

SUMMARY - GULF ROUNDTABLE SERIES

PARTICIPATING SCHOLARS

Dr. David Crist is a senior historian for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the author of numerous studies about current military operations in the Middle East and the Iranian military. He is currently serving as a special advisor to the commander, U.S. Central Command. He is also a colonel in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve and has served with Special Operations Forces in both Afghanistan and Iraq. **Commander Joshua Himes** was the 2010-2011 U.S. Navy Fellow at CSIS. Prior to this, he was deputy director for intelligence in the National Military Command Center, was responsible for the Chairman/SecDef Daily Intelligence Update brief, and deployed to the ISAF Joint Command in Kabul, Afghanistan. He has served with Carrier Airwing 11 and Carrier Strike Group 12, as well as in support of Operations Allied Force, Enduring Freedom, and Iraqi Freedom. ■

Iran's Evolving Naval Strategy

Iran's nuclear program gets the press, but Iran's navy is an indispensable part of its regional strategy. A swift, versatile navy gives Iran political and economic leverage in and around the Gulf, and allows it to challenge U.S. presence without necessarily suffering retaliation. In discussing Iran's naval strategy, Dr. David Crist, senior historian for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, explained that Iran has used its past conflict experiences with the United States to develop an asymmetric naval approach and robust resources for implementing it. Commander Joshua Himes, the 2010-2011 U.S. Navy Fellow at CSIS, argued that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) has made asymmetric warfare in the Gulf its main focus, while the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN) has begun to focus on engaging with regional powers outside the Gulf. Both experts argued that Iran's naval strategy requires creative thinking by U.S. strategists and their GCC allies for how to anticipate and counter Iran's actions at sea. The two experts delivered their remarks at a Gulf Roundtable at CSIS on July 7, 2011.

One of the most important parts of Iranian naval strategy is the use of asymmetric techniques. As Crist explained, the Iranians recognize that the United States has greater resources: more warships, more munitions, and greater firepower. Yet rather than trying to match these resources head-on and "play to [the United States'] strength," Iran focuses on exploiting the vulnerability of U.S. ships as "big, huge, dumb targets." Doing so involves techniques like indiscriminate mining and multiple attacks from small boats equipped with relatively simple missiles, rockets, and even machine guns.

Crist explained that these asymmetric tactics evolved from Iran's confrontation with the United States in Operation Earnest Will in 1987-1988. Iran lacked the resources to match the U.S. Navy's capabilities in the Gulf, but was able to inflict significant damage with less sophisticated technology. With \$1,500 worth of World War I-era mine technology, for example, the Iranians were able to sink what would now equal a \$1 billion U.S. warship. In assessing its experience in this conflict, Iran judged that its asymmetric strategy was well conceived but needed stronger technological support.

THE GULF ROUNDTABLE SERIES

The CSIS Middle East Program launched the Gulf Roundtable in April 2007 to examine the strategic importance of a broad range of social, political, and economic trends in the Gulf region and to identify opportunities for constructive U.S. engagement. The roundtable defines the Gulf as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, and Iran. The roundtable convenes monthly, assembling a diverse group of regional experts, policymakers, academics, and business leaders seeking to build a greater understanding of the complexities of the region. Topics for discussion include the role of Islamist movements in politics, the war on terror, democratization and the limits of civil society, the strategic importance of Gulf energy, media trends, trade liberalization, and prospects for greater regional integration. The Gulf Roundtable series is made possible in part through the generous support of the Embassy of the United Arab Emirates. ■

This lesson stuck and shaped Iran’s naval development until the present day.

Accordingly, Iran’s naval arsenal now includes a larger set of the tools it found useful in the late 1980s, as well as some more advanced capabilities. Mine stockpiles in particular have increased remarkably: while Iran only used 91 mines against the United States in 1987-1988, now its entire mine stockpile has reached 3,000-5,000. Most of these are simple contact mines, but some, perhaps 300, are sophisticated enough to lie on the ocean floor and target ships passing above. The Iranians have also modified their submarines, developed commando capabilities, and enhanced their boats’ ability to swarm targets as additional support for their asymmetric methods.

A second major milestone for the Iranian navy came when a 2007 reorganization established complementary mandates for the IRIN and the IRGCN. Himes argued that the IRIN was charged with the defense of the Gulf before 2007, but the reorganization shifted its focus to outside the Gulf. It now focuses on the “strategic triangle” between three key shipping chokepoints: the Strait of Hormuz, Bab al-Mandab, and the Strait of Malacca. Iran’s ambitions in this space are evident in its recent excursions, especially in the Gulf of Aden, where it has run fourteen patrols since 2008. Iran is also expanding its influence in the Red Sea and beyond: just recently, two IRIN ships passed through the Suez Canal on a trip to Syria, the first of its kind since the 1979 Revolution. According to Himes, the IRIN has conducted port visits to a range of countries in the Horn of Africa and elsewhere, normalizing the Iranian presence and laying the groundwork for future ties.

The IRIN’s reach beyond the Gulf has given the IRGCN primary responsibility for the Gulf itself, which it defends with a force tailored to complex irregular warfare. It uses a multitude of high-speed boats equipped with missiles designed specifically to damage larger warships. Himes argued that Iran sees this sort of deterrent as ideal. The IRGCN may not be able to win an engagement with the United States, but it can make engagement costly enough that the United States would not choose to get embroiled in a conflict in the first place.

The evolution of Iran’s naval capabilities, particularly those of the IRGCN, creates a complex set of concerns for U.S. strategy in the Gulf. To address them, the United States should focus on several key priorities. First, both Crist and Himes agreed that coalition efforts involving the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and other states are imperative.

For example, minesweeping is a very costly task for the United States, but European and GCC states could provide much-needed help. Crist noted that if the Iranians were to mine international waters, mustering support for a coalition would be relatively easy.

The United States can further adapt to Iran’s naval evolution by adjusting its own training methods. U.S. forces must be trained to take into account Crist’s point that “Iran is willing to escalate and take risks in confronting the United States,” an approach that Iran’s ideological hostility perpetuates. Himes emphasized this point, saying that Iran may see an incentive in provoking tactical-level conflicts in order to raise the flag of resistance to the United States without escalating to an all-out confrontation.

Both Himes and Crist agreed that the evolution of Iran’s naval strategy warrants the attention of U.S. strategists. Iran has a firm belief in the soundness of its asymmetric strategy, and a stronger set of capabilities than ever before for executing it. A robust combination of awareness, creative thinking, and strong allied efforts will allow the United States to enhance its ability to prevent or respond to a naval confrontation with Iran, they argued. ■

The views expressed here do not necessarily represent those of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Navy.

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