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Iran shifting tactics to step up attacks on shipping before US vote, officials say

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[1/2] Vessels in the Strait of Hormuz near the beach of Bandar Abbas, Iran, October 13, 2026. Razieh Poudat/ISNA/via WANA (West Asia News Agency) via REUTERS [Purchase Licensing Rights](#)



Summary

Iran using new strategy to target ships in and beyond Hormuz, officials say
Tehran aims to keep oil prices high in run-up to November vote, they say
One Iranian official compares contest to a 'game of chess'
US official says Iran using spotters but unable to prevent oil export ramp-up

DUBAI/LONDON/WASHINGTON, Oct 14 (Reuters) - Iran is deploying new tactics to target ships sailing through the Strait of Hormuz as it seeks to keep oil prices high and influence the US midterm elections, two senior Iranian officials told Reuters.

Tehran has tried to exert control over the Strait of Hormuz since the US and Israel launched strikes against Iran on February 28. It has restricted passage through the waterway, which carried about a fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas trade before [the war](#), in an effort to gain leverage over

Washington.

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Its threats and attacks have severely curtailed traffic through the strait, driving up [oil prices](#), though some oil has [continued to transit](#).

The two officials declined to provide details of the new strategy, but one said that Iran had started using different offensive tactics against vessels it considered in violation of its restrictions about 10 days ago, adding that this had led to an increase in attacks on such ships.

The strategy included a change in the type as well as the pace of attacks, with one goal being to influence the outcome of the US vote, they said.

"The aim is to frustrate efforts by the United States and its allies to bring down global oil prices," one of the two officials said.

The decision to adopt the new strategy had been taken at the highest levels of Iran's leadership and was fully coordinated across the country's ruling system, the officials said.

IRAN USING SPOTTERS

A US military official, speaking on condition of anonymity, confirmed that Iran had changed tactics in one significant way: after the US destroyed much of Iran's radar capabilities, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) had started using unarmed spotters in small boats to identify potential targets, including US naval vessels, the official said.

Last week, in a previously unreported incident, the US military determined that Iranian spotters were operating from a dhow, calling in targets to the IRGC, the official said. US forces confronted the vessel, told its occupants to abandon ship and then destroyed it. There were no casualties, the US official said.

Unwilling to risk its remaining fast boats, Iran had been unable to prevent a ramp-up in oil exports through the strait, the official said, particularly after US strikes devastated its navy.

The war — and its [\\$3 billion monthly price tag](#) — has become a key issue on the US campaign trail for November's [midterm elections](#), which will decide control of Congress.

US President Donald Trump has been [weighing next steps](#) against Iran, but has said he [will not attack](#) again before the vote.

The US has meanwhile been pressing its own naval blockade of Iranian ports and [extending sanctions](#) as it tries to pile [economic pressure](#) on Tehran to reach a deal to end the conflict.

The standoff over Hormuz has left global energy markets exposed to further disruption, with the threat of attacks and high shipping and insurance costs complicating efforts to restore normal traffic.

In recent days, attacks on commercial ships still sailing through the strait have [surged to their highest level](#) since the war began, according to independent data.

There have been at least five incidents in the past 48 hours involving tankers and other commercial ships around the Hormuz area, including drone strikes, according to data analysis from maritime security sources and incidents reported to British navy-affiliated agency United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO).

That approximately mirrored the rate of attacks on October 3-5, pointing to a new escalation, according to data from the UN shipping agency, the International Maritime Organization.

"There is a tempo increase in strikes, which looks deliberate," one maritime security source said.

ATTACKS OVER AN EXPANDED AREA

As part of the new strategy, Tehran will also expand the geographical scope of its operations beyond the Strait of Hormuz to the Gulf of Oman and waters further afield, the officials said.

Analysis by maritime security sources based on attacks reported to UKMTO and maritime security companies in the region suggest this may already be happening. They show Iran targeting ships in areas beyond the Strait of Hormuz, including waters off the coast of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, in recent days.

The second Iranian official added that Tehran would not allow Trump to bring down oil prices before the November elections.

"Just when they think they are getting close to the point where prices will fall, we will push them away from it. This is a game of chess," the second official said.

"Such vessels would be safe nowhere, even outside the Strait of Hormuz."

The Pentagon and Iran's Foreign Ministry did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

COMPLETE CLOSURE OF HORMUZ SOON, SAYS IRANIAN OFFICIAL

Both Iranian officials said Tehran is moving towards a situation in which no vessel violating its restrictions would be able to pass through the strait. "It will be complete closure soon," one of the officials said.

In its latest report on Sunday, the US Navy-led Joint Maritime Information Center (JMIC) said the threat to merchant shipping in the Strait of Hormuz remained "severe", the second-highest level.

"IRGC attacks, attempted attacks, and/or harassment activity persisted including UAV overflight, targeted surveillance of merchant shipping, and occasional VHF hailing," JMIC said.

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Phil Stewart has reported from more than 60 countries, including Afghanistan, Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, China and South Sudan. An award-winning Washington-based national security reporter, Phil has appeared on NPR, PBS NewsHour, Fox News and other programs and moderated national security events, including at the Reagan National Defense Forum and the German Marshall Fund. He is a recipient of the Edwin M. Hood Award for Diplomatic Correspondence and the Joe Galloway Award.



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