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Iran's 'Black Hole' Kilo-Class Attack Submarine Has Been Upgraded Just In Time To Fight The U.S. Navy

By: Kelsey Hallman | Published: February 20, 2026

Iran's Kilo-class submarine. Image Credit: Creative Commons.

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Iran Upgrades Kilo-Class Submarines As U.S. Naval Presence Grows

Iran has completed a modernization cycle of its Russian-built Kilo-class submarines, according to open-source satellite imagery and regional military observers.

Kilo-Class Submarines

The upgrades comes amid increased U.S. naval deployments in the Middle East and rising diplomatic tension over the Iranian nuclear program. The submarines are thought to be strategically other towards at Iran's potential maritime chokepoint in the Strait of Hormuz on February 19, 2026, after operating months in port.

Deployed in the late 1990s, the Kilos have been the region's most capable conventional submarines, allowing Iran to keep its limited but strategically valuable assets from visible as American carrier strike groups continue to operate closer to Iranian shores.

Polish Navy submarine. Kilo-Class

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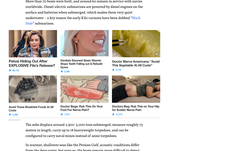
Tehran plans a huge value on its Kilos class, Soviet-designed diesel-electric attack submarines, as a deterrent against stronger naval forces. Over the decades since, overlapping sanctions have prevented the country from modernizing much of its military hardware across its naval, army, and air forces. To understand the significance of the Kilos to Iran's military, it is crucial to understand what these submarines are, where they fit in Iranian strategy, and how they integrate into regional dynamics.

From Russia: Want the Kilo-Class Submarine Is

The Kilo-class submarine is a type of diesel electric attack submarine originally designed by the Rubin Design Bureau in the Soviet Union in the mitre and introduced into service in the early 1980s.

Kilo-Class Submarine. Image Credit: Creative Commons.



Kilo-Class Submarine

More than 24 boats were built, and around 60 remain in service with navies worldwide. Diesel-electric submarines are powered by diesel engines on the surface and batteries when submerged, which makes them very quiet. Iran's Kilos are known for their quiet operation, which makes them very quiet and difficult to detect.

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The Kilos displace around 3,000 tons (surfaced/submerged), measure roughly 72 meters long, and typically carry a crew of around 50 sailors. They are configured to carry naval mines instead of some torpedoes.

In warmer, shallower seas like the Persian Gulf, acoustic conditions differ from the deep water, but even so, the boats remain more difficult to detect than surface warships.

Iran's Kilo Fleet

Iran's submarine force is relatively small compared with global navies – but it is strategically significant at the mouth of the Persian Gulf. Between 1991 and 1992, Iran received three Kilo-class submarines – known domestically as the Tareq class – from Russia.

Iran's Tareq Class Kilo-Class Submarines. Image Credit: Creative Commons.

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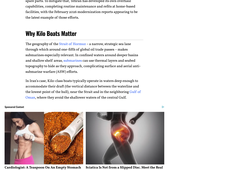
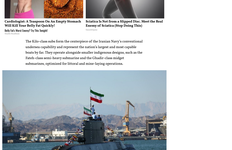
The Kilos operated in the 1991 Tonnage (yes), commissioned in 1992 and built in Saint Petersburg, and the 1991 Tonnage (yes), commissioned in 1996.



Iran's Tareq Class Kilo-Class Submarines. Image Credit: Creative Commons.



A Russian Kilo-class diesel-submarine purchased by Iran, is towed by a support vessel in the Persian Gulf, in this undated photo released by the Iranian Navy on Sept. 4, 2019. Iran's Navy on Sunday unveiled a new domestically-made submarine, the Fateh (Conqueror), which it said is equipped with cruise missiles and torpedoes, and can operate in the Persian Gulf and Sea of Oman, a strategic waterway in which Iran's military has been conducting drills in recent months. Iran's Navy unveils new submarine, which Tehran says is equipped with cruise missiles and torpedoes, and can operate in the Persian Gulf and Sea of Oman, a strategic waterway in which Iran's military has been conducting drills in recent months. Image Credit: Iranian Navy via AP.

All three are based at Bandar Abbas, Iran's principal naval base on the Strait of Hormuz, and have been the country's most capable naval assets. Iran's other submarines were expansive augmentations for Iran at the time, reportedly costing the country hundreds of millions of dollars per boat.

Over the years, Iran has faced logistical challenges in maintaining these older submarines under international sanctions that limit access to original spare parts. To mitigate that, Tehran has developed its own overhaul capabilities, completing routine maintenance and refits at Iranian-based facilities rather than relying on manufacturer-supported upgrades as the Iran's subsidy of these efforts.

Why Kilo Boats Matter

The geography of the Strait of Hormuz – a narrow, strategic sea lane through which around one-fifth of global oil trade passes – makes conventional submarines valuable. Shallow waters, commercial shipping lanes and shallow shelf areas, reduce sonar and thermal layers and limit topography to hide as they approach, complicating surface and aerial anti-submarine warfare (ASW) efforts.

In Iran's case, Kilo-class boats typically operate in waters deep enough to accumulate their draft (the vertical distance between the waterline and the lowest point of the hull), near the Strait and in the neighboring Gulf of Oman, where they avoid the shallower waters of the central Gulf.

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The Kilo-class boats have the conception of the Soviet Navy's conventional submarine capability and represent the nation's largest and most capable boats by far. They operate alongside smaller indigenous designs, such as the Fateh class mini-heavy submarine and the Ghadir class midget submarine, optimized for littoral and mine-laying operations.

Fateh Class Submarine. Image Credit: Iran Media.

The submarines are, by design, very quiet compared with many surface combatants and older diesel-electric designs, making them an ideal tool for shallow-water operations where ASW assets are complicated and deter superior naval forces like the U.S. Navy.

Kilo Boats Sunk Iranian Strategy

Iran's naval doctrine has long centered on serving as a complicating the movement of hostile naval forces near its shores because it cannot directly challenge larger, more capable navies in open water. Its submarines, medium-sized tankers, Iran's strategy consists of a layered combination of missile boats and coastal anti-ship batteries capable of targeting surface ships, swarms of fast attack craft intended to overwhelm larger warships, and mines and mine-laying submarines designed to block or threaten key shipping routes.

Kilo-class submarines fit into that strategy by offering Tehran a relatively low-profile way to deny or contest access to the waters around its coastline and approaches to the Strait. Iran's Kilos are considered quieter than surface warships or mine-laying vessels. They can also play out in real time Iran's strategy complicates U.S. operations and safe-fetches in the crisis. The U.S. knows it has more naval power, but influencing the region in Tehran is not as simple as just turning up.

The fleet in close-mined carrier USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78) transiting in the Atlantic Ocean, Feb. 2025. Exercise Gibbet Throwback on U.S. Navy conducted training exercises with Iran's close-mined carrier, the Shahid Bagheri, in the Gulf of Oman, Feb. 2026. Image Credit: Iran's Shahid Bagheri carrier, offline in the Gulf of Oman, Feb. 2026. The Gerald R. Ford carrier strike group, including Kilo-class submarines, conducted training exercises in the Gulf of Oman. Image Credit: U.S. Navy Communications Specialist 2nd Class Jacob Wallinger)

The mere presence of quiet submarines off Iran's coast complicates carrier strike groups and amphibious forces to operate with heightened caution and increased overhead. The Kilos force adversaries to allocate scarce ASW resources to detection, tracking, and contingency planning that costs time and fuel that could otherwise be available for other missions.

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Will Iran Fire First?

While technically capable of causing damage to large and superior fleets through asymmetric tactics, Kilo-class submarines are unlikely to be used in open conflict against U.S. forces for one simple reason: such an attack would almost certainly trigger overwhelming retaliation.

A hypothetical torpedo or cruise missile strike on a U.S. warship or other vessel – even if technically feasible – would be interpreted in Washington as an act of war, with immediate and decisive consequences for the attacking nation. The only hope Iran would have of surviving or fighting back would be in the form of support from its Iranian proxies, but there is no clear indication that the fleet of Russian or China would consider stepping in at this stage.

The U.S. Department of Defense maintains significant ASW and strike capabilities near Iran, especially the Gerald R. Ford carrier strike group to the region, including long-range bombers and guided-missile destroyers equipped with Tomahawk cruise missiles and anti-submarine warfare.

Additionally, Tehran knows – whether quiet, carrier-killer or mine-layer, cannot where they can dive deep and remain undetected. In shallower waters, the submarines are more susceptible to detection by sensors, meaning Iran's smaller midget submarines are better suited for shallow water scenarios near the coastline, while Kilo-class boats would be more effective in the Gulf of Oman and further offshore.

For these reasons and others, it appears that Tehran views its Kilo fleet primarily as a deterrent and signaling tool, rather than as a first-strike weapon that could enable it to compete against much larger naval powers.

Missiles, Mines, and Mini-Subs

Iran bolsters the deterrent value of its submarines with an expansive arsenal of missiles, including land- and sea-based anti-ship cruise missiles like the Noor and Nasr type systems. There is also the possibility of Iran-backed proxies operating in the Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb and ballistic missiles capable of threatening shipping infrastructure from afar.

In 2019, Iranian reporters claimed that Ghadir class submarines from Iran's submarine force had only ships cruise missile during exercises.

Naval mines, which Kilo-class boats can also deploy instead of torpedoes, also play a major role in Iran's denial strategy. Placing debonaire minefields in the Strait of Hormuz would force adversary navies to divert resources, operations and consult additional resources to mine countermeasure efforts.

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ships are deployed to the U.S. 5th Fleet area of responsibility conducting maritime security operations, theater security cooperation efforts and support missions as part of Operation Enduring Freedom. (U.S. Navy Photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Alex R. Forster/Released)

It's also worth noting that Tehran is not solely reliant on its aging Kilo fleet. The Iranians have pursued an indigenous submarine program aimed at producing vessels better tailored to the local conditions. The Fateh-class, for example, is a semi-heavy design that Iran claims can operate submerged for extended periods and deliver both torpedoes and cruise missiles.

The Kilo, Fateh, Ghadir, and potentially other platforms form the capability behind Iran's anti-access/area denial strategy, which is designed to pose enough risk to deter or slow foreign military intervention without engaging in direct large-scale open combat. During the coming weeks and months, however, we'll soon learn whether those assets are enough to prevent intervention by the U.S. Navy.

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Jack Buckby is a British researcher and analyst specialising in defence and national security, based in New York. His work focuses on military capability, procurement, and strategic competition, producing and editing analysis for policy and defence audiences. He brings extensive editorial experience, with a career output spanning over 1,000 articles at 19FortyFive and National Security Journal, and has previously authored books and papers on extremism and deradicalisation.

In this article: Defense, Iran, Kilo-class, Military, Russia, Stealth, Submarine, Submarines

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Jack Buckby is 19FortyFive's Breaking News Editor. He is a British author, counter-extremism researcher, and journalist based in New York. Reporting on the U.K., Europe, and the U.S., he works to analyze and understand left-wing and right-wing radicalization, and reports on Western governments' approaches to the pressing issues of today. His books and research papers explore these themes and propose pragmatic solutions to our increasingly polarized society.

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