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## Issue Brief

# Iran-US: Playing with fire in the Persian Gulf

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December 26, 2016

Iran has announced that it plans to construct two naval zones and three military bases on the coasts of Makran along the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, an announcement that has caused spiraling apprehensions among the regional countries. But this news is bound to ruffle some feathers in the US establishment as this directly impacts its maritime security interests in the Persian Gulf. Iranian Navy Commander Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari was reported saying that these construction projects were to secure all present and future maritime security interests of Iran, as well as to keep the merchant vessels safe from pirate attacks.<sup>1</sup> The entire Iranian establishment presents a united front to follow through on this decision as the Supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei has urged the Iranian navy to build these bases as a top priority project.<sup>2</sup> Keeping in mind the history of US-Iran skirmishes in the waters of the Persian Gulf, this development raises many serious questions. Is this project a direct threat to the US naval presence in the Gulf, or is it solely an act of maximization of Iranian defense interests?

The US shall be wary of these constructions as they have already voiced their concerns about the Iranian vessels harassing theirs, while there have been about 31 encounters between the two in 2016 only. Such pronounced actions that symbolize aggression and enmity between the fleets of these two countries must not be taken lightly. The more important question, however, is whether this development can, in fact, protect Iranian security interests or not?

To answer this question, it is pertinent to analyze the geographical morphology of the Persian Gulf and its adjacent water bodies. A gulf being an intrinsically narrow water channel makes it harder for proximal countries to harbor vessels of a vast expanse or to build large naval infrastructures. Bandar-Abbas at the Strait of Hormuz, situated between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, is the most important port of Iran. However, perched atop the Strait of Hormuz, it is quite vulnerable to interdiction, which is why Iran has delved into other options for securing its maritime borders. This infrastructure in question will have the ability to cater naval vessels that can be deployed on the coasts of Yemen and Syria.<sup>3</sup> It is being constructed so that Iran can gratify its maritime needs in the Indian Ocean and attempt to ward off the threats from foreign ships that may try to access its mainland territory in future.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rt.com/news/367762-iran-constructs-naval-bases/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13940906000717>

<sup>3</sup> <http://canadafreepress.com/article/iran-naval-bases-in-syria-and-in-yemen>

However, the US naval presence all around the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman and Aden are a heavy deployment of highly advanced carriers and 'destroyers' which are superior to the Iranian ships. These deployments also have the strategic advantage of being in a harrowing proximity to the Strait of Hormuz. This advantage can only be surpassed by the fact that the wider portion of the eastern shore of the Persian Gulf is made up by the Iranian coastline that has plenty of naval equipment and ships lined up fortifying its territory from any external aggression. The rough and swampy topology of the coastal land provides Iran a cushion from any force intending to attack from the West, through Iraq as well. While Iran holds the key to the gates of oil passage through the Strait of Hormuz, it is also in need of more regional allies to avoid the threat of being outnumbered by the US and its allies.

The encounters between the US vessels and Iranian ships have been quite frequent in this region, which has always been a point of concern for the regional, as well as global countries as these highly volatile waters are the literal lifeline to all big industrial zones of the world. This pronouncement of naval fortification comes at a crucial juncture in time when it is fighting two battlefronts currently in Syria and in Yemen, aiding the *Houthis* against the Saudi forces. The developments in the American politics are also significant to this decision of the Iranian government as Trump threatened to attack the Iranian vessels after the close encounter of September this year.<sup>4</sup> Although the newly elected president is known for his presumptuous statements, but words about the revocation of the US-Iran nuclear deal that had been signed in 2015 are not being taken lightly by Iran. Iran has remained adamant on carrying the deal towards completion and has also reflected that these naval installations are ten times more efficacious in deterrence than any nuclear deal that is brokered.<sup>5</sup> Both the statements issued by Iranian establishment and President-elect Trump reflect hostile stances which can trigger a maritime conflict of a serious nature.

Iran has its tentacles entangled in too many regional conflicts at the moment. It has also been carrying out naval drills with several countries, while there has been news about making Russian presence permanent on the Hamadan airbase in Iran to tackle with immediate threats from the Syrian conflict.

The geographical advantage that Iran holds over the Strait of Hormuz and the sheer number of its small and large naval vessels certainly works as a bulwark against US forces in these waters. These warships have also helped secure merchant ships in the Gulf of Aden from the threat of Somalian pirates. This

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<sup>4</sup> <http://crazzfiles.com/trump-threatens-to-shoot-iranian-ships-in-persian-gulf/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2016/11/26/1250918/iran-s-top-general-stresses-deterrent-effects-of-overseas-naval-bases>

threat has also been driven further towards the Strait of Hormuz due to *Houthi* conflict in Yemen, which makes these new installations an even more important step towards securitization of Iran's waters. Iran feels confident that its naval fleets will be able to successfully thwart foreign advances and will be in complete accordance with the International Maritime Security Law which it repeatedly claims, has been breached by US presence in these waters.

On the other hand, US naval supremacy is an agreed upon fact all over the globe which makes it the Goliath in this tale of ancient animosity. But Iran as the David in this scenario needs powerful allies like Russia to keep the Goliath at bay, only then can we imagine an ending identical to that of the original tale. Both the countries will adamantly continue to secure their respective interests in this region, while none will back away from this race of naval hegemony, which cannot have an absolute winner in the currently prevalent context of relative security. It may be true that the one who holds naval superiority rules the world but in the world of today, geopolitical and economic interests cannot be solely gauged against this parameter. The sea is a fickle friend. It is just as George Orwell states, "There is no such thing as a naval dictatorship."