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Iran to build permanent naval base in Syria

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Honor guard on Iranian warship at Latakia for Iranian, Syrian Navy chiefs

Just two days after two Iranian warships reached the Syrian port of Latakia via the Suez Canal, Friday, Feb. 25, an Iranian-Syrian naval cooperation accord was signed providing for Iran to build its first Mediterranean naval base at the Syrian port, **DEBKAfile's** military and Iranian sources reveal.

The base will include a large Iranian Revolutionary Guards weapons depot stocked with hardware chosen by the IRGC subject to prior notification to Damascus. Latakia harbor will be deepened, widened and provided with new "coastal installations" to accommodate the

large warships and submarines destined to use these facilities.

Iran has much to celebrate, **DEBKAfile's** military sources report. It has acquired its first military foothold on a Mediterranean shore and its first permanent military presence on Syrian soil. Tehran will be setting in place the logistical infrastructure for accommodating incoming Iranian troops to fight in a potential Middle East war.

According to our sources, the "cadets" the Kharg cruiser, one of the two Iranian warships allowed to transit the Suez Canal, was said to be carrying were in fact the first construction crews for building the new port facilities.

Two more events were carefully synchronized to take place in the same week.

On Feb. 24, as the Iranian warships headed from the Suez Canal to Syria, Hamas fired long-range made-in-Iran Grade missiles from the Gaza Strip into Israel, one hitting the main Negev city of Beersheba for the first time since Israel's Gaza campaign two years ago - [as DEBKAfile reported on that day](#). Tehran was using its Palestinian surrogate to flaunt its success in getting its first warships through the Suez Canal in the face of Israeli protests. The Iranians were also parading their offensive agenda in deploying warships on the Mediterranean just 287 kilometers north of Israel's northernmost coastal town of Nahariya.

The second occurrence was a contract announced by Russian Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov for the sale of advanced Russian shore-to-sea cruise missiles to Syria. The Yakhont missile system has a range of 300 kilometers and skims the waves low enough to be undetected by radar. **DEBKAfile's** military sources take this sale as representing Moscow's nod in favor of the new Iranian base at Latakia, 72 kilometers from the permanent naval base Russia is building at the Syrian port of Tartous.

The Russians are willing to contribute towards the Iranian port's defenses and looking forward to cooperation between the Russian, Iranian and Syrian fleets in the eastern Mediterranean opposite the US Sixth Fleet's regular beat.

This unfolding proximity presents the United States with a serious strategic challenge and Israel with a new peril, which was nonetheless dismissed out of hand by Israel's defense minister Ehud Barak. In a radio interview Monday, Feb. 28, he brushed aside the Iranian warships' passage through the Suez as "an outing for cadets" which did not require an Israeli response. He added, "For now, there is no operational threat to Israel."

According to Barak, the Suez Canal is open to all of the world's warships and the two Iranian vessels' transit could not have been prevented. He omitted to explain how Egypt did prevent it for 30 years and why it was permitted now. The defense minister went on to speak of "fresh signs that President Bashar Assad is willing to resume peace talks with Israel."



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