

Why Iran's Tiny Speedboats Are Outsmarting the World's Biggest Navy

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1. Reading Passage

Hidden in coves, caves and tunnels along Iran's rugged southern coast, hundreds of fast-attack boats wait for a signal. When it comes, they swarm into the Strait of Hormuz, harassing merchant ships and projecting Iran's grip on one of the world's most critical chokepoints – the waterway through which about a fifth of global oil and gas normally moves. Some of these boats are basic, little more than speedboats with mounted guns. Others are more sophisticated, fitted with short-range missiles. Together, military analysts call them the 'mosquito fleet.'

The flotilla belongs not to Iran's regular navy but to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, known as the IRGC – a separate, paramilitary force. That distinction matters. A few weeks into the current US-Israeli war with Iran, President Donald Trump boasted that Iran's navy was 'lying at the bottom of the sea, obliterated.' He was largely right about the conventional fleet: a handful of corvettes, ageing Russian-built submarines and a converted drone carrier were heavily damaged. But the IRGC's boats, drones and mobile missile launchers are a different problem. Even Trump has admitted the US did not consider the fast-attack ships 'much of a threat,' because a big speedboat is, as he put it, only 'a machine gun on front.'

That dismissal misses the point of asymmetric warfare. The IRGC boats can't sink a US destroyer in a head-on fight. They don't have to. The Washington Institute estimates the Guards run between 500 and 1,000 armed fast boats, plus more than 1,000 drones and missile batteries dotted along the coast. The fleet leans on cheap, domestically produced craft – some, like the Seraj-1, copied from a British-made Bladerunner 51 racing yacht – alongside more sophisticated designs. The doctrine dates back to the 1980s Iran-Iraq war, when Tehran first learned that small, fast, hard-to-find vessels could intimidate slower tankers and tie down a much larger adversary.

The real weapon is uncertainty. 'Anytime there is something flying at a vessel, whether it is a navy vessel or a merchant vessel, it is a real and present risk,' says Joshua Tallis of the Center for Naval Analyses. Sidharth Kaushal of the Rusi think tank puts the strategic logic more bluntly: Iran doesn't have to hit every ship, only enough vessels to keep the shipping-insurance market on edge. Premiums rise, ship owners hesitate, and the strait effectively narrows without a shot fired in many cases. Bryan Clark of the Hudson Institute notes that Iran has practised these tactics for decades; recent tensions have given the country the 'perfect provocation' to use them at scale.

The US still controls the flow of merchant traffic through Hormuz and is blockading Iranian ports in return. Last week the Navy ran an operation called 'Project Freedom,' using attack helicopters to sink six fast boats and escort merchant ships through. Yet even US officials concede the boats are 'more of a nuisance than a lethal threat,' and one – Admiral Bradley Cooper of US Central Command – said the very fact that the IRGC dispatched only six boats showed how 'degraded' the Iranian fleet was. Iran tells a different story, claiming it struck US civilian boats. Analysts caution that the US can sustain its current pressure only by diverting warships from other theatres, including Asia. Mehdi Bakhtiari, an editor close to the IRGC, argues that 'with the longest coastline along the Persian Gulf,' Iran can disrupt transit with minimal effort. 'Despite advanced technology,' he says, 'the US has lost to Iran's geography.'

2. Explanation

A swarm of speedboats – some little more than racing yachts with machine guns bolted on – is keeping a fifth of the world's oil hostage and embarrassing the US Navy.

What's Going On?

Hidden in coves, caves and tunnels along Iran's southern coast sit hundreds of fast-attack boats known as the 'mosquito fleet.' Operated by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), they swarm into the Strait of Hormuz to harass ships, threatening the chokepoint through which roughly a fifth of the world's oil and gas normally flows.

President Trump recently boasted Iran's navy was 'lying at the bottom of the sea, obliterated.' But that was the *regular* navy. The IRGC's mosquito fleet – paired with drones, mines and shore-based missiles – has kept enough pressure on shipping to maintain an effective blockade and push insurance premiums through the roof.

How To Think About It

This is asymmetric warfare – the weaker side refusing to fight on the stronger side's terms. Iran can't beat a US carrier group head-on, so it doesn't try. Instead, it makes the *cost* of moving through Hormuz unbearable.

- Think of a bouncer at a club door versus a hundred mosquitoes in a tent. The bouncer is stronger, but the mosquitoes don't need to win a fight – they just need to make you want to leave.
- Or think of ransomware gangs versus Fortune 500 IT departments: the attackers are cheap, hidden and replaceable; the defenders are expensive, exposed and must succeed every single time.

Key Things To Know

- The Washington Institute estimates the IRGC operates between 500 and 1,000 armed fast boats, plus at least 1,000 drones and coastal missile batteries.
- Some Iranian boats, like the Seraj-1, are copied from a British-made Bladerunner 51 racing yacht – civilian speed tech turned military.
- Iran doesn't need to sink ships. Analyst Sidharth Kaushal notes the IRGC just has to hit enough vessels to keep insurance markets on edge – and premiums spiral.
- The geography is the killer feature: Hormuz is narrow, there's no alternative route, and Iran's rocky coast gives infinite hiding places.
- Most people think 'Iran's navy' means warships. The real threat is paramilitary – the IRGC, a separate force, not the conventional navy Trump bombed.

Why It Matters

Roughly 20% of the world's oil moves through Hormuz. Disruption there means higher gas prices at your local pump, pricier flights, and inflation across everything that's shipped or made with petroleum – which is most things. It's also a live case study in how small, cheap weapons are rewriting modern warfare, the same lesson playing out with drones in Ukraine and the Red Sea.

The Bigger Picture

The mosquito fleet doctrine dates to the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, when Iran realised it could never out-shoot the US. Forty years later, that bet looks prescient. Watch for two second-order effects: insurers may simply stop covering Gulf transits (which would shut the strait without Iran firing a shot), and other regional powers – Houthis, Hezbollah's maritime wing – are studying the playbook closely.

3. Key Terms Glossary

Strait of Hormuz

A narrow sea passage between Iran and Oman connecting the Persian Gulf to open ocean. About a fifth of global oil shipments pass through it.

Asymmetric warfare

Conflict between sides of very unequal strength, where the weaker side avoids direct battle and uses cheap, unconventional tactics (guerrilla raids, drones, mines) to offset the stronger side's advantages.

IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps)

An elite branch of Iran's armed forces, separate from the regular military, that answers directly to the Supreme Leader. It runs its own navy, air force and foreign-operations wing.

Chokepoint

A geographic bottleneck — like a strait or canal — that concentrates traffic into a narrow path, making it strategically valuable and easy to disrupt.

Insurance premium (shipping)

The fee shipowners pay insurers to cover the risk of attack, sinking or seizure. When premiums spike, freight costs rise and some routes become uneconomic.

Fast-attack craft

Small, high-speed boats armed with guns, rockets or missiles. Cheap to build, hard to detect, designed for hit-and-run raids rather than sustained naval combat.

Blockade

A military operation that prevents ships from entering or leaving specified ports or waters, used to apply economic pressure without a full ground invasion.

4. Reading Comprehension Quiz

Circle the best answer for each question.

Q1. The passage primarily argues that

- A) Iran's conventional navy remains the main threat to US warships in the Gulf
- B) Iran compensates for naval weakness through cheap, dispersed, hard-to-target boats
- C) The US Navy has effectively neutralized Iranian threats in the Strait of Hormuz
- D) Oil prices are unaffected by military activity in the Persian Gulf region

Q2. According to the passage, the mosquito fleet is effective primarily because

- A) Its boats can sink modern US warships in direct combat
- B) It operates openly from large, well-defended naval bases
- C) Its threats keep shipping insurance costs prohibitively high
- D) It has formal backing from the United Nations Security Council

Q3. Which choice best states the central idea of the passage?

- A) Modern warfare rewards expensive, high-technology weapons over older designs
- B) Small, cheap, hidden forces can frustrate a far more powerful conventional military
- C) The Strait of Hormuz is geographically too wide for any country to control
- D) Iran's regular navy is the most active surface force in the Persian Gulf today

Q4. As used in the passage, the word 'irritant' most nearly means

- A) Allergen
- B) Nuisance
- C) Catastrophe
- D) Solvent

Q5. As used in the passage, the word 'asymmetric' most nearly means

- A) Mathematically uneven
- B) Strategically lopsided
- C) Visually unbalanced
- D) Politically illegitimate

Q6. Which statement about US naval strategy in the Gulf can most reasonably be inferred from the passage?

- A) The US has fully eliminated all Iranian fast-attack capability
- B) Sustaining heavy US naval presence in the Gulf carries significant trade-offs
- C) US warships routinely defeat IRGC swarm tactics without effort
- D) The US relies entirely on allied navies to police the Strait of Hormuz

Q7. The passage suggests that the geography of Iran's coastline

- A) Makes it easy for US satellites to find every Iranian boat
- B) Forces Iran to keep its boats in just a few open harbors
- C) Provides hiding places that complicate American targeting
- D) Is identical to the open coastlines of Saudi Arabia and Yemen

Q8. The author's tone toward Iran's mosquito fleet strategy is best described as

- A)** Dismissive and mocking
- B)** Alarmed and panicked
- C)** Analytical and measured
- D)** Celebratory and approving

Q9. Which statement about Iran's ability to keep pressuring Hormuz over time can most reasonably be inferred?

- A)** It depends mainly on how many US warships are diverted to the Gulf
- B)** It will end as soon as the current ceasefire takes effect
- C)** It hinges on whether Iran can develop nuclear-powered submarines
- D)** It requires Iran to sink at least one US aircraft carrier

Q10. Which choice provides the BEST evidence for the answer to the previous question?

- A)** 'Iran's earliest boats were civilian vessels...fitted with machine guns.'
- B)** 'The mosquito fleet concept dates back to the Iran-Iraq war.'
- C)** Analysts' warning that sustaining control requires diverting warships from theatres like Asia
- D)** 'Iran claims some of its boats can reach speeds of more than 100 knots.'

My Score: _____ / 10

5. Answer Key with Explanations

Q1. The passage primarily argues that

Answer: B

The passage's central claim is that Iran offsets its inferior conventional forces with a cheap, hidden 'mosquito fleet' to threaten Hormuz shipping. A is wrong (Trap A: opposite of the passage, which says the regular navy was largely destroyed). SAT Tip: For 'primarily argues' questions, find the thesis sentence – usually near the top or after a pivot word like 'but' – and ignore options that contradict it even if they sound plausible.

Q2. According to the passage, the mosquito fleet is effective primarily because

Answer: C

The passage explicitly notes Iran doesn't need to hit every ship – only enough to keep 'the insurance market on edge.' A is the main trap (Trap C: a real-world claim about firepower, but the passage explicitly says the boats *lack* power to sink warships). SAT Tip: When a question asks 'primarily because,' look for the mechanism the passage spends the most ink on, not the first plausible cause that pops into your head.

Q3. Which choice best states the central idea of the passage?

Answer: B

The passage is built around the paradox that hundreds of speedboats can pin down the US Navy. D is the closest trap (Trap B: it reuses passage vocabulary like 'most active surface force' but swaps the IRGC for the regular navy). SAT Tip: When two options use the same noun phrases, check whether the subject and verb are correctly paired – distractors often shuffle real terms from the passage into false combinations.

Q4. As used in the passage, the word 'irritant' most nearly means

Answer: B

In context, 'irritant' describes a persistent, low-grade problem – analysts explicitly call the boats more 'a nuisance than a lethal threat.' A is the common-meaning trap (Trap B: 'allergen' is the everyday medical sense of irritant but doesn't fit a military context). SAT Tip: On vocab-in-context, substitute each option back into the sentence – the right answer preserves the sentence's meaning; the common dictionary definition is usually a trap.

Q5. As used in the passage, the word 'asymmetric' most nearly means

Answer: B

The passage uses 'asymmetric' to describe Iran's strategy of using cheap forces against a stronger military – i.e. a lopsided strategic matchup. A is the literal/common meaning (Trap B: 'asymmetric' literally means uneven, but in military writing it has a specific strategic sense). SAT Tip: Specialist vocabulary often carries a field-specific meaning that differs from the dictionary one – let the surrounding sentences, not the dictionary, define the word.

Q6. Which statement about US naval strategy in the Gulf can most reasonably be inferred from the passage?

Answer: B

Analysts warn that maintaining a high level of control requires diverting warships from other theatres like Asia – a clear trade-off. C is the main trap (Trap A: it states the opposite of the passage's argument that the US is struggling). SAT Tip: 'Most reasonably inferred' answers are usually moderate and qualified; if an option contains absolutes like 'fully' or 'entirely,' it's almost always a trap.

Q7. The passage suggests that the geography of Iran's coastline

Answer: C

The passage notes the IRGC hides boats in coves, caves and tunnels, and that a former US officer admits the boats can reach attack positions in an hour. A is the inverted trap (Trap A: opposite of what the passage implies). SAT Tip: When the passage describes a problem the US faces, the correct inference usually explains **why** it's a problem – pick the option that supplies a cause, not one that contradicts the difficulty.

Q8. The author's tone toward Iran's mosquito fleet strategy is best described as

Answer: C

The author reports expert views from multiple sides, quantifies the threat, and notes both Iran's advantages and limits – hallmarks of a measured analytical tone. A is the closest trap (Trap C: a reader might assume that calling boats 'mosquitoes' is mocking, but the article treats the strategy as serious). SAT Tip: Distinguish the author's tone from the tone of people quoted in the piece – a journalist can quote alarmed officials while writing in a neutral voice.

Q9. Which statement about Iran's ability to keep pressuring Hormuz over time can most reasonably be inferred?

Answer: A

The passage explicitly ties the US ability to counter the fleet to how much naval resource Washington is willing to keep in the Gulf rather than other theatres. D is the trap (Trap C: dramatic, but the passage emphasizes the boats **can't** sink warships). SAT Tip: Inference answers almost always restate something the passage actually claims – just in slightly different words. Beware options that introduce dramatic new scenarios.

Q10. Which choice provides the BEST evidence for the answer to the previous question?

Answer: C

Option C directly supports the previous answer about US resource trade-offs. B is the trap (Trap B: it uses passage vocabulary but addresses the **origin** of the strategy, not its sustainability). SAT Tip: On evidence-pairing questions, lock in your previous answer first, then scan for the option whose words map onto that answer – don't re-evaluate the previous question.