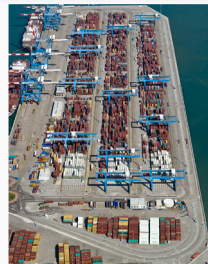
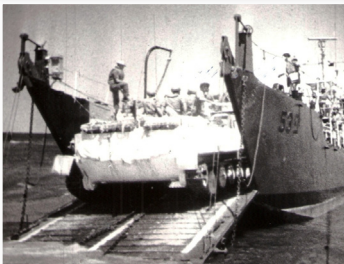


MARITIME STRATEGIC EVALUATION FOR ISRAEL 2019/20

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Iran's Maritime Policy as Expressed in the "Tankers War" of 2019

Shlomo Gueta

Introduction

Since the summer of 2019 the tension between Washington and Teheran has increased with the capture of the Iranian tanker 'Grace 1' in the Strait of Gibraltar and the imposition of sanctions on Iran and on the group of countries and organizations supported by it by Trump administration, that has caused a renewed combustibility of the tension around maritime traffic in the Strait of Hormuz, mainly in the context of oil tankers transportation from the Persian Gulf and to it. The background to the renewed tension is the rigorous sanctions that the United States imposed on Iran in order to bring it to the negotiating table regarding the nuclear deal.

In mid-2019 a year has passed since President Trump has cancelled the nuclear deal, and the one-year transition period has ended, that the Americans allocated until the transition into strict sanctions that will prevent Iranian oil exportation.

In response the rulers of Iran, in them the President Rouhani and officers of the Revolutionary Guards, threatened that their country will block the Strait of Hormuz and will prevent the passage of fuel cargos to international markets. In that context it's worthwhile to quote a statement made by the President Rouhani in the second half of the year 2018: "We have always ensured the security of this strait [referring to the Strait of Hormuz], don't you play with the lion's tail or you'll regret it forever" (free translation from Persian).¹

The Iranian navy commander, Admiral Hossein Khanzadi, stated on his part at the beginning of May 2019 that "The Islamic republic of Iran, in response to sanctions on oil exportation, will insist and operate to transport and export its oil through the Strait of Hormuz."²

On the background of Iran's threats to interrupt maritime traffic in the Strait of Hormuz on April 2019 an American naval task force was sent, under the command of the

1 Deutsche Welle, dated 22.7.18 <https://www.dw.com/en/iranian-president-hassan-rouhani-threatens-to-close-strait-of-hormuz/a-4477737> also quoted in an article by Alexandra Ma dated 13.8.19 <https://www.businessinsider.com/strait-of-hormuz-explainer-oil-us-iran-tensions-2019-7>

2 <https://www.alalamtv.net/news/4198076/%D9%87%D9%83%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-D9%86%D9%81%D8%B7%D9%87%D8%A7> dated 2.5.19 in a lecture given to students of religious studies.

aircraft carrier "Abraham Lincoln" in order to demonstrate presence and project power in the Gulf of Oman /the Arabian Sea. Since its arrival in the area, in the month of May 2019, the aircraft carrier remained in the Arabian Sea, and refrained from crossing the Strait of Hormuz into the Persian Gulf. On November 19th the aircraft carrier "Abraham Lincoln" sailed into the Strait of Hormuz and entered the Persian Gulf for the first time. Its entrance into the Persian Gulf has as predictably raised the tension levels between the two countries.

It is unclear whether the entry of the American aircraft carrier into the Persian Gulf, at the height of the tension with Iran, was meant for a demonstration of presence and for deterrence from an Iranian intent to reenact another attack against one of United States' allies, or its arrival at the Persian Gulf along with significant deployment of attack aircrafts including F-35 aircrafts in the area, and including the deployment of more American forces, was in preparation for an upcoming American attack as punishment measures for the Iranian offensive activity that has been occurring since mid-2019 against the oil tankers and against the Saudi oil facilities (events that will be reviewed later).

Iran threatened a number of times in the past to block the Straits of Hormuz, however this time accompanied the threat a practical and tangible expression in the form of delay and detention of tankers in the Persian Gulf in the area of the straits by the Iranians. Additionally, the tension around oil tankers traffic increased in other focal points as well, outside of the area of the Strait of Hormuz, such as the Strait of Gibraltar and in the center of the red sea, this time against tankers in the service of Iran.

The "tanker war" in the eighties during the Iraq-Iran war

The reinforcement of American forces in the Persian Gulf since the middle of 2019 on the background of concern that the Iranians intend on taking action against American target or against targets in the gulf countries that are allies of the United States, bring us back to the eighties of the last century, to the prolonged Iraq-Iran war. In this war Iran stood against a similar problem of an increasing damage to its oil exportation abilities, an act that was initiated at the time by the Iraqi President, Saddam Hussein, in order to cause a decrease in its income and a severe damage to Iran's economy.

The Iraqis were focused then on bombing the Iranian oil infrastructures in the Persian Gulf and within Iran itself, and expanded the bombing to foreign tankers that came to load Iranian oil, that were therefore damaged, in what was nicknamed at the time "The Tanker War". The Iranians on their side decided to execute oppositional measures and to respond in military ways against Iraq's allies in the gulf, and threatened (in May 1984)

to prevent oil exportation from the gulf entirely, especially against Saudi Arabia and Kuwait that assisted Iraq at the time. They also threatened to attack ports, oil facilities and other essential targets in these countries. By that Iran hoped to put an international pressure on Iraq to stop the siege on oil exportation from its ports in the Persian Gulf.

From now on things got complicated. There is no doubt, that the disruption of shipping in the Persian Gulf damaged both sides equally, as it reduced their income from oil exportation. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait were also hurt by this "Tanker War" as it continued full-on at least until the end of 1987. Due to the concerns of Kuwait Principality that is located near Iraq, the United States agreed that an American flag will be raised on Kuwait's oil tankers in order to deter in that way any attack on them.

However, despite of the raising of United States' flag on the tankers, or maybe because of it, the disruption in the tankers' traffic continued, and in July 1987 the tanker "Bridgeton" that raised the United States flag, got hit by an Iranian mine. There were many events in which the Iranians hit tankers that belong to United States' allies between the months of July-October 1987, including with marine mines and shore-sea missiles.³

The United States saw in these acts a provocation and a direct insult to it. It should be noted that during these years the United States was dependant on oil from the Middle East. At the end of that year (1987) began a certain calming in the situation, probably because the Iranians understood that the continuation of their attacks on Kuwait and Saudi Arabia and damaging the shipping to them, will cause an acute American reaction that will significantly worsen their situation.⁴

The current "Tanker War"

Since this "Tanker War" in the eighties, there were a couple more events of increased tension on the background of freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz, when Iran threatened a number of times to block the Strait of Hormuz, for instance in 2011 or in 2015. However, this time, since mid-2019, probably due to the tightening choke-tie of the economic sanctions, the threat is accompanied by practical and tangible expressions, that don't require special interpretation regarding the question of who is standing behind them. Additionally, Iran stopped and hindered in different claims, tankers that sailed in the area of the straits.

3 The Campaign on The Seas- The History of Maritime Power, by Meir Sas, digital edition, <https://benyehuda.org/read/12016>, chapter 24

4 Iran- To Learn from History's Lessons, by Pesah Melubani dated 13.5.19, an article in <https://www.israeldefense.co.il/he/node/38483> And also, Suyin Haynes dated 23.7.19 <https://time.com/5632388/strait-of-hormuz-iran-tanker>

The first event happened in 12.5.2019, when four oil tankers were attacked across from the port of Fujira in the UAE. The port of Fujira resides in the open sides (the Ocean side) of the Strait of Hormuz, and the attack was probably a signaling that this port cannot serve as a bypass to transport oil through pipes out of the Persian Gulf to ports such as Fujira.⁵

In June 13th, 2019 two oil tankers were attacked, the one belonging to Norway and the other to Japan, which sailed in the Gulf of Oman. The United States accused Iran for being involved in the attack, Iran denied.⁶



Picture 1: One of the two tankers which was hit in June 13th, 2019⁷

Seven days later Iran intercepted an American UAV that flew near the Strait of Hormuz. For a short while there was anticipation for an American reaction, however it wasn't realized. President Trump claimed that this kind of a reaction would have brought many victims, and so he would prefer to impose heavier sanctions, and not perform military retaliation.

At the beginning of the month of July 2019, a huge tanker by the name of 'Grace 1' was intercepted in Gibraltar by special British forces. The tanker sailed around Africa with

5 What we know and what is still unknown about the attack on the four tankers in the Strait of Hormuz, 15.5.19, <http://iglobali.com/?p=89004>

6 The events that occurred in May-June 2019 are covered in a variety of sources, including in Alexandra Ma's article (in the link in footnote number 1 above). Also, in Pazit Rabina's article from 27.7.2019 <https://www.makorrishon.co.il/international/157949>

7 ibid

crude oil cargo that was intended for Syria. The tanker was released after about 50 days and continued its sailing to the east of the Mediterranean Sea.

On July 10th 2019, an attempt was made by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards to intercept to no avail a British tanker that sailed in the Persian Gulf. A British frigate intervened and balked the interception of the tanker.

On July 18th Iran's Revolutionary Guards succeeded at diverting from its course a tanker that operated for the UAE and caused it to arrive at the shores of Iran in the Persian Gulf.

On July 19th 2019, Iran hindered two British tankers that were sailing in international waters near Iran. One was released soon after, but the other, "Impro Stena", remained in Iranian detention until the end of September 2019.

With that, in September 14th a widespread attack on oil targets in Saudi Arabia was carried out by UAVs and cruising missiles that were launched from Iran's territory. According to one of the versions the Iranians began planning this attack on May 2019 in order to punish the United States for its retirement from the nuclear deal, and for the worsening sanctions against it from the United States.

By this version the Iranians planned on attacking, among other target, a seaport in Saudi Arabia. Finally, it has been decided to settle for an attack of oil targets of the company Aramco in Saudi Arabia.⁸

On October 11th 2019, an Iranian tanker named 'Sabiti' that was sailing in the Red Sea west to the Saudi Jeddah port was damaged by two hits of some weaponry that was used against it. The perpetrators' identity is unknown, and since October the event has been investigated by the authorities in Iran.

On November 30th 2019 deputy commanding officer of the Iranian navy, Muhammad Mousavi, declared that Iran will respond to the terrorist attack against the oil tanker that occurred in the month of October.

His words imply that the perpetrators' identity has been revealed.⁹ On the first week of January 2020 the United States terminated Qasem Soleimani the commander of the Iranian Quds force and the one responsible for the exportation of the Iranian revolution to the area, and that only after a number of events of missile shootings on American

8 An article by Reuters agency, cited in the website <https://news.walla.co.il/item/3325801> And also, in the website- <https://www.israeldefense.co.il/he/node/41052>. Both articles are from 25.11.19.

9 Iran navy starts mass production of 'Jask' cruise missile, unveils other military projects <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2019/11/30/612482/mass-production-of-Jask-cruise-missile>

bases in Iraq and an attempt to penetrate into the United States' embassy in Baghdad. As part of these events the United States reinforced its forces in Iraq.

Basic geographical data and changing factors

In the Middle East there are four bottlenecks (marine choke-points)¹⁰, that are of international strategic significance: the Strait of Hormuz, the two ends of the Red Sea- the Strait of Bab el Mandeb at the south of the Red Sea and the Strait of Jubilee and Suez Canal at the north of the Red Sea. The fourth chokepoint is the Turkish straits: the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus that connect between the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea.

Out of these four choke-points Iran dominates and controls or influences two. It dominates and controls the Strait of Hormuz since many years ago. Additionally, it significantly dominates and influences in recent years the Strait of Bab el Mandeb in the south of the Red Sea, that is since it deployed sponsorship over the Houthi rebels in Yemen while equipping them with the best of advanced weapon systems including drones, ground missiles and rockets and marine weaponry such as mines and marine missiles.

The northern exit of the Red Sea and Suez Canal is exclusively under Egyptian control; however, it's used from time to time, as a target for terrorist acts from groups that are not necessarily related to sponsorship organizations of Iran. However, when Iran will want to escalate its hostile activity in Suez Canal it'll definitely be able to do so as it initiated at the time, in 1984 (during the Iran-Iraq war) marine mining in the Gulf of Suez. Libya, which during those years supported Iran in its war with Iraq, executed the mining mission probably to the request of Iran; this was through a RORO¹¹ ship owned by it (the ship "Gat"). The goal was to punish Egypt for supporting Iraq and to disrupt weaponry transport to the Iraqi military from Suez port in the southern opening of Suez Canal to ports in Aqaba or in Saudi Arabia.¹²

10 Regarding this topic see an article from a strategic update, Vol 14/ issue 2/ July 2012: Marine "Bottlenecks" To the Vulnerability of Sea-Straits in The Middle East by Yoel Gojenski, Galia Lindenstrauss, Jonathan Schechter. It should be noted that in the original article its authors mention three marine bottlenecks. Due to Iran's increasing influence and presence in recent years in the south of the Red Sea, due to the sponsorship it bestows over the Houthis in Yemen, the current article refers to Bab el Mandeb as another bottleneck that stands independently and is separate from the bottleneck of the Gulf of Suez and Suez canal.

11 RORO: Roll on/Roll off ship.

12 Levie, Howard. *Mine Warfare at Sea*. Dordrecht, NL: Martinus Nijhoff, 1992.

For the Turkish straits, they're of course completely out of Iranian control or influence today, it is also unclear whether Iran today has even a need or such interest in the area, as they might have had before in ancient times, in the period of the Persian empire and its maritime wars with the Greeks.¹³

Even if Iran will actualize its geo-strategic ambition in the future and will establish maritime presence in the coasts of Syria, it's unlikely it'll strive to influence this marine bottleneck, as it'll, probably, come across strong resistance from Russia and Turkey.

Out of these four marine bottlenecks, we will focus in this article, on the background of the events of 2019, on the Strait of Hormuz and on the Strait of Bab el Mandeb at the south of the Red Sea. These two focal points were mentioned in the statement that was given by the Iranian navy commander, Admiral Hossein Khanzadi, on the last week of November 2019, and which implied that Iran will take action against any threat that will be placed from hostile countries on its oil tankers in the Persian Gulf and in the Red Sea.¹⁴



Figure 2: The Iranian navy commander - Hossein Khanzadi

- 13 Xerxes's maritime wars against the Greeks in the fifth century BC. A wide variety of sources about the Persians and their Phoenicians allies' use in the Turkish straits. Including Meir Sas's book "The Campaign on The Seas", chapters F-G (digital edition in footnote number 3 above).
- 14 A statement made by Hossein Khanzadi, in the end of November 2019, during which he addressed the Iranian navy's presence in the Gulf of Aden and in the Red Sea. <https://www.alalamtv.net/news/4566591/%D8%A5%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84-64-D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B7%D8%B9-D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D8%AE%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%AC-%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%86-%D8%AD%D8%AA%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86>

The Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz – Basic data and changing factors

Iran borders with two marine areas; one is the Caspian Sea that Iran has coasts of about 700 km in length within it and its significance stems from its proximity to the capital city Teheran, for its natural resources, as well as the neighboring countries in Asia and in Europe (Russia). Iran's second marine space is the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, an area that this article will discuss.

The Straits of Hormuz connect the Persian Gulf (the Arab countries and especially Iran's neighbors in the Arabian Peninsula call it the "Arab's Gulf") with the Gulf of Oman, the Arab Sea and the Indian ocean. The straits are located between Iran in the north and Oman and Saudi Arabia in the south.

This route of shipping is one of the busiest in the world, because the alternatives for oil or gas transportation through pipes aren't significant. It is estimated that about 21 million barrels of crude oil are transported through the Straits of Hormuz every day. Farther more it is estimated that close to a third of all seaborne oil trade through the Straits of Hormuz, so is about 20% of all-natural gas. Attached below for illustrating the volume of traffic, a map that shows marine traffic in the Strait of Hormuz on the 5th of July 2019.

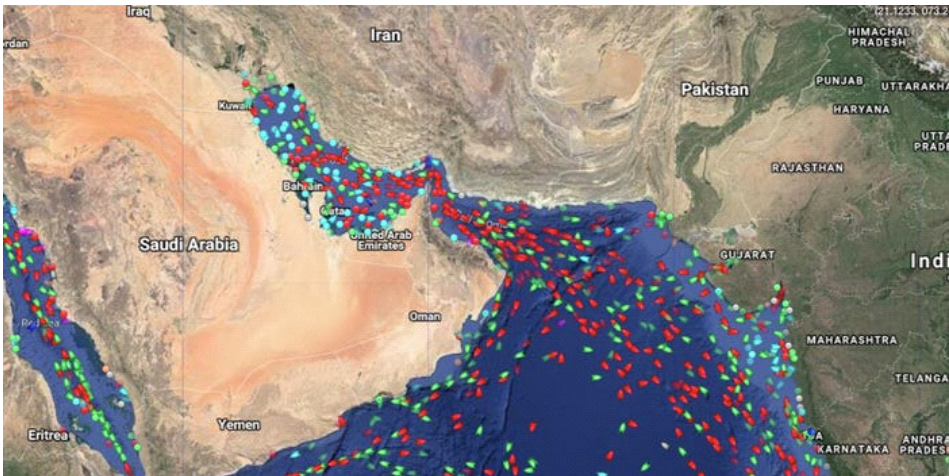


Figure 3: A map that illustrates marine traffic in the Strait of Hormuz on July 5th 2019.¹⁵

15 MarineTraffic.com, dated 5.7.19. The picture was taken from an article by Alexandra Ma (see footnote number 1 above).

The width of the Strait of Hormuz at its narrowest area is about 33 km; however, the width of the international shipping route stands at about 10 km only. The shipping route in the entrance to the Persian Gulf resides in Oman's territorial water, but a little later on from there, tankers are getting closer to islands under Iran's control- seven out of eight main islands near by the Straits of Hormuz from the west. The straits are international and lead from the Arab Sea into the Persian Gulf and serve as an only naval exit for a number of countries in the gulf (Iraq, Kuwait, The United Arab Emirates, and Qatar).

Below is a map that describes the naval border in the Straits of Hormuz, between Iran and Oman, according to the agreement that was signed between the two countries in 1974.

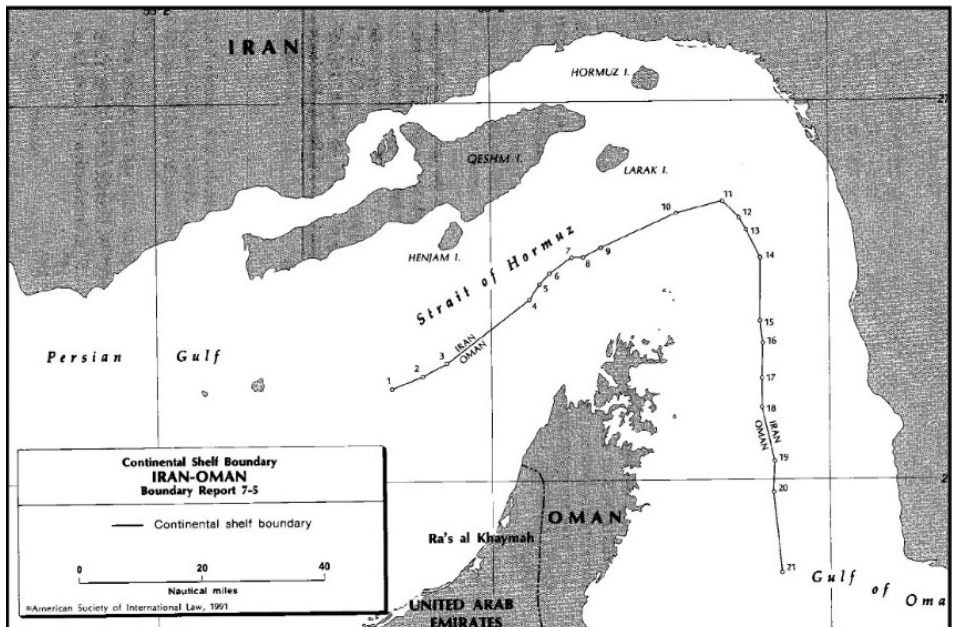


Figure 4: A map that describes the naval border in the Straits of Hormuz, between Iran and Oman, according to the agreement that was signed between the two countries in 1974.¹⁶

Comparing to its neighbors in the Arab Peninsula Iran is enjoying a geographical advantage. Its coasts in the Persian Gulf and in Oman bay stretch over the two sides of the Strait of Hormuz at a total length of about 2,300 km. Out of them more than 1,400 km within the Persian Gulf, from the Strait of Hormuz in the east and until the border with Iraq in the north-west. In this section of the Iranian coast, and in close proximity to

¹⁶ Vol 2 p1507. Charney Jonathan I and Alexander Lewis M "International Maritime Boundaries"

the Straits of Hormuz, is located the main port of Iran, port Bandar Abbas, that serves as the main base of the Iranian navy.

The length of the second section of the Iranian coast is about 850 km in the northern bank of Oman bay, from the Straits of Hormuz and until the border with Pakistan in the east. In this section of the Iranian coast is located Chah-Bahar port that resides in close proximity to the naval border with Pakistan.

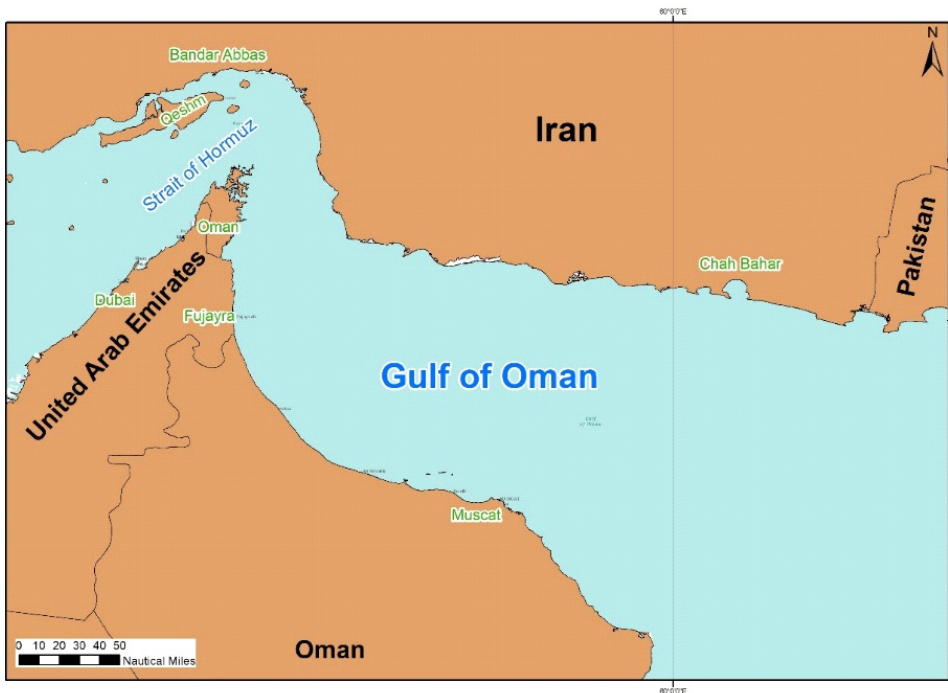


Figure 5: The Iranian coast in the Gulf of Oman (self-processing computer)

That is, Iran controls the Strait of Hormuz from both of its sides (before the strait and after) with weaponry systems, discovery and control systems so as aircrafts and sea crafts that belong to the Iranian navy and to the maritime arm of the Revolutionary Guards. Additionally, a group of islands within the Persian Gulf in Iran's sovereign waters, and that some of them are used as operational and logistical bases used by the navy and the maritime arm of the Revolutionary Guards.

One of the most prominent islands in the Persian Gulf and that belongs to Iran is the island Qeshm, that resides next to the southern coast of Iran. The island's size is about 1500 sq. km, its maximal length is 136 km and its maximal width is 40 km. Due to its

location it is of high strategic importance. Another island within the Persian Gulf, west to Qeshm Island and smaller than it is, is Kish Island. This island was mentioned in the past as the one in proximity to was executed, in December 2001, weaponry load onto a cargo ship owned by PLO. It was the ship Karin-A that the Revolutionary Guards' loaded with a great deal of weaponry of a variety of types, weaponry that was meant for the Palestinian Authority in Gaza strip.¹⁷



Figure 6: Shipping routes in the Straits of Hormuz

Straits of Bab el Mandeb and the south of the Red Sea- base data and changing factors

Bab el Mandeb is a sea strait separating Asia (Yemen in the Arab peninsula) and Africa (Djibouti and Eritrea in Africa), and connects the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden in the Indian sea. Its width is about 28 km. Perim Island that divides the strait into two, and its eastern part is about 3 km wide and about 30 meters deep, and its western part which is about 25 km wide and it's maximal depth is over 300 meters.

That same Perim island, that is near the Yemen side of the strait, was used in June 1971 as an exit base for an attack squad of the Popular Front organization of George Habash and his deputy Wadie Haddad, that emerged out of the island on a speed boat

¹⁷ Amos Gilboa, Drama in the Red Sea : the untold story how Karin A, a Palestinian ship carrying arms, was captured by Israeli navy special forces. pages 227, 235.

that launched a number of RPG rockets towards the tanker Coral Sea, that was on its way from the Persian Gulf to a fuel terminal in Eilat.¹⁸ The straits of Bab el Mandeb are also remembered as a naval bottleneck in the days of Yom Ha'kippurim War (1973) since the breakout of the war and until the first separation agreements between Israel and Egypt were signed in November 1973. In that war the Egyptian navy activated a naval blockade in the south of the Red Sea in order to prevent tankers traffic in the service of Israel from the Persian Gulf to Eilat's port and vice versa. For the purpose of implementation of this blockade the Egyptian navy operated two destroyers and a frigate that were based on friendly ports in the north of Yemen (Hodeidah Port) and in the south of Yemen (Aden port).¹⁹



Figure 7: The straits of Bab el Mandeb and Perim island that's closer to the east bank of the strait

With that in 1990 north Yemen and South Yemen united, and the People's Republic of Yemen was established. The Arab spring that emerged in the beginning of the current decade did not skip United Yemen's countries. In 2011 the country got into internal struggles. One of the sects that were and are affiliates to these struggles are the Houthis - an ethnic zaidi-shia group in Yemen. Due to the organization's shia character

18 Zeev Almog, Israeli navy commando commander – Cruises of My Life, Kineret, Zmora Bitan, 2014, pages 720-724.

19 A wide variety of sources that reviewed and analyzed the course of the war between Egypt and Israel during October 1973. including , an interview in 2012 with Ashraf Raafat, who was the Egyptian navy's head of operations division in Yom Ha'kippurim war: <https://www.elbalad.news/287297>

the Houthis are having friendly relations with Iran and Hizballah and see Sunni bodies such as Saudi Arabia and El-Qaeda in the Arab peninsula as enemies.

Gradually the Houthis gained power across Yemen until in February 2015 they announced that they actually control Yemen as a whole. The Houthis received significant assistance from Iran, including advanced weaponry that enabled them the victories in campaigns that were run by them inside of the Yemen territory and against the neighboring countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The sponsorship that the Iranians deployed over the Houthis in Yemen gives them in recent years considerable control over the straits of Bab el Mandeb in the south of the Red Sea- an important naval strait that is used for international shipping navigation from the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea to the Arab Sea and the Indian Ocean.²⁰

The potential control and naval threat from Iran in the south of the Red Sea, naturally arises concern amongst Sunni pro-western countries that border in the Red Sea, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. However other countries as well that use the Straits of Bab el Mandeb including tankers transportation from the Persian Gulf to European markets through the Red Sea and Suez Canal.

At the same time, it's estimated that Iran itself has an interest, at present time, that shipping routes in the chokepoints of the Red Sea (Bab el-Mandeb and Suez Canal) will operate freely and will be open for shipping. Therefore, as much as the current tension will increase and broaden into hostile activity in low or medium intensity, it will hence be expressed mainly in the area of the Persian Gulf and the Straits of Hormuz. To the extent that the hostile activity will be in higher intensity, while the Iranian regime will feel its existence is in danger, there might come into play also hostile activity in the Red Sea from Iran and the Houthis.

The Iranian naval factor – military and civilian

In accordance with its ambitions to be a regional power in the Middle East and in the Indian Ocean, Iran has built its naval abilities while leaning on its marine arm that includes two components. One component is the Iranian navy that receives in recent

20 For more information about the Iranian-Houthi relations in its maritime context see Maritime Strategic Assessment for Israel 2016, page 98, http://hms.haifa.ac.il/images/publications/Report_2016/Full-Report-2016_17-HE.pdf And also: In Maritime Strategic Assessment for Israel 18/19, page 93, http://hms.haifa.ac.il/images/pdf/report_2019.pdf And also: A Senior Egyptian Author Warns: The Missiles Supplied by Iran To the Houthis Are A Threat to Suez Canal as Well. <http://www.memri.org.il/cgi-webaxy/item?4563> and also: Uzi Rubin's article from 7.10.19: South Arabian Missile War: Israel's Lessons <https://jiss.org.il/he/rubin-missile-war-in-southern-arabia>

years resources and priorities with the aim of being "a green waters navy"²¹ as befits a regional maritime power. The second component is the Revolutionary Guards' naval force which is tasked with offensive and defensive missions mainly in the area of the Persian Gulf, however it has long arms for giving assistance, guidance and inspiration to maritime proxy forces in the same focal points that are employed sponsorship over by Iran: such as Yemen ruled by the Houthis, Lebanon ruled by Hizballah, Gaza strip which was ruled in the past by the Palestinian authority and in recent years assistance to the Islamic jihad and Hamas organizations. Not to mention the Iranians' involvement and attempts to control Assad's Syria.

Since the Islamic revolution in 1979, there has been a competition and rivalry between the two bodies mentioned above. However it can be assumed that in the circumstances of confrontation or escalation the Iranian navy and the naval Revolutionary Guards force will collaborate in order to reveal defensive and offensive teeth against hostile forces from western countries or from pro-western countries in the Middle East in order to take them down. It's possible that the fact that Admiral Ali Padavi, who was the Iranian navy's commander in the past, is the Revolutionary Guards' deputy commander currently, can contribute to operational and techno-logistical collaboration between these two bodies in circumstances of threat. Each of these two components has the ability to complete Iran's marine readiness in the defensive area as well as in the offensive area.

In addition to these militaristic marine components the existence of advanced and extensive civil shipping infrastructure in Iran cannot be ignored, and the regime can recruit it in order to contribute to the security effort regularly and to the war effort in the maritime range in case of a confrontation. Recruited elements of the Iranian merchant fleet were used before and can be used in the future as platforms for weaponry transportation, as outstretched focal points of control and intelligence, and in special

21 The term "green waters" is relatively new and refers to a naval force with an ability to operate far outside the sovereign waters of its country including capability to operate in a nearby ocean. It is actually a classification that bridges "brown waters" navy/coast guard that refers to navy or coast guard capable of carrying out guard operations or military operations in limited ranges in limited ranges in the naval area that is included in the country's territorial waters areas, and between "blue waters" navy that is a marine superpower force capable of operating worldwide, across the oceans, and to demonstrate control and power in far and wide ranges including the presence of combat groups in the center of which are aircraft carriers.

occasions may act as platforms manned by people and naval commandos so as UAVs and sea to sea missiles.^{22,23}

Summary and conclusions

Since the collapse of Saddam Hussien's regime in Iraq, following the two Gulf Wars in 1991 and 2003, Iran is increasingly standing out as a regional power that gains military and political powers not only in the areas of the Persian Gulf, but in other focal points as well such as Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. Iran's empowerment and the increase in its regional status and confidence stem from the decline that has begun in the last two years in the status of the Sunni bloc as a whole, and in Saudi Arabia's status in the region specifically, especially the lack of reaction after the resounding attack against Saudi targets in the middle of September 2019.

The accumulation of events since the cancellation of the nuclear agreement by the Trump administration, and even more so since the worsening of the economic sanctions on Iran in 2019, are putting the naval arena in west north of the Indian sea (especially in the marine bottlenecks in the Straits of Hormuz and in the Strait of Bab el Mandeb) as tension focal points that may erupt at any time.

Iran's leader, Ali Hamaney, gives great importance to the marine range, in which he sees a sphere that can add to Iran's deterrence and its expansion aspirations. In Hamaney's opinion, Iran's marine ability has to include an offensive dimension- such as through possible siege over the Straits of Hormuz, and a defensive dimension- by fending off possible offensive activity from the west against Iran from the sea. Hamaney sees the upgrading of the Iranian's navy abilities as another important component in turning Iran into a regional power.²⁴

For this reason, the Iranian navy is given recently special resources in order to increase its power, including independent development capabilities of marine weaponry (including missiles and UAVs), as well as self construction of marine weaponry, including destroyer ships. At the launch ceremony of two new destroyer ships from the

22 Ayal Finko, Greater Marine Strategic Assessment for Israel 18/19, page 80.

23 Omer Dostri, The Iranian Maritime Threat: Meanings and Implications for Israeli and Regional Security, Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, June 12th 2019. <https://jiss.org.il/he/dostri-iranian-naval-threat/?fbclid=IwAR1g7Ir4HPTq9Qm8-GVVuKlIakpMoJ79YbyDZ8S8ud6ugP7YMhbmi6kqfLvl>

24 *ibid.*

model "Alborz", in the beginning of 2019, the Iranian navy commander Khanzadi gave a quite pretensions statement that the Iranian navy is ready to explore the Atlantic.²⁵

Considering the marine power and independent technological development of weaponry that Iran gained during the last decades- abilities that are very much relevant in an environment of heavy economic sanctions against it- there's no doubt that it is a Middle Eastern country with a maritime strategy. As such it has abilities, by the opening factors at least, to escalate the marine confrontation between it and western countries, and the United State especially, and between it and its neighbors in the Arab peninsula or even between it and Israel that has no common border with Iran, but might be drawn into a military confrontation initiated by Iran. In this context it is worth mentioning that the Iranian presence and influence in the south of the Red Sea may be a threat to shipping traffic as a whole, and shipping traffic which is related to Israel specifically. Egypt too, that the traffic volume in Suez Canal is important to its economy, won't stand aside if Iran will threaten its freedom of navigation in the Straits of Bab el Mandeb.

The exacerbation of tension in Egypt may influence greatly crude oil prices. The game in the energy market is wider, and the questions are whether Saudi Arabia which has the world's largest oil reserve will offset the Iranian oil shortage, so as what will be the Russian policy which has a great interest in raising oil prices since its economy is heavily dependant on oil prices? Yet it should be noted that oil prices in the world have increased by only a few percent after the attack in Saudi Arabia, and that increase was also halted after a few days, facts indicating great flexibility and the existence of reserves in the world's oil markets.

As far as Iran is concerned, the question is if beyond provocation steps taken by it so far in the Persian Gulf; it will continue escalating the "Tanker War" in a similar scope to the war that has taken place in the eighties? At the time it walked a thin rope, as remembered, until it understood it mustn't exaggerate and make the Americans respond back in an acute to a fatal response.

This article is not focused on hostile Iranian activity against Israel in the near future, however, some mentions regarding the potential damage in shipping related to Israel in the south of the Red Sea can be noted, so as the foreign minister's Katz's comments quoted saying that Israel incorporates in the United States' move for securing the

25 "Looking West: Iran Is Ready to Explore the Atlantic", Jerusalem Institute for Public and State Affairs. December 5th 2019.

shipping in the Persian Gulf in intelligence aspects and in other fields in which it has a relative advantage.²⁶

The more there will be hostile activity against Israel, it will not necessarily be directly related to the "Tanker War" that surged in 2019. In Iran's view, it supposedly has unresolved issues with Israel against the backdrop of Israel's repeated attacks against the Revolutionary Guards' targets and against Hizballah's targets in Lebanon. Furthermore, an outbreak of hostilities in the Persian Gulf, including hitting some American target by the Iranians, can be exploited and accompanied by hitting an Israeli target at the same time, similarly to the strategy taken by the Iraqi ruler, Saddam Hussien, during the first Gulf War when he launched ground missiles towards Israel.

26 Foreign Minister Katz Revealed: Israel Participates in Shipping Routes Security Coalition in The Persian Gulf, Itamar Ichener, YNET, June 6th 2019.
<https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0.7340.L-5564712.00.html>