Established,” United States Navy, January 8, 2009.

<sup>96</sup> Mahnoor Sherazee, “Aman-II navy exercises: Joint efforts urged in fight against piracy, maritime terrorism,” *The Express Tribune*, March 9, 2011.

<sup>97</sup> Interview with Admiral Sayyari, Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, August 2010.



