

Current Situation

According to a US Navy spokesperson, on Thursday 6 July Iran's Revolutionary Guards "forcibly seized" a commercial vessel in international waters in the Gulf and that the vessel was possibly involved in smuggling. US 5th Fleet spokesperson Commander Tim Hawkins reported that the US Navy had monitored the situation and decided not to make any further response. Reports indicate that Iranian forces had attempted to seize a small Tanzanian flagged tanker around 59 nautical miles northeast of the Saudi Arabian port city of Dammam.

In a further sign of continued tensions in the region, the US Navy disclosed that it intervened to prevent Iran from seizing two commercial tankers in the Gulf of Oman on Wednesday 5 July. In a statement, the US Navy said that at 0100 local time (2100 GMT), an Iranian naval vessel had approached the Marshall Islands-flagged oil tanker *TRF MOSS* in international waters in the Gulf of Oman. The statement said that "the Iranian vessel departed the scene when US Navy guided-missile destroyer *USS McFAUL* arrived on station," adding that the Navy had deployed surveillance assets including maritime patrol aircraft. The Navy went on to say that around three hours later, it received a distress call from the Bahamas-flagged oil tanker *RICHMOND VOYAGER* which the ship was more than 32 km (20 miles) off the coast of Muscat, Oman and transiting international waters. The Navy statement disclosed that "another Iranian naval vessel had closed within one mile of *RICHMOND VOYAGER* while hailing the commercial tanker to stop," adding that the *McFAUL* directed course towards the merchant ship at maximum speed. The Navy reported that "prior to *McFAUL*'s arrival on scene, Iranian personnel fired multiple, long bursts from both small arms and crew-served weapons," adding that the *RICHMOND VOYAGER* sustained no casualties or significant damage. However, several rounds hit the ship's hull near crew living spaces. The Iranian navy vessel departed when *McFAUL* arrived." US oil major Chevron has since confirmed that it managed the *RICHMOND VOYAGER* and that crewmembers on board were safe and the vessel was operating normally. A spokesperson for the White House National Security Council said that "the United States will respond to Iranian aggression together with our global allies and our partners in the Middle East region to ensure the freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz and other vital waterways." On Thursday 6 July, the Maritime Search and Rescue Centre of Iran's Hormozgan Province told the official IRINN news agency that the *RICHMOND VOYAGER* had collided with an Iranian vessel and that the Iranian navy had a court order to seize it. According to IRINN, Iran disclosed that the *RICHMOND VOYAGER*'s collision with an Iranian ship carrying seven crewmembers had injured five people and caused flooding on board, and that the tanker had not stopped after the incident, adding that the Iranian ship's owner then requested that the tanker be seized.



Background

Since 2019, there has been a series of attacks on shipping in strategic Gulf waters, with a number of commercial vessels transiting through the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, and Gulf of Oman having been boarded and detained or seized by Iranian forces. The US Navy has reported that "since 2021, Iran has harassed, attacked or seized nearly 20 internationally flagged merchant vessels, presenting a clear threat to regional maritime security and the global economy." More recently incidents include the Iranian seizure of two Greek-flagged tankers in the Persian Gulf in May

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2022. Iranian forces have used small boats and/or helicopters during boarding operations and have attempted to force commercial vessels into territorial waters.

Advisory

It is likely that tensions in the region will remain elevated through the end of 2023. Consequently the threat of further incidents in this region remains high. In the past, Iranian forces have used small boats and/or helicopters during boarding operations and have attempted to force commercial vessels into territorial waters.

Any vessels transiting these waters are advised to remain on high alert at all times. Vessels operating in these waters are advised to exercise caution and should review security measures, including being abreast of the current security situation in the area, prior to entering these waters. Crewmembers should maintain a close lookout and remain vigilant for suspicious activity, including the approach of small boats. In the event that a commercial vessel is hailed by Iranian forces, vessels should provide their vessel name, flag state, and affirm that they are proceeding in accordance with international law as reflected in the Law of the Sea Convention. In the event that Iranian forces seek to board a commercial vessel navigating these waters, ship Masters should decline permission to board, noting that the vessel is proceeding in accordance with international law as reflected in the Law of the Sea Convention. This however should only be done if the safety of the vessel and crewmembers will not be compromised. If Iranian forces do board a commercial vessel, crewmembers should not forcibly resist the boarding party.