



FPI Bulletin: Iran Tests Trump in Persian Gulf

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Last weekend, several fast-attack vessels from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) [accosted](#) a U.S. Navy warship in the Strait of Hormuz, compelling it to shift course. Tehran also [test-fired](#) two [anti-ship](#) ballistic missiles into the Gulf of Oman, defying the U.N. Security Council resolution tied to the July 2015 nuclear deal. These provocations carry distinct symbolism: Iran regards its naval forces not merely as another branch of its military, but as the [most potent symbol](#) of its post-revolutionary strength. The regime seeks to convey the message that the new U.S. administration, despite its recent [statement](#) putting Iran "on notice," cannot alter Tehran's drive for regional hegemony. President Trump must now demonstrate otherwise.

Since the 1980s, the Persian Gulf has constituted a key battleground between the United States and Iran. Iran's naval forces remain strategically positioned in the Strait of Hormuz, which channels 40 percent of the world's oil tanker traffic and spans just 21 miles at its narrowest point. As such, Iran's navy maintains the ability to block the free flow of oil, which the U.S. Navy's own presence in the Gulf aims in part to secure. As the regime mouthpiece *Kayhan* [gloated](#) in February 2015, the closure of the Gulf "would be a nightmare for America and the global economy" and "make it the graveyard of the American superpower."

Tehran has repeatedly targeted Western forces in the Gulf in order to challenge U.S. influence in the Middle East. Recognizing that it cannot defeat the U.S. Navy in a conventional conflict, Iran has developed [asymmetric capabilities](#) that it believes will deter Washington from responding to its broader regional aggression. Over the years, Iran has repeatedly [harassed](#) U.S. warships by [dispatching](#) smaller boats to [conduct](#) maneuvers nearby, and has even [fired](#) rockets near U.S. vessels. More recently, Tehran's Houthi proxies in Yemen have [fired on U.S.](#) as well as [Saudi ships](#).

Iran has doubled down on this strategy in the wake of the July 2015 nuclear deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). According to Pentagon spokesman Capt. Jeff Davis, 35 "unsafe and unprofessional" encounters between U.S. and Iranian forces [occurred](#) in 2016 — [compared to 23](#) in 2015. The vast majority of the 2016 episodes, he added, transpired in the first half of the year. The timing is not coincidental: January 2016 marked the beginning of the JCPOA's formal implementation.

By increasing its naval belligerence at this sensitive moment, Tehran sought to demonstrate that the accord, contrary to the [stated hopes](#) of the Obama administration, would not fundamentally alter the relationship between Iran and the West. The most incendiary provocation occurred just hours before President Obama's final State of the Union address. On January 12, 2016, after 10 U.S. sailors strayed into Iranian waters due to a navigational error, Iranian forces [seized](#) their ship and [broadcast](#) their surrender on national television in a transparent attempt to humiliate Washington.

At the same time, Iran is taking steps to modernize and strengthen its naval forces. In a [report](#) released last week, the U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) noted that Tehran is pursuing "dynamic acquisition programs" that reflect its recognition of the "growing importance of

controlling the maritime environment in its security calculus." In particular, ONI reported, Iran is [developing](#) a submarine that can launch an anti-ship cruise missile designed to sink a U.S. combat ship. In his March 2016 confirmation hearing to serve as commander of U.S. Central Command, Gen. Joseph Votel [offered](#) a similar warning. "Iran's navies," he stated, "are expanding weapons and inventory and have instituted measures to ensure survival beyond an initial strike, through dispersal of its military forces."

Tehran has highlighted these efforts with routine missile tests and blustery rhetoric aimed at intimidating Washington. Last month, Iran [conducted](#) naval exercises that included the successful test of a guided anti-ship missile and a submarine-launched cruise missile. In September 2016, Iran even [threatened](#) to shoot down two U.S. Navy aircraft flying inside the Strait of Hormuz. "The Americans are aware," [said](#) IRGC Navy Commander Ali Fadavi in May 2016, "that if they make even the slightest mistake, their naval vessels will be sunk in the Persian Gulf, the Hormuz Strait, and the Sea of Oman."

In the context of these developments, Iran's latest provocations at sea amount to an early effort to test the mettle of the Trump administration. Tehran likely seeks to determine whether the new president will respond — or, more precisely, fail to respond — to its misbehavior at sea in the same manner as his predecessor. Should Washington's passivity continue, Iran would likely conclude that it can continue its naval aggression with impunity, thereby increasing prospects for a greater, and potentially more destabilizing, conflagration in the future.

Trump should counter Iran's misbehavior by designating the IRGC, which manages the regime's ballistic missile program, exports terrorism overseas, and spearheads much of the regime's naval aggression, as a terrorist organization. Such a move would lay the groundwork for further sanctions against the organization, which controls as much as 20 to 30 percent of Iran's economy. The White House should also make clear that further Iranian harassment of U.S. naval forces in the Gulf risks triggering a military response against the offending vessels.

The Trump administration has already put Iran "on notice." It must now demonstrate that those were not idle words.

FPI policy intern Kelsey Patterson contributed research to this bulletin.