

# Bracing for an Israeli-Iranian Faceoff in the Waters off Gaza

U.S. and European officials seem surprisingly relaxed about news that Iran is sending its own seaborne challenge to Israel's Gaza blockade. The officials say they see no cause to doubt Iranian media reports that the first ship in what could become a small flotilla will sail from Iran this week, if it hasn't embarked already. "This ship will pass through territorial waters of Oman, Yemen and Egypt before it reaches Gaza," the semiofficial Iranian news agency Mehr said, as quoted on Al-Jazeera's Web site. "It is said that the ship contains only humanitarian aid and there are no peace activists on board." News reports say the ship is sailing under the name *Toward Gaza*. It no doubt had another name prior to this voyage, remarks one U.S. official who (like others in this story) requested anonymity when discussing sensitive information.

Still, despite concern that the Iranians are sending the ship in a deliberate attempt to provoke the Israelis and worsen already severe tensions in the area, European and U.S. officials say Tehran actually seems to have dialed back some of its rhetoric and threats for the moment. At one point, an official of Iran's powerful Revolutionary Guards was publicly quoted as saying that his forces were prepared to provide a military escort for any aid vessels heading for Gaza. But Iran's official news agency later quoted Hossein Salami, the deputy of the corps, as saying there were no such plans. "Such a thing is not on our agenda," he reportedly said.

A second Iranian aid ship may be launched later from Istanbul, according to Al-Jazeera, but U.S. and European officials tell

Declassified they've seen no sign of any effort to mobilize Iranian military vessels for the purpose of escorting aid ships or otherwise challenging the Gaza blockade. In any case, one official says, Iran's Navy is the country's weakest military service and has little ability to project sea power very far from its home waters. Israel and other governments would have days and even weeks to track any ship as it sails from an Iranian port, across the Gulf, through the Strait of Hormuz, around the Arabian Peninsula, into the Red Sea, and then out via the Suez Canal. (One U.S. official mentions in passing that Somali-based pirates are a constant threat along this route.)

When the Iranian ship reaches the Suez Canal, it may face a lengthy inspection. Under U.N. Security Council sanctions, Iran is forbidden to export weapons—but even if the ship is carrying only humanitarian cargo, as Tehran asserts, Egyptian authorities could delay its voyage for days or weeks on technicalities such as requiring that any official documents be translated from Farsi into Arabic. One European official says the Egyptians might well choose to stall the Iranians' passage if only to reassert Cairo's international influence in the wake of heavily publicized efforts by Turkey and Brazil to broker a nuclear deal with Iran.



But if and when the Iranian ship reaches the Mediterranean, no one can be sure what will happen. Given the past actions of everyone involved in the standoff—the Israelis, the Hamas movement that rules Gaza, and now Iran's theocratic rulers—

there's no way to rule out the risk of a miscalculation by one of the parties or an accidental encounter that grows into something much nastier. Those threats persist no matter how much Iranian officials may have toned down their inflammatory public posturing.