

The U.S.-Iranian Naval Incident

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On January 6, five small Iranian boats, likely from Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN), approached three U.S. Navy ships that were transiting the Strait of Hormuz. The navy ships warned the boats to remain clear; however, the five small boats engaged in aggressive maneuvering and came as close as 200 yards from one of the vessels. During the encounter, one of the small boats placed what appeared to be small, white floating boxes in the path of the three U.S. ships. Also during the event, a threatening radio transmission could be heard on a commonly used maritime radio frequency saying, "You will explode in a few minutes." Whether this transmission was made by Iranian forces in the small boats, an Iranian command post ashore, or by some distant third party who simply wanted to stir things up (all are plausible), the U.S. ships received the communication and perceived an imminent threat.

Q1: Was this an intentional Iranian provocation?

A1: It may have been. The timing—just before President Bush's arrival in the Gulf—suggests the incident could have been intended as a signal to Arab Gulf states that Iranian forces are not intimidated by massive U.S. military power in the Gulf. Given close ties between elements of the Iranian leadership and the IRGC, it is difficult to dismiss it merely as a rogue operation or an innocent misunderstanding. Iranian intelligence is known to survey U.S. government facilities in times of tension, and this incident suggests that surveillance has extended to the seas.

Q2: Did Iran learn something from the incident?

A2: Absolutely. Both sides already know how to get along in the Gulf. There is routine interaction between U.S. Navy ships and both the IRGCN and the regular Iranian Navy that normally involves professional and predictable radio communications. This helps ensure safety of navigation for both sides in a relatively confined body of water. By engaging in close-in maneuvering with five small boats, Iran seems to have been testing how the United States would respond to an increasingly imminent threat. The deployment of the seemingly innocuous floating boxes is especially ominous, as it could seek to understand how the U.S. Navy would respond to drifting mines or some form of maritime improvised explosive device (IED) in the future. Additionally, the Iranian leadership must have been chagrined by news reports indicating that the U.S. ships were just seconds away from opening fire. Iran learned how close they came to precipitating a lethal response from the U.S. Navy as well as how strongly the most senior levels of the U.S. government will react to such activity.

Q3: Will there be more of this kind of action?

A3: There may be some, but it will probably be more cautious. Iran cannot win a conventional confrontation with the United States, and even an unconventional confrontation would likely leave Iran badly battered. At the same time, Iran is likely to seek to reinforce an image of military fearlessness in front of the Arab Gulf states. The longer-term Iranian goal is certainly to assert more influence in the Gulf while the United States exerts less, and that is a strategy that requires patience to execute.

As long as Iran is testing limits, however, the potential for an armed confrontation—and its unpredictable aftermath—will remain elevated. The U.S. chief of naval operations, Admiral Gary Roughead, highlighted a lack of operational communication when he told the *Boston Globe* recently, "I do not have a direct link with my counterpart in the Iranian Navy. I don't have a way to communicate directly with the Iranian Navy or Guard." The relatively irregular nature of the IRGCN makes military-to-military contacts especially difficult to institutionalize and is exacerbated by the IRGC's role as an anti-American bastion inside the Iranian security establishment.

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