The Limits of Israeli Sea Power and the Threat of Escalation with Iran

SAMUEL HELFONT

Over the past year, Israel and Iran have been engaged in a shadow war at sea. The Israelis have targeted Iran's ships carrying oil or other resources designed to aid its proxies in the Levant—most significantly, Hezbollah. The Iranians have responded by attacking random Israeli-linked ships. On July 31, Iranian drones hit the Israeli-linked MV *Mercer Street* off the coast of Oman in the Arabian Sea. For the first time in this secretive maritime war, two sailors—one British and one Romanian—were killed. Thus, the incident marked a significant escalation.[1]

These confrontations at sea are part of a broader conflict between Israel and Iran that has been taking place across the Middle East. Yet the maritime aspects of this shadow war are not well understood. The Israeli Navy has largely been overshadowed by other parts of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). It receives scant attention in the West, but understanding its history, capabilities, and role in Israeli defense policy is critical for any analysis of Israel's current confrontation with Iran. While the IDF is one of the most powerful militaries in the Middle East, the Israeli Navy lacks the tools to address the Iranian threat at sea. This weakness creates a dangerous situation. In the past, Israel's lack of naval options to solve maritime disputes has led it to launch broader wars, and Jerusalem recently threatened to escalate the current conflict into other domains to address Iran's threat to its shipping. As such, skirmishes at sea could easily turn into a larger confrontation, and while the Biden administration would like to shift American priorities elsewhere, maritime confrontations between Israel and Iran in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea deserve its continued attention.

The Israeli Navy

Israel's naval policy was largely isolated from its broader defense policy during the first few decades of the state's existence. The leadership of the Israeli Navy in the 1950s and 1960s attempted to imitate British doctrine. As such, they organized their fleet around destroyers and submarines designed to control sea lines of communication (SLOCs). However, the IDF did not see defending Israel's SLOCs as a priority and considered the navy's defense of the coast to be largely redundant with the Israeli Air Force's capabilities. The IDF's reasoning was based in part on its preference for short, decisive wars. Calling up the Israeli reserve, which is necessary in most major wars, puts considerable strain on the nation's economy.

As such, Israeli leaders try to avoid the type of protracted conflicts in which controlling SLOCs can play a decisive role.

A major shift in the navy's role occurred during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when an Israeli naval strategy built around the small but fast Saar missile boats performed beyond all expectations. The Israelis quickly defeated both the Syrian and Egyptian fleets, establishing command of the sea throughout the conflict.[2] From that point on, the Israeli Navy has increasingly developed its capabilities and been integrated into broader Israeli defense policy. The Saar 3s and Saar 4s that fought in 1973 were small, displacing under 500 tons. In the early 1990s the navy acquired three American-built Saar 5 corvettes, which displaced almost 1,300 tons.[3] Later in the decade, Berlin helped finance high-end German-built submarines. While Israel maintains a policy of strategic ambiguity about its nuclear arsenal, international experts generally agree that it maintains submarine-launched nuclear missiles designed as a second-strike capability.[4]

In the twenty-first century, the Israeli Navy continued to grow and develop. During the 2006 Lebanon War, Hezbollah hit and disabled a Saar 5, INS *Hanit*, with an Iranian-supplied C-802 anti-ship missile. The *Hanit*'s vulnerability came as a shock and provided the impetus to revamp tactics and upgrade systems.[5] Then, in the 2010s, Israel again decided to upgrade its navy by purchasing four new Saar 6 corvettes from Germany to defend its offshore natural-gas platforms in the Mediterranean. The Saar 6s displace 2,000 tons, making them considerably larger and more capable than the Saar 5s. They are also loaded with the most up-to-date weapons, detections, and countermeasures systems.[6] The first Saar 6, INS *Magen*, was delivered in late 2020. The three remaining ships, INS *Oz*, INS *Atzmaut*, and INS *Nitzachon*, were delivered in the summer of 2021. The combination of Saar 6s, Saar 5s, and a range of smaller vessels gives Israel a very capable surface fleet, and a small but vibrant literature has emerged to describe Israel's "turn to the sea."[7] Nevertheless, the Israeli fleet is still relatively small and lacks the logistics to maintain a sustained presence outside the Eastern Mediterranean or Red Sea. Thus, while it is currently growing in strength, it will essentially remain a brown-water fleet, and its inability to defend Israeli shipping in the Indian Ocean will drive Israel's strategic decisions in its current conflict with Iran.

The Iranian Challenge at Sea

Israel built its navy to defend its interests in the Mediterranean. Yet a third of Israeli trade by volume passes through the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean, where it is exposed to Iranian attacks.[8] This threat has led powerful voices in Israel to reconsider their priorities. For example, one of the most prominent voices on naval strategy in Israel, Shaul Chorev—a former deputy commander of the Israeli Navy and the current director of the Maritime Policy and Strategy Center at the University of Haifa—recently suggested that the Israeli Navy "should move its center of activity from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea."[9] Such a move, however, would be difficult. Israel's population, economy, and cultural centers are all concentrated

along the Mediterranean coast. Just offshore are the natural-gas fields that supply the state's energy. Israel's navy plays an important strategic role in protecting those assets and would have difficulty doing so if it shifted its focus to the Red Sea.

Nevertheless, denying Iran the ability to ship arms and other resources to Gaza and Lebanon remains important for Israel. While these territories are in the Mediterranean, Israel prefers to intercept Iranian ships in the Red Sea, before they pass through the Suez Canal. The Israelis fear that Iranians could unload the weapons in an ungoverned or uncontrolled part of the Sinai and then smuggle them north via land routes.[10]

Denying Iran the ability to use these waters has led to retaliations that Israel's fleet is ill equipped to address. Threats to Israel's southern SLOCs are not a new problem. In the 1950s and 1960s, Egypt blockaded Israeli shipping in the Red Sea, which Israel used as casus belli for both the Suez War in 1956 and the Six-Day War in 1967. In both of those conflicts, Egypt cut off Israeli shipping at the Straits of Tiran, which separate the Gulf of Aqaba from the Red Sea.[11] In both cases, the blockade was part of a larger confrontation with much broader interests at stake, but Israel's inability to relieve the blockade through a limited naval action became its official justification for launching a general war. Obvious parallels, and dangers, exist today.

The blockades of Tiran were eventually broken by ground campaigns in the Sinai. However, Egypt was still able to establish a more distant blockade at Bab el-Mandeb Strait, on the southern end of the Red Sea. In the early 1970s, Israeli leaders took the threat of a blockade at Bab el-Mandeb very seriously, and the Israeli minister of defense, Moshe Dayan, pushed the navy to develop the Saar 4, which was bigger and had more endurance than the Saar 3, to address this problem. The navy developed the ship, but relieving a blockade of the Bab el-Mandeb proved infeasible. The Israeli Air Force did not have the range to provide sustained air cover, and any Israeli ship that ventured that far south would have been surrounded by hostile Arab states—Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Yemen—as well as their air forces. The Israelis were able to address the threat only through American-led diplomacy.[12]

Today, Iranian forces operate off the coast of Yemen and in the southern Red Sea. In 2015, Iranian-aligned Houthi forces occupied Perim Island, in the middle of Bab el-Mandeb, and attempted to use it to control sea traffic through the strait.[13] However, Israel's geopolitical position has shifted. It is now at peace with Egypt and Sudan, and it enjoys increasingly friendly relations with Saudi Arabia. Each of those states is hostile to Iran. Thus, Iranian ships, like Israeli ships in previous decades, find themselves far from home in unwelcoming waters. As such, Israeli operations to control Red Sea SLOCs are not only in its interests—as they have always been—but are now also feasible.

However, while the Israeli Navy could theoretically protect Israeli shipping through the Bab el-Mandeb, almost all of Israel's southern SLOCs continue well into the Indian Ocean,

where Israel faces many of the same constraints it faced in the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandeb in earlier periods. It cannot provide sustained air cover, and even its upgraded fleet cannot remain on station for the extended periods of time required to secure shipping lanes. Respected former commander of the Israeli Navy rear admiral Eliezer "Chini" Marom recently called this shipping concern "our soft underbelly." "I am very worried," he continued, "the naval campaign against Iran is not in our favor."[14] Similarly, Shaul Chorev has questioned "whether Israel's Navy would be able to protect all the nation's shipping" as it transits south.[15] Moreover, while Israeli navalists see protecting Israeli shipping as one of the primary roles of the fleet, such missions have a long, contentious history dating back to the 1950s, and other elements of the IDF have generally opposed them in favor of concentrating its naval force closer to home.[16]

Threats of Escalation

Ideally, Israel would rely on a traditional sea power such as the United States to control its southern SLOCs through the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. Israeli foreign minister Yair Lapid spoke with his American, British, and Romanian counterparts about the recent *Mercer Street* attack in an attempt to develop a unified front. He argued that "Iran is not just an Israeli problem, but an exporter of terrorism, destruction, and instability that are hurting us all."[17] Indeed, Iran has not limited its attacks to Israeli-owned vessels. Several days after attacking the MV *Mercer Street*, Iranian commandos in the Gulf of Oman attempted to hijack the MV *Asphalt Princess*, which does not appear to have any connections to Israel.[18] And in 2019 they attacked international ships with limpet mines in the same waters.[19]

Yet, in the past, Jerusalem has been disappointed by its allies at sea. Israel asked for American help to relieve the Egyptian blockade of the Tiran Straits in 1967. The United States remained on the sidelines, which contributed significantly to Jerusalem's decision to launch the Six-Day War.[20] More recently, in 2002, Israel requested that the US Navy interdict an Iranian ship, the *Karine A*, which was smuggling fifty tons of weapons to the Palestinians during the Second Intifada. Although this occurred during the height of America's War on Terrorism, the US Navy refused to intervene, leaving the Israelis to scramble to intercept the ship in the Red Sea.[21] Moreover, Jerusalem and Washington appear to disagree about policy and strategy at sea in the current conflict. In a recent interview, Marom suggested that Israeli attacks on Iranian shipping had taken place quietly for some time. However, Iran had no desire to publicize the events out of fear of escalation. Members of the Biden administration saw these attacks as a threat to their attempt to renegotiate the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on Iran's nuclear program. Thus, Marom claimed, once the Biden administration took office, someone leaked details about Israeli attacks on Iranian ships to the press, which in turn forced the Iranians to respond.[22] Whatever the truth of such allegations from the former head of the Israeli Navy, they clearly suggest that the United States and Israel disagree about strategy and policy toward Iran at sea. As such, the American navy may be reluctant to provide the type of force and presence Israel would need to protect its shipping.

If the United States takes a hands-off approach, Israel's options at sea will be limited, which may create an even more dangerous situation. If history is a guide, in the absence of a naval option to counter Iran, Israel is most likely to rely on other forms of deterrence, such as cyberattacks, special forces, or air power. The resulting operations could occur in the Levant, Iraq, or Iran itself and thus are much more likely to spiral into a broader conflict. As Israeli prime minister Naftali Bennett said on August 3, "The Iranians must understand that it's not possible to sit calmly in Tehran and set the whole Middle East on fire. That is over." Even if Israel's allies remain on the sidelines, Bennett argued, Israel knows "how to act alone."[23] Similarly, Israeli defense minister Benny Gantz stated that "Israel is ready to attack Iran" and that "we are at a point where we need to take military action against Iran. The world needs to take action against Iran now."[24]

Conclusion and Recommendations

The ongoing shadow war between Israel and Iran at sea is a threat to regional security. Elements of the Biden administration might want to keep the conflict at arm's length either to aid their diplomacy with Iran or to facilitate a withdrawal from the Middle East as part of a shift toward Asia. That would be a mistake. Whatever reservations Washington or the international community have about Israeli strategy, staying on the sidelines risks seeing the conflict balloon into a broader war. Such a war would likely suck American attention and resources back into the Middle East and make an accommodation with Iran even more difficult.

The details of a solution will have to be left to those in government who have a fuller picture of the diplomatic landscape, but it is worth mentioning that multinational institutions such as the Bahrain-based Combined Maritime Forces already exist to address collective maritime security in the region. Policy makers might consider expanding its mandate to include the protection of peaceful shipping in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea—especially because such missions are a pillar of the liberal world order that Biden claims he wants to bolster. Whatever the solution, if the Biden administration is serious about extricating itself from the Middle East, this is the type of dangerous conflict that will demand its attention before it does so.

NOTES

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About the Author

SAMUEL HELFONT

Samuel Helfont is assistant professor of strategy and policy in the Naval War College program at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. He holds a PhD and an MA in Near Eastern Studies from Princeton University, and an MA in Middle Eastern History from Tel Aviv University. He served as an intelligence officer in the US Navy and Navy Reserve.

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