Iranian warships in US' backyard? Tehran to deploy navy to western Atlantic – commander

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Iran will send warships to the western Atlantic Ocean starting in March, a move likely designed to counter US aircraft carriers stationed in the Persian Gulf.

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The ambitious deployment was announced by a top Iranian naval commander on Friday, and comes several weeks after the Pentagon sent an aircraft carrier strike group to the Persian Gulf. The decision to send naval forces so far west may be motivated by the Islamic Republic's desire to counter what it sees as an aggressive US naval presence in its own backyard. The operation will begin in March and is expected to last for several months.

"The Atlantic Ocean is far and the operation of the Iranian naval flotilla might take five months," Rear-Admiral Touraj Hassani told state media.

He added that Sahand, a newly-built destroyer, would be one of the Iranian warships to take part in the flotilla. The new warship has a flight deck for helicopters and is reportedly equipped with anti-aircraft and anti-ship guns, surface-to-surface and surface-to-air missiles. Tehran claims that the destroyer also boasts electronic warfare capabilities.

Tehran previously insisted that the presence of the US carrier group was *"insignificant"* and vowed to prevent the US warships from entering Iranian territorial waters in the Persian Gulf. Notably, Iran's deputy army chief for coordination affairs, Habibollah Sayyari, said in December that the US navy was allowed to sail in international waters near the Islamic Republic – just as the Iranian navy could sail in the Atlantic Ocean near the US.

"They do not have the courage or ability to take any measures against us. We have enough capabilities to stand against their actions and we have fully rehearsed for that," Sayyari stressed.

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In November, the United States unilaterally re-imposed sanctions on Tehran's oil, shipping and banking industries. The sanctions had been previously lifted under the 2015 nuclear deal, which Washington unilaterally withdrew from in May 2018. Although it's unclear whether other nations will abide by Washington's diktats, US officials have predicted that Iranian ships will no longer be welcome in international waters.

Iran's military has stressed that it is *"prepared today as in the past"* to protect against "any threats," and to ensure the safe passage of Iranian oil tankers. Tehran has also repeatedly threatened to shut down the Strait of Hormuz and halt Persian Gulf oil exports if its own oil exports are blocked. In recent months, Iran's Revolutionary Guard has held naval exercises in the Persian Gulf designed to increase preparedness for *"confronting possible threats."*