



OPVs IN THE MIDDLE EAST: REQUIREMENTS AND SOLUTIONS

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The acronym OPV (Offshore Patrol Vessel) tends to be used in a loose way, meaning different things to different regions and even different agencies within some nations. Usually, the term is used to describe a ship from coastal patrol boats or large fast attack craft (about 500 tons) up to corvette or frigate-sized ships (2,500 tons), thus losing a useful meaning. On the other hand, the proper use of the term describes a vessel of peculiar applicability to contemporary maritime circumstances; in short, a patrol vessel designed for blue-water operations. This article describes the approach followed by some Middle East navies in procuring OPVs for meeting their particular requirements; the analysis

will basically include the Arabian Gulf and the North Arabian Sea theatres, whose maritime characteristics make it particularly suitable for OPVs operations.

The dramatic changes that occurred over the last decades in the strategic maritime environment have made OPVs increasingly relevant. In the mid-1990s, the dangers and risks posed by an uncontrolled diffusion of several types of threats to maritime resources led to the widespread ratification of the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Introduced in 1982, the most important

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feature of UNCLOS is probably the recognition of a 200-nm (nautical miles) wide, Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and archipelagic states' sovereignty over the waters connecting their coastal islands. However, enforcing that status has proven to be quite another, especially in those maritime areas where the separation between two or more nations is much less than 200 nm. Needless to say, such a scenario is totally applicable to the Arabian Gulf, as it lies at the heart of the Middle East and involves several nations. A similar consideration is applicable also to the Red Sea, as sovereignty over EEZ is an important task for other Middle East' Nations that border the North Arabian Sea and the western basin of the Indian Ocean. As widely recognised, the Arabian Gulf is probably the most important waterway in the world and its political stability is therefore paramount for the economic and political growth worldwide. Likewise, the Red Sea and the waters which border the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula are equally paramount.

Therefore the nations of the southern shores of the Arabian Gulf - all members of the Gulf Cooperation

Council (United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar) - have chosen different approaches to implement their maritime strategies in which a key task is with respect to the protection of the oil infrastructures and commercial shipping. A similar attitude is being followed by the newly re-established Iraqi Navy, with the financial and technical support coming from the United States. In fact, all GCC navies have benefitted both directly and indirectly by the increasing presence of U.S. military forces in the region during the past years, but they have correctly considered the implications of a dramatic drawdown of these forces under the Obama administration in the aftermath of the US disengagement from Iraq and Afghanistan.

There are two major types of challenges and threats facing the GCC and Iraqi navies: the first is located in the Arabian Gulf and stem from Iran's attitude toward a regional hegemony, while the second is linked to the disruption of maritime trade caused by piracy and other illicit trafficking taking place around the Horn of Africa and off Yemeni and Omani coasts. In both cases,

challenges and threats have a clear maritime focus and facing them require the availability of a range of capabilities that can be easily expressed by light surface combatants and OPVs.



Therefore, the Middle East navies bordering the Arabian Gulf and the Arabian Sea have chosen different patterns of development to face such challenges and threats, also in accordance with their ability to manage efficiently a certain range of naval assets. According to such criteria, these Middle East navies can be grouped into two groups, the first including naval forces able to field and manage

OPVs, corvettes and frigates (UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Iraq) and the second comprising smaller naval forces equipped mostly with coastal patrol boats (Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and Yemen). The exception to this rule is the frigate *Sabha*, a former Perry-class frigate now being the flagship of the small Royal Bahrain Naval Force.

The UAE Navy has chosen the upper hand of the OPV/corvette range to enhance its capabilities. The flagship of the UAE Navy is the corvette *Abu Dhabi*, a vessel of about 1,500 tons of displacement which was built in Italy according to the design of the Comandanti-class OPVs, of which six units are in service in the Italian Navy. *Abu Dhabi* maintains the general layout of an OPV but she has been equipped with a range of weapons and sensors that confirms how an OPV design can be easily adapted to the user requirements. Also the Royal Navy of Oman has chosen a similar approach, in this under the guise of the 'Karheef' programme; this was initially related to the construction of three *Al-Shamik* class OPVs that are designed and built in the UK, but they were recently reclassified as corvettes. Although their hull is

based on a British-derived OPV, the *Al-Shamiks* displace 2,550 tons, have stealthy features and are equipped antiship and anti-air missiles, other than a 76 mm main gun.

The newly-reestablished Iraqi Navy has chosen a traditional approach to achieve a range of different capabilities. The two major surface vessels of the new Iraqi Navy are the two Al-Basrah class OPVs (*Al-Basrah* and *Al-Fayhaa*) that have been built in the US in the framework of the Foreign Military Sales programme. The two OPVs have been conceived for the surveillance and the protection of the off-shore oil infrastructures that are located in the northern part of the Arabian Gulf. They are 60-m long, are armed with a 30 mm light gun and are equipped with fast craft for close protection.

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In principle, while small coastal patrol can police territorial waters, EEZ protection and high-seas constabulary duties require larger vessels with better seakeeping and endurance. They remain the most

important requirements, as well as acceptable living and working conditions for the crew. A lower speed than most frigates and corvettes is usually regarded as acceptable. Simple requirements are also provided for damage control, while the vessels are frequently designed and built in accordance with rules of civil classification agencies. In short, OPVs remain an affordable option for other Middle East navies that need to recapitalise their fleets and thus contributing to the stability of the region.

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