



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on September 7, 2016

## U.S. Ship Involved in Confrontation With Iranian Patrol Boats in Persian Gulf

The *USS Firebolt*, a 174-foot-long coastal patrol boat based at NSA in Manama, Bahrain, became involved in an encounter with seven Iranian Republican Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) fast-attack boats (FIACs) in international waters in the Persian Gulf on September 4.



NSA Bahrain, situated in the Kingdom of Bahrain, is home to the U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (CENTCOM) and the U.S. 5th Fleet. The incident involving the *Firebolt* took place in the vicinity of the aircraft carrier *USS Dwight D. Eisenhower*.

The report about the incident in the *Navy Times* on September 6 stated:

The IRGCN boats approached *Firebolt* in the middle of the Persian Gulf on Sunday. Three peeled off and shadowed the PC [patrol boat coastal] from about 500 yards away for about eight minutes before turning and leaving the area, Cmdr. Bill Urban told *Navy Times* on Tuesday.

One of the remaining four FIACs in the area then turned and stopped directly in *Firebolt's* path.

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“This situation presented a drastically increased risk of collision, and *Firebolt* then maneuvered to narrowly avoid the FIAC at a range of 100 yards before departing the area,” the *Navy Times* quoted Urban as saying.

There have been 31 unsafe American encounters with Iranian vessels in the Persian Gulf so far this year, up from 23 in all of 2015, a U.S. defense official told CNN on September 6.

CNN also reported that U.S. Army General Joseph Votel, commander of U.S. Central Command at CENTCOM’s headquarters in Tampa, Florida, last week called the Iranian conduct in such incidents “concerning.” “In recent days, we have witnessed even more provocative activity by the IRGC and Navy vessels. That type of behavior is very concerning, and we hope to see Iran’s naval forces act in a more professional manner,” he said.

Votel believes the “unsafe, unprofessional” behavior is an attempt by Iran to “exert their influence and authority in the region,” reported CNN.

A report from Reuters noted that in late August, a U.S. Navy patrol craft fired warning shots toward an Iranian fast-attack vessel that approached two U.S. ships.

Following that incident, Iran’s defense minister said the Iranian vessels were just doing their job.

Reuters also quoted Kenneth Pollack, a former top CIA and White House official who is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, who said that one or two incidents could have been explained “as being the work of an over-zealous commander” within Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, but the number



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of such incidents in recent weeks make it “very hard for me to believe these are not sanctioned by higher authority” within Iran.

If that is the case, Iranian authorities may be using the incidents to stir up popular anger against the United States, Pollack said.

While the actions engaged in by the Iranian boats were undeniably provocative and irresponsible, other questions remain, including why the Iranians harbor such ill feelings against Americans, and perhaps most important of all, why the United States has a naval presence in the Persian Gulf.

Iran is located on the eastern shore of the Gulf, with Saudi Arabia and several small Arab states being located on the western shore. Iran claims as its territory all waters in the Gulf within 12 nautical miles of its land, as well as waters that are within 12 nautical miles of any islands in the Gulf claimed by Iran.

An incident occurred last January when a U.S. patrol boat apparently inadvertently strayed into the 12-mile territorial water surrounding the Iranian island of Farsi, which is located in the middle of the Gulf. The planned transit path for the boat was down the middle of the Gulf and not through the territorial waters of any country other than Kuwait and Bahrain. However, after the boat strayed through Iranian waters, an Iranian naval vessel boarded it and detained 10 U.S. sailors for a day. The incident proved to be a diplomatic embarrassment for the United States after an Iranian video surfaced on the day of the sailors’ release showing a sailor apologizing to Iranian interrogators.

We noted in [our article about that incident last January](#):

At a crucial time in U.S.-Iranian relations, when the United States has just lifted sanctions against Iran, this misstep by and apology from a U.S. naval crew makes the United States look weak and incompetent. That this change in U.S. policy has not necessarily created good will with the Iranians was revealed by a statement made by Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on January 19, who stated in a letter to President Hassan Rouhani:

I reiterate the need to be vigilant about the deceit and treachery of arrogant countries, especially the United States, in this [nuclear] issue and other issues.

Relations between the United States and Iran deteriorated rapidly after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which ousted the U.S.-supported shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and replaced him with the anti-American Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. (The CIA’s support for the coup that removed the Shah’s predecessor, Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq, as well as U.S. support to build up the pro-American shah, had long caused resentment among Iranians.)

Following the revolution that deposed the shah, U.S.-Iranian relations sank to an all-time low during the Iran hostage crisis, when 52 U.S. diplomats and citizens were held hostage for 444 days (November 4, 1979, to January 20, 1981) after a group of Iranian students belonging to the Muslim Student Followers of the Imam’s Line, who supported the Iranian Revolution, took over the U.S. Embassy in Tehran.

U.S.-Iranian relations have further deteriorated in more recent years, since the United States imposed sanctions against Iran because of that nation’s uranium enrichment program, which Western powers assert is designed to produce fuel for a nuclear-weapons program. In June 2005, President George W. Bush issued an executive order freezing the assets of individuals connected with Iran’s nuclear program. On June 24, 2010, Congress passed the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act of 2010 (CISADA), which President Obama signed into law July 1, 2010. The act greatly enhanced restrictions in Iran.



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As we noted in our article in January 2015 ([“Is Iran Trying to Develop Nuke Weapons? Where’s the Proof?”](#)):

*The New American* discussed the technical aspects of Iran’s nuclear fuel enrichment program in a November 30, 2013, article, [“UN Inspectors to Visit Iran’s Nuclear Facilities.”](#) That article cited a White House press release dated November 24, 2013 about an agreement that had been reached on Iran’s nuclear program. The release noted some of the details:

First of all, Iran has committed to halt all enrichment above 5 percent and dismantle the technical connections required to enrich above 5 percent. Iran has committed to neutralize its stockpile of near 20 percent uranium, and this is, of course, what has been of principal concern to us in terms of their stockpile. It will dilute below 5 percent, or convert to a form that is not suitable for further enrichment, its entire stockpile of near 20-percent enriched uranium before the conclusion of this six-month phase.

Iran also promises to halt progress on the growth of its 3.5 percent-enriched uranium stockpile over the next six months, in addition to neutralizing the stockpile of 20 percent-enriched uranium.

Low-enriched uranium, suitable for powering nuclear reactors, is generally enriched to a level of 3-4 percent U-235. Highly enriched uranium has a greater than 20 percent concentration of U-235; however, the fissile uranium used in nuclear weapons usually contains 85 percent or more of U-235.

Given the lack of evidence that the type of uranium being produced by Iran is suitable for the production of nuclear weapons, it seems reasonable that the United States not impose any sanctions against Iran. In fact, even if such uranium *were* suitable, sanctions could not be logically justified, since we do not impose similar sanctions against the communist giant China, which already possesses nuclear weapons.

*The New American* [posted an article](#) (“When Peace Breaks Out With Iran ...”) by former U.S. Representative Ron Paul (R-Texas), who is known for his strong non-interventionism. The article was written in the aftermath of the detention of the U.S. Navy personnel who were caught in Iranian waters that we discussed above.

In that article Paul provided example of Iran’s behavior that he interpreted as being not belligerent at all. For example, after the U.S. sailors had been detained, the Iranians did the following:

Weighing the costs and benefits they decided it made more sense not to belabor the question of what an armed US Naval vessel was doing just miles from an Iranian military base. Instead of escalating, the Iranian government fed the sailors and sent them back to their base in Bahrain.

Then on Saturday, the Iranians released four Iranian-Americans from prison, including *Washington Post* reporter Jason Rezaian. On the US side, seven Iranians held in US prisons, including six who were dual citizens, were granted clemency. The seven were in prison for seeking to trade with Iran in violation of the decades-old US economic sanctions.

This mutual release came just hours before the United Nations certified that Iran had met its obligations under the nuclear treaty signed last summer and that, accordingly, US and international sanctions would be lifted against the country.

Paul then observed:



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Events this week have dealt a harsh blow to Washington's neocons, who for decades have been warning against any engagement with Iran. These true isolationists were determined that only regime change and a puppet government in Tehran could produce peaceful relations between the US and Iran. Instead, engagement has worked to the benefit of the US and Iran.

If the Iranians indeed have been adopting a more moderate posture, we might again ask: Why are we maintaining a large naval fleet in the Persian Gulf? Who is the enemy?

Photo of Iranian fast attack boats: <http://akkasemosalman.ir/>

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