

2 IDF warships cross Suez to Red Sea

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Yaakov Katz , THE JERUSALEM POST

In a new signal to Iran, two Sa'ar 5-class Israeli Navy ships crossed through the Suez Canal from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea on Tuesday to beef up Israel's naval presence near Eilat.

The passage of the ships comes several weeks after a Dolphin-class submarine passed through the international waterway for the first time.

One of the ships, the INS *Hanit*, already crossed the canal in June, in what an Egyptian source said was the first time a large missile ship used the strategic waterway, which is the fastest route to get Israeli Navy vessels from the Mediterranean, where they are based, to the Red Sea and beyond.

The other ship to cross on Tuesday was the INS *Eilat*.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit said that under a long-standing treaty, warships can freely sail through Suez as long as they have no hostile intentions against the state that owns the canal. He declined to say whether the maneuver was aimed at sending a message, saying, "I don't want to analyze an issue that I am not fully aware of."

The significance of the move is debatable, but could be interpreted as a message to Iran and a demonstration of a strengthening of ties between Egypt and Israel. Iran has recently deployed several of its navy ships in the Gulf of Aden and near Eritrea.

In the event of a conflict with Iran, and if Israel decided to involve its three Dolphin-class submarines - which according to foreign reports can fire nuclear-tipped cruise missiles and serve as a second-strike platform - the quickest route would be to sail them through the Suez Canal. Going through the canal would also be the only way to get to the Gulf of Oman without refueling.