

Middle East military briefing**The Iranian 'mosquito fleet' taking on the mighty US Navy**

Tehran's hundreds of small, fast boats are vital in maintaining its stranglehold on global energy markets

Andrew England in London, **Steff Chávez** in Washington and **Najmeh Bozorgmehr** in Tehran

Published MAY 9 2026



Iran's 'mosquito fleet' is designed to police the Strait of Hormuz using armed fast-attack boats © Reuters

Hidden in coves, caves and tunnels, and spread out along Iran's rugged southern coast, the hundreds of fast-attack boats in its "mosquito fleet" lie poised for action.

At a signal, they swarm into the Strait of Hormuz, harassing ships and projecting Iran's ability to control the crucial chokepoint. Many are basic, lightly armed speedboats; others are more sophisticated, fitted with short-range missiles.

Together, the flotilla of small boats has faced off against the might of the US Navy, while playing an integral role in an effective blockade that has strangled global energy supplies and heaped pressure on President Donald Trump.

The boats, part of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' navy, lack the firepower to seriously trouble US warships or heavily damage modern tankers, experts say. But, coupled with the IRGC's missile and drone arsenal, they have helped Iran maintain a large enough threat to deter merchant ships from sailing through the strait.

“Anytime there’s something flying at a vessel, whether it’s a navy vessel or a merchant vessel, it’s a real and present risk to the sailors or mariners on board,” said Joshua Tallis, analyst at the Center for Naval Analyses.



An Iranian military helicopter flies over Revolutionary Guards' fast boats during naval exercises in the Gulf in 2010 © Mehdi Marizad/AFP/Getty Images

A few weeks into the US-Israeli war on Iran, Trump boasted that the country's navy was “lying at the bottom of the sea, obliterated”.

But despite deploying the largest American fleet to the region in decades, the US has failed to reopen the strait, through which about a fifth of the world's oil and gas usually passes.

Trump acknowledged last month that the US had not hit the “fast-attack ships” because “we did not consider them much of a threat”.

“Big deal that it’s fast, it’s [only] got a machine gun on front,” Trump said on Thursday.

Yet the IRGC’s mosquito fleet — which epitomises Iran’s strategy of using asymmetric warfare against more powerful militaries — has long posed Tehran’s most active naval threat. First developed during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, its boats move in packs to intimidate slower vessels. They can target crews, damage cargoes, help seize ships and lay mines.

The fleet relies on cheap, domestically produced boats that are easily replaced, as well as more sophisticated models, such as the Seraj-1, a copy of the British-made Bladerunner 51 racing boat.

“They’ve been practising these mosquito fleet or fast-boat tactics for decades, and it was always a latent threat, because it would be highly escalatory to close the Strait of Hormuz,” said Bryan Clark of the Hudson Institute. “But the US has now provided them with the perfect provocation.”

US and Iranian forces have clashed over control of the Strait of Hormuz

 Port

300 km



FINANCIAL TIMES

MapLibr

Sources: VesselFinder; FT research

The creaking conventional navy, meanwhile, consisted of a few US-made corvettes acquired more than half a century ago under the last shah, plus a “couple of converted cargo vessels” and three ageing Kilo-class Russian submarines, two of which were inoperable, said Sidharth Kaushal of London-based think-tank RUSI.

So Trump’s claim to have destroyed the conventional navy was “a case of true but also irrelevant”, Kaushal said.

“They destroyed the regular Iranian navy very early on. But the regular Iranian navy was always a parade ground force,” Kaushal said. Iran is really relying on “the IRGC navy — the mosquito fleet, the cruise missiles, the UAVs [drones] and all these other asymmetrical capabilities”.

There was “no evidence that the Americans have made as significant a dent in that capability as they would have wanted to”, he said.

PLAY | 00:17

The IRGC stores some of its attack boats in underground tunnels © Iran state media/Reuters

The IRGC has between 500 and 1,000 operational armed speedboats of various capabilities, estimated Farzin Nadimi of the Washington Institute think-tank.

The guards also have upwards of 1,000 drone boats — kamikaze drones and missile- or torpedo-launching unmanned vessels — as well as missile batteries deployed along the coast.

The guards were given sole responsibility for the Gulf and Hormuz from 2007, said Nadimi. The conventional force was responsible for the Gulf of Oman and the “blue waters” beyond it, he said.

If the mosquito fleet remains intact and the Islamic regime sticks to its plans to charge ships passing the strait even after the war ends, the fast boats would be central in policing the narrow waterway.

The US Navy has the ability to neuter their threat, but it requires far more resources to protect shipping than it takes the IRGC to push up insurance premiums and make ships wary of travelling through the waterway, experts said.

“They don’t have to hit every ship going through Hormuz, they just have to hit enough to keep the insurance market on edge,” said Kaushal. “It’s the US which has to protect almost every vessel going through.”

Naval exercises in the Gulf in 2010 © US Central Command

The US military said it used attack helicopters to sink six fast boats on Monday during Trump’s brief “Project Freedom” operation that was intended to open up channels for merchant ships to transit the strait.

Admiral Bradley Cooper, head of the US military's Central Command, claimed the fact that the guards dispatched only six fast boats was evidence of the threat posed by IRGC's fleet being degraded. Iran claimed the US struck civilian boats.

"You typically see between 20 and 40 small boats in the pack coming out. Today, we saw six, and eliminated them quickly," Cooper said. "This is an example of the degradation of their capability. It doesn't mean it's all gone, but it's highly degraded."

Trump on Tuesday said he was pausing the operation in response to a request from Pakistan and others, in order to leave room for negotiations with Tehran.

During another skirmish on Thursday, Trump said US forces "took down a lot of small boats", adding that the US also "knocked out eight" the previous day.

But Iran still controls the flow of merchant vessels through the narrow chokepoint, while the US imposes a blockade on Iranian ports.

The US Navy, whose Fifth Fleet is based in Bahrain, has long been aware of the menace posed by the attack boats, which over the years would often harass or "buzz" American warships during moments of tension in the region.

They are more a nuisance than a lethal threat and relatively easy to target when they come out into the open waters, former US officials say. But some add they could be fitted with explosive charges to act almost like guided bombs.

"Their problem is the further they're out, the longer we have to target them. So if they come out an hour away from where they're hiding space is, that's an hour we have to target them," a former senior US military officer said. "Then you have a plethora of weapon systems that can engage them."

PLAY | 00:13

Iran has fast-attack boats poised for action along its coastline © Reuters

Yet analysts say the US's ability to counter the guards' navy depends on how long Trump is willing to maintain significant naval resources in the Gulf and divert warships from other vital theatres, such as Asia.

If the US "can sustain the existing high level of control, those speedboats can't do much because they will quickly be detected, engaged and destroyed", said Nadimi. But "these speedboats are designed to operate for the long term. They are going to be here, and I'm not sure if this level of [US] deployment can be sustained".

Mehdi Bakhtiari, editor of the politics and defence desk at Tasnim News Agency, which is close to the IRGC, said Iran also had geography on its side.

"With the longest coastline along the Persian Gulf . . . Iran can easily disrupt transit. Even minimal disruption, 1 per cent insecurity, can significantly affect shipping," Bakhtiari said. "Despite advanced technology, the US has not been able to open the Strait of Hormuz. The US has lost to Iran's geography."

Additional reporting by James Politi in Washington

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2026. All rights reserved.

Follow the topics in this article

Middle East war

Middle East military briefing

US foreign policy

Nuclear proliferation

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps