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Iran: Naval Bases in Syria and in Yemen?

Ephraim Kam

In late November 2016, the Chief of Staff of the Iranian armed forces, General Mohammad Hossein Baqeri, announced to commanders of the Iranian fleet that Iran may establish naval bases in the future far from its shores, on islands or as floating bases, and that one day it may be possible to have bases on the shores of Yemen or Syria. Baqeri emphasized that expanding the current range of the Iranian naval presence is meant to demonstrate power, strengthen deterrence, and force potential enemies to refrain from entering Iranian waters. He stressed that Iran likewise needs a fleet of ships to protect its interests in the Indian Ocean, similar to its fleet in the Gulf. Iranian Navy Commander Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari added that Iran has plans to expand its naval presence in international waters, and that a flotilla of two battleships is now circumnavigating the African continent en route to the Atlantic Ocean in order to demonstrate the power of the Iranian fleet. Iran is also proposing an exchange of visits and joint naval exercises with countries along the coasts of Africa and the Indian Ocean.

The remarks by the Iranian commanders derive primarily from Iran's fundamental hegemonic aspirations in the Middle East and, in some respects, beyond. The drive toward regional hegemony has been a key target in the Iranian strategy since the days of the Shah, but the current regime has added an Islamic-religious layer to the strategy. Its objective is not necessarily territorial expansion, but rather, to bring about a change in the geostrategic conditions in the region and impact on key processes, while improving Iran's positioning and minimizing the external threats to its security. Iran's aim is to spur the regional elements and global powers to take its spheres of interest into consideration. This aspiration is based on its imperialistic history, the sheer size of its population and territory, its religious importance, and its cultural heritage.

In concrete terms, Iran is translating its hegemonic aspirations into efforts to establish its centrality as a regional power and to reduce United States regional involvement, because to the Iranian regime, the principal threat is posed by the United States. Concurrently, it is taking action to intervene and influence other countries in the region with military and economic means and through affiliated Shiite organizations, in order to contend with the threats that have emerged as a result of the regional upheaval, and take advantage of the opportunities to promote interests in the region.

The Iranian naval fleet plays an important role in Tehran's efforts to achieve regional hegemony, while protecting Iran's long coastline in the Gulf and its interests in the Caspian Sea. The fleet's principal role is to protect Iran's oil assets, which for the most part are located in the Gulf, and to deter its rivals – led by the United States, Saudi Arabia, and, formerly, Iraq – since most of their threats to Iran are focused in the Gulf area. In addition, the Iranian fleet serves as Iran's long arm for security and deterrence purposes – first and foremost, in the vicinity of the Gulf and the Indian Ocean. Now the heads of the Iranian military have begun to announce publicly that they are also expanding the influence of the Iranian fleet beyond the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea, even toward the Atlantic Ocean.

Although the Iranian naval fleet still uses partially outdated equipment, it poses a significant threat to its rivals in the Gulf region, due to its rocket and mine-laying capabilities and due to Iran's complete control over the entire length of the eastern shore of the Gulf. The fleet's two units – the Iranian mainline fleet and the fleet of the Revolutionary Guard – include three submarines, two corvettes, four guided-missile frigates, dozens of rocket vessels and rocket-bearing patrol boats, 15 midget submarines, some of which were manufactured in Iran, and additional types of vessels. The Iranian fleet is also developing and manufacturing additional types of vessels, and is constructing additional naval bases in the Gulf. The prevailing assessment is that the Iranian fleet is incapable of blocking navigation in the Gulf over an extended period, due to United States capabilities in breaking through any Iranian obstacle, but Iran is capable of disrupting marine traffic in the Gulf with rockets, mines, and shore-to-ship artillery fire.

The salient point in the Iranian Chief of Staff's remarks is his unprecedented comment about the possibility of establishing Iranian naval bases in Syria and in Yemen. Not clear is whether the step has already been agreed on with Syria and Yemen and is about to be launched. It appears from the general tone of his remarks that at issue is a statement of intentions, which perhaps have already been discussed with Syria and Yemen – and perhaps also with Russia – but his choice of words, that “it may become possible one day,” could imply that this is still a remote possibility that has not yet been agreed upon with the two countries. The timing of these remarks is also not clear, but presumably there are two factors: One, Iran already began sending vessels toward the Atlantic Ocean. Clearly this is a tactic mainly serving its internal and external propaganda needs, without any tangible substance. Perhaps Iran is floating the idea of naval bases to create the impression that this is a comprehensive strategic course of action, in order to check the reactions to its announcement about the construction of naval bases in Syria and in Yemen. Two, the remarks perhaps were intended to counterbalance recent news about Israel's purchase of modern submarines. Or, Iran's announcement may serve as a trial balloon that it intends to set up permanent shop in two countries with shaky regimes, in order to ensure continuity of influence in the event that these regimes collapse, while collecting a price in exchange for the considerable assistance it supplies them.

If in the final analysis Iran succeeds in establishing naval bases on the shores of Syria and Yemen, this will have troubling implications, mainly for Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States, and for Egypt and Turkey. It is unclear whether Iran is thinking in terms of establishing a permanent base – as per the Chief of Staff's remarks – or whether at issue is a temporary and limited presence and the receipt of port services. The worst-case scenario is the construction of a permanent base in Syria, which connotes a permanent naval arm in the Mediterranean Sea and an Iranian military presence in proximity to Israel, while creating a threat and establishing deterrence against Israel. Moreover, the establishment of a naval base in Syria will enable Iran to transport regular supplies and other assistance to Hezbollah, without being dependent upon overland convoys or aerial transport through Syria, Iraq, and/or Turkey, and will serve its intelligence collection needs. The establishment of a naval base in Yemen will exacerbate the Iranian threat from the south against Saudi Arabia, and will provide Iran with the ability to pose a threat at the entrance to the Red Sea, and a capacity to affect the navigation of ships towards the Suez Canal and the Gulf of Eilat in the event of a confrontation.

Nevertheless, Iran presumably recognizes that the establishment of naval bases so far from its shores, when its ability to defend them is problematic, exposes these bases to strikes from its rivals, mainly in the event of a confrontation. This consideration may restrain Iran from hurrying to establish the naval bases, before it finds a solution to such threats.

At this stage, Israel would do well to monitor the developments in this regard, because it is not at all clear whether the bases will materialize, and if they do, when and in what form. Therefore, the extent of their threat to Israel and other countries is unclear. Insofar as it will become evident that the establishment of the naval bases creates substantial threats, then it will be necessary to examine to what extent the United States intends to take action in this regard, since such threats also concern the United States and its allies. The establishment of the naval bases relatively close to Israel gives Israel a more convenient possibility of destroying them if necessary, for example, in retaliation for an Iranian provocation. At the same time, any military operation against an Iranian naval base in Syria – whether overt or covert – is liable to trigger an Iranian response – directly, or through Hezbollah.

