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New U.S. Drone Initiative is an Opportunity to Counter Iranian Aggression

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The U.S. Navy recently announced an initiative, named Task Force 59, to expand its use of unmanned systems in Middle Eastern waters. The plan coincides with a large escalation of aggression by Iran and its proxies—both at sea and with drones—that has triggered little U.S. military response so far. Task Force 59 intends to provide the United States with expanded capabilities to better address this threat. To best leverage these new unmanned capabilities, the U.S. Navy should expand Task Force 59's mission to include joint operations with regional partners. Meanwhile, Congress should conduct urgent oversight hearings and briefings to examine Iranian naval aggression and how lessons learned can be applied to the Indo-Pacific Command to counter China's robust drone arsenal and production program.

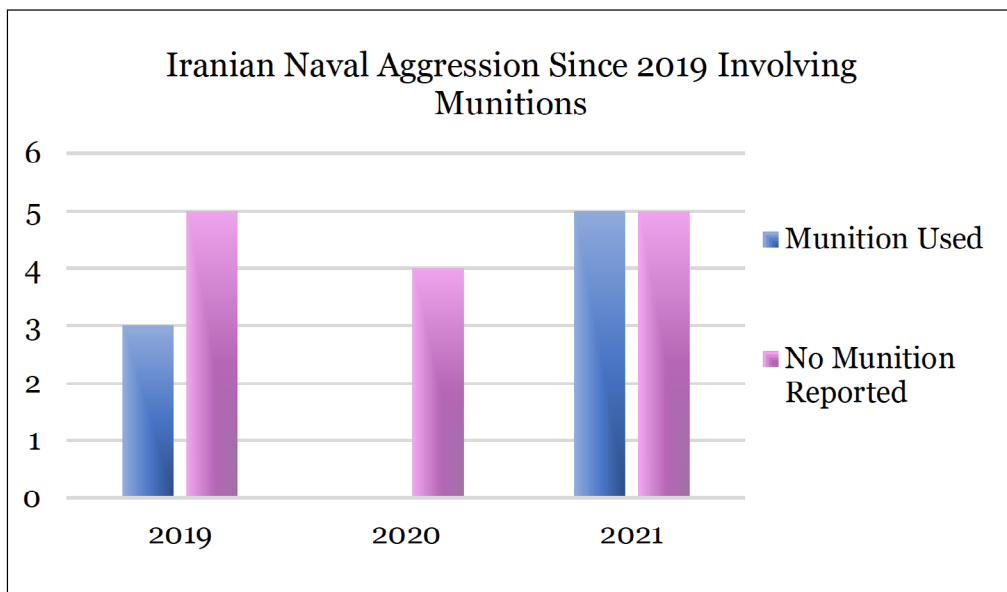
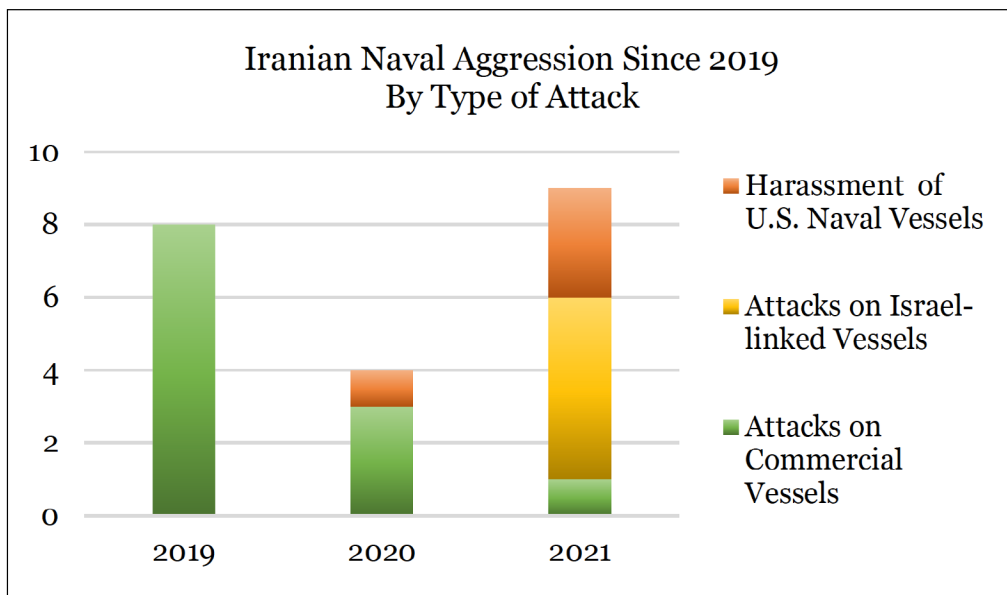
What Happened?

- The U.S. Fifth Fleet based in Bahrain announced on September 8, 2021 the creation of Task Force 59 “to put more systems out in the maritime domain above, on and below the sea,” according to the fleet’s commander Vice Adm. Brad Cooper.
 - The task force will [reportedly deploy](#) some drones that the Navy’s Pacific Fleet used during an April test, which included ultra-endurance aerial surveillance drones, unmanned surface ships the Sea Hawk and the Sea Hunter, and underwater drones that resemble torpedoes.
 - Task Force 59’s first efforts will be tested during International Maritime Exercise 2022 in January and February, which also involves experts from twenty-one countries, [according to Breaking Defense](#).
- The Fifth Fleet’s statement coincided with Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Michael Gilday revealing his plan for a [similar Navy-wide effort](#).

Why Is It Important?

- Iran has an established history of naval aggression at sea and has recently grown bolder.

- Recent incidents include fast-attack watercraft [harassing U.S. Naval vessels](#) and the [illegal seizure of shipping vessels](#), as well as the [rapidly increasing frequency of drone attacks](#) from Iran and its proxies in 2021, including an [attack against the MT Mercer Street](#) on July 29 that killed 2 crewmembers.
- Iran's behavior indicates that its leadership believes that the maritime domain is optimal for retaliation against Israel's efforts to interdict its weapons proliferation in Syria and Lebanon. It also favors this arena, though not exclusively, to apply pressure to the United States and its regional partners with hostile, but deniable or indirect, acts.
- Iran will continue its aggression unless a nation or coalition denies it the ability to conduct successful attacks or punishes Iranian aggression with military force.



- Task Force 59 could provide the Fifth Fleet with greater flexibility, coverage, and capacity to detect, prevent, and respond to Iranian maritime aggression.
 - Increasing the use of U.S. drones in the Gulf could support a U.S. strategy to deny Iran the ability to conduct successful attacks.
 - Through a combination of drones with surveillance and munition delivery capabilities, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) can identify and track suspicious Iranian craft, show U.S. forces are tracking it, fire warning shots, and, if necessary, destroy or disable it before an attack.
 - Surveillance drones as part of a sensor network would enable earlier warning when Iran or one of its proxies initiates a drone or maritime attack, allowing shipping vessels and U.S. partner nations to launch countermeasures like evasive maneuvers or counter-drone technologies.
 - A more expansive use of drones to preempt Iranian aggression would circumvent several challenges that have hindered U.S. action in the past, including improving intelligence that Iran was responsible, making a political decision to act, and finding a suitable target.
 - Unmanned surface vessels (USV), like Seahawk and Sea Hunter, minimize the risks to American personnel, allowing them to operate more freely than crewed ships as Iran conducts unsafe naval maneuvers designed to harass and dissuade ships from traveling in international waterways.
 - Ship-launched drones with air-to-air or air-to-surface missile capabilities can respond quicker and travel at much faster speeds for deterrence, protection, prevention, and—with the proper political will—retaliation operations than Naval vessels.
- It is vital that the United States cooperate with its regional partners and promote the interoperability of their systems since U.S. action alone is unlikely to sufficiently deter or protect against further Iranian aggression throughout the Middle East.
- Lessons learned by Task Force 59 from operating in the Middle East will also be applicable to the U.S. competition with China.
 - Conversely, an inability to create solutions for engaging Iranian drones portends a similar problem when dealing with unmanned Chinese systems.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- Immediate Action Items:
 - Congress should hold both open and classified oversight hearings and briefings about Iranian naval aggression where it can explore Iranian-linked drone attacks, and U.S. defense plans to address these challenges, including via Task Force 59.

- Task Force 59 should dialogue and, where appropriate, partner with the Israel Defense Forces, who have proven adept at both launching drone attacks against Iran and its proxies as well as countering their attacks with the Iron Dome short-range air defense system.
 - Legislators should push for an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) that urges Task Force 59 to provide intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) or additional firepower to support Israel's military action against Iranian attacks within the scope of existing legal authorities.
- As JINSA argued in a recent memo [detailing Iran's naval aggression](#), President Biden should direct CENTCOM to respond after Iranian-backed attacks with "a forceful, persistent, and integrated response, alongside its partners, that disrupts Tehran's ability to mount such attacks and instills fear of future U.S. reactions."
 - In the context of Task Force 59, this should include CENTCOM expanding the frequency and firepower of drone strikes against Iranian vessels that have previously or are prepared to conduct aggressive activities.
- Long-term Action Items:
 - The Fifth Fleet, particularly Task Force 59, should conduct joint drone exercises with Israel and Arab partners to improve their operational capabilities and coordination while demonstrating deterrent resolve to Iran.
 - Exercises should focus on operating unmanned systems within close proximity to other U.S., partner, and commercial vessels and for various missions including surveillance, deterrent signaling, and firing munitions.
 - Congress should authorize a report detailing how the Pentagon intends to apply Task Force 59's operations (1) to other services and domains in the Middle East and (2) to other combatant commands, particularly the Indo-Pacific Command given [China's robust drone arsenal](#) and production program and the Eastern Mediterranean considering [Turkey's increasingly hostile posture](#) and [growing drone production](#).

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