

Global Security Briefing – May 2019

## **Confronting Iran: To What End?**

Paul Rogers

### **Summary**

The escalation of tensions and threats between Iran and the United States during May has increased the potential for a new war in the Middle East with potentially catastrophic social and economic consequences. This briefing seeks to clarify what interests Washington and its key regional allies, Israel and Saudi Arabia, see as worth risking such destruction. And what might be the alternatives?

### **Introduction**

In the past month there has been a marked increase in tension between the United States and Iran, coinciding with the first anniversary of President Trump's withdrawal from the multinational Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) of July 2015. The remaining state signatories to the JCPOA, China, Russia, the UK, France and Germany, as well as the EU, all remain committed to the agreement with Iran, which is intended to prevent it from developing nuclear weapons. President Trump regards it as a bad deal and has re-imposed sanctions on Iran which are already seriously affecting the country's economy.

The Iranian government has been angered by the failure of the other members of the JCPOA – especially its ostensible allies: the UK, France and Germany – to counter the US sanctions. The rhetoric coming from both sides, especially the United States, has become increasingly ill-tempered. It is a situation further complicated by the desire of Israel to see Iran's nuclear and missile ambitions severely curbed, and by the Saudi government's more general concern over the power of Iran, not least its growing influence in Arab states like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen.

ORG has explored the risks of war on a number of occasions ([Iran: Consequences of a War](#), 2006; [Military Action Against Iran: Impact and Effects](#), 2010; and [The Risk and Consequences of an Israel-Iran War](#), 2018) and all have concluded that any major confrontation would be disastrous and should be avoided. They have concentrated primarily on the nature of a conflict, the damage that could be inflicted on Iran and how that country, although the weaker party, would still be able to respond with irregular and asymmetric actions leading to a long-drawn-out conflict with regional and global consequences.

This briefing acknowledges the immediate risk of conflict but concentrates on motivations in determining longer term trends, principally of the United States but also of

Israel and Saudi Arabia. While it is the proximity of Iran that may be the main factor for Israel and Saudi Arabia, the attitude of the Trump administration does require further discussion, given that it is so different to that of the Obama era.

## Recent Developments

Despite the potentially dangerous outcomes of a war, the risk of conflict is currently substantial. The United States has moved an aircraft carrier battle group and a Marine Corps amphibious task group into the Gulf area, has deployed B-52 strategic bombers to Al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar, started what are described as “deterrence patrols” with F-15 and B-52 aircraft close to Iranian air space, and plans to deploy an additional 1,500 troops to the Middle East region. Iran has announced an increase in uranium enrichment which is allowed under the JCPOA but has increased tensions, and there have been a number of incidents that may also cause concern.

On 12 May, four oil tankers were damaged by what appears to have been small-scale sabotage near Fujairah, a UAE port on the Arabian Sea coast. A trans-Saudi pipeline was attacked by Yemeni Houthi rebels using armed drones on 14 May. And an unidentified paramilitary group fired a Katyusha rocket at a building in the heavily protected US embassy compound in Baghdad on 19 May. The significance of the first two attacks is that Fujairah is the terminal for a UAE pipeline which avoids tankers transiting the Strait of Hormuz and the trans-Saudi pipeline enables Saudi oil to be exported via the Red Sea not through the Gulf. The Baghdad attack is a salutary reminder that Iran has considerable influence in Iraq, including direct support for Shi’a militias.

## US Motivations

In these circumstances, and with tensions likely to continue, one significant problem is that there are mixed messages coming out of Washington as to the administration’s strategic goals. Is the aim to terminate any uranium enrichment, even that allowed by the JCPOA? Do US objectives extend to non-JCPOA issues like ending Iran’s capacity to deploy medium-range missiles or its support for the Houthis, Hezbollah and Hamas? Or are they really about regime termination and the transition of Iran to what is described as “a normal country”? All have been suggested by senior political figures in the administration.

More generally, although the Trump administration is particularly hard-line in relation to Iran, it is necessary to appreciate a wider US perspective. The Iranian Revolution in 1979 ended the reign of the Shah, a close ally of the United States, as well as the UK and Israel, and a regime regarded as a bulwark against the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War. The shock of that radical change, from ally to an anti-American theocracy, was bad enough, but it was made much worse by the detention of 52 American diplomats and citizens for 444 days at the height of the political turmoil of the revolution. Worse still was the humiliation of a failed military rescue bid that cost the lives of eight US personnel. For once, it had seemed that the US was militarily impotent to protect its interests in Iran.

The failure of the US political system to end the hostage crisis for over a year did serious damage to the re-election campaign of President Jimmy Carter and aided the election of Ronald Reagan. The whole experience had a lasting effect on US psychology, not far below that of the Suez Crisis on Britain, or the loss of Dien Bien Phu in the Indo-China War on France, a generation earlier.

Although some Western countries maintained diplomatic contact with Iran after 1979, relations with the United States remained very poor and there were many in the George W. Bush administration in the early 2000s who saw the intended termination of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq as a means of greatly increasing US influence in the region at the expense of Iran. As the Washington saying at the time went, “the road to Tehran runs through Baghdad” in the sense that a post-war Iraq as a strongly pro-Western state would have greatly limited Iran’s capacity to influence events in the region. Something similar was anticipated in Afghanistan, with another pro-Western government installed.

In the event, the outcome of both wars was the opposite to that expected, with Iran hugely increasing its influence in Iraq, influence that it maintains to the present day, and relieved of the hostile Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Moreover, one of the other consequences of the 9/11 attacks on the United States and the 2003 invasion of Iraq was the relative disengagement of the US military from Saudi Arabia, which feared al-Qaida’s demonization of this “occupation” of the Islamic holy lands, and its relocation across the other Gulf States, not least Qatar. This has latterly stoked Saudi fears of declining influence relative to Iran, the only regional state that can realistically rival its influence in the Muslim world.

### **Israeli Motivations**

While Israel is the region’s undoubted superpower, complete with nuclear weapons, long range missiles and stealth attack aircraft, it has been described as a state that is “impregnable in its insecurity” in the sense that it is fundamentally insecure by reason of geography and a determination to maintain an exclusive identity. Although it is protected by its own military capabilities as well as being strongly supported by the United States, it has vulnerabilities. Its defence thinking is still affected by the experience of the Iraqi Scud missile attacks in 1991 which betrayed a largely unacknowledged security weakness and it is greatly concerned by the extent and number of missiles stockpiled by Hezbollah in Lebanon, an issue exacerbated by Israel’s chastening experience in the ground war against Hezbollah in 2006.

More generally, the Israeli state has moved markedly to the political right in the past thirty years, partly through absorbing around a million migrants from the former Soviet bloc in the 1990s, with their understandable concern for complete security, but also because of the increased influence of religious parties. Behind all of this is also a basic demographic trend as Palestinian communities maintain higher birth rates to an extent that within a generation Israeli Jews will be in a minority in “greater Israel” including the occupied West Bank, Gaza and the annexed Golan Heights.

Israel sees the influence of Tehran behind almost all its security problems including Hamas, Hezbollah, missiles fired from Lebanon, Gaza, Syria or even Iran, and above all Iran's presumed nuclear weapon ambitions which it regards as its most pressing existential threat. Israel is also concerned that the very strong support offered by the Trump administration may not survive next year's US Presidential Election. Israel badly wants a seriously weakened Iran and sees a relatively short window of opportunity to achieve that.

### **Saudi Motivations**

For Saudi Arabia, like the United States, much of its concern with Iran goes back to 1979 and the revolution. As the Guardian of the Two Holy Places the House of Saud has long regarded itself as the world's leader of Islam but saw this threatened with the rise of Shi'a Iran following the fall of the Shah. It responded with the more vigorous promotion of Wahabi Islamic teachings, not least by supporting madrassas right across the Middle East and Southern Asia, not least Iran's eastern neighbours Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Yet Riyadh has witnessed with a sense of dismay sometimes verging on disbelief the growing influence of Iran across the "Shi'a Crescent" of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Iran, from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean, as well as across its southern border in Yemen. Given that north-eastern Saudi Arabia, its principal oil production zone, has a large Shi'a minority, the Saud regime feels also feels a significant domestic threat from Iran. This perceived vulnerability is also felt by Saudi Arabia's close allies Kuwait and, more critically, by Bahrain, which has a Shi'a majority population actively opposed to the Sunni monarchy. Riyadh also sees in Iran a country with many thousands of years of history, in marked contrast to its own much more recent creation. At the very least Saudi Arabia wants to see the military and economic weakening of Iran and a comprehensive diminution of its regional influence.

### **The Iranian End State**

Given the military power of the United States, especially with the co-operation of Israel and Saudi Arabia, the capacity to set back Iran's nuclear and missile programmes and to weaken its whole security apparatus would be considerable but would involve widespread targeting of direct research and development facilities, factories, transport links and even university laboratories. Whatever the claims that might be made of the use of precision-guided munitions, the reality would be considerable civilian casualties. Moreover, while much of this might be done with long-range cruise missiles launched from bombers, submarines and warships off Iran, the destruction of Iran's deeply buried facilities would likely entail lengthy over-flight missions by US bombers and, thus, far greater risk to US personnel.

In response Iran would be sure to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and to use its best endeavours to embark on an accelerated programme to produce nuclear weapons, which would no doubt ensure further US or Israeli attacks,

and might well compel Saudi Arabia to pursue a nuclear programme of its own, most likely through its close links to Pakistan.

Two ways that this nuclear response might be of less concern to the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia would be if attacks occasioned or incited regime change, as in Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011), or precipitated an Iranian civil war that paralysed the regime and distracted it from targeting its external enemies. The latter course of action is far more likely than a smooth capitulation and democratic transition of the type that US neo-conservatives once suggested could transform the Middle East. It is also deeply unappealing. In short, what might start as a short but intense military operation would very likely develop into a long-drawn-out war, as with Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.

As previous ORG reports have indicated, Iran also has many ways of retaliating quite apart from an immediate withdrawal from the NPT. This would include asymmetric attacks on facilities in Gulf States and the Strait of Hormuz, including oil and gas production, processing and exporting systems, and it would also be very likely to use proxies to target US interests within Iraq and Afghanistan and to attack Israel (from Lebanon, Syria and Gaza) and Western shipping in the Red Sea (from Yemen). Unlike targeting Iranian weapons production facilities, ballistic missile launch sites or air defences, such low-tech, widely distributed capacities would be virtually impossible for the United States to destroy.

While there are some [hawks](#) in the Trump administration who likely believe that a military strike is necessary to disarm or degrade Iran in the short-term, it is less likely that President Trump himself has the appetite for a major and expensive new war. Indeed, there is much in recent US actions that emulates the Maximum Pressure strategy deployed against North Korea in 2017, ahead of the Trump-Kim Summit in Singapore. As [highlighted](#) after that summit, Trump is a high stakes bluffer determined to extract a bilateral deal on his terms even if it is worse than the multilateral agreement it replaces. Iran has shown some signs of recognising this and preparing its own [agenda for ostensible compromise](#), perhaps on missile development, even as it highlights its military capability to respond to foreign attack.

## Conclusion

The implications of this are that the current state of tensions between Iran and the United States that has followed Mr Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA should rightly cause concern, not least because of the risk of an unplanned escalation, but it should also be seen in this wider context. Three countries, the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia, all want Iran greatly weakened, preferably with regime change to a more acceptable geopolitical outlook but that is a long-term as well as a short-term goal.

Given the dangers of any war, though, it is essential that the JCPOA system survives and it should therefore be a priority of states such as the UK and France to work to this end, even if that is opposed by the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia. That may be a big

“ask”, but it would at least be one small step in a direction away from an immediate conflict, even if it leaves the much bigger issues for the future.

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**About the Author**

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