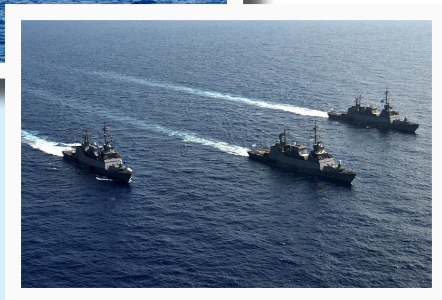
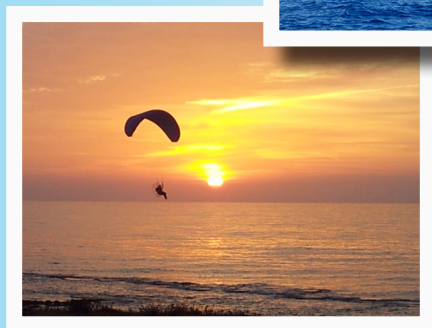
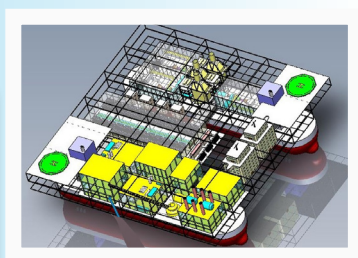


MARITIME STRATEGIC EVALUATION FOR ISRAEL 2016

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Chapter 6: Iran – the Maritime Involvement and Influence in the Red Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean Sea

Yoram Laks

Iran and Israel; geopolitical aspects

The Iranian presence within the first circle around Israel was significantly increased with the entry of the Iranian forces into actual combat in Syria, shoulder to shoulder with the Assad regime, Russia and Hezbollah. This activity, which has become overt and active, and which has included losses and public criticism from home, already today provides the Iranians with multiple leverages in Syria and special status in the negotiation on the future of Syria, or, in the alternative, a demand for repayment of the investment by the Syrian government, if it survives.

An additional result is the institutionalization and strengthening of the Russian, Syrian, Iranian and Hezbollah axis, which may prompt processes, overt and covert, of transfer of information, technologies and weapons to Iran. A further concern is that the strengthening of this axis is liable to accelerate the transfer of weapons and of technologies from Iran to Hezbollah, under the patronage (even if covert) of Russia. The further arming of Hezbollah is liable to have grave consequences as far as Israel is concerned, at the strategic level and at the operational level alike.

Iran's power base in east mediterranean region is the Hezbollah organization, a local Lebanese organization that is funded and directed by 'Quds Force' of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Hezbollah has a maritime force with powerful coast to sea capabilities, which could compete with the capabilities held by sovereign states. This maritime force includes an intelligence array, detection capabilities, battle picture building capability and launching to sea capability on mobile and stationary targets (as proven by the Second Lebanon War 2006, in the course of which Hezbollah tracked the 'INS Hanit' ship of the Israeli navy). Since then, Hezbollah has become stronger and developed additional maritime and other capabilities. The fighting of Hezbollah alongside the Assad and Russian forces in Syria provides it with vast operational experience and exposes it to capabilities, tactics, and the modus operandi of armies of sovereign states such as Syria and a super-power such Russia.

Major trends

In a situation assessment of the characteristics of the Iranian maritime involvement anticipated in 2017, we can propose an assessment of the primary trends and of the manner in which they may affect the characteristics and intensity of the involvement.

The nuclear deal: This deal constitutes the key designing and restraining aspect in Iran's conduct vis-à-vis the West. Since this is a tiered agreement, which stipulates the thawing of the commercial sanctions and the receipt of the economic and military benefits upon its observance for at least four years, it should be expected that Iran would want to observe the agreement verbatim, as long as there is no threat of its cancellation by the West.

The election results in the United States: The President Elect and his foreign policy constitute a significant 'area of uncertainty'. Presumably, this uncertainty will first prompt deep restraint and later will lead to a cautious testing of boundaries. The belligerent declarations on the one hand and the isolationism on the other hand, of the President Elect, together with the threat to cancel the nuclear deal, will probably prompt conservatism in all matters pertaining to friction with the United States, but may result in 'the launching of experimental balloons' in other arenas or on other topics.

The presidential elections in Iran: The anticipated elections in Iran, in May 2017, will determine whether the moderate reform process, which yielded the nuclear deal with the super-powers, will continue, or the hard conservative line will return to power. It should be kept in mind that above the president stands 'the Supreme Leader', who determines the overall policy (since 1989 this post has been held by Ali Khamenei who is known for his hard line). Presumably, the decision on holding the elections will prompt Iran to want to avoid moves that may implicate it, beyond the present physical involvement in Syria and the deep involvement in Iraq and Yemen. Nonetheless, it stands to reason that the Iranian government would still want 'to make a show of force', probably in an arena close to home, in order to demonstrate resoluteness vis-à-vis conservative rivals from home, who will claim that it has capitulated to the West.¹ From the conclusion of the elections and until the transition of power, if such occurs, certain stagnation is expected and this

1 Iranian Press (June 19th, 2016) Iranian Navy Heading to Aden Gulf and The Government Wants to Hide the Failure of Negotiations from People. <http://arabiangcis.org/english/iranian-press/iranian-press-19-jul-2016-iranian-navy-heading-to-aden-gulf-and-the-government-wants-to-hide-the-failure-of-negotiations-from-people>

assuming that the strict control of foreign activity of 'the revolutionary guards' will continue.

A significant threat to the very existence of the nuclear deal, or an attempt to alter it, certainly a public attempt, would very likely prompt the Iranian government to perpetrate a belligerent and bold action, which would threaten the survivability of the reform presidency and would influence the election results.



Figure 6.1 Players in the Iranian nuclear deal

The Iranian maritime force

In Iran there are three components of maritime force. The first is a maritime policing force whose missions are domestic, the second is the maritime branch of the Iranian military and the third is the maritime branch of 'the Revolutionary Guards'.

The Islamic Republic of Iran Navy

The Iranian fleet was conceptually and armamentally a Western fleet. Over the years, in light of the sanctions imposed on the country, Iran transitioned to purchasing from China, from North Korea and from Russia, but primarily it

relied on self-production of vessels and of maritime armaments. As a result of the internal and geopolitical events, the operating concept of the fleet was changed to a concept with defensive characteristics.² Consequently, changes occurred in the emphases and in the combat doctrine, such as significant reinforcement of the coast to sea array and of the mining array.

However, the fleet also retained classic missions of projecting power, demonstrating presence, activity over the expanses of the ocean and the sea beyond the waters of the Persian Gulf and maintaining the national interests of Iran on the open sea.

The Iranian fleet is composed of an order of battle of 3 outdated Russian Kilo class submarines and a large number of self-produced medium and small sized submarines.³ The large number of small submarines enables redundancy, decisive activity with a concentration of force against threatening vessels and carrying out rapid mining activity (primarily in the Persian Gulf and in the Strait of Hormuz). Furthermore, a considerable portion of the small submarines have a special purpose capability of carrying incursion fighters for executing offensive activity and minor tactics warfare, primarily against nearby countries (the Persian Gulf countries) and in infrastructure facilities at sea.

The surface fleet consists of a mix of outdated western vessels and self-built vessels. The order of battle includes 6 frigates, some of them self-built, 3 old corvettes produced in Great Britain and Holland, a large number of missile boats and patrol boats (some of them armed with short range missiles, most of them produced in China, North Korea and the local industry).⁴ The Iranian fleet is also equipped with amphibious vessels, landing vessels and auxiliary and supply vessels.

A small portion of the fleet is situated in the Caspian Sea, but it is mainly scattered among ports in the Persian Gulf and along the shores of the country.

In recent years, the fleet has been implementing power projecting voyages of a pair of vessels, generally an offensive vessel and of auxiliary and supply vessels. The voyages are implemented both in an easterly direction (including a port visit in China) and also westward, towards the Red Sea and Somalia (including

2 Iranian Navy troops continue maneuvers in Sea of Oman https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p9q9Hx_AYz4 (Iranian Navy Drill).

3 Iran building new submarine with missile-launching capability <http://theiranproject.com/blog/2015/02/18/iran-building-new-submarine-with-missile-launching-capability>

4 New warships, frigates join Iran Navy's fleet <http://theiranproject.com/blog/2014/12/01/new-warships-frigates-join-iran-navys-fleet>

involvement and monitoring of the events in Yemen). This force is also involved in anti-piracy activities, which has reached operational manifestation. This is an independent, external force to the 'international task force'.⁵ As the supply ports for this activity, heading westward, the Port of Djibouti and the Port of Sudan were sometimes used.

The force has crossed the Suez Canal three times (2011, 2012) the force crossed the Canal while patrolling the Eastern Basin of the Mediterranean Sea and docking in Syria. Once the force remained in the mouth region of the Suez Canal and turned back. These voyages were accompanied by belligerent statements by the fleet command. These statements continue to appear occasionally in speeches, which declare that the Iranian fleet intends to proceed with continuous activity in the Mediterranean Sea. Recently (December 2016), there were several announcements of voyages also in the direction of the Atlantic Ocean.⁶



Figure 6.2 Vessels of the Iranian fleet

In the course of 2016, the main activity of the fleet was large scale and publicized exercises and maneuvers, which included collaborations with foreign fleets such as

- 5 4 pirate attacks on cargo ships thwarted by Iranian warships in Gulf of Aden. <http://theiranproject.com/blog/2015/09/17/4-pirate-attacks-on-cargo-ships-thwarted-by-iranian-warships-in-gulf-of-aden>
- 6 Impact of Iran's warships' voyage to Atlantic. <http://theiranproject.com/blog/2016/12/04/impact-irans-warships-voyage-atlantic>

the Indian fleet⁷ the Pakistan fleet⁸ and the Italian fleet. Concurrently, the Iranian fleet proceeded with its long term activity in an Easterly direction (the Indian Ocean)⁹ and heading westward (in the region of Somalia and Bab el-Mandeb) and was also involved in attempts to transfer weapons to Yemen.

The Revolutionary Guards Navy

The Revolutionary Guards (hereinafter RG) fleet is built on an asymmetric combat concept, which is based on a very large number of small vessels (The largest among them are the size of a missile boat with displacement of approximately 200 tons), of attack vessels and of torpedo boats. These vessels are equipped with combat systems of various models and with missiles and torpedoes with a great deal of technological variance (most of them are produced in Iran based on a special purpose operational requirement), and with advanced maritime mining capabilities. Furthermore, the fleet has a coast to sea assault array, which is based on missiles positioned in fixed or mobile coastal systems.

The main mission of the Revolutionary Guards Navy is protection of the homeland in the Persian Gulf,¹⁰ and along the southern coast, with offensive and initiated activity against attackers. The fleet is trained in tactics of assimilation, of camouflage, of disguise, of swarming¹¹ of saturating targets and threats of different categories simultaneously, as well as additional tactics.

Within the asymmetry, there is also an element of 'psychological-warfare', while generating friction and constant threat, as was revealed in the attack maneuver on the American aircraft carrier model, in the takeover of the U.S. vessels, in the publication of the photos of the captured sailors,¹² and in additional incidents. There is a certain overlap in the areas of operational responsibility between the fleet of the Revolutionary Guards and the fleet of the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy. Although the command and control arrays are completely separate, there is a basic cooperation between the two fleets.

7 India, Iran in naval drills. <http://www.marsecreview.com/2016/05/india-iran-in-naval-drills>

8 Iran's naval fleet docks at Karachi for joint exercises ahead of 'Aman 17' <http://www.dawn.com/news/1286466> [Iran's naval fleet docks at Karachi for joint exercises ahead of 'Aman 17'](http://www.dawn.com/news/1286466)

9 Navy's 42nd Flotilla Saves 7 Iranian Sailors in Indian Ocean. <http://ifpnews.com/news/politics/security/2016/08/navys-42nd-flotilla-saves-7-iranian-sailors-indian-ocean>

10 <http://www.timesofisrael.com/iranian-commander-threatens-to-close-strait-of-hormuz-to-us>

11 <http://dailycaller.com/2016/09/06/seven-iranian-attack-boats-swarm-us-navy-ship-in-the-persian-gulf>

12 US sailors divulged information during Iran capture. <http://www.timesofisrael.com/us-sailors-divulged-information-during-iran-capture>

'Quds Force' of the Revolutionary Guards is the key component in the military involvement outside the Iranian borders and is responsible for direct involvement overseas, for subversion, for weapons smuggling, etc.

From the beginning of 2016 to September 2016 the number of friction incidents in the Persian Gulf between RG vessels and other vessels (primarily US fleet vessels) reached 31 and this compared with 23 incidents during all of 2015.^{13,14,15}

The RG maritime branch engaged in 2016 in creating friction and warning vis-à-vis the Western fleets mainly the United States fleet.

The branch mainly engaged in transfers of weapons to Yemen and in operational trainings, which culminated in the firing of coast to sea missiles.

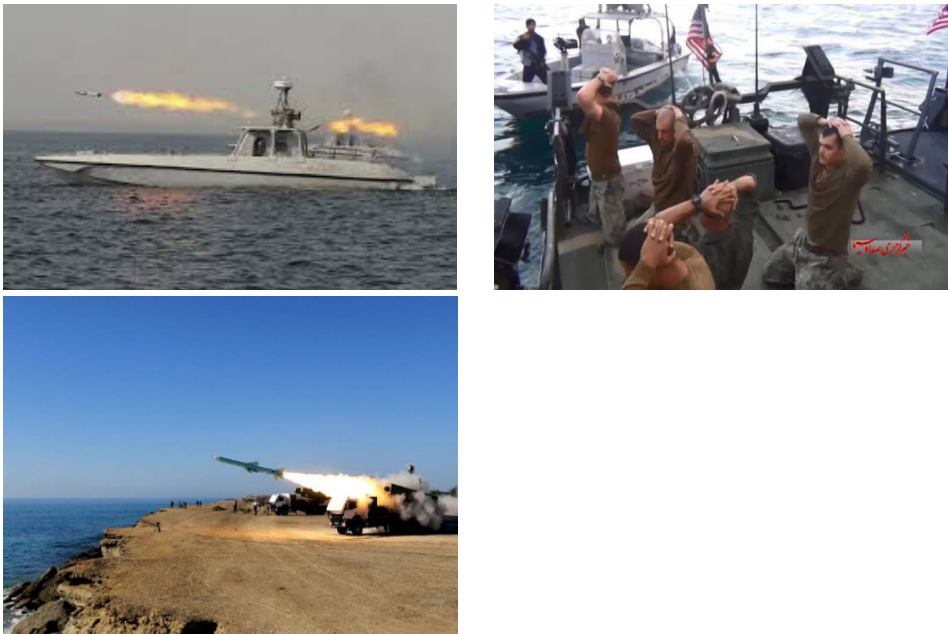


Figure 6.3 Vessels of the Revolutionary Guards fleet

- 13 Iran escalates high seas harassment of US Navy. <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/09/06/politics/iran-us-navy-confrontation>
- 14 US Navy ship fired warning shots at Iranian ship; 4 Mideast close calls this week <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/08/25/us-navy-ship-fired-warning-shots-at-iranian-ship-in-2nd-mideast-close-call-this-week.html>
- 15 U.S. Navy Says Video Shows Iranian Navy Firing Rockets Near Warships in Strait of Hormuz. <http://gcaptain.com/u-s-navy-video-shows-iran-navy-fire-rockets-near-warships-in-strait-of-hormuz>

Maritime involvement in Yemen

There is a historic rivalry in Yemen between the Zaidi Shia minority and the Sunni majority. This rivalry led, as of 2001, to several rounds of fighting and of suppressing insurgencies. Since 2014, the hostility has come to actual combat, including occupation of territories by the Shia and an attempt to pursue a full takeover of the country, while occupying the capital city of Sana'a (which led to transferring the governmental center to a region controlled by the Sunnis) and occupying the coastal region including the port city of Hudaydah.

The Zaidi Shia forces, headed by the Houthi clan from north Yemen (and who are sometimes called Houthis) have been supported for many years by the Iranians through the Revolutionary Guards in a variety of measures and forms. For these forces, occupation of the port city of Hudaydah – which is located approximately 130 nautical miles from the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and approximately 80 nautical miles from Eritrea, on the other side of the Red Sea – has opened a window to the outside world.

In March 2015 a multinational force was established, in coordination with the Yemeni government, which initiated operation 'Decisive Storm' against the Houthi forces. The force was comprised of ten countries, with the leader among them being Saudi Arabia followed by the Gulf countries: Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates.

This coalition announced a maritime blockade and it allows vessels to enter the region controlled by the insurgents only after a cargo inspection.

The Iranians failed several times in their attempts to smuggle arms into the region. The coalition forces seized various vessels with weapons several times. Concurrently, Iranian vessels, which openly declared their intention to transfer humanitarian cargo to insurgents, were forced to turn back after having refused an inspection of their cargo. In April 2015, there was an Iranian attempt to transfer a convoy of merchant ships guarded by combat vessels. This convoy was also forced to return to Iran following diplomatic clarifications of several countries, mainly the United States, with respect to their readiness to prevent the docking of the ships in Yemen. Presumably, part of the cargo was not seized and managed to reach its destination.¹⁶

16 Why Iran supported Houthi attacks against the US Navy. <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/10/why-iran-supported-houthi-attacks-against-the-us-navy.php>

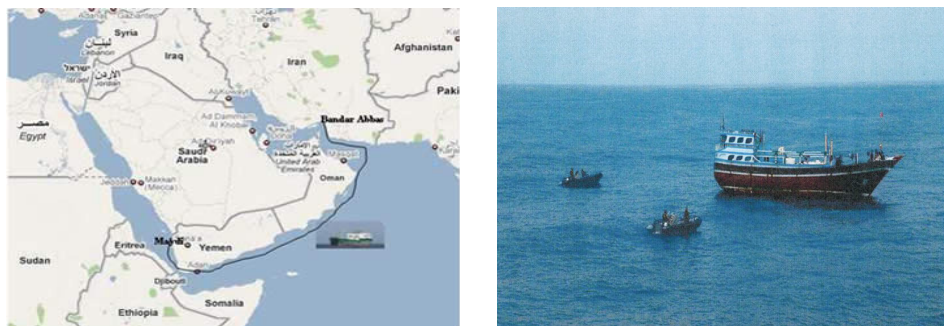


Figure 6.4 Route map of attempts of smuggling weapons by the Iranians to the Houthi insurgents (in the photo: an Iranian ship)

The Iranians on their part armed the Houthis with maritime capabilities that would help them cope with the blockade, including coast to sea missiles (some of them apparently an Iranian or Chinese version of C-802 missiles). This arming required, at a minimum, active Iranian involvement in training and in positioning of the systems.

In the course of October 2016, at least four missiles were fired on military vessels in the region north of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. One missile hit a troop transport vessel of the United Arab Emirates.¹⁷ Two attacks on American vessels ended without injury. In response, the Americans attacked with cruise missiles three maritime radar stations on the shores that are controlled by the Houthis. It seems that these radar stations,¹⁸ according to the American's understanding, assisted in detection of the position of the forces at sea. Presumably, Iran was involved, to some extent in their operation. Firing missiles on American vessels, let alone the firing the second time, which followed media publicity with respect to the firing on vessels of the United States fleet, constitutes a significant escalation. The kinetic response received clarified to the Iranians that the Americans regard them as bearing the responsibility, either partially or exclusively. Following this attack, the Iranians announced in mid-October 2016 that they would send a task force to the Red Sea in order to defend against pirate activity and protect the Iranian national interests. A continued attack of Western vessels may lead to a more decisive response against Iranian interests in the region.

17 <http://www.businessinsider.com/photos-us-navy-ship-damaged-houthi-missile-yemen-2016-10>

18 <http://www.businessinsider.com/photos-us-navy-ship-damaged-houthi-missile-yemen>

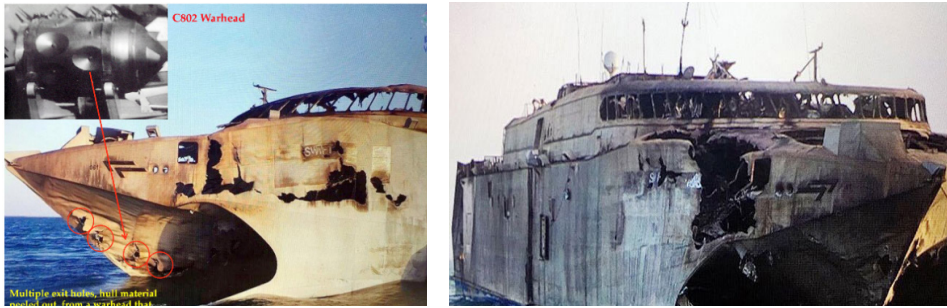


Figure 6.5 Vessels of the United Arab Emirates fleet that was damaged by a coast to sea missile

The presence of coast to sea missiles, which have a shooting range that reaches to the Bab El-Mandeb Strait and which covers the entire width of the Red Sea up to the Eritrea shores, may, if first used against commercial vessels, lead to a rise in maritime insurance prices and may prompt the global shipping sector to consider using an alternate route other than through the Suez Canal. Such risk would lead to increasing involvement of Egypt and of other effected nations to eliminate the threat to the international shipping routes. This may be the explanation that the Houthi firing was done towards military and not commercial vessels. Nonetheless, it should also be noted that the trade routes moved westward as a result of the fighting in this region.

The involvement in Yemen enables Iran to fight its traditional rival, Saudi Arabia, through a third party (proxy), in a region outside the Persian Gulf and thereby to create Iranian separation from the fighting and to reduce the threat of harm to significant interests of Iran in the Persian Gulf. The presence of coast to sea missiles in Yemen, close to Saudi Arabian ports, constitutes a strategic achievement for Iran and enables it to exert pressure on the Saudis, both in the Red Sea and in the Persian Gulf, while attempting to destabilize the Saudi regime

The presence in Yemen constitutes a base for the Revolutionary Guards and serves them as a springboard to the North-West. Yemen constitutes a way station for weapons, in order to facilitate distribution and smuggling of advance capabilities to the Gaza Strip and to Lebanon. A base on the shores of the Red Sea enables smuggling by sea and opens overland transportation options through Africa and Egypt. This way, station, although it is closer to Israel, would make it operationally difficult for the Israeli and Western intelligence and operational to thwart the shipments. If the intensity of the conflict in Yemen lessens as a result of negotiations or another turnaround, the Western pressure (intelligence and

operational) will become more moderate in this sector. The Iranians on their part will attempt to reach an agreement that will establish an Iranian home port in Yemen, either in the region controlled by the Houthis or as part of negotiations to resolve the conflict. Such a process would release assets, weapons and manpower of the Revolutionary Guards and would enable operational flexibility and smuggling activity in the east Mediterranean.

Maritime weapons smuggling efforts from Iran to East Mediterranean

Over the years, the Iranians, led by 'Quds Force' of the Revolutionary Guards, has made considerable efforts to transfer weapons 'to Hezbollah' in Lebanon and to the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip (both to 'Hamas' and to the 'Palestinian Islamic Jihad'). The predominate part of the weapons in the last decade came to Lebanon through Syria and to the Gaza Strip through Egypt (over land to the Sinai Peninsula and from there to the Gaza Strip). The arrival of weapons to Egypt was overland, through Sudan or through Egyptian transshipment ports to which weapons and raw materials came from other transshipment ports in the Middle East or in Europe.

Several attempts to transfer large quantities of weapons by sea were thwarted and exposed to the public (in certain cases the exposure was done by foreign media). The last attempt that was thwarted occurred in March 2014. The ship 'Klos C' sailed for the Port of Sudan from Iran through a port in Iraq, in an attempt to cover up the Iranian involvement, while it was carrying M-302 ground to ground missiles on board. It seems that after unloading the cargo at the Port of Sudan, the weapons were supposed to arrive overland to the Gaza Strip.

The capture of the ship exposed several of the Iranian smuggling methods, which include use of unsuspected commercial companies and ships whose crews are unaware of the content of the containers on board. Furthermore, the involvement of transshipment ports was partially clarified, including ports in Europe and in Egypt (several publications on thwarting the smuggling of containers of weapons at European ports). According to foreign media, the Israeli air force and navy intercepted further attempts to smuggle weapons, among them of the ship 'Francop' in November 2009, and the ship "Victorya' in March 2011. Moreover, the foreign media wrote of attacks of the Israeli air force and navy on vessels and convoys in the Sudan region. Furthermore, information was accumulated in Israel of such that in the not so distant past there was a smuggling route from Yemen to the shores of Sudan and Egypt, which relied on local smugglers on small vessels.



Figure 6.6 Weapons smuggling attempt on the Klos C ship

During the course of the summer of 2014, the Sudanese government changed its policy towards Iran. First Sudan closed down the Iranian cultural centers and then it distanced itself, at least outwardly, from the Iranian hegemony and joined the task force headed by Saudi Arabia and Yemen. The significance of these measures in terms of Iran was blockage of the transshipment capability of the weapons in Sudan in general and at the Port of Sudan in particular. Since those moves, the Iranians have been attempting to establish a different home port in Yemen or in Eritrea where they would be able to operate freely.

The continuing fighting in Syria has led in its wake to the involvement of the super-powers and increased maritime presence in the region of a large number of nations with various interests, including diversion of vast intelligence resources of the international community. This presence has heightened the risk for Iran in transferring weapons to Hezbollah through the sea ports in Syria and has made this activity more complex.

Concurrently, the Iranian involvement in the fighting alongside Hezbollah in favor of the Assad regime may provide the Iranians with other alternatives. Presumably,

if and when the fighting in Syria abates, or advances to the negotiation stage, Iran will aspire to receive a reward for its efforts. Part of this reward is expected to be a home port in Syria, which will facilitate easier transfer of weapons and forces to Hezbollah and above all, a permanent Iranian presence in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea.

The issue of Iranian ability to dock and to use ports in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea may also be relevant to Lebanon and this in light of the appointment of a new president in Lebanon who is acceptable to Hezbollah, although internal and external pressures against the new president are expected.

Concurrently, the Iranians came to an agreement with Italy on providing port services to their vessels and this following a port visit of the Italian fleet in Iran¹⁹ in September 2016.

Trends for 2017

The Iranian fleet will continue in its long-term activity under the heading of 'fighting pirates', primarily towards the Horn of Africa region, while demonstrating presence in the Yemen region and power projection missions, which if possible will reach the Mediterranean Sea or the Atlantic Ocean, including ports visits and maneuvers with foreign fleets.

The Revolutionary Guards, including the maritime branch, will operate under the moderate policy of the presidency, although presumably they will increase the friction activity in the Persian Gulf in order to provide 'aggressive' images to the government for domestic purposes.

'Quds Force' will continue to support insurgents in Yemen, including transfers of weapons in the red sea and to the mediterranean, while attempting to separate and distance Iran from direct linkage to operational events.

The support of the Hezbollah maritime force building process will continue, under Iranian budget constraints on the one hand and the allocation of Hezbollah resources and inputs on the other hand.

The merchant navy of Iran, which was involved in smuggling and in efforts to break the international economic sanctions on Iran, is under an international embargo that led to creative efforts for its operation. Upon removal of the sanctions, the

19 Italian Navy Warship Docks In Iran. <http://yournewswire.com/italian-navy-warship-docks-in-iran>

Iranians are expected to rebuild the national shipping company,²⁰ which shall serve as a component in the national and military axis.

Iran has a significant interest in the establishment of home ports outside Iran that would be used both for official port visits and as a base for transfers of weapons, which would replace the Port of Sudan. These ports may be situated in Yemen or in Syria, as part of the arrangements to be made after the cessation of fighting in these countries, or within the framework of signing an arrangement or consent of the host countries, such as Italy, Syria, Lebanon and Djibouti.

The process of recognition of the implications of the nuclear deal from purchasing perspectives will continue, while attempting to upgrade and to overhaul the combat systems, the ships and the submarines. Concurrently, we can expect an attempt to purchase components for the weapons and for the systems that the Iranian industry has had difficulty to produce on its own, such as advanced combat and communication systems. At this stage, the Iranian military industry, including the marine systems, will continue to maintain R&D and self-production capability.

20 Iran's Revolutionary Guard faces problems as economy opens. <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/12/17/business/economy-business/irans-revolutionary-guard-facesproblems-economy-opens/#.WFUWmIUrLIU>