

UK speedboat floats into Iran's arms

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Has a record-breaking British powerboat become the "ultimate toy" for an Iranian playboy or – as US investigators fear – is it now equipped with the world's fastest torpedoes aimed at sinking an aircraft carrier in the Gulf?

In spite of efforts by the Obama administration to stop it falling into the hands of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, the Bradstone Challenger – a high-performance powerboat built with support from a US defence contractor – is believed to be under new and dangerous ownership.

The unusual journey of the Bladerunner 51 powerboat began in 2005 when a team led by UK adventurer Neil McGrigor took it from a Florida boatyard and smashed the Italian-held record for the fastest circumnavigation of Britain. The time of 27 hours and 10 minutes, at an average speed of 61.5 mph including fuel stops, still stands.

Advertised for sale the next year through a broker "as the ultimate toy for someone looking for something a little bit special", the 51ft craft caught the eye of the Iranians. Initial attempts to buy it were blocked by the UK Department of Trade and Industry.

As the Financial Times has learned from defence and industry sources, Iran did not give up. After the boat passed through at least two more parties, the US got wind in January 2009 it was about to be transferred in the South African port of Durban on to a Hong Kong-flagged Iranian merchant vessel, the Diplomat, bound for the Gulf.

The US commerce department's Bureau of Industry and Security asked South African authorities to block the transfer. It voiced concern that Iran's Revolutionary Guards intended to use the boat as a "fast attack craft". The bureau noted that similar vessels had been armed with "torpedoes, rocket launchers and anti-ship missiles" with the aim of "exploiting enemy vulnerabilities through the use of 'swarming' tactics by small boats".

The loading went ahead because, said one source, no one saw the US notice sent by fax over a weekend. US special forces were ready to intercept the Iranian merchant vessel but the operation was called off, the source said.

In the meantime, Iran was developing Russian-designed Shkval (Squall) torpedoes, known to be the fastest in the world. In April 2006, General Ali Fadavi, deputy head of the Revolutionary Guards, announced the test of a torpedo moving at speeds of 360kph that "no warship can escape from".

Craig Hooper, a San Francisco-based naval strategist who has been following the Bradstone Challenger, says Iran is scouring the world for speedboats with potential military use. Its force is based on ageing Swedish-designed Boghammar craft, as well as Chinese and North Korean speedboats.

But there is much debate whether a boat such as the Bradstone Challenger, even armed with one or two torpedoes, would represent a serious threat against an aircraft carrier in the confined waters of the Gulf.

"Though the US Navy is very concerned a swarm of small boats can overwhelm and sink a large warship, the hypothesis is untested. It has never been done," Mr Hooper told the FT. "A small, fast boat navy is nothing more than a surprise strike and harassment force. Every time small, fast boats run into helicopters, the helicopters win."

There is speculation that Iran wants to copy the boat's revolutionary hull design. The Bladerunner 51 model, designed by Lorne Campbell of the UK and powered by US Caterpillar engines, was built by Britain's ICE Marine. The project was partly financed by Navatek, a Hawaii-based defence contractor, which says it is developing a naval patrol boat version.

Jeremy Watts, the ICE Marine director who helmed the Bradstone Challenger's record-breaking run, says only two have been built and that Iran used "cloak and dagger operations" to try to get one.

"The boat is the newest, best thing around. I was quite fond of it," he said.

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