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The Silent War Beneath the Strait of Hormuz

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Subsurface warfare is becoming the new contest for control of the world's most strategic maritime chokepoint. The Strait of Hormuz has traditionally been viewed through the lens of warships, fast attack craft, missiles, mines and oil tankers. But a new dimension of the contest is increasingly taking place beneath the surface.

On September 27, 2026, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Navy claimed that it had captured U.S. Autonomous Underwater Vehicle (AUV) in the Strait of Hormuz. The IRGC initially associated the vehicle with the *REMUS 600* family, while IRGC spokesman Brigadier General Hossein Mohebbi subsequently identified it as a *Mk 18 Mod 2 Kingfish*. The United States, however, denied that Iran had captured an operational American AUV, saying that it maintained positive control of its operational drone assets in the region.²

The conflicting accounts are important. Whether the vehicle was actually captured in the manner claimed by Iran remains unresolved. But the episode itself reveals something significant: the underwater domain has become an increasingly important battlefield in the struggle over Hormuz.

A War Beneath the Surface

The most important feature of underwater warfare is its invisibility. Ships and aircraft can be detected visually or by radar. An AUV operates in a far more opaque environment.

It can map the seabed, search for mines, inspect underwater infrastructure and collect information without exposing human operators to danger.

The U.S. Navy's *Mk 18* program illustrates this evolution. The *Mk 18 Mod 2 Kingfish* is based on the *REMUS 600* platform and forms part of the Navy's expeditionary mine-countermeasure capability. The Navy has described *Mk 18* systems as AUVs providing commanders with options for mine detection and other underwater missions. More than 90 *Mk 18 Mod 2* vehicles had been delivered to the fleet by the time production of the program of record was completed in 2023.

The system is therefore not simply a "drone submarine." It is part of a broader transformation in naval warfare in which relatively small autonomous platforms perform missions once requiring ships, helicopters, divers or manned submarines. This is precisely why Hormuz is such an important laboratory for subsurface warfare.

Why Hormuz Matters

The Strait of Hormuz is a narrow maritime passage connecting the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. Its strategic importance is obvious: disruption of the waterway can affect energy supplies, commercial shipping and the wider global economy. But for military planners, Hormuz presents another opportunity—and another danger. Its relatively confined waters create an environment in which mine warfare, seabed

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² Euronews Persian, "Iran Claims Seizure of an Underwater US Drone in Hormuz, US Denies the Claim," *Euronews*, September 27, 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/2026/09/27/irans-revolutionary-guard-claim-seizure-of-second-us-underwater-drone-in-strait-of-hormuz>

surveillance, underwater reconnaissance and anti-access operations become particularly important.

A AUV can be deployed to search for mines or chart the seabed. It can also potentially examine underwater infrastructure. Conversely, the presence of foreign AUVs gives the coastal state an incentive to develop methods for detecting, tracking and neutralising them. The result is an emerging contest between underwater surveillance and counter-surveillance.

From Surface to Seabed

Iran's asymmetric maritime strategy has traditionally emphasized speedboats, coastal missiles, mines, drones and the ability to threaten commercial shipping. The introduction of sophisticated AUVs adds another layer.

The objective need not necessarily be to destroy an enemy vessel. It may be enough to know where the enemy is operating, what routes are being surveyed, where mines might be placed, or what areas of the seabed are being monitored.

In such an environment, information becomes a weapon. An AUV that silently surveys an area can create an underwater picture that is invisible to most conventional observers. Equally, a coastal defence network capable of detecting such a vehicle can deny an adversary that information. This is why the reported capture of a *Mk 18 Kingfish*—or any comparable AUV—has significance far beyond the monetary value of the vehicle.

The Intelligence Prize

Iran has said that specialists were examining the captured system and attempting to recover its data. That claim should be treated cautiously because the United States disputes the underlying capture. Nevertheless, the possibility illustrates a central vulnerability of autonomous systems.

A captured AUV potentially provides the adversary with an opportunity to study its physical architecture, sensors, communications arrangements, navigation equipment and operating characteristics. That does not automatically mean that classified technology or operational secrets

can be extracted. Modern military systems can incorporate encryption, data protection and procedures intended to limit the consequences of loss.

Indeed, the September 8 incident provides an interesting contrast. Iran previously claimed to have captured an American *Anduril* Dive-LD AUV near the strait. U.S. officials acknowledged the loss but said the vehicle was an older model that had malfunctioned more than a day before it was captured and did not contain classified sonar or radar equipment. *Anduril*'s founder also described the Dive-LD as an “attributable” AUV designed for operations in dangerous environments where loss could be expected. This concept is important. The future underwater battlefield may deliberately employ relatively inexpensive autonomous platforms in circumstances where losing a machine is preferable to risking a ship, aircraft or sailor.

Electronic Warfare Beneath the Waves

The Iranian account of the September 27 operation also raises another important question: how do you find an AUV? Iran claimed that intelligence and electronic warfare were involved in locating and capturing the AUV. The precise method, if any, remains unverified.

Underwater warfare is particularly complicated because radio-frequency communications do not propagate through seawater in the same way they do through the atmosphere. AUVs, therefore, rely on a combination of autonomous navigation, acoustic systems, inertial navigation and periodic communications or positioning techniques. This creates an unusual technological contest.

One side seeks to make its underwater vehicles increasingly autonomous and stealthier. The other seeks to identify its acoustic, electromagnetic, navigational or behavioural signatures. The result is a form of subsurface electronic warfare in which the most important battle may be over detection rather than destruction.

Seabed: A Strategic Territory

The significance of the development extends beyond military drones. Modern

economies depend increasingly on underwater infrastructure—pipelines, telecommunications cables, offshore energy facilities and other seabed installations.

An AUV capable of surveying such infrastructure can perform legitimate inspection and security missions. The same basic technological capability can also be adapted for intelligence collection or military preparation. Consequently, the seabed itself is becoming a strategic domain.

The contest is no longer simply about who controls the surface of the sea. It increasingly concerns who can see, understand and influence what is happening beneath it.

A New Cat-and-Mouse Game

The two reported AUV incidents in September suggest the emergence of a potentially significant pattern. On September 8, Iran claimed an *Anduril* Dive-LD. Washington said the vehicle malfunctioned and was subsequently recovered by Iran. On September 27, Iran claimed a second U.S. AUV, this time identifying it as a *Mk 18 Mod 2 Kingfish*. Washington disputed the claim and said its operational drone assets remained under positive control.

The facts surrounding the second incident will require further independent verification. But the strategic message is already clear. The United States is expanding the use of unmanned systems to perform dangerous maritime missions. Iran, meanwhile, has a powerful incentive to develop counter-AUV capabilities because foreign underwater systems operating around Hormuz could provide valuable intelligence about the maritime battlespace. This becomes a catalyst for the classic cat-and-mouse game: The hunter can become the hunted.

A Largely-Invisible Future of the Strait of Hormuz

The traditional image of a naval confrontation involves frigates facing frigates or aircraft attacking ships. The future could look

very different. A swarm of small AUVs may quietly map the seabed. Another network may attempt to detect them. Mines could effectively be positioned or removed. Underwater infrastructure could profoundly be monitored. Autonomous systems could transmit information to command centers positioned far away from the immediate vicinity of the battlespace. Most of this activity may occur without a single shot being fired. That is the essence of subsurface warfare. It is about persistent surveillance, deception, denial, intelligence collection and control of information.

For Hormuz, this is particularly consequential. Any confrontation in the Strait would have consequences far beyond the immediate participants because the waterway sits at the intersection of regional security, energy markets and international commerce. Iran recently indicated that it could reopen the Strait if U.S. military pressure was reduced and its ports' blockade lifted, underscoring how closely maritime access is linked to the wider strategic confrontation.

From Gunboats to Autonomous Hunters

The reported *Kingfish* incident therefore deserves attention not merely because an underwater drone may—or may not—have been captured. Its real significance lies in what it tells us about the changing character of naval warfare.

The Strait of Hormuz is becoming a testing ground for a new generation of warfare in which machines search for machines beneath the waves, intelligence competes with autonomy, and the seabed becomes an extension of the battlefield. The most important weapon may no longer be the missile that everyone can see. It may be the small undetected autonomous vehicle that nobody knows is there. In the narrow waters of Hormuz, where every movement can have strategic consequences, the next naval confrontation may begin long before anyone on the surface knows that a battle has started.

