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U.S.-Iran Tensions and Implications for U.S. Policy

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SUMMARY

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U.S.-Iran Tensions and Implications for U.S. Policy

Since May 2019, U.S.-Iran tensions have escalated, but not erupted into armed conflict. The Trump Administration, following its 2018 withdrawal from the 2015 multilateral nuclear agreement with Iran (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA), has taken several steps in its campaign of applying "maximum pressure" on Iran. Iran and Iran-linked forces have targeted and sometimes seized commercial ships, attacked critical infrastructure in U.S. partner countries, and posed threats to U.S. forces and interests, including downing a U.S. unmanned aerial vehicle. The Administration has sent additional military assets to the region to try to deter future Iranian actions.

President Donald Trump has said he wants a diplomatic solution that would not only ease tensions but resolve broader disputes with Iran, centered on a revised JCPOA that encompasses not only nuclear issues but also Iran's ballistic missile program and Iran's support for regional armed factions. Since May 2019, the Administration has placed further pressure on Iran's economy by expanding U.S. sanctions against Iran, including sanctioning its mineral and petrochemical exports, and Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i and his associates. Iran has begun to exceed some nuclear limitations stipulated in the JCPOA. High-ranking officials from several countries, including Japan, Germany, France, Oman, Qatar, and Iraq, as well as some Members of Congress, have sought to mediate to try to de-escalate U.S.-Iran tensions, or otherwise encourage direct talks between Iranian and U.S. leaders. President Trump has stated that he welcomes talks with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani without preconditions, but no direct talks have been known to take place to date or are scheduled, including during the upcoming U.N. General Assembly meetings in New York that both leaders are expected to attend.

The action-reaction dynamic between the United States and Iran has the potential to escalate into significant conflict. The United States military has the capability to undertake a large range of options against Iran, both against Iran directly and against its regional allies and proxies. However, Iran's alliances with and armed support for armed factions throughout the region, and its network of agents in Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere, give Iran the potential to expand confrontation into areas where U.S. response options might be limited. A September 14, 2019, attack on critical energy infrastructure in Saudi Arabia demonstrated that Iran and/or its allies have the capability to cause significant damage to U.S. allies and to U.S. regional and global economic and strategic interests.

Members of Congress have received additional information from the Administration about the causes of the uptick in U.S.-Iran tensions and Administration planning for further U.S. responses. They have responded in a number of ways; some Members have sought to pass legislation requiring congressional approval for any decision by the President to take military action against Iran.

Additional detail on U.S. policy options on Iran, Iran's regional and defense policy, and Iran sanctions can be found in CRS Report RL32048, *Iran: Internal Politics and U.S. Policy and Options*, by Kenneth Katzman; CRS Report RS20871, *Iran Sanctions*, by Kenneth Katzman; CRS Report R44017, *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*, by Kenneth Katzman; and CRS Report R43983, *2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force: Issues Concerning Its Continued Application*, by Matthew C. Weed.

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Context for Heightened U.S.-Iran Tensions

U.S.-Iran relations have been mostly adversarial—but with varying degrees of intensity—since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. Since then, U.S. officials consistently have identified Iran's support for militant Middle East groups as a significant threat to U.S. interests and allies. Attempting to constrain Iran's nuclear program took precedence in U.S. policy after 2002 as that program advanced. The United States also has sought to block Iran's ability to purchase advanced conventional weaponry and to develop ballistic missiles.

In May 2018, the Trump Administration withdrew the United States from the 2015 nuclear agreement (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA), asserting that the accord did not address the broad range of U.S. concerns about Iranian behavior and would not permanently preclude Iran from developing a nuclear weapon.[1] Administration officials, such as Secretary of State Michael Pompeo and his senior adviser on Iran affairs, Ambassador Brian Hook, say that Administration policy is to apply "maximum pressure" on Iran's economy to (1) compel it to renegotiate the JCPOA to address the broad range of U.S. concerns and (2) deny Iran the revenue to continue to develop its strategic capabilities or intervene throughout the region.[2] Administration statements also suggest that an element of the policy could be to create enough economic difficulties to stoke unrest in Iran, possibly to the point where the regime collapses.[3]

As the Administration has pursued its policy of maximum pressure, bilateral tensions have escalated significantly, with U.S. steps going beyond the reimposition of all U.S. sanctions that were in force before JCPOA went into effect in January 2016. Key developments since April 2019 include the following:

- On April 8, 2019, the Administration designated the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO),[4] representing the first time that an official military force was designated as an FTO. The designation stated that "The IRGC continues to provide financial and other material support, training, technology transfer, advanced conventional weapons, guidance, or direction to a broad range of terrorist organizations, including Hizballah, Palestinian terrorist groups like Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Kata'ib Hizballah in Iraq, al-Ashtar Brigades in Bahrain, and other terrorist groups in Syria and around the Gulf.... Iran continues to allow Al Qaeda (AQ) operatives to reside in Iran, where they have been able to move money and fighters to South Asia and Syria."[5] Iran's parliament subsequently enacted legislation declaring U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) and related forces in the Middle East to be terrorists.

[1] For information on the JCPOA and the rationale for the U.S. withdrawal, see CRS Report R43333, *Iran Nuclear Agreement and U.S. Exit*, by Paul K. Kerr and Kenneth Katzman.

[2] Speech by Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, Heritage Foundation, May 21, 2018; Testimony of Ambassador Brian Hook before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa, Hearing on U.S.-Iran Relations. June 19, 2019.

[3] Speech by Secretary of State Pompeo, Heritage Foundation, op. cit.

[4] Statement from the President on the Designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, April 8, 2019, at https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-designation-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps-foreign-terrorist-organization/.

[5] Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, Factsheet: Designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, April 8, 2019.

- As of May 2, 2019, the Administration ended a U.S. sanctions exception for any country to purchase Iranian oil, aiming to drive Iran's oil exports to "zero."[6]
- On May 3, 2019, the Administration ended waivers under the Iran Freedom and Counter-Proliferation Act (IFCA, P.L. 112-239) that allow countries to help Iran remain within stockpile limits set by the JCPOA.[7] Five waivers for nuclear work on Iran were extended and, at the next expiration on August 1, 2019, the Administration renewed those five waivers again.
- On May 5, 2019, citing reports that Iran might be preparing its allies to attack U.S. personnel or installations, then-National Security Adviser John Bolton announced that the United States was accelerating the previously planned deployment of the USS *Abraham Lincoln* Carrier Strike Group to the region and sending a bomber task force to the Persian Gulf region.[8]
- On May 8, the President issued Executive Order 13871, blocking the U.S.-based property of persons and entities determined by the Administration to have conducted significant transactions with Iran's iron, steel, aluminum, or copper sectors.[9]
- On May 24, 2019, the Trump Administration formally notified Congress of immediate foreign military sales and proposed export licenses for direct commercial sales of defense articles—training, equipment, and weapons—with a possible value of more than $8 billion, including sales of precision guided munitions (PGMs) to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In making the 22 emergency sale notifications, Secretary of State Pompeo invoked emergency authority codified in the Arms Export Control Act (AECA). The notification cited the need "to deter further Iranian adventurism in the Gulf and throughout the Middle East" as justification for the sales.[10] The September 14, 2019, attack on Saudi critical energy infrastructure could prompt additional sales to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states of missile defense, air defense, cyber attack defense equipment, and other gear.
- On June 24, 2019, President Trump issued Executive Order 13876, blocking the U.S.-based property of Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i and his top associates. Sanctions on Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif were imposed on July 31, 2019, under that Order.
- On September 4, 2019, the State Department Special Representative for Iran and Senior Advisor to the Secretary of State Brian Hook said the United States would offer up to $15 million to any person who helps the United States disrupt the financial operations of the IRGC and its Qods Force, which is the IRGC unit that assists Iran-linked forces and factions in the region. The funds will be drawn

[6] State Department Factsheet, April 22, 2019, at https://www.state.gov/advancing-the-u-s-maximum-pressure-campaign-on-iran/.

[7] Letter from Mary Elizabeth Taylor, Assistant Secretary of State for Legislative Affairs, to Senator James Risch, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. May 3, 2019.

[8] The text of the announcement can be found at https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-national-security-advisor-ambassador-john-bolton-2/.

[9] The text of the Order can be found at https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-imposing-sanctions-respect-iron-steel-aluminum-copper-sectors-iran/.

[10] Letter from Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo to Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman James E. Risch, May 24, 2019.

from the longstanding "Rewards for Justice Program" that provides incentives for persons to help prevent acts of terrorism.

Iranian Responses and Actions

Iran has been responding to the additional U.S. pressure in part by demonstrating its ability to harm global commerce and other U.S. interests and to raise new concerns about Iran's nuclear activities. Iran also could be trying to cause international actors, such as Russia, European countries, and countries in Asia that depend on stable oil supplies, to put pressure on the Trump Administration to reduce its sanctions pressure on Iran.

Attacks on Tankers

- On May 12-13, four oil tankers—two Saudi, one Emirati, and one Norwegian ship—were damaged. Iran denied involvement in the incidents, but a Defense Department official on May 24, 2019, attributed the tanker attacks to the IRGC.[11] A report to the United Nations based on Saudi, UAE, and Norwegian information found that a "state actor" was likely responsible, but did not name a specific perpetrator.[12]
- On June 13, 2019, two Saudi tankers in the Gulf of Oman were attacked. One was carrying petrochemicals and the other, crude oil, to buyers in Asia. The same day, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo stated "It is the assessment of the U.S. government that Iran is responsible for the attacks that occurred in the Gulf of Oman today. The assessment is based on the intelligence, the weapons used, the level of expertise needed to execute the operation, recent similar Iranian attacks on shipping, and the fact that no proxy group in the area has the resources and proficiency to act with such a high degree of sophistication.... "[13]

Actions by Iran's Regional Allies

In addition to direct Iranian action, Iran's allies in the region have been conducting attacks that might be linked to U.S.-Iran tensions, although it is not known definitively whether Iran directed or encouraged such attacks. Still, Trump Administration policy, as articulated by Secretary of State Pompeo, has been to hold Tehran responsible for the actions of its regional allies.[14]

- On May 19, 2019, a rocket was fired into the secure "Green Zone" in Baghdad but it caused no injuries or damage.[15] Iran-backed Iraqi militias were widely suspected of the firing and U.S. Defense Department officials attributed it to Iran.[16] The incident came four days after the State Department ordered "nonemergency U.S. government employees" to leave U.S. diplomatic facilities in Iraq, claiming a heightened threat that Iranian allies may act against the United

[11] Department of Defense Briefing on Iran, May 24, 2019. For analysis on Saudi Arabia, see CRS Report RL33533, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Christopher M. Blanchard.

[12] Pamela Falk, "Oil tanker attack probe reveals new photos, blames likely 'state actor,'", CBS News, June 7, 2019.

[13] Statement by the Secretary of State, June 13, 2019.

[14] Pompeo Warns Iran about Trigger for U.S. Military Action as Some in Administration Question Aggressive Policy. Washington Post, June 18, 2019.

[15] For analysis on Iraq, see CRS Report R45025, *Iraq: Background and U.S. Policy*, by Christopher M. Blanchard.

[16] Department of Defense Briefing on Iran. May 24, 2019, op. cit.

States there. In mid-June, there were several other rocket attacks in Iraq, including one that landed near a housing compound for employees of an Exxon-Mobil energy project in the southern Iraqi province of Basra, wounding several persons.[17] A May 2019 attack on Saudi pipeline infrastructure in Saudi Arabia with an unmanned aerial aircraft, first attributed to being launched from Yemen, was later determined to have been initiated from Iraq.[18]

- In June 2019, the Houthis, who have been fighting against a Saudi-led Arab coalition that intervened in Yemen against the Houthis in March 2015, claimed responsibility for three attacks on an airport in Abha, southern Saudi Arabia.[19] The Houthis have since conducted similar attacks against Saudi airports, energy installations, and other targets. The Houthis claimed responsibility for the large-scale attack on Saudi energy infrastructure on September 14, 2019, but, as discussed below, U.S. officials question Houthi origin for the attack.
- In a June 13, 2019, statement, Secretary of State Pompeo asserted Iranian responsibility for a May 31, 2019, car bombing in Afghanistan that wounded four U.S. military personnel. Recent State Department reports have asserted that Iran is providing materiel support to Taliban militants, but the Taliban claimed responsibility for the May 31 attack and outside experts asserted that the Iranian role in that attack is unclear or even unlikely.[20]

Iran and U.S. Downings of Drones

On June 20, 2019, Iran shot down an unmanned aerial surveillance aircraft (RQ-4A Global Hawk Unmanned Aerial Vehicle) near the Strait of Hormuz, claiming it had entered Iranian airspace over the Gulf of Oman. U.S. Central Command officials stated that the drone was over international waters.[21] IRGC commander-in-chief Major General Hossein Salami stated "The downing of the American drone is an open, clear and categorical message, which is: the defenders of the borders of Iran will decisively deal with any foreign aggression.... This is the way the Iranian nation deals with its enemies."

On June 20, 2019, according to his posts on the Twitter social media site, President Trump ordered a strike on three Iranian sites related to the Global Hawk downing, but called off the strike on the grounds that it would have caused Iranian casualties and therefore been "disproportionate" to the Iranian shootdown.[22] The United States did reportedly launch a cyberattack against Iranian equipment used to track commercial ships.[23]

On July 18, 2019, President Trump announced that U.S. forces in the Gulf had downed an Iranian drone via electronic jamming in "defensive action" over the Strait of Hormuz. Iran denied that any of its drones were shot down.

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[17] "Rockets strike near U.S.-linked oil installation and military bases in Iraq; 3 wounded," *Washington Post*, June 19, 2019.

[18] "U.S. says Saudi pipeline attacks originated in Iraq: Wall Street Journal," Reuters, June 28, 2019. For analysis on the Yemen conflict, see CRS Report R43960, *Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

[19] Sadursan Raghavan, "Yemeni rebels claim new drone attack on Saudi airport," *Washington Post*, June 17, 2019.

[20] "The Taliban Claimed an Attack on U.S. Forces. Pompeo Blamed Iran," *Washington Post*, June 16, 2019.

[21] See U.S. Central Command Statement at https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/STATEMENTS/Statements-View/Article/1881682/us-central-command-statement-iranians-shoot-down-us-drone/.

[22] President Donald Trump interview on "Meet the Press," June 23, 2019.

[23] "U.S. Cyberattack made it Harder for Iran to Target Oil Tankers." *New York Times*, August 29, 2019.

UK-Iran Tensions and Iran Tanker Seizures

An effort by the United Kingdom (UK) to enforce EU sanctions against Syria opened up a dispute between Iran and the UK. On July 4, authorities from the British Overseas Territory Gibraltar, backed by British marines, impounded an Iranian tanker, the *Grace I*, off the coast of Gibraltar on the grounds that it was allegedly violating an EU embargo on the provision of oil to Syria. Iranian officials termed the seizure an illegitimate act of "piracy," and in subsequent days, the IRGC Navy sought to intercept a UK-owned tanker in the Gulf, the *British Heritage*, but the force was reportedly driven off by a British warship escorting the tanker. On July 19, the IRGC Navy seized a British-flagged tanker near the Strait of Hormuz, the *Stena Impero*, claiming variously that it violated Iranian waters, was polluting the Gulf, collided with an Iranian vessel, or that the seizure was retribution for the seizure of the *Grace I*.

On July 22, the UK's then-Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt explained the government's reaction to the *Stena Impero* seizure as pursuing diplomacy with Iran to peacefully resolve the dispute, while at the same time sending additional naval vessels to the Gulf to help secure UK commercial shipping there. Secretary Hunt stated that the UK had "made clear in public that [it] would be content with the release of Grace I if there were sufficient guarantees the oil would not go to any entities sanctioned by the EU."[24] On August 15, following a reported pledge by Iran not to deliver the oil cargo to Syria, a Gibraltar court ordered the ship – which had been renamed the Adrian Darya 1 - released. Gibraltar courts turned down a U.S. Justice Department request to impound the ship as a violator of U.S. sanctions on Syria and on the IRGC, which the U.S. filing said was financially involved in the tanker and its cargo.[25] The ship apparently, despite the pledge, delivered its oil to Syria,[26] and, as a consequence, the United States imposed new sanctions on individuals and entities linked to the ship and to the IRGC-linked network that the Treasury Department identified as assisting that and other Iranian oil shipments. Iran said on September 16, 2019, that it would release the *Stena Impero* within days.

President Donald Trump and other senior U.S. officials publicly supported the UK position. Secretary of State Pompeo said that "the responsibility ... falls to the United Kingdom to take care of their ships."[27] At the same time, UK officials stated that they remained committed to the JCPOA and would not join the Trump Administration campaign of maximum pressure on Iran.

Separate from the UK-Iran dispute over the *Grace I* and the *Stena Impero*, on August 5, Iran seized an Iraqi tanker for allegedly smuggling Iranian diesel fuel to "Persian Gulf Arab states."[28]

[24] UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Statement by Jeremy Hunt to Parliament, July 22, 2019.

[25] "Iran Warns U.S. Against Seizing Oil Tanker Headed to Greece." *Bloomberg*, August 18, 2019.

[26] Iran Tanker Unloaded its Cargo, Tehran Says. *New York Times*, September 10, 2019.

[27] "In naval confrontation with Iran, great Britain can find neither ships nor friends," *Defense News*, July 25, 2019.

[28] "Iran Reportedly Seizes Iraqi Tanker In Persian Gulf." NPR, August 5, 2019.

Parallels to Past Incidents in the Gulf[29]

Iran's apparent attacks on tankers in May and June share some characteristics with events in the mid-to-late 1980s during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war. 1987-1988 represented the height of the so-called "tanker war," in which both Iran and Iraq were attacking ships in the Gulf. The United States backed Iraq during that war, and sought to limit and deter Iranian attacks on shipping, but there were several U.S.-Iran skirmishes in the Gulf. To protect commercial shipping, the United States launched "Operation Earnest Will" in July 1987, in which the United States reflagged 11 of Kuwait's oil tankers and the U.S. Navy escorted them through the Gulf. Almost immediately after the operation began, one of the tankers, the *Bridgeton*, was damaged by a large contact mine laid by Iran. In August 1987, U.S. forces captured the *Iran Ajr*, an Iranian landing craft being used for covert minelaying. However, Iran continued attacking, including with missiles; on October 16, 1987, an Iranian Silkworm missile struck on a U.S.-flagged Kuwaiti tanker, *Sea Isle City*, 10 miles off Kuwait's Al Ahmadi port. In response to that attack, U.S. destroyers and Special Operations forces blew up an Iranian oil platform east of Bahrain. On April 14, 1988, an Iranian-laid mine struck the U.S. frigate *Samuel B. Roberts* on patrol in the central Gulf, an attack that led to an April 16, 1988, naval confrontation in which the United States, in Operation Praying Mantis, put a large part of Iran's naval force out of action, including sinking one of Iran's two frigates and rendering the other inoperable. On July 3, 1988, mistaking it for an attacking Iranian aircraft, the guided missile cruiser USS *Vincennes* shot down Iran Air commercial passenger flight 655, killing all aboard.

Attack on Saudi Energy Infrastructure on September 14

On September 14, an attack was conducted on multiple locations within critical Saudi energy infrastructure sites at Khurais and Abqaiq. The Houthi movement in Yemen, which receives arms and other support from Iran, claimed responsibility but Secretary of State Pompeo stated: "Amid all the calls for de-escalation, Iran has now launched an unprecedented attack on the world's energy supply. There is no evidence the attacks came from Yemen."[30] Saudi officials said on September 16, 2019, that the attacks did not originate in Yemen and that the weapons used in the attack were of Iranian origin, but they did not name Iran as the perpetrator, instead inviting "U.N. and international experts ... to participate in the investigations."[31] Press reports stated that U.S. intelligence indicates that Iran itself was the staging ground for the attacks, in which cruise missiles, possibly assisted by unmanned aerial vehicles, struck 17-19 targets at those Saudi sites.[32] The Iraqi government denied that its territory was used for the strikes and said that Secretary Pompeo agreed in a call with Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abd al Mahdi. Iranian officials have denied responsibility for the attack.

The attack shut down a significant portion of Saudi oil production and, whether conducted by Iran itself or by one of its regional allies, escalated U.S.-Iran and Iran-Saudi tensions and demonstrated a significant capability to threaten U.S. allies and interests. Whether, or how, the United States and/or Saudi Arabia or other countries might respond to the attack was not announced. President Trump wrote on Twitter: "There is reason to believe that we know the culprit, are locked and loaded depending on verification. But we are waiting to hear from the Kingdom as to who they believe was the cause of this attack, and under what terms we would proceed." Some critics, including some in Congress, expressed the view that President Trump was appearing to defer to Saudi Arabia too much decision making input about the U.S. response to the attack.[33] He also stated in a White House meeting on September 16 that he would "like to avoid" conflict with Iran, and it is possible that President Trump might be using apparent deference to

[29] Much of this textbox is derived from Ronald O'Rourke, U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings, "The Tanker War," May 1988; and CRS Issue Brief IB87145, "Persian Gulf: U.S. Military Operations," January 19, 1989.

[30] Secretary Pompeo on Twitter. 3:59 PM, September 14, 2019.

[31] Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ministry of Foreign Affairs Statement. September 16, 2019.

[32] U.S. Tells Saudi Arabia Oil Attacks Were Launched from Iran." *Wall Street Journal*, September 16, 2019.

[33] "With Oil under Attack, Trump's Deference to Saudis Returns to the Fore." *New York Times*, September 17, 2019.

Saudi Arabia to defray calls for a U.S. military response to the attack. President Trump stated that Secretary of State Pompeo would soon visit Saudi Arabia to discuss the issue.

Some of the possible options, should the United States and/or Saudi Arabia or other U.S. partners decide to retaliate militarily, are discussed below.

International Responses to the Current Dynamic

Responses by U.S. partners and other actors to the U.S.-Iran tensions have been consistent with positions of major international players on the JCPOA. Secretary Pompeo's statement on June 13, 2019, "call[ed] upon all nations threatened by Iran's provocative acts to join us in that endeavor [of compelling Iran to return to the negotiating table]." U.S. allies in Europe—all of whom criticized the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA—have tended to call for an easing of tensions and for "maximum restraint" by the United States.[34] After the initial escalation of tensions in early May, Secretary of State Pompeo attended meetings with EU officials on May 13 to brief them on U.S. intelligence about the heightened Iranian threat. At the conclusion of the meetings, UK Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt stated "We [EU] are very worried about the risk of a conflict happening by accident, with an escalation unintended really on either side."[35]

As an example of the apparent EU hesitancy to back the U.S. maximum pressure campaign, several EU countries questioned U.S. assertions of Iranian responsibility for the June 13 attacks. The UK was an exception; its Foreign Office issued a statement saying: "It is almost certain that a branch of the Iranian military—the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—attacked the two tankers on 13 June. No other state or non-state actor could plausibly have been responsible."[36] After the United States released videos purporting to show the IRGC at one of the tankers, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that there was "strong evidence" Iran committed the attacks, but the EU and the German foreign ministers maintained that they had not reached any conclusions.[37]

Russia is a signatory to the JCPOA and a partner of Iran in Syria and on other issues, and Russia's deputy foreign minister warned the United States against using the latest tanker attacks to "further aggravate the situation in an anti-Iran sense."[38] On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, a major adversary of Iran, called for "decisive" action to protect global energy supplies that it said are threatened by Iran.[39]

At the same time, some U.S. allies have joined a U.S. effort to deter Iran from further attacks on shipping in the Gulf. The U.S. efforts to construct a Gulf shipping protection operation are discussed further below.

JCPOA-Related Iranian Responses[40]

Since the Trump Administration's May 2018 announcement that the United States would no longer participate in the JCPOA, Iranian officials repeatedly have rejected renegotiating the

[34] "Distrustful of Both Sides, Europe Urges 'Maximum Restraint" as Tensions Escalate," *New York Times*, June 15, 2019.

[35] "Pompeo crashes Brussels meeting of E.U. diplomats but changes few minds on Iran," *Washington Post*, May 13, 2019.

[36] "UK joins US in accusing Iran of tanker attacks as crew held," *The Guardian*, June 14, 2019.

[37] "Germany says there is 'strong evidence' Iran behind tanker attacks," *Deutsche Welle*, June 18, 2019.

[38] "Russia Warns Against Using Tanker Attacks to Pressure Iran," Reuters, June 13, 2019.

[39] "Saudi Arabia calls for 'decisive' action over tanker attacks," Al Jazeera, June 15, 2019.

[40] This section was prepared by Paul K. Kerr. Specialist in Nonproliferation. For additional details, see CRS Report RL34544, *Iran's Nuclear Program: Status*, by Paul K. Kerr.

agreement or discussing a new agreement. Tehran also has conditioned its ongoing adherence to the JCPOA on receiving the agreement's benefits from the remaining JCPOA parties, collectively known as the "P4+1." On May 10, 2018, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif wrote that, in order for the agreement to survive, "the remaining JCPOA Participants and the international community need to fully ensure that Iran is compensated unconditionally through appropriate national, regional and global measures." He added that

> Iran has decided to resort to the JCPOA mechanism [the Joint Commission established by the agreement] in good faith to find solutions in order to rectify the United States' multiple cases of significant non-performance and its unlawful withdrawal, and to determine whether and how the remaining JCPOA Participants and other economic partners can ensure the full benefits that the Iranian people are entitled to derive from this global diplomatic achievement.[41]

Tehran also threatened to reconstitute and resume the country's pre-JCPOA nuclear activities. According to Iranian officials, the country can rapidly reconstitute its fissile material production capability and has begun preparations for expanding its uranium enrichment program since the May 2018 U.S. announcement described above.[42]

Several meetings of the JCPOA-established Joint Commission since the U.S. withdrawal have not produced a firm Iranian commitment to the agreement.[43] Tehran has argued that the remaining JCPOA participants' efforts have been inadequate to sustain the agreement's benefits for Iran. In May 8 letters to the other JCPOA participant governments, Iran announced that, as of that day, Tehran had stopped "some of its measures under the JCPOA," though the government emphasized that it was not withdrawing from the agreement. Specifically, Iranian officials said that the government will not transfer low enriched uranium (LEU) or heavy water out of the country in order to maintain those stockpiles below the JCPOA-mandated limits. A May 8 statement from Iran's Supreme National Security Council explained that Iran "does not anymore see itself committed to respecting" the JCPOA-mandated limits on LEU and heavy water stockpiles.[44]

Behrouz Kamalvandi, spokesperson for the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), warned on June 17, 2019, that Iran would exceed on June 27 the JCPOA-mandated quantitative limit on Iran's LEU stockpile if the agreement's other participants did not meet Tehran's demands. The Iranian government stated that it would resume full compliance with the JCPOA if the remaining participants agree during a 60-day period following the May 8, 2019, announcement to meet Tehran's demands (by July 7). However, Kamalvandi and other Iranian officials warned that, absent such an agreement, Iran would cease to accept any constraints on the concentration of Iranian-produced LEU. According to two July reports from then-IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano, both the quantity of Iran's LEU stockpile, as well as the that LEU's concentration of the

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[41] "Letter of Foreign Minister to UN Secretary General," May 10, 2018.

[42] "Iran Can Resume 20 Per Cent Uranium Enrichment Only in 5 Days: Salehi," Iranian Students News Agency (ISNA), August 22, 2017; "AEOI Chief: Iran Able to Resume 20% Enrichment in Maximum 5 Days," FARS News Agency, August 22, 2017.

[43] Unless otherwise noted, this paragraph is based on "AEOI Chief: Iran No More Remaining Restricted To 300 Kg Ceiling For Enriched Uranium," *Fars News Agency*, May 8, 2019; "Iran: Report Publishes Text of Supreme National Security Council Statement on Nuclear Deal," *Tehran Fararu Online*, May 8, 2019; *Revision: Iran: President Ruhani Heralds New Nuclear Deal Strategy, Announces 60-Day Deadline*, May 8, 2019; *Statement from Supreme National Security Council of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, May 8, 2019; "Spokesman: Iran to Cross 300kg Uranium Stockpile Borderline in 10 Days," *FARS News Agency*, June 17, 2019.

[44] "Parliament Speaker's Top Advisor: Iran Not to Extend 60-Day N. Deal Deadline," *FARS News Agency*, June 16, 2019.

relevant fissile isotope uranium-235, currently exceed JCPOA-mandated limits.[45] A report from IAEA Acting Director General Cornel Feruță explains that Iran has continued this activity.[46]

Iranian officials have conditioned Tehran's continued implementation of its JCPOA commitments on fulfillment by France, Germany, and the United Kingdom (collectively known as the "E3") of Iran's demands described above. On August 27, Foreign Minister Zarif reportedly stated that Tehran will scale back still more of its JCPOA commitments, should the E3 fail to meet these demands.[47] Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi stated on August 28 that Iran's continued JCPOA participation depends on the government's ability to export oil or receive compensation for lost oil export revenue. Specifically, Araqchi explained, the E3 should persuade the United States to reinstate sanctions waivers that permitted such exports pursuant to the JCPOA. Should Washington refuse to do so, he argued, the E3 should "provide lines of credit" to Iran "equivalent to the amount of oil Iran would export."[48] Some of these proposals are discussed further below.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani Rouhani stated on September 5 that the AEOI

> is required to start whatever technical needs of the country are in the field of research and development immediately, and put aside all [JCPOA-mandated] commitments in the field of research and development in all kinds of new centrifuges and everything we need for enrichment.[49]

Iran has begun installing advanced centrifuges at its pilot uranium enrichment facility, according to a September 8 report from Feruță.[50] If Tehran and the P4+1 reach an agreement within 60 days, Iran will resume implementing its JCPOA commitments, Rouhani added in his September 5 statement.[51] The remaining JCPOA participants apparently judge Tehran in compliance with the agreement.[52]

U.S. Military Deployments

In response to the escalating tensions with Iran in recent months, the United States has added forces and military capabilities in the region, beyond the accelerated deployment of the USS *Abraham Lincoln* and associated forces, discussed above. The deployments have added several thousand U.S. military personnel to a baseline of more than 60,000 U.S. forces in and around the Persian Gulf, which include those stationed at military facilities in the Arab states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain), and those

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[45] *Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in Light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015),* Report by the Director General, GOV/INF/2019/8. July 1, 2019; *Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in Light of United Nations Security Council Resolution* 2231 (2015), Report by the Director General, GOV/INF/2019/9, July 8, 2019.

[46] *Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in Light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015),* Report by the Acting Director General, GOV/2019/32. August 30, 2019.

[47] "FM Zarif: Tehran Firm to Keep Scaling Down N. Commitments," *FARS News Agency,* August 27, 2019.

[48] "Iran Official Outlines Conditions for Preservation of the Nuclear Deal," *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Network 1,* August 28, 2019.

[49] "President After the Meeting of Three Branches' Heads: Iran's Third Step to Begin Friday; Atomic Energy Org. Authorized to Do Whatever Needed in Nuclear Technology, Research/ Iran's Activities within IAEA Framework/ Europe Has Another 60 Days," September 5, 2019. Available at http://president.ir/en/111155.

[50] *Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in Light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015),* Report by the Acting Director General, GOV/INF/2019/10, September 8, 2019.

[51] http://president.ir/en/111155.

[52] For additional details, see CRS Report R40094, *Iran's Nuclear Program: Tehran's Compliance with International Obligations,* by Paul K. Kerr.

in Iraq and Afghanistan.[53] Defense Department officials have indicated that the additional deployments since early May restore forces who were redeployed from the region a few years ago, and that the new deployments do not represent preparation for any U.S. offensive against Iran.[54]

- On May 24, 2019, the Defense Department said that the President approved a plan to augment U.S. defense and deterrence against Iran by deploying to the Gulf region an additional 900 military personnel, extending the deployment of another 600 that were sent earlier to operate Patriot missile defense equipment, and sending additional combat and reconnaissance aircraft.[55]
- On June 17, then-Acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan announced that the United States was sending an additional 1,000 military personnel to the Gulf "for defensive purposes."[56]
- On July 18, U.S. defense officials said that an additional 500 U.S. troops would deploy to Saudi Arabia. The deployment, to Prince Sultan Air Base south of Riyadh, reportedly will include fighter aircraft and air defense equipment.[57] U.S. forces utilized the base to enforce a no-fly zone over southern Iraq during the 1990s, but left there after Saddam Hussein was ousted by Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003.

Coalition to Secure the Gulf

The Trump Administration has sought to assemble a coalition that would use military assets to try to protect commercial shipping in the Gulf. In June, Secretary Pompeo visited Saudi Arabia, UAE, and several Asian states to recruit allies to contribute funds and military resources to a new maritime security and monitoring initiative (termed "Operation Sentinel") for the Gulf.[58] The U.S. plan reportedly involves U.S. surveillance of Iranian naval movements and coordination of multilateral naval vessels escorting or protecting commercial ships under their respective flags. The U.S. plan appears to represent a version of the 1987-1988 "Operation Earnest Will," discussed in the textbox above.[59]At an August 28 press briefing, Defense Secretary Mark Esper told reporters "I am pleased to report that Operation Sentinel is up and running." The countries recruited to the mission are as follows:

- In concert with the dispute with Iran over the *Grace I* (see above), Britain sent two warships to the Gulf to protect British shipping. On August 5, the UK announced it would join the U.S. protection mission.[60] On August 25, it was reported that the UK had sent a third warship to the Gulf to join the effort. In the August 5 announcement and subsequent statements, UK officials stated explicitly

[53] Paul Sonne and Missy Ryan, "Amid tensions with Iran, White House mulls U.S. military request to send more forces to the Middle East," *Washington Post*, May 23, 2019.

[54] Gordon Lubold and Michael Gordon, "U.S. Deploys Forces to Mideast to Mideast to Deter Iran," *Wall Street Journal*, May 5, 2019.

[55] Department of Defense Briefing on Iran, May 24, 2019, op. cit.

[56] Doha Madani, "U.S. Sending 1,000 troops to Middle East amid heightened tension with Iran," NBC, June 18, 2019.

[57] Robert Burns, "Officials: US putting troops back in Saudi Arabia," Associated Press, July 21, 2019.

[58] Edward Wong, "Trump Imposes New Sanctions on Iran, Adding to Tensions," *New York Times*, June 24, 2019.

[59] Bradley Peniston, "Operation Earnest Will," at http://www.navybook.com/no-higher-honor/timeline/operation-earnest-will/.

[60] UK Statement on Maritime Security Mission. August 5, 2019.

that the UK remains committed to the JCPOA and that its deployments are not to be taken as support for the U.S. maximum pressure campaign against Iran.

- On August 19, Bahrain, which hosts the headquarters for all U.S. naval forces in the Gulf, announced it would join the U.S.-led Gulf shipping protection mission. Its role was not specified.
- On August 22, the Australian government announced it would join the mission by sending A P-8A Poseidon maritime surveillance plane by the end of 2019 and a Royal Australian Navy frigate, which will deploy with the security flotilla in January for six months.[61]

Other nations, such as India, have sent some naval vessels to the Gulf to protect their commercial ships, and China's ambassador to the UAE said in early August that China is considering joining the mission, although no announcement of China's participation has since been made. Additionally, Israeli Foreign Minister Yisrael Katz said Israel would join the coalition, although it is likely that Israel would remain in a supporting role in light of the stated opposition of Iran, Iraq, and other regional governments to a direct Israeli military role in the Gulf.[62] Defense Secretary Esper did not list Israel as a participant in his August 28 press briefing mentioned above. A question is whether additional countries might join the mission in the aftermath of the September 14 attack on Saudi critical infrastructure.

Scenarios and Possible Outcomes

Events could take any of several directions that might affect congressional oversight and authorization or limitations on the U.S. use of military force, Administration and congressional steps to support regional partners potentially affected by conflict, or new sanctions measures.

Further Escalation

U.S. and Iranian officials have said they do not want armed conflict. However, leaders on each side have said they will respond with force if the other attacks. There is the potential for the United States to respond to any new Iranian actions not necessarily with military action but through additional sanctions or other measures. For detail on U.S. sanctions on Iran, see CRS Report RS20871, *Iran Sanctions*, by Kenneth Katzman.

The Iranian leadership insists that U.S. sanctions be eased, and, in order to pressure on the United States to do so, Iran could undertake or provide material support for further actions such as the September 14 strike against Saudi critical energy infrastructure. Iran could potentially try to attack U.S. military, civilian, diplomatic, or other personnel. Iran could attack or seize additional commercial ships in the Gulf, possibly causing loss of life.

The IRGC's Qods Force (IRGC-QF) could encourage its allies in Syria, Lebanon,[63] Iraq, Yemen, Bahrain, and Afghanistan to attack a wide range of targets, potentially including U.S. military personnel and installations.[64] The IRGC-QF has supplied these regional allies with rockets, short-

[61] Australia Joins U.S.-Led Maritime Force Protecting Persian Gulf Shipping. NPR, August 22, 2019.

[62] See "Israel to join US-led coalition in Persian Gulf."' Anadolu Agency, August 7, 2019.

[63] For analysis on Syria and on Lebanon see CRS Report RL33487, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response,* coordinated by Carla E. Humud and CRS Report R44759, *Lebanon,* by Carla E. Humud.

[64] "Iran's Playbook—Deconstructing Tehran's Regional Strategy," Soufan Center, May 2019, at https://thesoufancenter.org/irans-playbook-deconstructing-tehrans-regional-strategy-by-the-soufan-center/.

range ballistic missiles, and other weaponry to undertake such assaults.[65] The annual State Department report on international terrorism has consistently asserted that Iran and its key ally, Lebanese Hezbollah, have a vast network of agents in Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere that could act against U.S. personnel and interests outside the Middle East.[66] The U.S. intelligence community assess that Iran has "the largest inventory of ballistic missiles in the region," and press reports indicate that Iran is advancing its drone technology and the precision targeting of the missiles it provides to its regional allies. Israel asserts that these advances pose a sufficient threat to justify Israeli attacks against Hezbollah, additional targets in Syria, and apparently also against Iran-backed forces in Iraq during August 2019.[67] The September 14 attack on Saudi critical energy infrastructure could represent an Iranian intent to escalate tensions, perhaps to increase pressure on the United States and its allies to ease sanctions.

Status Quo

It is possible that the U.S.-Iran tensions might not evolve to military conflict, but might not result in talks that lead to a potential resolution of the U.S.-Iran differences. "Status quo" appears to characterize the situation in the Gulf from the aborted U.S. retaliation for Iran's downing of the U.S. unmanned aerial vehicle in late June until the September 14 attack on Saudi energy infrastructure. At the August 28, 2019, DOD press briefing discussed above, Defense Secretary Esper asserted that the U.S.-led Gulf protection mission, Operation Sentinel, had "been successful" in deterring further Iranian attacks and that "I'm not sure I'm ready to call the crisis over yet, but so far so good. And we hope the trend lines continue that way." The September 14 attack appears to represent a break in that trend.

De-Escalation

Since June, U.S. and Iranian officials have explored ways to de-escalate the tensions, and could take additional steps to do so. Iran, for its part, could potentially take up U.S. offers to negotiate a broader, revised JCPOA, although U.S. demands for a new JCPOA are extensive and Iranian leaders have insisted that the United States first return to the JCPOA as it exists. Iran might also offer to de-escalate by pledging to refrain from any interference with international shipping or by reducing its naval operations in the Gulf. The Trump Administration might relax its maximum pressure policy on Iran, for example by restoring a sanctions exceptions for the purchase of Iranian oil—a step that could remove Iran's objections to being largely denied the ability to export that vital commodity.

President Trump and other senior officials have stated several times since May that the United States is willing to talk directly with Iranian leaders, without preconditions, to de-escalate tensions and negotiate a revised JCPOA.[68] On June 2, Secretary Pompeo stated that "We are prepared to engage in a conversation [with Iran] with no preconditions, we are ready to sit down." Before departing on a trip to the region to discuss the Iran issue, Secretary Pompeo stated on June 23, "The President has said repeatedly we want a brighter future for the people of the Islamic

[65] Ambassador Brian Hook, "The Iranian Regime's Transfer of Arms to Proxy Groups," November 29, 2018.

[66] Department of State. Country Reports on Terrorism: 2017.

[67] "As Israel's anti-Iran strategy shifts into higher gear, worries of fresh conflict grow."Al Monitor, September 13, 2019.

[68] Alyza Sebenius, "Trump Says 'Always a Chance' of War with Iran But Prefers Talks," Bloomberg, June 5, 2019.

Republic of Iran. Those negotiations are the gateway. That's how we'll ultimately achieve this."[69] For Iran's part, Foreign Minister Zarif visited the United Nations in July 2019 and offered, in return for the United States' lifting of U.S. JCPOA-related sanctions, to accelerate Iran's ratification of the Additional Protocol to its IAEA safeguards agreement ahead of the JCPOA-mandated schedule.[70]

Still, the United States and Iran do not have diplomatic relations and there have been no known high-level talks between Iran and the United States since the Trump Administration withdrew from the JCPOA. The absence of direct channels has led various third country leaders, as well as some Members of Congress, either with or separate from specific U.S. imprimatur, to try to move Tehran and Washington toward direct talks. Shortly after tensions began escalating, Secretary Pompeo had at least one direct contact with Sultan Qaboos of Oman, who in the past has mediated U.S.-Iran talks,[71] and Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe sought to mediate a de-escalation during his visit to Iran on June 12-13, 2019, the first visit to Iran by a Japanese leader since the Islamic revolution. That visit followed one by Germany's foreign minister to Tehran in early June. President Trump also confirmed on July 19, 2019, that he authorized Senator Rand Paul to engage in diplomatic discussions with Foreign Minister Zarif; Senator Paul reportedly met with Zarif in New York in July.[72]

Several Gulf countries, including Qatar and the UAE, have sent delegations to Iran to try to ease U.S.-Iran tensions that the Gulf leaders say could lead to severe destruction in the Gulf states themselves in the event of conflict.[73] Whereas Qatar has consistently maintained relations with Iran, the UAE delegation that visited Tehran in late July undertook the first security talks with Iran since 2013 and their visit appeared to soften the country's prior hardline against engagement with Iran.

Since July, French President Macron has apparently produced some movement toward U.S.-Iran talks. In early July, he sent a top aide, Emmanuel Bonne, to Tehran for mediation talks. While hosting the G-7 summit in Biarritz, Macron invited Foreign Minister Zarif to meet with him and to speak with British and German diplomats. No Trump-Zarif meeting took place in Biarritz, and President Trump told reporters "I think it's too soon to meet, I didn't want to meet." However, at a press conference at the close of the summit, President Trump reiterated his willingness, in principle, to meet with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, while at the same time reiterating his criticism of the JCPOA as a "bad deal." President Macron expressed hope for a Trump-Rouhani meeting in the near future, presumably during the U.N. General Assembly meetings in New York in September. President Trump has stated that he welcomes talks with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani without preconditions, but no direct talks have been known to take place to date or are scheduled, including during the upcoming U.N. General Assembly meetings. Rouhani reacted to the U.S. and French statements by expressing a willingness to meet with President Trump. However, apparent pressure from hardliners has contributed to Rouhani's restating the view that U.S. sanctions be lifted before any direct U.S.-Iran high level talks. Some press reports indicated that President Trump has considered - possibly as an incentive for Iran to meet - supporting a

[69] Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo Remarks to Press, Joint Base Andrews, June 23, 2019.

[70] "Iran's Foreign Minister Proposes Modest Deal to End Impasse with U.S," *New York Times*, July 18, 2019.

[71] Department of State, Secretary Pompeo's Call with Omani Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id Al Sa'id. May 16, 2019.

[72] "Trump: Sen. Rand Paul to help with Iran negotiations," *Politico*, July 19, 2019.

[73] "Iran, U.A.E. Discuss Maritime Security Amid Heightened Tensions in Gulf." *Wall Street Journal*, July 30, 2019.

French credit line proposal discussed below by approving sanctions waivers and exceptions to facilitate the credit line.[74]

Even if the United States and Iran do not talk directly, the EU or other actors could also produce a de-escalation by formulating policies that provide Iran with the economic benefits of the JCPOA. One new European proposal was revealed at the G-7 meeting: according to French officials, the proposal involves multiple countries providing a $15 billion credit line, secured by future deliveries of oil, in exchange for Iran's return to full JCPOA compliance. The credit line would be used to facilitate the operations of a new EU trading mechanism (Instrument in Support of Trading Exchanges, INSTEX) that has yet to complete any transactions.[75]

U.S. Military Action: Considerations, Additional Options, and Risks

The military is a tool of national power that the United States can use to advance its objectives, and the design of a military campaign and effective military options depend on the policy goals that U.S. leaders seek to accomplish. The Trump Administration has stated that its "core objective ... is the systemic change in the Islamic Republic's hostile and destabilizing actions, including blocking all paths to a nuclear weapon and exporting terrorism."[76] As such, the military could be used in a variety of ways to try and contain and dissuade Iran from prosecuting its "hostile and destabilizing actions." These ways range from increasing presence and posture in the region to use of force to change Iran's regime. As with any use of the military instrument of national power, any employment of U.S. forces in this scenario could result in retaliatory Iranian action and/or the escalation of a crisis.

U.S. military action may not be the appropriate tool to achieve systemic change within the Iranian regime, and may in fact worsen the situation for Iranians sympathetic to a change of regime. Employing overt military force is likely to strengthen anti-American elements within the Iranian government. Some observers question the utility of military power against Iran due to global strategic considerations. The 2017 National Security Strategy and 2018 National Defense Strategy both note that China and Russia represent the key strategic challenges to the United States today and into the future. As such, shifting military assets into the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility requires diverting them from use in other theaters such as Europe and the Pacific, thereby sacrificing other long-term U.S. strategic priorities.

U.S. officials have stated that the additional U.S. deployments since May are intended to "deter" Iran from taking any further provocative actions. Yet, the downing of the RQ-4A Global Hawk Unmanned Aerial Vehicle on June 20, 2019, demonstrates that deploying additional assets and capabilities has not necessarily succeeded in deterring Iran from using military force.

Still others contend that the risks of military inaction are greater than those associated with the employment of force. For example, should Iran acquire a nuclear weapons capability, U.S.

[74] "Bolton's departure allegedly pegged to disagreement over lifting sanctions on Iran." Washington Post, September 14, 2019.

[75] "France reportedly offers Iran $15bn Instex credit line for sanctions-protected trade." Intellinews, August 7, 2019.

[76] The White House, *A Look at the U.S. Strategy for Iran*, February 13, 2019, at https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/look-u-s-strategy-iran/.

options to contain and dissuade it from prosecuting hostile activities could be significantly more constrained than they are at present.[77]

For illustrative purposes only, below are some potential additional policy options related to the possible use of military capabilities against Iran, beyond the Gulf shipping protection mission the United States is establishing. Not all of these options are mutually exclusive, nor do they represent a complete list of possible options, implications, and risks. And, the escalation of U.S.-Iran tensions has prompted Congress to assess its role in any decisions regarding whether to undertake military action against Iran, an issue that is discussed later in this report. The following discussion is based entirely on open-source materials.

- **Operations against Iranian allies or proxies**. The Administration might decide to take action against Iran's allies or proxies, such as Iran-backed militias in Iraq, Lebanese Hezbollah, or the Houthi movement in Yemen. Such action could take the form of air operations, ground operations, special operations, or cyber and electronic warfare. Attacks on Iranian allies could be limited or expansive—intended to seriously degrade the military ability of the Iranian ally in question. Options to combat Iran's allies could be undertaken by U.S. forces, partner government forces, or both. On the other hand, military action Iran's allies has the potential to further inflame or harm the prospects for resolution of U.S.-Iran tensions or the regional conflicts in which Iranian allies operate.
- **Retaliatory Action against Iranian Key Targets and Facilities.** The United States retains the option to undertake air and missile strikes, as well as special operations and cyber and electronic warfare against Iranian targets, such as IRGC Navy vessels in the Gulf, nuclear facilities, military bases, ports (see **Figure 1**), oil installations, and any number of other targets within Iran itself.[78]
- **Blockade.** Another option could be to establish a naval and/or air quarantine of Iran. Iran has periodically, including in the latest round of tensions, threatened to block the vital Strait of Hormuz. Some observers have in past confrontations raised the prospect of a U.S. closure of the Strait or other waterways to Iranian commerce.[79] Under international law, blockades are acts of war.
- **Invasion.** Although apparently far from current consideration because of the potential risks and costs, a U.S. invasion of Iran to oust its regime is among the options. Press reports in May 2019 indicated that the Administration was considering adding more than 100,000 military forces to the Gulf to deter Iran from any attacks.[80] Such an option, if exercised, might be interpreted as potentially enhancing the U.S. ability to conduct ground attacks inside Iran, although most military experts indicate that a U.S. invasion and/or occupation of Iran would require many more U.S. forces than those cited.[81] Iran's population is

[77] Kathleen J. McInnis (2005) Extended deterrence: The U.S. credibility gap in the Middle East, The Washington Quarterly, 28:3, 169-186, DOI: 10.1162/0163660054026489.

[78] "Trump Administration Prepares Multiple Military Options for Iran, Including Airstrikes and Setting Up Ground Invasion." *Newsweek*, May 14, 2019.

[79] Emanuele Ottolenghi, "Only Crippling Sanctions Will Stop Iran," *New York Times*, March 2, 2012.

[80] Eric Schmitt and Julian Barnes, "White House Reviews Military Plans against Iran, in Echoes of Iraq War," *New York Times*, May 13, 2019.

[81] Adam Taylor, "A conflict with Iran would not be like the Iraq War. It would be worse," *Washington Post*, May 14, 2019.

about 80 million, and its armed forces collectively number about 525,000, including 350,000 regular military and 125,000 IRGC forces.[82] There has been antigovernment unrest in Iran over the past 10 years, but there is no indication that there is substantial support inside Iran for a U.S. invasion to change Iran's regime.

Resource Implications of Military Operations

Without a more detailed articulation of how the military might be employed to accomplish U.S. objectives vis-a-vis Iran, and a reasonable level of confidence about how any conflict might proceed, it is difficult to assess with any precision the likely fiscal costs of a military campaign, or even just heightened presence. Still, any course of action listed in this report is likely to incur significant additional costs. Factors that might influence the level of expenditure required to conduct operations include, but are not limited to, the following:

- **The number of additional forces,** and associated equipment, deployed to the Persian Gulf or the CENTCOM theater more broadly. In particular, deploying forces and equipment from the continental United States (if required) would likely add to the costs of such an operation due to the logistical requirements of moving troops and materiel.
- **The mission set that U.S. forces are required to prosecute and its associated intensity.** For example, some options leading to an increase of the U.S. posture in the Persian Gulf for deterrence or containment purposes might require upgrading existing facilities or new construction of facilities and installations. By contrast, options that require the prosecution of combat operations would likely result in significant supplemental and/or overseas contingency operations requests, particularly if U.S. forces are involved in ground combat or postconflict stabilization operations.
- **The time required to accomplish U.S. objectives.** As demonstrated by operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the period of anticipated involvement in a contingency is a critical basis for any cost analysis. On one hand, a large stabilizing or occupying ground force to perform stabilization and reconstruction operations, for example, would likely require the expenditure of significant U.S. resources. On the other hand, a limited strike that does not result in conflict escalation would likely be relatively less expensive to the United States.

Congressional Responses

Members of Congress have responded in various ways to increased tensions with Iran and to related questions of authorization for the use of military force.

Some Members have expressed concern about the legal justification for military operations in or against Iran. On June 22, Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT) cast doubt on the notion of a "limited strike," saying that "[attacking] another country with bombs ... that's an act of warfare" and said that an attack on Iran would be, in his view, "unconstitutional."[83] Although Presidents have long asserted wide-ranging authority to unilaterally initiate the use of military force, no legislation has

[82] IISS, The Military Balance: 2019, Iran.

[83] Grace Segers, "Bernie Sanders says Trump 'helped create the crisis' in Iran," CBS News, June 22, 2019.

been enacted authorizing the use of force against Iran, and several measures include provisions specifying that such authorization is not being granted.[84] For instance, Section 9026 of Division C of H.R. 2740, as engrossed in the House on June 19, 2019, states that "Nothing in this Act may be construed as authorizing the use of force against Iran." H.R. 2500, the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2020, as reported in the House on June 19, 2019, contains a similar provision (Section 1225). On July 12, 2019, the House also passed, by a vote of 251-170, an amendment to H.R. 2500 that would prohibit funding for the use of force against Iran, with provisions clarifying that such a prohibition would not prevent the President from using necessary and appropriate force to defend U.S. allies and partners, consistent with the War Powers Resolution.

Other Members have positioned themselves as more generally supportive of broad discretion for the Administration to act. Senator Tom Cotton (R-AR) said on June 16 that "these unprovoked attacks on commercial shipping warrant a retaliatory military strike" and argued that the President had the authority to order such an attack.[85] The day before, Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC) made a similar argument, stating that "enough is enough" and called on President Trump to "be prepared to make Iran pay a heavy price by targeting their naval vessels and, if necessary, their oil refineries."[86] On June 28, 2019, the Senate rejected by a 50-40 vote an amendment (S.Amdt. 883) to the FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act that would have prohibited the use of any funds to "conduct hostilities against the Government of Iran, against the Armed Forces of Iran, or in the territory of Iran, except pursuant to an Act or joint resolution of Congress specifically authorizing such hostilities."[87]

President Trump said in a June 24 interview that he believes he has the authority to direct strikes against Iran, and said that "I do like keeping them [Congress] abreast, but I don't have to do it, legally."[88] On June 25, he tweeted that "any attack by Iran on anything American will be met with great and overwhelming force. In some areas, overwhelming will mean obliteration."[89]

At a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on April 10, 2019, Secretary of State Pompeo, when asked if the Administration considers the use of force against Iran as authorized, answered that he would defer to Administration legal experts on that question. However, he suggested that the 2001 authorization for use of military force (AUMF, P.L. 107-40) against those responsible for the September 11 terrorist attacks could potentially apply to Iran, asserting that "[Iran has] hosted Al Qaida. They have permitted Al Qaida to transit their country. [There's] no doubt there is a connection between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Al Qaida. Period. Full stop." Other analyses have characterized the relationship between Iran and Al Qaeda as "an on-again, off-

[84] Some analysts have suggested that the 1973 War Powers Resolution (P.L. 93-148), which requires the President to notify Congress when U.S. armed forces are introduced into hostilities or situations of imminent hostilities and withdraw those forces within 60 to 90 days unless Congress authorizes such action, might also represent a check on the President's authority under Article II of the Constitution. Scott Anderson, "When Does the President Think He Can Go To War With Iran?" *Lawfare*, June 24, 2019. For more, see CRS Report R42699, *The War Powers Resolution: Concepts and Practice*, by Matthew C. Weed.

[85] Nicholas Wu, "Trump says he doesn't want war, but Sen. Cotton called for 'retaliatory strikes' on Iran," *USA Today*, June 16, 2019.

[86] Lindsey Graham, Twitter, June 15, 2019. https://twitter.com/LindseyGrahamSC/status/1140063250438078466.

[87] For more on arguments around congressional attempts to limit military action via appropriations, see CRS Report R41989, *Congressional Authority to Limit Military Operations*, by Jennifer K. Elsea, Michael John Garcia, and Thomas J. Nicola.

[88] Saagar Enjeti and Jordan Fabian, "EXCLUSIVE: Trump: I do not need congressional approval to strike Iran," *The Hill*, June 24, 2019.

[89] President Trump (@realDonaldTrump), Twitter, June 25, 2019, 7:42 AM.

again marriage of convenience pockmarked by bouts of bitter acrimony."[90] Section 9025 of H.R. 2740 would repeal the 2001 AUMF within 240 days of enactment.[91]

In a June 28, 2019, letter to House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Eliot Engel, Assistant Secretary of State for Legislative Affairs Mary Elizabeth Taylor stated that "the Administration has not, to date, interpreted either [the 2001 or 2002] AUMF as authorizing military force against Iran, except as may be necessary to defend U.S. or partner forces engaged in counterterrorism operations or operations to establish a stable, democratic Iraq." In response, Chairmen Engel and Middle East Subcommittee Chairman Ted Deutch welcomed the Administration's apparent acknowledgment that "the 2001 and 2002 war authorizations do not apply to military action against Iran," but cautioned that "the Administration claims that the President could use these authorizations to attack Iran in defense of any third party he designates a partner."[92] In reviewing the letter, two analysts have suggested additional related topics for potential congressional oversight, including which groups are carrying out such counterterrorism operations, where they are doing so, and what nations or groups threaten them.[93]

Additionally, some Members seeking to prevent the Administration from pursuing military action against Iran have introduced several standalone measures prohibiting the use of funds for such operations, such as the Prevention of Unconstitutional War with Iran Act of 2019 (H.R. 2354/S. 1039) which would prevent the use of any funds for "kinetic military operations in or against Iran" except in case of an imminent threat.

Possible Issues for Congress

Given ongoing tensions with Iran, Members are likely to continue to assess and perhaps try to shape the congressional role in any decisions regarding whether to commit U.S. forces to potential hostilities. In assessing its authorities in this context, Congress might consider, among other things, the following:

- Does the President require prior authorization from Congress before initiating hostilities with Iran? If so, what actions, under what circumstances, ought to be covered by such an authorization?
- If the executive branch were to initiate and then sustain hostilities against Iran without congressional authorization, what are the implications for the preservation of Congress's role, relative to that of the executive branch, in the war powers function? How, in turn, might the disposition of the war powers issue in connection with the situation with Iran affect the broader question of Congress's status as an equal branch of government, including the preservation and use of other congressional powers and prerogatives?

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[90] Ned Price, "Why Mike Pompeo Released More bin Laden Files," *Atlantic*, November 8, 2017. See also Barbara Slavin, "Expediency and betrayal: Iran's relationship with al-Qaeda," *Al-Monitor Iran Pulse*, September 7, 2018.

[91] For background, see CRS Report R43983, *2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force: Issues Concerning Its Continued Application*, by Matthew C. Weed.

[92] Engel & Deutch Receive State Department Answer on Old War Authorizations & Iran, Committee on Foreign Affairs Press Release, June 28, 2019. While the Trump Administration has previously stated that it views the 2001 AUMF as authorizing U.S. action in defense of partner forces participating in counter-Islamic State operations in Syria, one analyst argues that the State Department's letter represents "the first time the executive branch has publicly extended this collective self-defense theory to the 2002 AUMF." Scott R. Anderson, "Parsing the State Department's Letter on the Use of Force Against Iran," *Lawfare*, July 3, 2019.

[93] Tess Bridgeman and Ryan Goodman, "Unpacking the State Dept Acknowledgment that 2001 and 2002 AUMFs Don't Authorize War Against Iran," *Just Security*, July 3, 2019.

- The Iranian government may continue to take aggressive action short of directly threatening the United States and its territories while it continues policies opposed by the United States. What might be the international legal ramifications for undertaking a retaliatory, preventive, or preemptive strikes against Iran without a U.N. Security Council mandate?

Conflict with, or increased military activity in or around, Iran could generate significant financial costs. With that in mind, Congress could consider the following:

- The potential costs of heightened U.S. operations in the CENTCOM area of operations, particularly if they lead to full-scale war and significant postconflict operations.
- The need for the United States to reconstitute its forces and capabilities, particularly in the aftermath of a major conflict.
- The impact of the costs of war and post conflict reconstruction on U.S. deficits and government spending.
- The costs of persistent military confrontation and/or a conflict in the Gulf region to the global economy.
- The extent to which regional allies, and the international community more broadly, might contribute forces or resources to a military campaign or its aftermath.

Figure 1. Iran, the Persian Gulf, and the Region

Sources: Created by CRS using data from the U.S. Department of State, ESRI, and GADM.

Appendix A. Selected Statements by U.S. and Iranian Leaders on Recent Tensions[94]

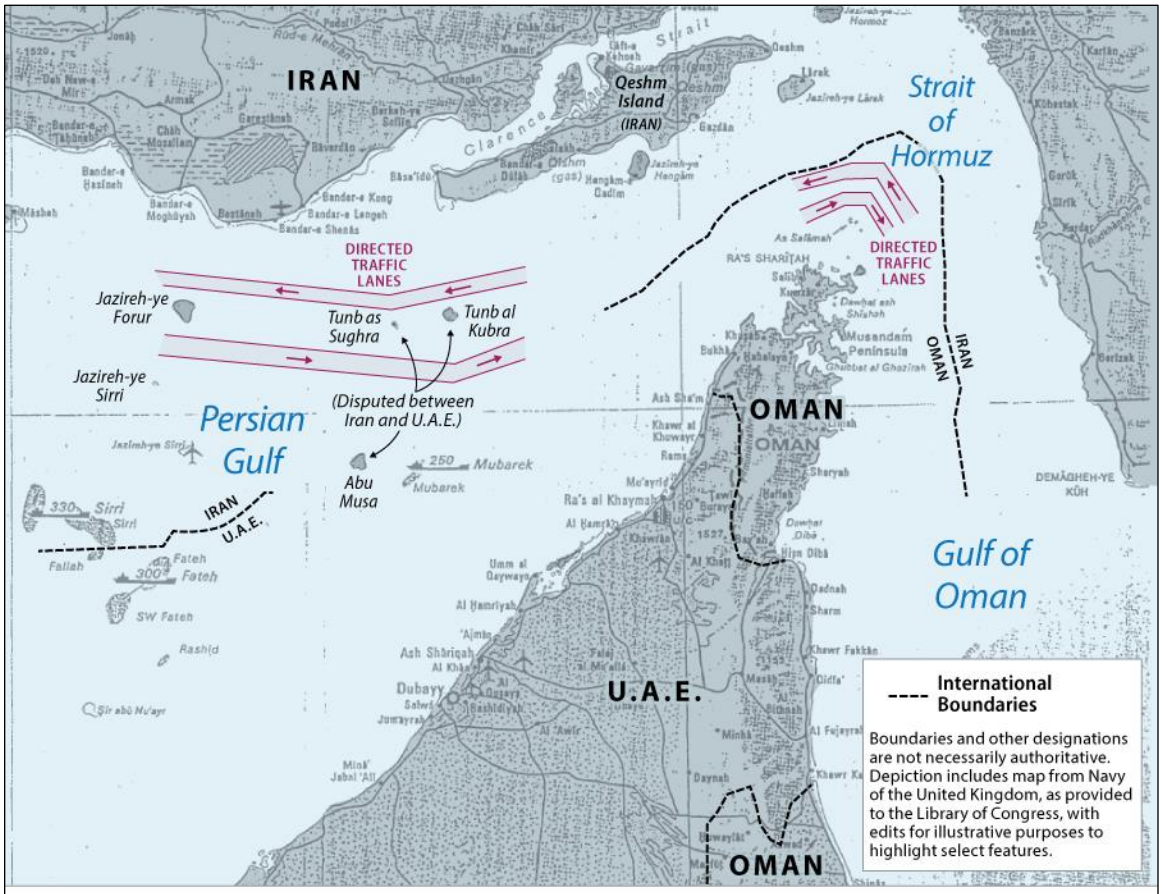
Date in 2019	U.S. Statements	Iranian Statements
April 22	Pompeo: "We have watched Iran have diminished power as a result of our campaign. Their capacity to wreak harm around the world is absolutely clearly diminished."	
April 24		FM Zarif: "It is not a crisis yet, but it is a dangerous situation. Accidents, plotted accidents are possible.... The plot is to push Iran into taking action. And then use that."
April 30		Rouhani: "America's decision that Iran's oil exports must reach zero is a wrong and mistaken decision, and we won't let this decision be executed and operational.... In future months, the Americans themselves will see that we will continue our oil exports."
May 5	National Security Advisor John Bolton statement: "In response to a number of troubling and escalatory indications and warnings, the United States is deploying the USS *Abraham Lincoln* Carrier Strike Group and a bomber task force to the U.S. Central Command region to send a clear and unmistakable message to the Iranian regime that any attack on United States interests or on those of our allies will be met with unrelenting force. The United States is not seeking war with the Iranian regime, but we are fully prepared to respond to any attack, whether by proxy, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, or regular Iranian forces."	
May 8		President Rouhani (via Twitter): "Starting today, Iran does not keep its enriched uranium and produced heavy water limited. The EU/E3+2 will face Iran's further actions if they can not fulfill their obligations within the next 60 days and secure Iran's interests. Win-Win conditions will be accepted."
May 9	President Trump: "I'd like to see [Iran] call me" to "make a deal, a fair deal"	
May 12		Rouhani: "The pressures by enemies is a war unprecedented in the history of our Islamic revolution ... but I do not despair and have great hope for the future and believe that we can move past these difficult conditions provided that we are united."

[94] The quotes in this table are from various public sources available to congressional clients from the authors upon request.

Date in 2019	U.S. Statements	Iranian Statements
May 14		Supreme Leader Khamenei: "There won't be any war. The Iranian nation has chosen the path of resistance"
May 15	President Trump (via Twitter): "I'm sure that Iran will want to talk soon."	
May 19	President Trump (via Twitter): "If Iran wants to fight, that will be the official end of Iran. Never threaten the United States again!"	
May 20	President Trump (via Twitter): "Iran will call us if and when they are ever ready. In the meantime their economy continues to collapse—very sad for the Iranian people!"	Rouhani: "Today's situation is not suitable for talks and our choice is resistance only."
May 27	President Trump: "I really believe that Iran would like to make a deal, and I think that's very smart of them, and I think that's a possibility to happen.... It has a chance to be a great country with the same leadership.... We aren't looking for regime change—I just want to make that clear. We are looking for no nuclear weapons."	
May 29	NSA Bolton: "I think it is clear these [tanker attacks] were naval mines almost certainly from Iran.... There is no doubt in anybody's mind in Washington who was responsible for this."	Supreme Leader Khamenei (via Twitter): "We won't negotiate with Americans. Because there's no use negotiating and it's even harmful. Otherwise we have no problems negotiating with others & with Europeans."
June 2	Pompeo: "We are prepared to engage in conversation with no preconditions, we are ready to sit down" with Iran.	
June 13	President Trump (via Twitter): "While I very much appreciate [Japanese Prime Minister] Abe going to Iran to meet with Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, I personally feel it is too soon to even think about making a deal. They are not ready, and neither are we!" Pompeo: "Iran is lashing out because the regime wants our successful maximum pressure campaign lifted.... Our policy remains an economic and diplomatic effort to bring Iran back to the negotiating table at the right time, to encourage a comprehensive deal that addresses the broad range of threats—threats today apparent for all the world to see—to peace and security."	Supreme Leader Khamenei (via Twitter): "We have no doubt in [PM Abe's] goodwill and seriousness; but regarding what you mentioned from U.S. president, I don't consider Trump as a person deserving to exchange messages with; I have no response for him & will not answer him."
June 17	President Trump, on alleged Iranian attacks in the Gulf: "So far, it's been very minor"	
June 20	President Trump: "I find it hard to believe [Iran shooting down a U.S. drone] was intentional.... I have a feeling that it was a mistake made by somebody that shouldn't have been doing what they did."	
June 21	President Trump: "I'm not looking for war, and if there is, it'll be obliteration like you've never seen before."	

Date in 2019	U.S. Statements	Iranian Statements
June 22	President Trump: "We're not going to have Iran have a nuclear weapon. And when they agree to that, they are going to have a wealthy country, they're going to be so happy and I'm going to be their best friend."	
June 25	President Trump (via Twitter): "Iran's very ignorant and insulting statement, put out today, only shows that they do not understand reality. Any attack by Iran on anything American will be met with great and overwhelming force. In some areas, overwhelming will mean obliteration."	President Rouhani: "This White House is suffering from intellectual disability and doesn't know what to do"
July 14		President Rouhani: "We have always believed in talks ... if they lift sanctions, end the imposed economic pressure and return to the deal, we are ready to hold talks with America today, right now and anywhere"
August 8	President Trump (via Twitter): "Iran is in serious financial trouble. They want desperately to talk to the US, but are given mixed signals from all those purporting to represents us, including President Macron of France.... I know Emmanuel means well, as do all others, but nobody speaks for the United States but the United States itself."	
August 26	President Trump: "The sanctions are absolutely hurting them horribly.... I don't want to see that. But we can't let them have a nuclear weapon.... So I think there is a really good chance we could meet [with Iran]."	President Rouhani: "If I knew that going to a meeting and visiting a person would help my country's development and resolve the problems of the people, I would not miss it.... We have to negotiate, we have to find a solution, we have to solve the problem."
August 27		Foreign Minister Zarif: "a meeting between the Iranian president and Trump is not imaginable until the U.S. returns to 5+1 and discharges [its commitments] under the JCPOA, and even then, there would be no bilateral talks."

Figure A-1. Shipping Lanes in the Strait of Hormuz and Persian Gulf



Vessels transiting to the Western part of the Persian Gulf must first enter from the Gulf of Oman, and pass through the Strait of Hormuz. The shipping lanes separate inbound and outbound traffic and keep vessels in navigable waters. The inbound lane, outbound lane, and separation lane (a median strip in between) occupy a width of 4 miles, completely in Omani territorial waters and as far from Iran's shore as safe navigation permits, but never further than 30 miles from Iran's Qeshm Island.

Upon entering the Persian Gulf, east of the Strait of Hormuz, vessels navigate a second set of directed traffic lanes keeping vessels headed in opposite directions apart, and clear of obstacles. The inbound lane, which is to the north, at one point comes within 6 miles of the Iranian mainland. The outbound lane lies to the south of the inbound lane; the separation lane directs traffic on either side of the Tunb islands.

During the Iran-Iraq war, to avoid Iranian naval forces, ships entered the Gulf through the Strait of Hormuz shipping lane and headed along the U.A.E. coast to a point 12 miles south of Abu Musa island.

Source: CRS. Based on, and includes, map by Navy of the United Kingdom.

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