

BRIEFING NOTE

The Iran-U.S. Trigger List

20 JUNE 2019

The International Crisis Group's Trigger List platform tracks developments on key flashpoints between Iran, the U.S. and their respective allies in the Middle East. In these weekly updates, we highlight and provide context for the previous week's major events.

Actions of Note

June 13

Two oil tankers are attacked in the Gulf of Oman.

June 14

U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo asserts that Iran was behind these attacks and a string of earlier ones.

June 17

Iran announces that it will further downgrade its Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) commitments by ramping up its enrichment of low-grade uranium unless the Europeans can alleviate the pain of U.S. sanctions.

June 18

The White House announces it will send 1,000 additional U.S. forces to the Middle East.

June 19

German Chancellor warns Iran must uphold nuclear deal or face consequences.

In Heavy Waters

On 17 June, Iran declared that its stockpile of low-enriched uranium will on 27 June exceed the 2015 nuclear deal's limit of 300kg.

WHY IT MATTERS: In May, Tehran threatened to curb its compliance with the JCPOA's enriched uranium and heavy water limits as of 7 July. It argued that U.S. sanctions have made the quid pro quo that underpins the deal – nuclear restrictions and monitoring for sanctions relief – an all quid and no quo, and that its continued adherence ends if there is no guaranteed dividend from the remaining parties to the deal on the horizon. But it is a risky move: while the Europeans are trying to set up a financial mechanism (Instex), if Iran continues to chip away at the deal – as it already has started to do by growing its stockpile – they might shift the blame from Washington to Tehran and reimpose their own sanctions on Iran. Should the so-called breakout timeline (how long it would take Iran to produce a bomb's worth of weapons-grade uranium) be reduced to significantly under a year, the U.S. also has threatened to take military action; Israel might also decide to act.

All Roads Lead Back To Tehran?

Referring to the attacks on two oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman, Secretary of State Pompeo contended on 16 June that “these were attacks by the Islamic Republic of Iran on commercial shipping, on the freedom of navigation, with the clear intent to deny transit through the Strait ... we have high confidence with respect to who conducted these attacks as well as half a dozen other attacks throughout the world over the past forty days”.

WHY IT MATTERS: If Iran was indeed behind the attacks on a total of six tankers in the past few weeks, the rocket that landed near the U.S. embassy in Iraq on 19 May, and the Taliban suicide attack in Kabul on 31 May, as Pompeo alleges, then it seems that maximum pressure and a bolstered U.S. military presence have made Iran more, not less belligerent. None of these incidents is likely to constitute a casus belli



in itself, but presented as a pattern of behaviour by an aggressive power, they could provide a rationale for the U.S. taking military action against Tehran sooner or later. Asked about whether the administration has the legal authorisation for a strike on Iran, Pompeo said on 16 June: “We always have the authorization to defend American interests ... These are attacks on fundamental, international norms, and now on American interests, and we always have the right to defend our country”.

The Gulf Widens

In an interview published on 14 June, Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) asserted that the Kingdom “does not want a war in the region, but we will not hesitate in dealing with any threat against our people, sovereignty and vital interests”.

WHY IT MATTERS: Riyadh has fully endorsed the Trump administration’s Iran policy. To the Saudi leadership, recent Huthi operations on Saudi territory, including attacks against an Aramco pipeline and Abha airport, the latter of which resulted in 26 injuries as well as the 12 May and 13 June tanker incidents, have Iran’s fingerprints all over them, and this is further chilling relations between the two regional heavyweights. For now, however, Riyadh’s preference appears to be for Washington to take care of the “Iran problem” on its behalf. To Iran this may merely be a distinction without a difference. Interestingly, the United Arab Emirates refrained from directly accusing it of having perpetrated these attacks, clearly hoping for de-escalation. Meanwhile, President Trump, who still seems very reluctant to stumble into another conflict into the region, tried to downplay the attacks on tankers as “very minor”.

Iran Briefing Notes are populated with content from International Crisis Group’s Iran-U.S. Trigger List.

This tool provides regular updates on key events and flashpoints that could lead to a direct confrontation or a dangerous regional escalation.

Explore further www.crisisgroup.org/trigger-list/iran-us-trigger-list.



USS Abraham Lincoln in the Arabian Sea

What to Watch

21 June: Financial Action Task Force plenary concludes with possibility of counter-measures against Iran

24 June: U.S./Russia/Israel National Security advisors meeting which is likely to focus heavily on Iran

27 June: Iran due to exceed JCPOA uranium cap

28 June: JCPOA Joint Commission meeting
