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## The IRGC Navy's long-term strategy of asymmetrical warfare

The ongoing security crisis in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden caused by Houthi missile and drone attacks on shipping off the coast of Aden has led to a significant reduction in merchant maritime traffic in the vital Suez Canal-Red Sea artery of international trade. This situation has concentrated minds on the threat posed by Iran's threat network at sea. To carry out this campaign, the Houthis have relied in part on targeting information fed to them by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) spy ship *MV Behshad*, underlining the growing ambitions and capabilities of IRGC's Navy (IRGC-N), which is the focus of this paper.\*

Iran's maritime ambitions stem from the old precept that power at sea determines power on land<sup>1</sup>. One correlates with the other. The sea offers the advantage of greater tactical depth, allowing *"the movement and deployment of military units in different parts of the world"*, says Admiral Shahram Irani, the commander of the Islamic Republic's navy<sup>2</sup>. The regime in Tehran is looking to establish a permanent presence on every ocean and be in a position to carry out transcontinental military operations. It is also eyeing the distant ice of Antarctica, rich in fossil resources<sup>3</sup>. On March 6, 2024, Yahya Rahim-Safavi, a military adviser to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, stated: *"We have no solution other than deepening the defense and security of the country. Our strategic defense depth is in the Mediterranean Sea, and we must increase our strategic depth by 5,000 kilometers"*<sup>4</sup>.

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\* Footnotes containing (Ir) indicate that the source is Iranian, (Ar) that the source is Arabic, (Ru) – Russian.

<sup>1</sup> Maryam Rezaei, Hossein Dosti Moghadam, "The role of strategic corps leadership in total security and defense strategies", *Geography and human relationships* (Ir), vol. 2, n° 1, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> "Admiral Amir: The alliance is synonymous with regional synergy and especially with the Islamic world", *khabaronline* (Ir), July 3, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> "Iranian military map for Antarctica", *Eghtesad News* (Ir), September 28, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Ayatollah Ali Khamenei declared: *"In the early years of the Revolution, the presence of the Navy beyond territorial waters was unimaginable. Today, however, the Navy travels the world with power and fear and returns home with pride"* ("The Navy can help the maritime economy (Leader)", Tasnim News Agency, November 28, 2023).

The Iranian regime fully understands that the oceans are key to global influence. After refusing to sign the 1982 Convention on the Law of the Sea on the grounds that it limited its ambitions, Tehran began building up naval power. Rather than competing with Western navies, the IRGC-N aims to create an asymmetrical military strategy to disrupt the established order.

In August 2023, the IRGC-N conducted training exercises off the island of Abu Musa in the Persian Gulf. This exercise followed a familiar script: the IRGC-N repels a foreign threat and secures the Persian Gulf, through which its fossil fuel exports and 80 percent of its imports and exports pass. During the Abu Musa exercise, the Martyr Hajji's Special Unit presented a new version of the Qadeer cruise missile – with a claimed range of 330 kilometers and payload of 200 kilograms – and the Fatah 360 ballistic missile<sup>5</sup>.

This note is based primarily on Iranian sources aimed at the local public, Iranian security actors and naval specialists. The approach attempts to cut through official propaganda and get as close as possible to Iranian OSINT. The paper begins with an overview of the IRGC-N, then describes its areas of operation, its fleet, its satellite communications, and its threat activity/capability, before making some concluding observations.

## The IRGC-N: an overview

The IRGC-N was established during the Iran-Iraq conflict in 1983. The aim was to supplement Iran's naval capabilities with a flexible rapid force capable of harassing enemy vessels, conducting surprise attacks, and carrying out pinpoint strikes. From its base on Farsi Island, during the 1980s Tanker War, the IRGC-N sought to cut off the route of supertankers trading Iraqi oil. During those years, the small, highly maneuverable vessels also worked to protect Iran's territorial waters, coastline, and islands.

Today, the IRGC-N counts 100,000 military personnel, including 20,000 active-duty sailors<sup>6</sup>. It is based in Bandar Abbas, in Shahid Bahonar Square, the city's Marine Corps headquarters. The IRGC-N is commanded by Admiral Alireza Tangsiri. Admiral Abolqasem Walagher is the Deputy Coordinator, Admiral Mohammad Taher Jafari is responsible for preparation and support of operations.



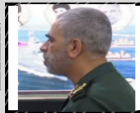


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<sup>5</sup> Sabre Gul Ambre, "Iranian Revolutionary Guards launch new maneuvers on Abu Musa Island", *Al Araby* (Ar), August 2, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> The Iranian defense budget is estimated at \$bn 10-15 annually (Kenneth Katzman, "Iran's Foreign and Defense Policy", *CRS Report*, n° R44017, Congressional Research Service, April 29, 2020).

## Areas of operation

The IRGC-N operates in five areas as shown in the illustration below.

Zones	Name	Region	Commander	
Zone 1	Sahibul Zaman	Bandar Abbas	Rear Admiral Abbas Gholamshahi	
Mission	To defend the Strait of Hormuz. In the event of a conflict, the IRGC-N envisages sealing off the area with 2,000 naval mines, drones, speedboats, and helicopters.			
Zone 2	Noah Nabi	Bouchehr	Admiral Haider Henarian Magdar	
Mission	To protect Khark and oil export facilities. Located near the Bushehr nuclear power plant, the area is home to the Mata Officer Training Centre.			
Zone 3	Imam Hossein	Bandar Mahshahr	Second Admiral Pasdar Hashemi	
Mission	Coastal area of Khuzistan province			
Zone 4	Tharullah	Asaluyeh	Rear Admiral Mohammad Hossein Bargahi	
Mission	To protect waters between the island of Kish (Hormozgan) to Ras Mataf (Bouchehr).			
Zone 5	Imam Baqir	Bandar Lange	Brigadier General Sardar Azmaei	
Mission	Created in 2013, this zone is a subdivision of the first zone of Sahibul Zaman.			

## The IRGC-N fleet

The IRGC-N uses three types of vessels to carry out its coastal surveillance operations<sup>7</sup>, combat oil smuggling and harass enemy vessels.

These are multi-dimensional IRGC-N combat platforms that can be deployed in international waters with a variety of capabilities including air (drones), sea (speedboats) and land (special forces). These combat platforms can carry out intelligence operations<sup>8</sup>. With economic sanctions preventing the IRGC-N from acquiring new ships, tankers have been converted at the Bandar Abbas shipyard into “bazaar ships”, an Iranian term that alludes to the wide variety of weapons and assets that can be placed onboard: missiles, drones, anti-aircraft guns, speedboats, and helicopters<sup>9</sup>. During the conversion operations, significant modifications were made to the ships. The foredeck of a converted *Panamax* container ship previously called the *Sarvin*, and renamed the *Shahid Mahdavi*<sup>10</sup>, was redesigned to accommodate a drone runway.

<sup>7</sup> “[Video](#) of trans-regional surveillance of ships by army and IRGC forces”, *Etemad Online* (Ir), April 30, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> “Iran Quietly Replaced ‘Saviz’ Spy Ship in Red Sea”, *Asharq Al Awsat*, August 8, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> “Iran: 1000 Basij boats parade in the Persian Gulf”, *Al Manar TV*, November 27, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> According to the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Navy, Alireza Tangsiri, “[t]he *Shahid Mahdavi* weighs 2,100 tons, is 240 meters long and 27 meters wide. It is equipped with a three-dimensional array radar, air defense systems and surface-to-surface missiles, as well as high-tech telecommunications systems” (“Iran’s IRGC expands its navy by converting commercial vessels into warships”, *TopWar* (Ru), March 10, 2023).



The *Shahid Mahdavi* (credit: H. I. Sutton Photo Illustration)

The IRGC-N’s spy vessels in the Red Sea, the *MV Behshad* and its predecessor the *MV Saviz*, were both assessed to be cargo vessels converted into spy ships.






**Medium-sized vessels.** These IRGC-N vessels are also known as mid-heavy and are between 50 and 60 meters in length on average. They are characterized by their maneuverability and speed, reaching 27 knots. According to the Iranian newspaper *Khabarban*, their “so-called ‘catamaran’ design has become one of the IRGC-N Navy’s preferred construction models”<sup>11</sup>. Several boats of this type have been built in recent years. These include the *Shahid Nazerest*, a boat which can carry a helicopter, and the *Shahid Soleimani*, a vessel designed to break through enemy lines with missiles. The *Shahid Rudak* and the *Martyr Siavashi* are logistical support vessels.

**Light surface craft.** According to U.S. Navy intelligence data released in 2019, the IRGC-N consists primarily of *MK13*, *Peykaap* (I, II, III) and *Ashoora* coastal patrol boats. While the exact number of vessels is not publicly known, there are reports of several “hundreds of small boats” operating in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. Iranian open sources provide some figures, but these cannot be independently verified. According to one Iranian news outlet, the IRGC-N had at least 1,500 *Ashura-*, *Tariq-* and *Dhul-Janah-*class speedboats in 2022. During a small boat parade on the anniversary of the martyr Raees Ali Delawarz, in September 2023, the IRGC-N sailed some fifty boats, some of which were equipped with “radar-evading” hulls<sup>12</sup>. The parade also featured around a hundred boats belonging to the Basij, a paramilitary militia founded in 1979 during the Islamic Revolution.

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<sup>11</sup> “The IRGC also seeks to lead the world in heavy ships”, *Khabarban* (Ir), December 17, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> “A naval parade took place on the Delaware beach”, *Irib News* (Ir), September 2, 2023.

Speedboats of IRGCN			
© P. Bousset - 2024			
Main models for offensive sea operations			
Zulfiqar	Mahdi	Azarakhsh	Bavar Flying Boat
			
Speedboat for offensive missions	Speedboat for offensive missions	Speedboat for offensive missions	Speedboat - drone for offensive missions
Specifications	Specifications	Specifications	Specifications
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. Range: 320 nautical miles (576km)</li> <li>. Hull length and beam (respectively): 16 metres and 4 metres respectively.</li> <li>. Column height: 1 metre</li> <li>. Standard load capacity: 14 tonnes</li> <li>. Boat weight: 13 tonnes</li> <li>. Propulsion model : twin diesel engines</li> <li>. Speed: 52 knots (100 km/h)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. Body length and width: 1.3 metres and 1.9 metres</li> <li>. Height: 1.5 metres with 65 cm drinking bowl</li> <li>. High speed hull material: low effective radar cross section composite</li> <li>. Powered by two 660hp engines</li> <li>. Speed: 50 knots or 92 km/h</li> <li>. Weapons: Three missile launchers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. Length: 23 metres</li> <li>. Body width: 4 metres</li> <li>. Height of columns: 1 metre</li> <li>. Standard load capacity: 20 tonnes</li> <li>. Power: Two diesel engines connected to two shafts.</li> <li>. Speed: 50 knots (93 km/h)</li> <li>. Number of gears: 2</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. Length, width and height: 89.8 metres, 59.7 metres and 2.37 metres respectively.</li> <li>. Top speed: 160 km/h</li> <li>. Maximum take-off weight: 930 kg</li> <li>. Can fly up to 0.5 metres above water level.</li> <li>. Maximum altitude above water: 50 metres</li> <li>. Body material: aluminium composite</li> <li>. Useful range: 350 km</li> <li>. Weapons: Cruise missile</li> <li>. Standard payload: 130 kg</li> <li>. Distance required to fly the Bavar boat: 120 to 150 metres.</li> <li>. Distance required to land the Bavar bird: 60 to 100 metres.</li> </ul>
			

## IRGC-N Speedboats

**Unmanned vessels.** The IRGC-N has unmanned underwater vehicles (UUV) and unmanned surface vehicles (USV)<sup>13</sup>. Equipped with propulsion engines, they can take off and land on water while carrying weapons. These models are an offshoot of the *Ariana* prototype, the first unmanned boat unveiled at a ceremony at Tehran’s Islamic Azad University in 2012. In its initial version, it could carry a payload of four kilograms. Since then, the USVs have become more powerful. The IRGC-N uses them for mine countermeasures, anti-submarine warfare, maritime security, surface warfare, operational force support, electronic warfare, maritime interdiction support, identification, and intelligence gathering.

## Satellite communications

For its communications, the IRGC-N has access to three Iranian military satellites. The latest, *Noor-III*, launched on September 27, 2023, is dedicated to space imaging. According to the

<sup>13</sup> The Iranian navy has the *Abu Mahdi* long-range strategic cruise weapon system (“Video report of the Abu Mahdi maritime cruise missile assembly ceremony”, *Khabar Online* (Ir), August 3, 2023). The IRGC-N has developed its own production capacity for hybrid drones that can fly over water with one engine and patrol the water with a second engine on reconnaissance patrols lasting up to fifteen hours (“Building aquatic and hybrid drones”, *Fars News* (Ir), July 2, 2023). The function of the second engine is to extend the flight time and to act as a backup engine in the event of a technical problem over a long distance.

commander of the IRGC Aerospace Force's Space Division, General Ali Jafarabadi, Iran is in the process of establishing "*a constellation of satellites*"<sup>14</sup>. Iran is autonomous when it comes to launching satellites into orbit, thanks to its *Qassed* rocket.

## Threat activity and threat potential

Officially, the IRGC-N's task is to patrol the Iranian coast and the Strait of Hormuz. Its mission is to rescue ships in distress, monitor illegal fishing and combat oil smuggling.

### Harassment

Technological innovation in the 2000s contributed to the computerization of vital ship functions such as navigation, telecommunications, and machinery. The downside of these gains has been the emergence of vulnerabilities. In the Gulf of Oman, in 2021, ships sailing near the UAE port of Fujairah reported malfunctions in their navigation systems. Suspicion fell on Iran, which has set up electronic warfare units whose mission is to disrupt the communications of its adversaries, as confirmed by Iranian Brigadier General Alireza during his presentation on the *Kaman-19* drone to the Iranian press on October 5, 2023<sup>15</sup>.

The Iranian armed forces are developing expertise in laser cannons. According to the Pentagon, these "*disrupt the free flow of commerce in the region*"<sup>16</sup>. On several occasions, U.S. aircraft have been targeted by these devices in the Persian Gulf. For example, on September 27, 2023, an *AH-1Z Viper* attack helicopter of the 26<sup>th</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit was targeted during a routine flight. According to a statement from the U.S. 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet, "[t]he IRGCN interacted in an unsafe and unprofessional manner"<sup>17</sup>. In addition to blinding the pilot, the laser can damage the helicopter's optical and electronic systems (flight instruments, control panels), increasing the risk of collision.

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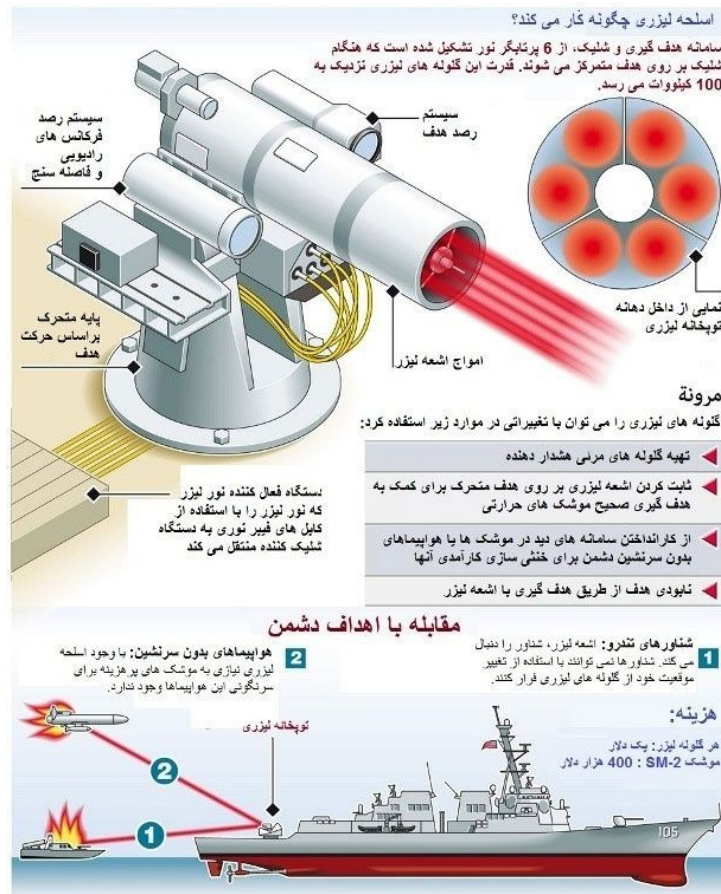
<sup>14</sup> "Iran is capable of launching satellites for its neighbors", *Tasnim News Agency* (Ir), September 28, 2023.

<sup>15</sup> "Iran Army unveils Kaman-19 drone in large-scale drill", IRNA, October 3, 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Sam LaGrone, "Iranian Forces Harass Marine Attack Helo with Laser in Persian Gulf", USNI News, September 28, 2023.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*





Graphic describing the general operation of a laser gun. It is not linked to any particular model in the IRGC-N arsenal. This graphic, which was published in the Iranian press<sup>18</sup>, is not officially sourced. Having been republished several times, it appears to have been endorsed by the Iranian military authorities .

The first *Sateb* laser weapon systems were built by Sairan, the Organization of Electronic Industries of Iran, in 2011. The date of their integration into the IRGC-N is not available in the open source. Since 2011, the Iranian industry has certainly improved its capabilities in this regard. The *Zahir* laser weapon was unveiled at the Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Support exhibition during the Defense Industry Week in September 2022. According to the local press, “this system, equipped with an image detector to disrupt the performance of image sensors assigned to flying targets such as drones, cruise missiles and micro-birds, is capable of handling aerial targets using a powerful laser”<sup>19</sup>.

## Maritime electronic warfare

The Microsoft teams responsible for identifying criminal group taxonomies have identified an Iranian actor close to the IRGC called Mint Sandstorm<sup>20</sup>. This covert unit is suspected of targeting opponents of the Iranian regime. According to Microsoft, Mint Sandstorm targets sensitive infrastructure such as seaports, navigation systems and energy infrastructure (petrol pumps)

<sup>18</sup> This illustration shows how the laser pistol works (“Introduction of Iranian military laser weapons + photos and technical specifications”, Eghtesad News (Ir), February 23, 2022 ; “Technical specifications of the laser weapon America tested in the Persian Gulf / see images of it”, *Khabar Online* (Ir), August 5, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> “Satab and Zaheer, defenders at the speed of light”, *Pish Khan* (Ir), April 13, 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Microsoft Security, “May 2023 update – The actor that Microsoft tracks as Volt Typhoon targets US critical infrastructure with living-off-the-land techniques”, April 18, 2023.

that have become potential targets for hackers and intelligence services. Mint Sandstorm's virus infections cause significant damage. A cyberattack on the shipping company Maersk in 2017 resulted in 76 port terminals being blocked<sup>21</sup>, causing a loss of \$300 million.

Although the IRGC-N is not directly involved in this type of operations, since this is not its area of intervention, its fleet could benefit from a disruption of the enemy's maritime system in the event of a conflict. If and when maritime traffic becomes increasingly automated by chartering unmanned ships could open up a new phase in digital warfare. The possible future automation of merchant marine systems *via* Internet of Things (IoT) technology could open up the possibility for IRGC hackers to steal cargoes or cause groundings by, for example, opening ballast tanks<sup>22</sup>.

## Boardings

Iranian officials have been keen to publicize their capabilities to board ships off the coasts of Iran. In September 2023, Alireza Khalili, the director of the office of the Iranian ambassador to France, posted a video of an exercise in which an Iranian marksman jumped from an Mi-171E helicopter near Faror Island and landed on the IRGC ship *Shahid Roudaki*.

There are three main motivations for the boardings of ships by Iran. The first lies in administrative reasons. On July 19, 2019, the IRGC-N carried out a commando operation to take control of the British-flagged *Stena Impero*. The ship was accused of ignoring distress calls and switching off its transponder. The ship's owner, Stena Bulk, said that "*unidentified small boats and a helicopter*" approached the ship as it passed through the Strait of Hormuz. Military personnel boarded the ship and detained 23 crew members, none of whom had British passports. In reality, the IRGC-N boarding was a response to the decision by a Gibraltar court to extend the impoundment of an Iranian tanker suspected of carrying oil to Syria<sup>23</sup>.

A second motivation for these boardings is to create leverage to advance Iranian interests. In August 2021, the *MV Asphalt Princess*, flying the Panamanian flag, was hijacked for a few hours in the Strait of Ormuz when negotiations over the Iranian nuclear issue stalled. The IRGC-N denied responsibility. But a conversation between the crew of the *Asphalt Princess* and the UAE coastguards was made public, leaving no room for doubt: "*Sir, we have a lot of people on board with ammunition. We're drifting and I can't tell you our exact position*", one sailor said. The coastguards asked for an estimate of the number of Iranians who had boarded the ship. The sailor replied: "*Between five and six*"<sup>24</sup>. According to Israeli Major General (Reserve) Eliezer (Cheney), these Iranian operations are acts of "terrorism"<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Andy Greenberg, "The Untold Story of NotPetya, the Most Devastating Cyberattack in History", *Wired*, August 22, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Irfan Saif, "Cyber risk in an Internet of Things world. Flashpoint edition 4: More data, more opportunity, more risk", Deloitte, undated.

<sup>23</sup> Behnam Shahriyari, head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps of Iran – Quds Force (IRGC-QF), and Rostam Ghasemi, former head of the IRGC-QF, were designated by the United States in May 2022 as leaders of an international oil smuggling and money laundering network (Antony J. Blinken (press statement), "Targeting an oil smuggling network supporting the FQ-CGRI and Hezbollah", US Department of State, May 25, 2022).

<sup>24</sup> The text of the conversation was published by X/Twitter on the Linz account (@supergranlinz) on August 4, 2021 (link no longer available).

<sup>25</sup> Major General (Reserve) Eliezer (Cheney) Marom, "Iranian maritime terrorism: Western countries must act", *Israel Hayom*, April 8, 2021.



## Seizures

In September 2023, the Iranian frigate *Jamaran* seized two unmanned U.S. Navy surface ships (*Saildrone Explorers*) in the Red Sea. They were taken out of the water. The intention was apparently to study their operating system. The missile destroyers *USS Delbert D. Black* and *USS Nitze*, which were in the area, had to send in *MH-60R Sea Hawk* helicopters to put pressure on the Iranians when they refused to hand them over.

## Sabotage

In February 2023, three data transmission cables were cut in the deep waters of the Red Sea in what are still mysterious circumstances. The disrupted lines account for 25 percent of the traffic under the Red Sea and include the Seacom (linking the United Kingdom to South Africa), TGN (linking Bombay to Marseille), AAE-1 (Asia-Africa-Europe 1, a system of submarine cables linking South-East Asia to Europe) and EIG (Europe-India Gateway) cables. Although the Houthis have denied carrying out the attack, this raises the key question of the submarine logistics required to carry out such an action.

In August 2023, the Iranian English-language newspaper *Tehran Times* announced that a new generation of submarines, as the *Ghadir* and the *Fateh*, would soon be in service<sup>26</sup>. The ongoing investigation aims to determine who was responsible and what type of submersible was involved in the operation to cut the cable. It could be a submersible drone, also known as an unmanned underwater vehicle (UUV), used by the Iranian navy. On February 18, 2024, the U.S. military, highlighting this Houthi capability, carried out a self-defense strike against an UUV in waters off the coast of Yemen – the first strike of this kind since the Houthis began targeting Red Sea shipping. Three days before this strike, the U.S. Central Command revealed that “*unmanned underwater/surface vehicle (UUV/USV) components*” originating from Iran had been seized by U.S. forces on January 28, 2024 from a vessel bound to Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen<sup>27</sup>. According to an analysis published by the U.S. Naval Institute, “[t]he weapon seizure connects Houthi’s UUV threat to Iranian-supplied vehicles and techniques”<sup>28</sup>.

## Supplying target information

The IRGC-N also provides military support to its allies. The aforementioned IRGC-N spy ship *MV Behshad* is suspected of having helped the Houthis hijack the Israeli-owned ship *Galaxy Leader* on November 19, 2023. A commander of the IRGC’s Quds Force, Brigadier General Abdolreza Shahlaei, is suspected of orchestrating the operation<sup>29</sup>.

The *MV Behshad* has reportedly been operating in the Red Sea/Gulf of Aden since 2021 when it replaced a previous vessel, the aforementioned *MV Saviz*, that was targeted by a limpet mine in

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<sup>26</sup> “IRGC Navy to receive new submarines”, *Tehran Times*, August 28, 2023.

<sup>27</sup> “Press Release: CENTCOM Intercepts Iranian Weapons Shipment Intended for Houthis”, U.S. Central Command, February 15, 2024.

<sup>28</sup> H. I. Sutton, “Houthi Lethal Underwater Drones Adds New Threat to Red Sea”, U.S. Naval Institute News, February 19, 2024.

<sup>29</sup> “First exposure: This is Abdelracha Yusef Shahla’ai – the senior Iranian who, according to the intelligence, led the hijacking operation in the Red Sea by the Houthis against the foreign ship allegedly linked to Israeli ownership”, @Intelli Times, X/Twitter, November 22, 2023; on Shahlaei being on the *Behshad*, author’s communication with Israeli security sources, December 2023.

the Red Sea in 2021. Since January 2024, the *MV Behshad* has been operating around the Bab-al-Mandeb Strait in the Gulf of Aden “near the port of Djibouti, close to a Chinese military base on shore, according to ship tracking data. Military analysts say it is possible Iran has chosen to move the ship near the Chinese base to discourage U.S. naval forces from trying to physically attack or board the suspected spy vessel”<sup>30</sup>. The Iranian ship has been suspected of providing operational intelligence to the Houthis, who have been carrying out missile attacks on merchant shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. In early February 2024, the U.S. reportedly carried out a cyber-attack against the *MV Behshad* to degrade its ability to help the Houthis target shipping.

Significantly, the reported US cyber-attack on the *MV Behshad* reduced the Houthi threat to shipping, at least for a time. Between February 2 and 19, around the reported time of the incident, the *MV Behshad* sat off Djibouti, where China has a large naval base. There were few effective attacks on ships during that period, and a sudden upsurge around the time that ship-tracking data shows it returning to the Gulf of Aden. This included the February 18 attack on the *Rubymar*, which subsequently became the first to sink as a result of a Houthi strike. Two more ships were attacked the following day. As of March 6, 2024, the *MV Behshad* appeared to still be operating in the southern part of the Gulf of Aden.

On May 22, 2023, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant stated that “the floating terrorist bases operated by Iran, while converting merchant ships to military vessels armed with unmanned aircraft, missile systems and advanced intelligence, enable prolonged activity in maritime spaces far from Iran”<sup>31</sup>. He added that at least five ships had been identified as belonging to the Revolutionary Guards’ naval forces, namely the *Shahid Siyavashi*, the *Shahid Rudaki*, the *Makran*, the *Shahid Mahadavi* and the *Shahid Bagheri*.

### **Ballistic missile launches**

In February 2024, the IRGC released a video showing it firing two ballistic missiles from shipping containers aboard the *Shahid Mahdavi*. This highlighted a very concerning new dimension to the IRGC-N threat. As noted by analyst Oliver Parken, “this particular combination, which has not been seen to date, greatly expands the reach with which those weapons could be used to strike potential targets by surprise, especially given that shipping containers can be embarked on any vessel that has the space to accommodate them”<sup>32</sup>.

### **Unsafe maneuvers**

The West is increasingly focused on the threat posed by the IRGC-N. Western navies have always been vigilant about the safety of shipping in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. Their forces are prepared to fire warning shots at the IRGC-N if necessary. In April 2021, two U.S. Navy ships, the *Wrangel* and the *Monomoy*, were on a routine patrol when three Iranian speedboats launched from the IRGC-N *Harth 55* vessel and approached about 150 meters from the American ships. According to a 5th Fleet communiqué, “[t]he U.S. crews issued multiple warnings via

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<sup>30</sup> Keir Simmons, Mo Abbas, Dan De Luce, Matthew Mulligan, “Iran goes public with stark warning over suspected spy ship as U.S. refuses to rule out more strikes, NBC News”, February 6, 2024; Keir Simmons, Mo Abbas, Dan De Luce, Matthew Mulligan, “Iran goes public with stark warning over suspected spy ship as U.S. refuses to rule out more strikes”, NBC News, February 6, 2024.

<sup>31</sup> Anna Brasky, Tal Lev Ram, “Floating terrorist bases: the new sector in which the Revolutionary Guards operate”, *Maariv*, May 22, 2023.

<sup>32</sup> Oliver Parken, “Iran Fires Ballistic Missile From A Shipping Container At Sea”, *The War Zone*, February 14, 2024.

*bridge-to-bridge radio, five short blasts from the ships' horns, and while the Harth 55 responded to the bridge-to-bridge radio queries, they continued the unsafe maneuvers".*

This type of Iranian operations is in line with the statements of the CGRI-N, which claims to be able to "strike back" at its aggressors, by which it means the United States, and threatens to pursue them as far as Mexico. In December 2023, Iran's Defense Minister, Amir Mohammadreza Ashtiani, stated that "[a]ll countries are present in this region, but the Red Sea is our region and we control this region, no one can certainly maneuver". He warned that the international naval force would face "extraordinary problems"<sup>33</sup>. Tehran has adopted a strategy of ambiguity in the current conflicts in Gaza, Lebanon and Yemen, claiming non-involvement while positioning itself as a mentor to armed actors in the region who have entered the fray in solidarity with Palestinian factions, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and the so-called Islamic Resistance in Iraq.

The commander of the IRGC-N, Alireza Tangsiri, announced that he had "organized an oceanic mobilization and, as part of this mobilization" and "assembled large ships and boats capable of sailing as far as Tanzania"<sup>34</sup>. According to pro-government Iranian sources, this unit would bring together 33,000 ships and 55,000 men currently being trained in the Persian Gulf.

## Conclusion

In the coming years, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Navy (IRGC-N) will pursue a doctrine of asymmetrical warfare in which they conduct harassment, electromagnetic jamming, and espionage operations. For a long time, Iran's priority was to develop small, fast and maneuverable vessels to carry out pinpoint or swarm attacks against Western targets. Its arsenal is now moving towards larger vessels to become a full-fledged naval force capable of either supporting its allies (the Houthis) or acting as a deterrent.

The Iranian sources consulted for this study indicate that Tehran hopes to achieve at sea what it has achieved on land or, in other words, to become a power that can hold its own against the world's superpowers. Tehran wants to remind its Russian and Chinese allies that it is a player that will have to be reckoned with in the future, both on land and at sea. Contrary to appearances, the IRGC-N's aim is not to win a clear and definitive victory, but to gradually build up pressure on the West so that its goals in the region can be achieved<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> "Iran warned against the formation of an international naval force in the Red Sea", *Al Arabiya Farsi* (Ir), December 14, 2023.

<sup>34</sup> "Commander of the IRGC Navy", *Entekhab* (Ir), 10-28 December 2023.

<sup>35</sup> The representative of Wali Faqih in IRGC, Hojjat-ul-Islam Abdullah Haj Sadeghi, declared in 2014: "Maintaining a revolution is more difficult than creating a revolution" ("Iran's Islamic revolution has conquered the world's main strongholds", *Mehr News* (Ir), February 20, 2014).

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