

Expanding Middle East Maritime Security Cooperation

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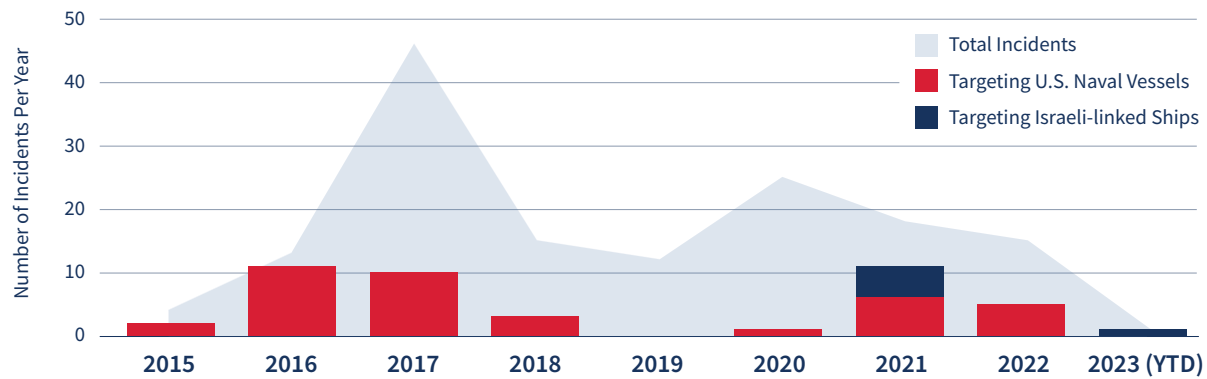
Fifty nations, including Israel, and international organizations from around the world are currently participating in the U.S.-led International Maritime Exercise (IMX) and Cutlass Express (CE) joint training exercises in Middle Eastern waters. The global interest in these drills—far more than in any regional air- or ground-based exercise—indicates significant international concern about the region’s maritime security, which is directly threatened by Iran’s repeated aggression at sea. In the last two years, JINSA has recorded thirty-four incidents of Iranian naval aggression.

Since Israel is often the target of Iranian attacks at sea and has significant relevant technological capabilities, to better protect the region’s critical waterways the United States should explore ways of including Israel in key multinational maritime initiatives, including the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) and International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC), and develop an integrated maritime domain network among its Middle Eastern partners.

What Happened?

- The combined U.S.-led International Maritime Exercise (IMX) and Cutlass Express (CE) joint training exercises [began](#) on February 26, 2023 and will run until March 16 and 17, respectively.
 - » The exercises involve over fifty nations and international organizations operating in the Middle East and North Africa, including Israel, France, Germany, Egypt, Jordan, the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Lebanon, the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), and the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC).
 - » IMX-CE is focused on combined command and control, maritime security, mine countermeasures, unmanned systems and artificial intelligence integration, and, for the first time, using unmanned systems to help move casualties to shore.
- On February 10, Iran was likely responsible for [launching a drone](#) that struck the Campo Square, an Israeli-owned commercial tanker, as it sailed in the Arabian Sea. This was the thirty-fourth incident since 2021 of Iranian naval aggression according to JINSA data tracking.

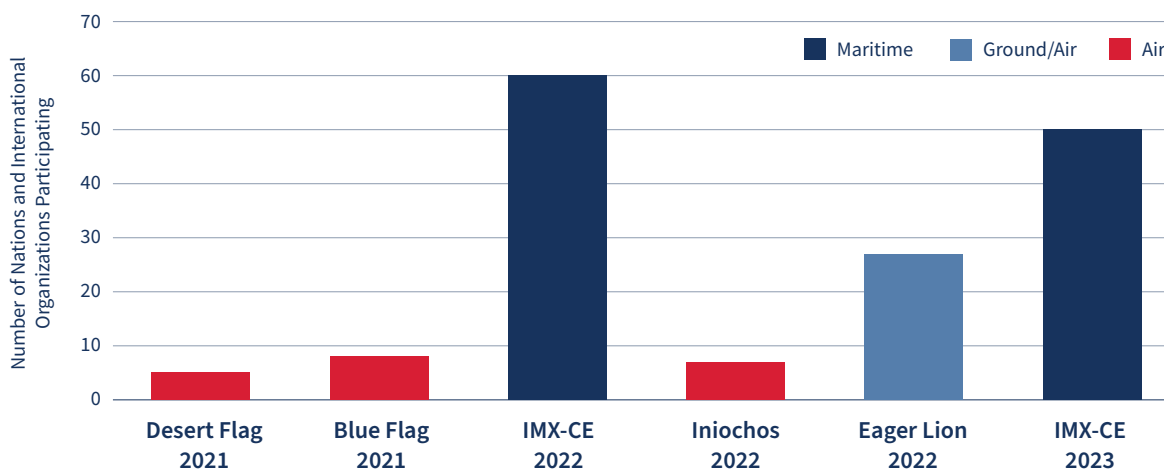
Major Incidents of Iranian Naval Harassment and Attacks Against U.S., Partner, and Commercial Vessels in the Middle East



Why Is It Important?

- The over fifty nations and international coalitions participating in the IMX and CE exercises are a testament to the global importance of Middle Eastern maritime security. Given that Iran is the major aggressor in regional waters, that it favors targeting Israel at sea, and that Israel has significant technological capabilities in unmanned systems, which are increasingly being used at sea, better integrating Israel into a joint regional maritime security framework would help bolster capabilities and protect U.S. and global interests.
 - The IMX and CE exercises are the largest regional exercises of any type, including multiple militaries from beyond the Middle East. The significant interest in these maritime exercises is a reflection of the global importance of protecting the large amount of trade that sails through Middle Eastern waterways.
- » While the fifty nations and international organizations participating in this year’s IMX-CE is a slight decline from the sixty involved in 2022, both maritime domain drills included a much larger number of participants than exercises for the air or ground domain.

Large Multinational Exercises Involving Middle Eastern Nations Since 2021



- » As of 2021, almost [a fifth of the world's oil supply](#) passed through the Strait of Hormuz and nearly [twelve percent of global trade and thirtieth percent of cargo transports](#) went through the Suez Canal.
- Iran is the main aggressor at sea in the Middle East. It harasses and attacks ships in regional waters in addition to using ships to smuggle weapons to its proxies.
 - » Iran has repeatedly harassed U.S. naval ships by sailing dangerously close to them, attempted to [steal American unmanned surface vessels](#), as well as [illegally detained](#) and [attacked commercial ships](#) sailing in international waters.
 - » Instead of attacking Israel directly, the regime in Iran has turned to [attacking commercial ships linked to Israelis](#). Iran and its proxies have only launched three rockets from Syria at Israel. However, by comparison, Iran has targeted six commercial ships with ties to Israel over this period.
 - » Iran has also illegally proliferated weaponry to the Houthi rebels in Yemen, violating a [United Nations Security Council resolution](#) embargoing the transfer of weapons to the group. In December 2022 and January 2023, U.S. and partner navies [interdicted four large cargos](#) that together contained over 5,000 weapons and 1.6 million rounds of ammo bound for the Houthis. In February, the United Kingdom [seized](#) anti-tank missiles and fins for ballistic missiles likely bound for Yemen. The United States is reportedly considering [transferring](#) the seized weapons to Ukraine.
- Iran has a long history of resorting to naval aggression, including during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. As the U.S. experience from this “tanker war” demonstrates, deterring Iranian naval aggression requires a forceful, persistent, and integrated response from the United States and its regional partners.
 - » During the Iran-Iraq War, after an [initial attempt](#) to reflag Kuwaiti oil tankers failed to deter Iranian attacks, the United States adopted a [more aggressive policy](#) of tit-for-tat attacks sinking an Iranian missile boat, frigate, and a small boat, as well as damaging several other vessels.
- While Israel has trained alongside the CMF and IMSC, it is not a part of either multinational coalition. Israel has robust capabilities in the Red Sea but much less so beyond the Bab El Mandeb Strait. Israel’s role as a world leader in developing unmanned and AI technologies, its participation with the U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) unmanned systems initiative called Task Force 59, and its extensive intelligence on Iranian capabilities would make it an ideal addition to the CMF and IMSC.
 - » The CMF is a thirty-four-nation partnership based at NAVCENT headquarters in Bahrain that focuses on freedom of navigation, counterpiracy, counter narcotics, and other illicit activity by non-state actors.
 - » The IMSC’s specific mission is to deter and defeat Iranian aggression against commercial shipping in the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, Gulf of Oman, Gulf of Aden, and southern Red Sea.
 - » Since [being launched in September 2021](#), Task Force 59 has added significant maritime domain awareness through the deployment of unmanned vessels and has [trained alongside Israel](#).

What Should the United States Do Next?

- The Department of Defense should explore where Israel has capabilities that could be integrated into the CMF, specifically Combined Task Force (CTF) 152 for Arabian Gulf security and CTF 153 for Red Sea security, as well as the IMSC.
- Congress should request Defense Department a strategy from the Defense Department that builds out an integrated maritime domain awareness and operations among America's partners in the Middle East.
 - » This strategy should include sharing sensor data so that all partners have full maritime domain awareness to provide earlier detection and longer tracking of possible threats.
- The Pentagon should deploy additional maritime domain sensors to the Middle East, including unmanned systems to Task Force 59.
- Mirroring Iran's [transfer of attack drones to Russia](#) that Moscow is using to [devastate Ukrainian cities](#), the United States should explore legal justifications for transferring the weaponry it seizes from illegal Iranian smuggling to Ukraine so that it can better defeat the Russian invasion.
 - » Current legal obstacles, including the United Nations embargo on the Houthis, may require the United States to destroy or store the illegal weaponry, but an executive order or legislation could provide an avenue toward transferring the arms to Ukraine.