

Iran warships sail through Atlantic, said heading for US-sanctioned Venezuela

Vessels departed in May from Iran's southern port, says deputy army chief, describing their mission as navy's longest, most challenging voyage yet.



Iranian warships are seen in the Atlantic Ocean, in a photo released on June 10, 2021. (Iranian Army via AP)

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — An Iranian destroyer and support vessel are now sailing in the Atlantic Ocean in a rare mission far from the Islamic Republic, Iran's state TV reported on Thursday, without offering the vessels' final destination.

The trip by the new domestically-built destroyer, Sahand, and the intelligence-gathering vessel, Makran, comes amid US media reports, citing anonymous American officials, saying the ships were bound for Venezuela. The Associated

Press could not immediately confirm the ships' destination.

The vessels departed last month from Iran's southern port of Bandar Abbas, said Adm. Habibollah Sayyari, Iran's deputy army chief. He described their mission as the Iranian navy's longest and most challenging voyage yet, without elaborating.

Iranian state TV released a short clip of the destroyer cruising through the Atlantic's rough seas. The video was likely shot from the Makran, a converted commercial oil tanker with a mobile launch platform for helicopters.



An Iranian warship moves in the Atlantic Ocean, in a photo released on June 10, 2021. (Iranian Army via AP)

"The Navy is improving its seafaring capacity and proving its long-term durability in unfavorable seas and the Atlantic's unfavorable weather conditions," Sayyari said, adding that the warships would not call at any country's port during the mission.

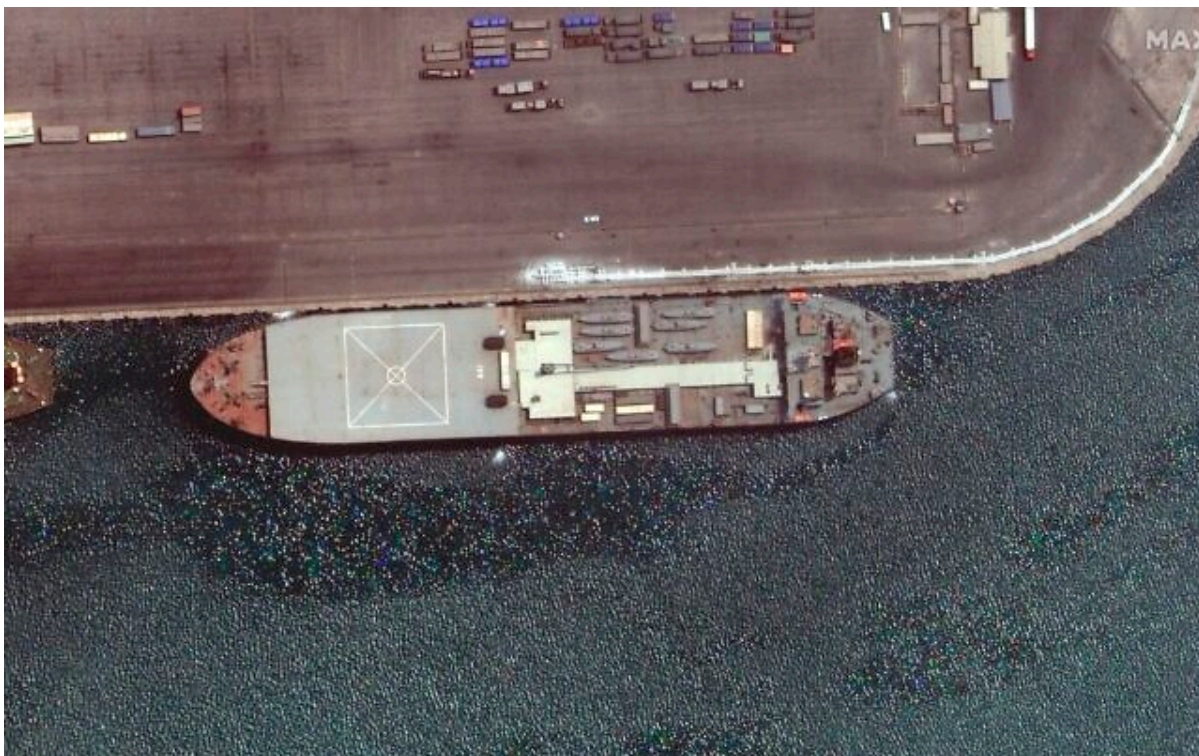
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Images from Maxar Technologies, dated April 28, appear to show seven Iranian fast-attack craft typically associated with its paramilitary Revolutionary Guard on the deck of the Makran. Satellite images from Planet Labs Inc. suggest it left a

port at Bandar Abbas sometime after April 29. It was not immediately clear where the Makran and the destroyer are now.

The website Politico first reported in late May, citing anonymous officials, that the ships' final destination may be Venezuela. Iran maintains close ties to Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, and has shipped gasoline and other products to the country amid a US sanctions campaign targeting fuel-starved Caracas. Venezuela is believed to have paid Iran, under US sanctions of its own, for the shipments.

A top aide to Maduro has denied press reports that the ships will dock there. The official spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive geopolitical issues.



In this satellite photo provided by Maxar Technologies, the Iranian navy vessel Makran is seen at port at Bandar Abbas, Iran, April 28, 2021. (©2021 Maxar Technologies via AP)

During a news conference on May 31, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh declined to say where the Makran was going.

“Iran is always present in international waters and it has this right based on international law and it can be present in international waters,” he said. “No country is able to violate this right, and I warn that no one makes miscalculations.

Those who sit in glass houses should be careful.”

The fast-attack craft aboard the Makran are the type that the Guard used in its tense encounters with US warships in the Persian Gulf and its narrow mouth, the Strait of Hormuz. It was not immediately clear what Venezuela’s plans would be for those ships.

“If the boats are delivered, they may form the core of an asymmetrical warfare force within Venezuela’s armed forces,” the US Naval Institute said in an earlier published analysis. “This could be focused on disrupting shipping as a means of countering superior naval forces. Shipping routes to and from the Panama Canal are near the Venezuelan coast.”



An Iranian warship moves in the Atlantic Ocean, in a photo released on June 10, 2021. (Iranian Army via AP)

Earlier this month, fires sank Iran’s largest warship, the 207-meter (679-foot) Kharg, which was used to resupply other ships in the fleet at sea and conduct training exercises. Officials offered no cause for the blaze, which followed a series of mysterious explosions that began in 2019 targeting commercial ships in Mideast waterways.

The unusual voyage comes ahead of Iran’s June 18 presidential election, which

will see voters select a successor for the relatively moderate President Hassan Rouhani.

Source:

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