

Lebanon: What U.S. Warships off the Coast Do -- and Do Not -- Mean

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Summary

At least part of the USS Nassau Expeditionary Strike Group will pause in the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of Lebanon and Syria during a routine deployment, Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Michael Mullen said Feb. 28. While the ships' presence is sure to grab Syria's attention, it is not a precursor to a military strike. Rather, the United States is signaling to Syria, Iran and Hezbollah that any bold moves to impose their will on the Lebanese government or retaliate for the death of Hezbollah commander Imad Mughniyah could have serious repercussions.

Analysis

At least a portion of the USS Nassau Expeditionary Strike Group (ESG) will pause off the coast of Lebanon and Syria during a routine deployment, Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen announced Feb. 28. The Nassau is set to join the USS Cole (DDG-67), and the ships will probably remain over the horizon and largely unseen from the coast (although the Nassau has a much more imposing silhouette than the Cole).

The total number of U.S. warships in the eastern Mediterranean will thus likely rise above three — something that is sure to get Syrian President Bashar al Assad to sit upright in his seat. U.S. naval presence off the Syrian coast could grow even more in only two weeks or so if other ships in the ESG arrive.

Syria is already facing mounting pressure from multiple sides to back down on its aggressive campaign in Lebanon. While Washington and the Gulf Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia, are pressuring Syria to strike a deal over the Lebanese presidency to pull that country out of political stagnation, Israel is strongly hinting that it is preparing for a rematch with Hezbollah. The prospect of a coordinated U.S.-Israeli military operation against Hezbollah in Lebanon is a signal to the Syria-Hezbollah-Iran axis that any bold moves to force its political demands in Lebanon or retaliate for the Feb. 12 assassination of Hezbollah top commander Imad Mughniyah will likely be met with a heavy blow to Hezbollah.

The Nassau ESG had been expected to deploy with the North Carolina-based 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU), but those Marines were recently retasked for a last-minute deployment to Afghanistan. Thus, despite rumors circulating in the press, there are few if any Marines deployed with this particular ESG. In addition, various components of the ESG have left in a staggered manner, meaning that portions of the group have not yet joined up with the Nassau.

When fully assembled, the Nassau ESG will include some 2,800 sailors and will comprise:

1. The Nassau (LHA-4), a Tarawa-class amphibious assault ship that is larger than a World War II aircraft carrier and normally carries more than 1,500 Marines and some 50 helicopters and fighter aircraft;
2. The Ashland (LSD-48), a dock landing ship that can carry as many as four air-cushion landing craft;
3. The Nashville (LPD-13), an amphibious transport dockship whose sister ship, the Trenton (LPD-14), was involved in the evacuation of some 3,500 U.S. nationals from Beirut in 2006 before it was transferred to the Indian Navy in 2007;
4. The Ticonderoga-class guided missile cruiser Philippine Sea (CG-58);
5. The Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyers Ross (DDG-71) and Bulkeley (DDG-84), which have the same capabilities as the Cole, with the exception that the Bulkeley is a later Flight IIA variant that likely carries two helicopters; and
6. The attack submarine Albany (SSN-753), an Improved Los Angeles class variant with 12 vertical launch tubes for Tomahawk cruise missiles (it might carry more internally).

Even without the MEU aboard, this would represent an impressive naval force unlike anything the United States has parked off the Levant in some time. In addition to the Albany's capabilities, the surface combatants soon to arrive off the Syrian coast are equipped with Aegis, Harpoon anti-ship and Tomahawk cruise missiles, as well as 5-inch guns. That represents the most naval hitting power currently positioned in the Eastern Mediterranean.

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