



Directorate of
Intelligence



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Near East and South Asia Review



5 December 1986



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APPROVED FOR RELEASE

SEP 1999

14-00000

Near East and
South Asia Review

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Articles

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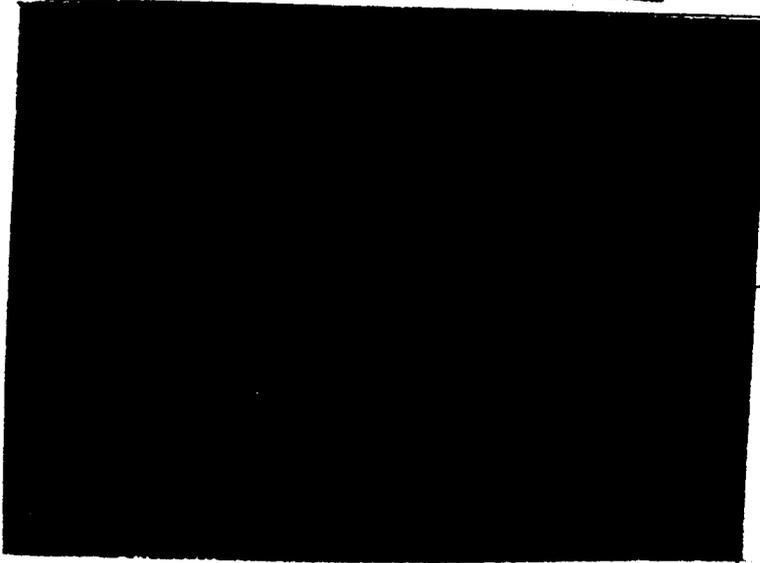
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The Growing Iranian Threat to Persian Gulf Shipping
Steve Ward, 482-0073, and Rusty Sheets, 482-0086

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The Growing Iranian Threat to Persian Gulf Shipping

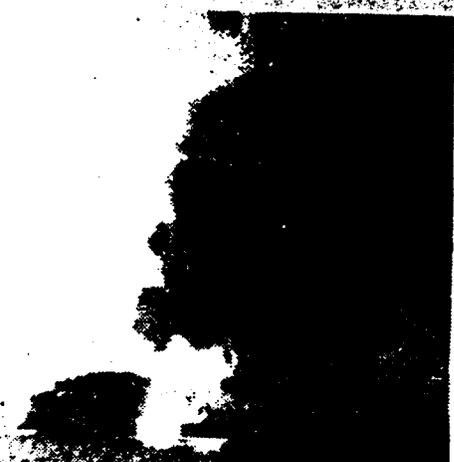
Tehran, reacting to its severe economic difficulties, is showing a greater willingness to interfere with merchant shipping in the Persian Gulf. Since late summer Iran has increased the strength and range of its air and naval forces in the southern Gulf and has expanded the scope of its antishipping operations.¹ The Gulf Arabs are increasingly worried and are bracing themselves for possible military encounters. Although the Iranian military still displays some caution, Tehran's recent aggressiveness and the threat of more attacks increase the possibility of a widening of the conflict.

The Politics of Ship Attacks

Iran has been attacking ships in the Persian Gulf since 1984, usually in retaliation for Iraqi airstrikes against tankers carrying Iranian oil exports. This year, however, Iran has increasingly focused its attacks—and its suspension of attacks—on influencing the Gulf Arabs to reduce their support for Iraq and to alter their oil production policies. The greater determination shown by Tehran in the past few months probably results from a desire to retaliate for Iraq's effective air campaign against the Iranian economy. In view of the damage to Iran's oil export system, Tehran may also believe it needs to back up its repeated threats to make Iraq's allies suffer if Iran cannot export oil.

Iran is now focusing pressure on Kuwait, which is a strong financial backer of Baghdad and serves as a major transshipper of arms bound for Iraq. In addition, Iran has been annoyed by Kuwaiti intransigence over oil production quotas at recent OPEC meetings. Tehran may view Kuwait as an attractive target because it cannot effectively defend shipping beyond its coastal waters. Most of the Iranian ship attacks in the past few months were conducted against Kuwaiti vessels or those trading with Kuwait.

¹ Antishipping operations include ship attacks and ship interdiction—the stopping, inspection, and sometimes seizure of merchant vessels.



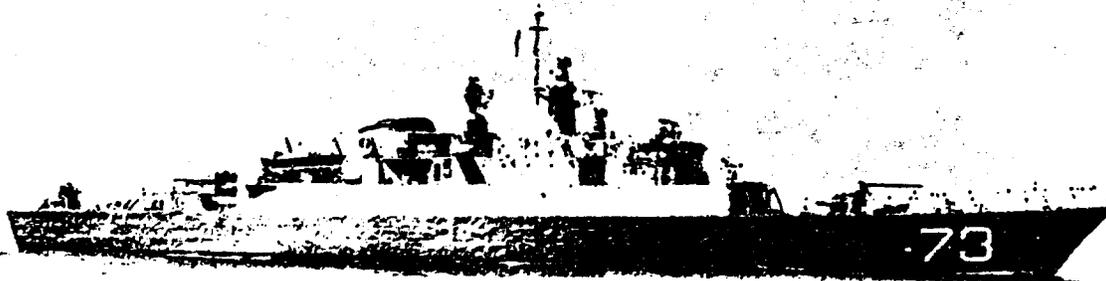
The supertanker Akarita following an attack by Iranian aircraft in mid-August 1986 *June's Defense Weekly, 6 Sep 1986*

Tehran is taking more of a carrot-and-stick line with Saudi Arabia. Displeased with Saudi oil policies earlier this year, Iran attacked three Saudi tankers within one month in April and May after previously exempting them from the antishipping operations. As Riyadh has moved closer to Tehran's position on OPEC oil production, Iran is again exempting Saudi vessels from attack. Iranian pressure may no longer be overt, but the threat is implicit in the increased size of Iran's air and naval forces in the southern Gulf.

A Shadow Over the Strait

Iran has greatly increased its military presence in the southern Gulf, where Tehran already had a major naval base and airfield at Bandar-e Abbas. During 1986 the Iranians began staging helicopters from Abu Musa Island and oil platforms in the southern Gulf. Iran has further extended its operational range by deploying aircraft to Kish Island.

since late summer, Iranian naval ships



Iranian Navy frigates, like the Sabalan (nee Rostam), have conducted the recent night attacks against merchant shipping using both Sea Killer missiles and their 4.5-inch guns.

Jan's

have been more aggressive, attacking at night and using antiship cruise missiles and naval guns against merchant shipping for the first time in the war. Moreover, the Iranian Navy plans to put its first Chinese-built HY-2 coastal defense missile battery on Qeshm Island.

Tehran is constructing a launchsite at Kuhestak for the HY-2s, and both sites give it the capability to hit any ship passing through the Strait of Hormuz.

Nearly two-thirds of all ship attacks by Iran during the six-year Iran-Iraq war have occurred in 1986. Moreover, Iran's deployment of air and naval units has greatly expanded the range of its antishipping operations since the fall of 1985. The area patrolled by Iran is now so large that merchant ships cannot avoid it or completely cross it at night when Iranian air and naval forces are not as active. Using the new staging areas, Iranian antishipping operations have occurred throughout the western approaches to the Strait of Hormuz and even in the Gulf of Oman. In early November, Iranian Navy Commander Malekzadegan said that merchant ships using Gulf state territorial waters are within Iran's defensive zone and subject to attack.

Iran has been forceful in making its presence felt in the southern Gulf. Iranian naval units have challenged Omani patrol boats and have twice fired on aircraft of the United Arab Emirates. An Iranian F-4 fired warning shots at an Omani reconnaissance aircraft in September.

Ship Attacks in the Persian Gulf, 1986

	Iran ^a	Iraq ^b
Total	42	59
January	3	4
February	3	6
March	9	5
April	4	4
May	3	7
June	4	4
July	0	3
August	8	8
September	3	6
October	3	5
November	2	7

^a 1980-86 Iranian ship attacks total 70.

^b 1980-86 Iraqi ship attacks total 127.

Moreover, Tehran has stopped Soviet and US-flag merchant ships as part of its campaign to halt the supply of arms to Iraq. This aggressiveness has been tempered by Iran's recognition of its limitations. Iran has tried to avoid confrontations with the major powers, and the Soviet and US vessels that were seized were quickly released. Since October the

Navy has been ordered not to seize any more Soviet or US ships. The Navy has long operated under instructions to avoid warships or merchant vessels under military escort.

all ships calling at Saudi ports. The Air Force will provide air cover for the escort ships. the Gulf Cooperation Council also will ask the United States to approve an extension of AWACS coverage over the southern Gulf.

The Gulf States Respond

The Gulf states thus far indicate a willingness to resist the Iranian pressure. In late October, Kuwait fired two surface-to-air missiles at what it believed was an Iranian aircraft. By publicizing the event, Kuwait probably hoped to demonstrate its resolve to protect its sovereignty from Iranian aggression. A month earlier

Kuwait sent a similar message to Tehran by firing an air-to-air missile at an Iranian aircraft crossing Kuwaiti airspace after bombing an Iraqi oilfield.

While aggressively showing its desire to protect itself, Kuwait has taken additional measures to increase its defensive capabilities.

Kuwait is planning to deploy Hawk surface-to-air missiles to Faylakah Island, extending its missile coverage by at least 40 kilometers. The Kuwaiti Navy has also begun escorting tankers through its own territorial waters and it recently held its first live-fire exercise in nearly a year.

Riyadh is also responding to Tehran's growing belligerence. The Saudis are deploying their newly organized Marine Forces as well as naval special forces from the Red Sea to Ras al Ghar in the Persian Gulf.

In addition, the Saudi Air Force engaged in a major air defense exercise in the Persian Gulf during early October. AWACS reporting indicates Saudi F-15s significantly boosted the number of practice intercepts flown from Dhahran—flying more intercepts in a recent four-day period than had been flown in the previous 10 months.

In addition, Saudi Arabia has instituted a contingency plan in case Iran resumes its attacks on Saudi tankers. In the event of an attack on a Saudi vessel, Saudi naval forces in Jubail will stage in Omani waters to escort

Shippers, Seamen Worried

In response to Iranian attacks earlier this year, shippers ordered their tankers to avoid the Iranians by traveling at night and spending the daytime protected in safe anchorages. By early fall, however, the extended range of Iranian antishipping operations and the use of night attacks removed this defense. The number of lives lost in ship attacks has dramatically increased this year. More than 50 seamen have been killed.

insurance payments during the first eight months of 1986 totaled \$80 million.

the owners, insurers, and seamen's unions are becoming more militant over the risk to lives and ships in serving Gulf ports. Convoys are regarded as impractical by the operators, however, and they do not expect the Western or Gulf state naval forces to protect them.

Outlook

There is a good chance that Iran will increase its antishipping operations as economic pressures build because Tehran will consider that it has less to lose by expanding the war in the Gulf. Iran's efforts to date have not resulted in any significant reduction in the movement of arms to Iraq, putting additional pressure on Tehran to do more. Even if Tehran only maintains the current pace of its ship attacks, the possibility of more severe actions may cause some shippers to avoid Gulf ports. Once Iran's HY-2 missiles become operational—probably in early 1987—shipowners and seamen may become even more reluctant to enter the Strait. If Iraq continues to attack Tehran's oil export facilities, Iran may clamp down on the Gulf states' exports. Tehran might seize Gulf state oil shipments to compensate for its own losses or eventually use commando-style raids directly against their oil facilities.

Iran probably will not try to close the Strait of Hormuz. Tehran does not want a confrontation with Western nations, which depend on the oil shipped through the Strait. Moreover, Iran needs to move its own exports through the Strait and cannot afford to have it closed. In addition, Iranian capability for such an operation is limited.

Tehran will probably continue to modulate its ship attacks to keep pressure on the Gulf states while avoiding a dramatic escalation of its confrontations with their militaries. The risk of hostilities, however, is increasing because of Iran's more aggressive activities and greater military presence. Saudi and Kuwaiti actions to deter Iranian attacks could lead to a military confrontation. Any confrontation is likely to be followed by urgent requests for US assistance. Iran will try to avoid clashes with Western or Soviet naval forces. The risk of accidental confrontation is increasing, however, because of the Iranian Navy's expanding operations and because of Tehran's increasing willingness to take risks in the Gulf as its economic problems grow.

Bad News for Shipowners

In October an Iranian frigate fired an Italian-made Sea Killer antiship missile against a Kuwaiti-chartered tanker. Thirteen crewmen were killed or wounded, and the ship suffered serious damage in this first use of an Iranian naval missile against a merchant vessel. Shippers' concerns over this development were further heightened because the attack took place at night. Previously, merchant ships traveled at night because Iranian aircraft—Tehran's preferred weapon platform for ship attacks—did not operate during darkness.

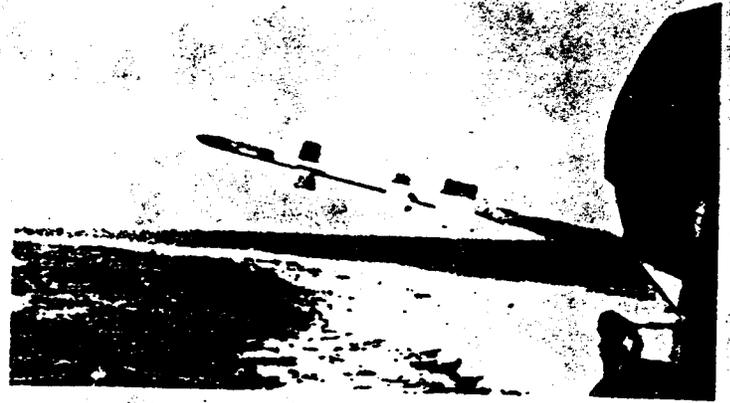
The threat to shipping will increase greatly in early 1987 when Iran will probably be ready to deploy its Chinese-built HY-2 missiles. The HY-2 has a 500-kilogram warhead that is nearly three times as large as the French-built air-launched Exocet missile used successfully by Iraq and is seven times larger than the Sea Killer. In addition, the Exocet was designed to damage naval vessels' fire-control and command-and-control equipment, not to sink ships, but the HY-2 is capable of sinking many types of merchant ships. The HY-2, however, has a less capable guidance system than either the Exocet or Sea Killer. The HY-2 has a range of approximately 100 kilometers, or enough to cover the entire Strait of Hormuz from launchsites along the Iranian coast. Iranian frigates need to close to within at least 27 kilometers of their targets to fire the Sea Killer and could be deterred by Western or Gulf state naval escorts. Use of the HY-2s, which are positioned on land, is unlikely to be affected by the presence of foreign warships.

Sea Killer

Warhead 70 kg. semi-armor-piercing HE

Guidance Beam rider, radio command

Maximum range 27 km

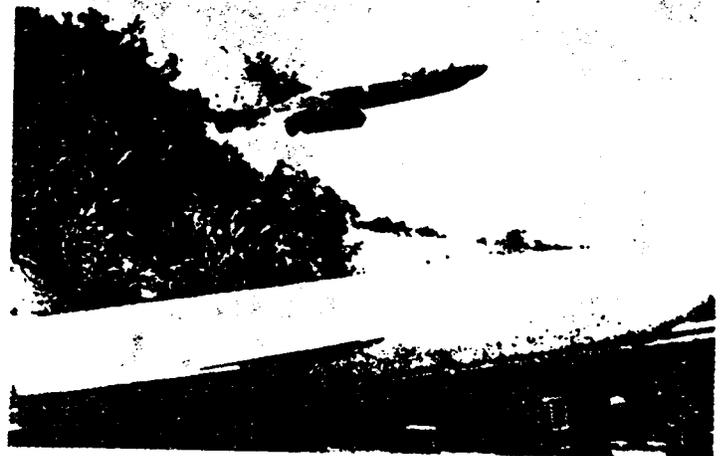


HY-2 missile

Warhead 500 kg. HE

Guidance Active radar

Maximum range 100 km



Exocet

Warhead 165 kg. HE

Guidance Active radar

Maximum range 50 to 70 km

