

The Maritime Dimension to the Conflict in Israel

Description

Editor's note: This article is part of [Project Maritime](#), which explores modern challenges and opportunities in the maritime dimension at the intersection of irregular warfare and strategic competition. We warmly invite your participation and engagement as we embark on this project. Please send submissions to submissions@irregularwarfare.org with the subject line "Project Maritime Submission" and follow us on X (formerly Twitter) [@proj_maritime](#).

On July 15, 2006, during the opening days of the last major conflict between Israel and Hezbollah, [four Israeli sailors were killed](#) in a surprise attack. This attack, though, didn't come over a border fence or through attack tunnels. Instead, [Hezbollah struck an Israeli Sa'ar 5 class corvette](#), INS *Hanit*, with two anti-ship cruise missiles. At the time, *Hanit* was acting as the Israeli flagship and [sailing about 10 miles off the coast of Southern Lebanon](#). The attack shocked Israeli forces because it challenged their assumption that they maintained complete control of the maritime environment around Israel. In fact, the attack may have succeeded in part because [officials in the Israeli Navy did not believe that Hezbollah had the ability to attack the vessel](#) and therefore didn't take necessary precautions. They [may have even turned off some of the ship's early warning and self-defense systems](#), leaving the ship vulnerable to attack. Iran almost certainly supplied the C-802 missiles used in the attack, and [Iranian advisors may have also helped plan and execute it](#). Despite the damage, the *Hanit* was quickly repaired in the Israeli port of Haifa and returned to service. But the incident demonstrated that even non-state actors without formal or well organized naval forces can threaten advanced warships and challenge the assumed maritime superiority of established navies.

In the current conflict between Israel and Hamas, coverage has focused primarily on ground combat, airstrikes in Gaza, and rocket attacks on Israel. However, the precedent of an asymmetric seaborne attack from the 2006 conflict with Hezbollah, the latest in a long history of maritime attacks on Israel, looms large. Hamas and its allies like Hezbollah, the Houthis in Yemen and Iran all have demonstrated the ability to carry out attacks in the maritime environment and could do so to further expand the current conflict.

Attacks at Sea

Weaker powers and non-state actors have long used asymmetric means to threaten the naval assets of a more powerful navy by attacking warships [at sea](#) or [in port](#), or [by attacking naval infrastructure ashore](#). In these attacks, asymmetric forces have used everything from suicide-boat terrorist attacks and mining to sophisticated, combined arms assaults to damage and sink adversary vessels and port infrastructure. These attacks can be powerfully symbolic, but they can also force difficult choices about how and where a more powerful navy is willing to employ its warships with major implications for the conflict.

The al-Qaeda attack on [USS Cole in Yemen](#) is a prime example of an attack on a vulnerable warship in port. On Oct. 12, 2000, an explosive-filled speedboat approached the ship, killing 17 sailors and causing grave damage. Iraq employed naval mines to great effect during the 1991 Persian Gulf War, during which [both USS Princeton and USS Tripoli were damaged](#). In 2019, Iran was accused of using divers [to attach limpet mines to tankers transiting the Strait of Hormuz](#). In past years, Houthi rebels in Yemen have also [fired missile at US warships](#) and used [explosives-laden drone boats and missiles to strike Saudi vessels](#). And just since the October 7 attacks in Israel, US warships [have defeated multiple attacks](#) by Houthi-launched drones and missiles in the Red Sea.

The most significant modern example of a force without a functional navy carrying out major attacks on a superior naval power is the ongoing conflict in between Russia and Ukraine in the Black Sea. Ukrainian forces made headlines when they [were able to sink the Russian Black Sea flagship Moskva](#), with domestically-produced Neptune anti-ship missiles, [likely relying on US-supplied intelligence](#). The sinking of the *Moskva* was only the most infamous attack during a campaign to strike Russian naval vessels and maritime infrastructure, [The Battle of the Black Sea](#), with a combination [of missiles](#) and [locally-designed drone boats](#). Ukrainian forces have also attacked [the headquarters of the Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol](#); [ships in drydock including a Kilo-class submarine, the Kerch Bridge](#); and even [a Russian submarine commander](#).

While Ukraine's own small fleet was sunk or scuttled in the opening days of the war, Ukrainian forces have been successful in contesting Russian control of the Black Sea and forcing Russian warships out of the Crimea and farther from Ukrainian waters. The attacks have, in the words of the UK Minister of State for the Armed Forces, delivered a [functional defeat of the Black Sea Fleet](#). Other experts have also highlighted Ukrainian successes in the Black Sea as [major breakthroughs](#), especially because they often involve innovative tactics like the employment of the locally-built [Sea Baby](#) drone boat. They have put the Russian fleet on the defensive, limiting its ability to strike Ukraine or support Russian offensives on land. This has then forced Russian forces to deploy more resources to protect key infrastructure instead of deploying them to the frontlines. Russia's desire to control the Black Sea has been critical to the conflict since 2014, when Russian ["little green men"](#)

seized Crimea. Crimea is host to Sevastopol, the most important naval port in the region, and home to Russia's Black Sea Fleet. And the Black Sea is a critical conduit for commercial shipping for both Ukraine and Russia.

Attacks by Sea

Israel is no stranger to maritime terrorism. In 1975, terrorists used small fishing boats to land in downtown Tel Aviv where [they killed several Israelis and held hostages in the Savoy Hotel](#). Again in 1978, terrorists [landed between Haifa and Tel Aviv by boat and killed dozens of Israeli civilians](#). The following year in 1979, [in an infamously brutal attack](#), a seaborne raid by Hezbollah in Nahariya killed four Israelis, including a four-year old girl whose head was smashed against rocks on the shore. Again in 1990, the Israeli military [beat back an attempted terrorist attack on Tel Aviv](#) by a force mounted in speedboats.

In the recent attacks, it appears that Hamas infiltrators also tried to enter Israel through a maritime route. [Multiple video clips](#) released by the Israeli Defense Forces purportedly [show Israeli vessels firing on Hamas infiltrators attempting to use boats to cross from Gaza into Israel](#). In the weeks since the Oct. 7 attacks, [the Israeli military claims to have thwarted an infiltration attempt by divers](#) sent by Hamas to Southern Israel. The boats were launched from tunnels directly to the sea to help avoid detection by Israeli forces. These attacks are examples, and also a warning of what Hamas and its allies could still be planning.

On Nov. 18, Houthi rebels, allies of Hamas and another Iranian proxy, [seized an Israeli-owned, vehicle cargo ship, the Galaxy Leader, transiting through the Red Sea](#). [Videos of the Houthi seizure of the Galaxy Leader](#) indicate that the Houthis likely have Iranian supplied training and equipment. This hijacking is a direct threat to any Israeli-owned or operated vessels transiting through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea and could easily lead to further escalation and a larger threat to all maritime traffic through a critical global chokepoint, and even without further attacks could put pressure on Israel by raising shipping and maritime insurance costs [for Israeli owned or operated vessels](#).

Maritime terrorism is an important part of the threat landscape facing Israel and cannot be ignored. In addition to using maritime routes to infiltrate Israel itself, Hamas could carry out attacks on other targets in the Eastern Mediterranean, such as the Tamar Production Platform, [which is visible from the Gaza strip on a clear day](#). Last year, the [Houthis launched several drone attacks on oil terminal infrastructure](#) in government-controlled Yemen as part of a coordinated campaign to disrupt crude exports. Hamas could also attack private or commercial vessels operating in Israeli waters or further abroad. In 1985, Palestinian terrorists [hijacked an Italian cruise ship, the Achille Lauro](#), and the same year another group seize a yacht off moored off the coast of Cyprus and [killed three Israelis who were](#)

[aboard.](#)

The Threat of New Technology

New technology is changing warfare at sea, where innovation and affordable uncrewed systems are creating new dilemmas for larger navies, threatening both warships and maritime infrastructure. This can be seen most clearly in Ukraine, where Ukrainian forces have successfully designed, built, and employed semi-submerged drone boats loaded with explosives and used them to attack both Russian warships and infrastructure. These new weapons should not come as a surprise to anyone who has followed advances in the so-called [“narco-submarines”](#) used by drug smugglers to move cocaine in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific. These vessels are typically manned, but use a semi-submersible design to avoid detection and carry a large payload, albeit of drugs instead of explosives.

At the same time, small uncrewed aircraft systems, or sUAS, also [pose a growing threat to warships](#) and naval infrastructure. Even a small payload, if delivered in the right place, could mission-kill a capital ship or help disable defenses. Hamas and Hezbollah have already demonstrated proficiency not only in employing but also manufacturing these weapons. Smaller warships, like patrol vessels that don’t have a robust air defense capability, [are particularly vulnerable](#) to attacks by sUAS; civilian vessels generally have no defenses. Last year the [Houthis used small drones to attack a Greek ship at an oil terminal in Yemen](#), and [an Iranian drone](#) with explosives struck a tanker off the coast of Oman.

Both Hamas and Hezbollah have demonstrated they are [more than capable of innovation](#) in the past. The maritime environment is likely no exception. One of the ways Hamas fighters infiltrated Israel for the Oct. 7 attacks was [on hang gliders](#); they [also employed locally-designed suicide drones against IDF targets](#). In 2020, Hamas [released a documentary featuring their divers extracting unexploded ordnance from Second World War-era sunken naval vessels](#) to be recycled into new weapons. [In 2021 a Hamas-built underwater drone was destroyed in an Israeli airstrike, causing experts to worry that there could be similar weapons](#) waiting to be used. Fabian Hinz, a missile expert and defense analyst, warned the *New York Times*, [“It is quite likely that Hamas has capabilities that we haven’t seen yet, but might see later.”](#) Similar to how small uncrewed aircraft have changed land warfare by proliferating and [“democratizing”](#) airpower, uncrewed technology is promising to do the same in the maritime domain and these new technologies are within reach for both for Hamas and Hezbollah.

More Eyes, More Ears

In response to the Oct. 7 attacks, Israel’s allies deployed naval forces into the region to support deterrence, prepare for contingencies and send a clear message of support. The United States currently has [one carrier strike group with several ships and dozens of aircraft](#) in the Eastern

Mediterranean, a [Marine Expeditionary Unit](#) between the Eastern Mediterranean and the Red Sea, and another carrier strike group near the Persian Gulf. The [Royal Navy has also sent ships, aircraft and marines](#). Beyond their critical roles in deterrence and as a tangible demonstration of support, these vessels and their aircraft can also help [provide more situational awareness for the Israelis](#)• according to a former commander of US Central Command. They can also take a more active role and complement Israeli air defenses. US destroyers in the Red Sea have already thwarted [multiple drone and missile attacks coming from Yemen](#), as well as [the attempted hijacking of the Israeli-owned MV Central Park](#). But, as more vessels are deployed to the region, the risk of miscalculation increases. During the 1967 Six-Day War, Israeli air and naval forces [attacked the USS Liberty](#), an intelligence-gathering vessel in a case of mistaken identity. No matter how many foreign naval vessels are deployed to the Eastern Mediterranean, they present a risk to escalation in the maritime domain.

The Conflict Continues

As tragic as the current conflict is, it does not appear to be ending soon. Most attention is focused on Israeli ground operations in Gaza, the potential for escalation between the IDF and Hezbollah on Israel's northern border, or even conflict between Iran and Israel. The possibility of an expansion of the conflict in the maritime domain, while equally likely, has received far less attention. Both Hamas and Hezbollah are capable of attacking Israeli vessels and maritime infrastructure or using the Mediterranean as a maneuver space to infiltrate their operatives or weapons into Israel. The Houthis in Yemen have already demonstrated a willingness to join the conflict by attempting to attack US naval vessels in the region and targeting Israeli-owned vessels transiting the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

Israel has previously faced attacks both from the sea and at sea. New uncrewed technology and the continued proliferation of anti-ship missile technology will create new opportunities for the types of attacks that have already been attempted by Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis.

More international naval forces in the Mediterranean and Red Sea may be able to deter further expansion of the conflict in the maritime domain, but ultimately it will fall to Israeli forces to secure Israel's maritime frontier and deter attacks on Israeli vessels.

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Main image: INS Hanit in port in 2010. Hanit was damaged in a Hezbollah attack in 2006. (Israel Defense Forces via Wikimedia Commons)

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