

Iranian naval forces

A tale of two navies

Office of Naval Intelligence

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Relations internationales

At the time of our first publication in 2009, Iran's two navies were only a few years into a major reorganization, and each service was navigating through a period of considerable change. Now, nearly a decade following the reorganization, we have a better understanding of Iran's ultimate intentions for the reorganization and clearer insight into how its navies are progressing during this time of transition. This new insight and understanding have made it even more necessary to consider and address each of Iran's navies as distinct organizations with independent strategies, doctrines and missions. It is, in fact, a tale of two navies.

In 2009, we provided a brief history of Iran's naval forces dating back to the period of the Shah. In the current publication, we have provided a more comprehensive history, including Iran's Persian imperial past, the spread of Islam, and the Iran-Iraq War. We believe these three threads provide the best backdrop for appreciating Iran's vision for its current and future naval forces.

Iran's defense strategists recognize the growing importance of the maritime environment and are shaping its naval forces to secure Tehran's interests accordingly. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) emphasizes an asymmetric doctrine to ensure national security in the Persian Gulf against regional neighbors and foreign presence. The Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN), dubbed by the Supreme Leader as a strategic force, employs a more conventional doctrine and focuses on forward presence and naval diplomacy. Its mission areas include the Caspian Sea, the Gulf of Oman and out-of-area operations. Both navies have considerable equities and are well positioned to influence and leverage the Strait of Hormuz; a vital chokepoint for the flow of resources and international commerce.

During the early stages of the naval reorganization, both navies implemented leadership

and structural changes to improve command and control within their respective areas of responsibility (AOR). The basic elements of these changes were incorporated early in the transition, but significant elements have yet to be realized. This is especially true for the IRIN, which requires more substantive changes to infrastructure along the Makran coast to accommodate its larger ships and logistics needs.

Since the naval reorganization of 2007, both navies have engaged in dynamic acquisition programs. The IRGCN has continued to pursue smaller, faster platforms equipped with sophisticated weaponry, ideally suited for its asymmetric doctrine. The IRIN, largely neglected since the end of the Iran-Iraq War (with the exception of submarines), has undertaken a major recapitalization program to replace its aging surface fleet and augment its submarine force. Additionally, Iran's navies have been supplemented by its other military branches through acquisition of air-launched cruise missiles and antiship ballistic missiles. These developments are a clear indication that Iran understands the growing importance of controlling the maritime environment in its security calculus.

Over the past several years, much of the world's attention on Iran has been focused on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), in relation to its nuclear program. During the same period of time, Iran staged a major naval exercise that blatantly featured attacks directed against a mock-up of a U.S. Nimitz-class aircraft carrier. Iran also employed its navies in an attempt to reinforce Huthi rebels in Yemen and to interdict the merchant vessel Maersk Tigris in the Strait of Hormuz. Each of these events serves as a reminder that Iran's navies are capable of churning the waters of the Persian Gulf and beyond. As Iran continues to hone its naval strategy and modernize its respective fleets, this capability will only improve, creating greater challenges to security in an already security-challenged region.

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