



BETWEEN PIRACY AND PERSIA: MOUNTING THREATS TO MARITIME CHOKEPOINTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Maritime chokepoints are among the most sensitive locations where geography, trade, and politics meet. The challenges posed by Middle Eastern chokepoints, in particular, were evident even before the massive dependence on oil of the twentieth century. These points have become increasingly volatile in recent years, and especially since the Arab uprisings began. Complications include increased regional instability and aggravation of existing threats, preeminently piracy, terrorism, and the challenges posed by Iran.

PIRACY AND TERRORISM AS GROWING CONCERNS

Though states' interests vary and are sometimes in conflict with one another, all value unfettered shipping. In recent years, the greatest regional threat to this common interest in the Red Sea, has been Somali piracy (although not exclusively). Much has been undertaken to address this ongoing problem. International efforts and resources, including the deployment of European, American, NATO, Chinese, Indian, Iranian, and other naval forces, coordinated commercial shipping movements, dedicated tracking and communications resources, and widespread adoption of anti-piracy practices have driven the attacks away from the Bab el-Mandab Strait further east along the Yemeni coast of the Indian Ocean (towards the Straits of Hormuz) and to the south of the Horn of Africa.¹

Tactical measures have reduced (that is, displaced) the number of pirate attacks in the Red Sea in recent years. However, the strategic problem of failing states—of which piracy is only a symptom—may be getting worse at the sea's two ends and in the middle. Somalia's ongoing problems could prove to be just the tip of the iceberg. Current international anti-piracy efforts mainly target the symptom (i.e. attacks on the seas) and not the fundamental causes of the phenomenon.

Yemen has been racked by sectarian and tribal violence. In the last two years, it has become the adopted home of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). This is similar to how the political and economic conditions in Somalia proved to be a breeding ground for both piracy, and the Islamist terrorist group, al-Shabaab. Recent reports suggest that AQAP has seized control of areas along the Yemeni coast. While Yemen's instability predates the large-scale demonstrations that swept across the Arab world in early 2011, an increasingly chaotic Yemen could make the country ever more attractive as a base for Somali pirates, expanding their already thriving black market for weapons.

While instability in Yemen, or even its collapse, would not lead inevitably to increased piracy on the Red Sea, it is a distinct possibility. This potential, combined with the global importance of undisturbed shipping through the area, suggest that the stability, security, and prosperity of these states provide a distinct shared interest.

Egypt is also a concern when it comes to maritime chokepoints. While the effective management and smooth operation of the Suez Canal and the Suez-Mediterranean (SUMED) pipeline remain a clear Egyptian interest, the country at present is experiencing its greatest political challenge in over half a century. Egypt's poverty and governance problems pale in

¹ The move eastward also reflects pirates' ability to adapt and extend the distances at which they can operate. See Lauren Ploch et al, *Piracy off the Horn of Africa* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2011), p. 1.

comparison to those in Yemen and Somalia, and the country appears an unlikely source of Red Sea piracy. Yet, Egypt is struggling with a restive Bedouin population in the Sinai Peninsula. In May 2011, an Egyptian security official claimed that over 400 Bedouin, Palestinian, and foreign Arab members of al Qaeda were in the peninsula. While Egypt dedicates significant resources to securing the Suez Canal, it is possible that the canal or the SUMED pipeline could become targets for future attacks. An attack on either site could hinder global transportation. This is not just a theoretical concern. In 2009, Egyptian authorities arrested 26 people for planning to attack ships in the Suez Canal and oil pipelines.² The Sinai pipeline, which carries natural gas from Egypt to Israel and Jordan, and provides Israel with more than 40 percent of its natural gas supply primarily for electricity generation, has been sabotaged repeatedly in recent months.³

THE IRANIAN THREAT

Iran's threats to close the Straits of Hormuz to international shipping and, thereby, stop the flow of Gulf oil have increased in frequency and intensity recently. Senior Iranian officials have warned explicitly that Iran can—and will—block the Straits in response to any act of aggression. In general, these pronouncements are intended to deter the international community from increasing pressure on Iran and to raise the perceived cost of any military confrontation with it, particularly against its nuclear facilities. Former commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's naval force, Rear Admiral Morteza Saffari, warned in 2010 that U.S. warships are easy prey for the Iranian navy. Iran also threatened to respond if its ships' cargoes are subjected to inspections (a step included in a 2010 Security Council resolution on Iran). Iran ended the "Great Prophet 6" maneuvers in July 2011 by firing several supersonic coast-to-sea missiles against moving targets near the Hormuz Straits to demonstrate that the country is capable of disrupting, if not blocking, the Straits and will not hesitate to do so.⁴

Because of America's military superiority in the Gulf, Iran has placed a priority on acquiring and building a large number of small, fast-moving vessels (some of which are for unmanned use). It also has re-outfitted civilian vessels for military missions. As a result, in recent years there have been reports of Revolutionary Guard naval vessels skirmishing with U.S. ships. These incidents were demonstrative, rather than destructive (the U.S. ships were not actually attacked). They were intended to send a message ("naval diplomacy") to the United States—namely that Iran sees the Straits as its strategic backyard. In recent months, there have been several near misses between Iranian and American ships because of Iran's increased military activity. Both sides appear uncomfortable with the rising tensions in the Straits, as evidenced by occasional talk that a "hot line" should be established between the two rivals.

Recent assessments suggest that the American Fifth Fleet is capable of opening the Straits to naval traffic within a few weeks, even if Iran were willing to sacrifice all of its assets, suffer massive retaliation, and potentially lose many of its own oil facilities and export revenues.⁵ Such assessments may be based on the fundamental weakness of the Iranian air force, a belief in the American ability to paralyze Iranian positions near the Straits (where Iran stations its coastal defense cruise missiles), and America's improved ability to remove naval mines. In addition, unlike other vessels such as cargo ships, tankers are hard to sink due to their size, structure, and the fact that crude oil doesn't burn easily.

Even in the unlikely possibility that Iran could effectively close the Straits for a long period of time, such a move would not be in Iran's best interests. It would interfere with the import of refined oil to Iran and its export of crude oil (which accounts for some 80 percent of its income). Also, it would undoubtedly lead to a confrontation with the U.S. Navy, which has a clear operational advantage. Unlike Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and the United Arab Emirates, the majority of Iran's oil exports pass through the waterway.⁶

Yet, even a partial blockade of the Straits with rapid, effective international action to open them, would affect the already volatile global energy market. The impact of even a limited campaign on the market would likely last a long time, beyond the event itself, because of the residual concern about supply disruptions. In order to mitigate these negative effects, three options are available:

- 1) **Tapping into strategic petroleum reserves, half of which are in the United States.** In July 2011, because of the impact of the "Arab Spring" on oil prices, there was an international decision to release a limited quantity of oil from

² Alaa Shahine and Alaric Nightingale, "Suez Canal Ships, Pipelines Were Plotters' Targets," Bloomberg, July 9, 2009, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=aPJCNKXydyAc>

³ Karl Vick, "The Sinai Gas Blast: Another Reason for Israeli Anxiety over Egypt," *Time*, February 7, 2011, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2046573,00.html>

⁴ "Iran to test-fire new Supersonic Missiles," *PressTV* July 4, 2011, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/187450.html>; See also "Iran Tests Hitting Mobile Naval Targets with Hi-Tech Missile," *Fars News*, July 6, 2011. <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9004151166>

⁵ Anthony Cordesman, *Iran, Oil and the Strait of Hormuz* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., March 2007), p. 6, http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/070326_iranoil_hormuz.pdf.

⁶ Gawdat Bahgat, "Persian Gulf Security at the Turn of the Century: Opportunities and Challenges," *Defense Analysis* 15, no. 1 (1999), p. 82.

American, as well as other reserves.⁷

- 2) Taking advantage of excess global oil production capacity, which is primarily concentrated in Saudi Arabia. Saudi senior officials have claimed that the Kingdom can produce an additional four million barrels of oil per day, which approximately equals Iranian production capability.
- 3) Using alternate shipping routes, such as the Saudi East-West and the Habshan-Fujairah pipelines, which can carry up to five million and 1.5 million barrels, respectively, per day.

As discussed above, because of its fundamental military weakness, Iran is incapable of blocking the Straits completely for long. Therefore any conflict would focus on disrupting freedom of movement in the Gulf in general, while attempting to avoid a comprehensive campaign that might cost it dearly—militarily, politically, and economically.⁸ Within these limits, Iran will continue to take advantage of the Straits' unique geographical conditions and global sensitivity to tremors in the world's energy market by threatening to close the Straits. This blustery threat continues to serve the regime well even if it appears contrary to its own basic interests.

That said, any confrontation might develop into a more widespread campaign, where both sides lose the ability to limit its scope in time and space. For example, Iranian harassment actions and U.S.-led counter-actions could precede an attack on the western shore of the Gulf, where there is strategic infrastructure, including ports, refineries, and desalination plants. This possibility undoubtedly would give pause to anyone considering a muscular response to Iran's threats.

The Hormuz Straits are not the only point of maritime friction with Iran. The Red Sea is becoming an increasingly important Iranian-Israeli arena. Iran reportedly transports and even manufactures weapons in the Sudan to supply terrorist groups in Africa and the Middle East. According to U.S. sources, Israel, in turn, has dispatched its air force to attack Iranian weapons convoys headed for Hamas-controlled Gaza.⁹ Israel is increasingly concerned that Iran has invested significant efforts in developing its relationships with several East African countries, including Kenya, Eritrea, Somalia, Djibouti, Tanzania, and the Comoro Islands. For Israel, this is reminiscent of Gamal Abdel Nasser's initiatives in the 1960s that were intended to provide Egypt with greater ability to block Israeli shipping along the length of the Red Sea. In addition, as part of Iran's high profile, regional muscle flexing, in 2011, it dispatched ships to the Mediterranean Sea through the Suez Canal, and reportedly for the first time, sent submarines to the Red Sea.

The Iranian threat also has implications for the Black Sea region and the Turkish Straits. Already in 2007, there were reports that the United States might use air force bases in Bulgaria and on Romania's Black Sea coast to launch an attack on Iran.¹⁰ Recently, Russia complained about the presence of a U.S. Aegis cruiser with antimissile technology in the Black Sea as part of a joint U.S.-Ukrainian naval exercise.¹¹ The perceived need for deploying such technology on the European continent is an indication, in part, of the growing fear in the West of Iranian intentions because of the increased range of Iranian missiles.

CONCLUSION

Piracy, terrorism, and the growing threat from Iran are problems that the international community is trying to tackle collectively. These problems are not necessarily distinct, as Iran is trying to increase its influence in states with weakening governmental control such as Yemen, partly as result of the "Arab Spring." Iran is also taking advantage of growing piracy to justify its increasing naval presence in the Red Sea vicinity. These Iranian efforts to project power have turned the waters around the Horn of Africa into another area of maritime friction. The result is that other navies operating in the area are now combating both piracy and Iranian weapon smuggling and muscle flexing.

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⁷ Dan Strumpf, "Oil Futures: Oil Plunges as IEA Plans to Tap Strategic Reserves," *Wall Street Journal*, June 23, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/BT-CO-20110623-710876.html>.

⁸ Yoel Guzansky, "The Straits of Hormuz: Strategic Importance in Volatile Times," *INSS Insight* No. 204, September 3, 2010, <http://www.inss.org.il/publications.php?cat=21&incat=&read=4387>

⁹ Luis Martinez, "Exclusive: Three Israeli Airstrikes against Sudan," *ABC News*, March 27, 2009, <http://blogs.abcnews.com/politicalradar/2009/03/exclusive-three.html>

¹⁰ Rick Rozoff, "Black Sea Crisis Deepens as US-NATO Threat to Iran Grows," *Global Research*, September 16, 2009, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=15239>

¹¹ "Russia Decries U.S. Antimissile Ship's Presence," *Global Security Network*, June 13, 2011, http://gsn.nti.org/gsn/nw_20110613_3406.php