

US destroyer fires warning shots at Iranian patrol boats

Peter Symonds
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A US guided missile destroyer fired warning shots at Iranian patrol boats on Sunday, which, US defence officials claimed, engaged in “harassing” behaviour. The incident underscores the volatile situation in the Middle East and the potential for a rapid rise of US-Iranian tensions once Donald Trump assumes the US presidency.

According to the Pentagon’s account, the USS Mahan fired three warning shots from a .50-caliber machine gun at four Iranian boats after attempting to warn them off via radio, siren, ship’s whistle and flares. At least one of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) vessels reportedly came within a kilometre of the US destroyer, which was transiting the Gulf of Hormuz into the Persian Gulf with two other US Navy ships—the amphibious craft USS Makin Island and the oiler, USNS Walter S. Diehl.

Pentagon spokesman Jeff Davis branded the encounter as “unsafe and unprofessional.” He alleged that Iranian boats ignored warnings and approached the USS Mahan at high speed with weapons manned. He did acknowledge that the incident was “somewhat out of character” for Iran recently, saying there were 23 such “unsafe and unprofessional” incidents involving Iran in 2015 and 35 in 2016, mostly in the first half of the year. The last time that a US warship fired warning shots at IRGC vessels was last August.

Iranian authorities have yet to comment on the latest incident.

It is possible that the IRGC, which is supported by hard-line factions of the Iranian regime, staged a show of force ahead of a parliamentary session on Monday that approved increases to military spending, including for the development of long-range ballistic missiles. The US and its allies last year objected to Iranian missile tests, claiming they were “inconsistent with”

and “in defiance of” a UN resolution implementing the nuclear deal reached between Tehran and the major powers in July 2015. The agreement, however, only banned the development of missiles capable of carrying a nuclear warhead.

It is also possible that the US Navy provoked the encounter, flexing its muscles ahead of the Trump presidency. Trump is known for his belligerent statements against Iran, and also has pledged to boost US naval strength by 40 to 350 ships. The US Navy last month released a proposal to increase its size even further to 355 vessels, including another aircraft carrier, 16 large surface ships and 18 nuclear attack submarines.

The debacle for US foreign policy in Syria will only heighten the hostility in the American military and intelligence apparatus toward Iran, whose support for the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad contributed to the fall of the Syrian city of Aleppo to government forces.

Like his other erratic and inconsistent foreign policy remarks, Trump’s hostile attitude toward the 2015 nuclear agreement has veered from announcing his intention to rip it up to proposing to renegotiate it and impose harsher terms on Iran. Speaking to the Zionist lobby group, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), in March, he declared: “My No.1 priority is to dismantle the disastrous deal with Iran ... This deal is catastrophic—for America, for Israel, and for the whole Middle East.”

Trump also told the AIPAC gathering he would stop Iran’s missile program. “Those ballistic missiles, with a range of 1,250 miles, were designed to intimidate not only Israel ... but also intended to frighten Europe and someday maybe hit the United States,” he declared. “We’re not going to let that happen.” Israel, which has

its own substantial nuclear arsenal, has vehemently opposed the nuclear deal with Iran.

A group of top US scientists, followed by some prominent Iranian-Americans, this month appealed to Trump to stick to the nuclear agreement. These appeals are likely to be ignored. Last Friday, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman, Republican Senator Bob Corker, advised Trump not to abruptly pull out of the agreement, saying that could create “a crisis.” Instead, he urged Trump “to begin to radically enforce it,” in order to blame Iran if it fell apart.

The Republican majority in the Congress already triggered an angry reaction from Tehran by passing legislation in November to extend some sanctions on Iran that would also make it easier to re-impose others lifted under the nuclear agreement. The Republicans also attempted to block the sale of dozens of Boeing jets to Iran worth an estimated \$16 billion. Signalling Trump’s support, a campaign statement in June declared that under a Trump presidency “the world’s largest state sponsor of terror would not have been allowed to enter into these negotiations with Boeing.”

Trump has nominated figures for the top military and intelligence posts in his administration who have track records of backing aggressive action against Iran. His nominee for defence secretary, retired Marine General James “Mad Dog” Mattis, was preoccupied with Iran during his period as head of US Central Command. According to a recent *Washington Post* article, Mattis advised the Obama administration in 2011 to take military action inside Iran in retaliation for alleged attacks on US forces inside Iraq by Iranian-backed militia.

Trump’s incoming national security adviser, Michael Flynn, told the House Foreign Affairs Committee in 2015 that “regime change in Tehran” was the best means to halt Iran’s nuclear programs. In a book entitled *The Field of Fight*, he and co-author Michael Ledeen branded Iran as “the lynchpin” of a “working coalition” of nation states and terrorist groups focussed on attacking the US. Trump’s pick to head the CIA, Mike Pompeo, led the campaign in Congress to oppose the nuclear deal with Iran and declared last year on Fox News that Congress had to “change Iranian behaviour, and, ultimately, the Iranian regime.”

An incident involving Iran’s naval forces might well become the starting point for a reckless confrontation

with Tehran by the Trump administration. An article in the influential US journal *Foreign Affairs*, entitled “Iran’s Growing Naval Ambitions,” highlights Iranian plans to establish naval bases in Syria and Yemen, and advises Trump “to do more to counter the threat posed by Iran, particularly in the naval arena.” Its author, Yoel Guzansky, is a former top Israeli official who was in charge of strategic issues, particularly pertaining to Iran, at the National Security Council in the Prime Minister’s Office.

Trump himself has no compunction in threatening acts of war. “With Iran, when they circle our beautiful destroyers with their little boats, and they make gestures at our people that they shouldn’t make, they will be shot out of the water, OK? Believe me,” he told a campaign meeting audience in Florida last September.



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