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IRAN'S "UNDULY PROVOCATIVE" ACT AGAINST THE US NAVY?

"Unduly provocative" was the term used by Vice Admiral Kevin J. Cosgriff, who commands U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, to characterize the incident that just took place between the Islamic Revolution's Guard Corps and the US Navy. In what was identified as an "encounter," Admiral Gosgriff insisted, "the U.S. ships were clearly marked, at daylight, decent visibility" and "the behavior of the Iranian ships was...unnecessary, without due regard for safety of navigation and unduly provocative in the sense of the aggregate of their maneuvers, the radio call and the dropping of objects in the water."

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News quoted an unidentified source from IRGC's Navy as saying that the three American ships were contacted by Iranian vessels "as usual" to identify themselves and, after they did, continued their path.

The American versions of the encounter, however, involve much more. According to Pentagon spokesman, Bryan Whitman, "three U.S. ships had been in international waters passing through the Strait of Hormuz on Sunday when they were approached by five fast boats, at least some of which were visibly armed. "Iranian vessels apparently made "some aggressive maneuvers against our vessels and indicated some hostile intent." According to

Whitman "the speed of the Iranian boats and their distance from the U.S. Navy vessels demonstrated potentially hostile intent. Bridge-to-bridge radio communications between the Iranian vessels and the U.S. Navy ships reinforced this impression."

On record, Pentagon initially stayed mum about the content of the communication but an anonymous official told CNN the U.S. Navy received a radio transmission that "officials believe came from the Iranian boats." The transmission said, "I am coming at you. You will explode in a couple of minutes." CNN further reported that when the U.S. ships heard that radio transmission, they took up their gun positions and officers were "in the process" of giving the order to fire when the Iranians abruptly turned away. CNN goes on to say, "After the radio transmission, one of the Iranian boats dropped white boxes into the water in front of the U.S. ships."

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A variation of the sequence of events was relayed by Vice Admiral Cosgriff who said that after five boats approached the U.S. formation and "maneuvered aggressively" in the direction of the U.S. ships, "U.S. captains called on the radio and sounded the ships' horns to warn the Iranians off." It was apparently after this initial contact that the U.S. ships "received a radio call that was threatening to our ships to the effect that they were closing our ships and that the U.S. ships would explode."

The various American versions suggest that the speed and short distance as well as threatening communication denoted hostile intent or harassment. In this context, it is rather strange that there has been so little clarification about who contacted who first and when the verbal threat was voiced. There is also a bit of variation about the exact words used in the threatening communication and whether there was a possibility of miscommunication.

Finally, although Vice Admiral Cosgriff suggested that the American forces adequately followed procedures, no explanation was given about why, with the Iranians dropping unidentified white boxes into the water at close range, the U.S. vessels did to fire on those objects with small arms once they floated away from the Iranian vessels.

No matter which of the possibilities (misunderstanding, Iranian provocation, the Bush Administration capitalizing on a relatively routine encounter) are entertained, the fact remains that the described sequence of events leaves many questions unanswered about the extent of the threat or harassment faced by the US Navy.

After all, these white boxes could have been dangerous.

These questions are important because if a verbal threat did actually occur, this is a big deal that goes well beyond harassment. As such it cannot simply be attributed to the actions of a local IRGC commander who was acting on his own. The Iranian military, in its regular and guards wings, is simply too centralized to allow for such provocative moves without direction from the top. If a communication to which the US Navy reacted was indeed received, we are either talking about a case of miscommunication (leading to a genuine mistake, misunderstanding or overreaction on the part of US Navy) or an outright provocation on the Iranian part, the order for which must have come from the top perhaps to make a point prior to George

Bush's visit to the Middle East that Iran can make trouble for the US forces if it wishes to.

At the same time, while the possibility of centrally ordered provocation cannot be ruled out, neither can the likelihood voiced by some in the Iranian media that, given the big noise made about the encounter and the Iranian reckless behavior in the US as well as Arab media, that the Bush Administration is essentially trying to highlight the Iranian threat right before George Bush's trip to the region which according to most observers has as one of its objectives the cementing of a coalition against Iran.

No matter which of the possibilities (misunderstanding, Iranian provocation, the Bush Administration capitalizing on a relatively routine encounter) are entertained, the fact remains that the described sequence of events leaves many questions unanswered about the extent of the threat or harassment faced by the US Navy. The only thing certain is the continued volatility of the conditions present in the Persian Gulf and the real potential for routine encounters between American and Iranian forces turning into something bigger and uglier.

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