

BRIEFING NOTE

The Iran-U.S. Trigger List

12 SEPTEMBER 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

6 September

National Security Advisor John Bolton shares imagery of Adrian Darya 1 off Syrian coast, adds "Iran's not getting any sanctions relief until stops lying and spreading terror".

7 September

Iran detains towboat and 12 Filipino crew on suspicion of fuel smuggling.

7 September

Iranian nuclear agency briefs details of "third step" JCPOA breaches, including the activation of advanced centrifuges.

8 September

Acting International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) director general in Tehran for meetings with senior Iranian officials.

8 September

Iran's foreign ministry indicates that "the Adrian Darya oil tanker finally docked on the Mediterranean coast and unloaded its cargo".

Cont. overleaf

September Surprise

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on 9 September claimed to expose a "nuclear weapons development site" near Abadeh and called for "pressure, pressure and more pressure" against Iran.

WHY IT MATTERS: Netanyahu's disclosure, based on Iranian archives exfiltrated by Israeli intelligence last year, left some key details unaddressed: namely, what sorts of experiments Iran had conducted and when. But it underscored the recent prioritisation of Iran's nuclear activities as the most pressing issue for Israel's military and intelligence services. The timing of the announcement, just days before Israelis head to the polls on 17 September, led Netanyahu's political rivals to cry foul; his office insisted the disclosure was appropriate given parallel developments in Vienna (see below). Expect Netanyahu to throw more surprises, particularly if, as Israeli officials have reportedly concluded, the prospects for some kind of U.S.-Iran diplomatic breakthrough increase.

Once More into the Breach

A spokesperson for the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) on 7 September confirmed that "we have started lifting limitations on our research and development imposed by the [nuclear] deal", including the activation of advanced centrifuges.

WHY IT MATTERS: Iran's third step in reducing its compliance with the JCPOA furthers its staggered breaches to add urgency without emergency vis-à-vis European efforts aimed at countering the economic toll of U.S. sanctions; a 60-day clock is already running toward the next rollback. French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian on 8 September asserted that "the channels for dialogue are still open... [but] Iran must give up such actions". Meanwhile, the IAEA's Acting Director General, Cornel Feruta, on 9 September told the IAEA Board of Governors that in Tehran the previous day he "stressed the need for Iran to respond promptly to Agency questions related to the completeness of Iran's safeguards declarations". "Time", he added, "is of the essence".

8 September

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo estimates that Iran's "GDP will shrink by as much as 12 or 14 per cent this year".

9 September

Hizbollah claims to down and retrieve Israeli drone.

9 September

Airstrikes reportedly hit "Iran-backed militias" in Al-Bukamal on Syria's border with Iraq.

9 September

Israeli military says "a number of rockets were fired from Syria toward Israel ... all failing to hit Israeli territory".

9 September

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu claims that Iran "conducted experiments to develop nuclear weapons" at a secret site, Abadeh; Foreign Minister Zarif hits back saying that "the possessor of real nukes cries wolf".

10 September

Drone strike reported against Iraqi paramilitary weapons facility in Anbar province.

10 September

Secretary of State Pompeo contends Iran's "lack of cooperation with IAEA raises questions about possible undeclared nuclear material or activities".

10 September

President Donald Trump announces departure of John Bolton as U.S. national security adviser.

10 September

U.S. Treasury announces sanctions designations against "fifteen leaders, individuals and entities affiliated with terror groups", including from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Qods force and Hamas.



Spokesperson for the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOL) briefs media in Tehran on 7 September. Source: AEOL.

Signed, Sealed ... Delivered

Iran's diplomatic spokesperson on 8 September announced that the Adrian Darya 1, which was released from detention by Gibraltar last month after Tehran provided "written assurance" that the crude oil cargo would not go to a recipient blacklisted under EU sanctions, had "unloaded its cargo" at an unnamed Mediterranean destination.

WHY IT MATTERS: Following a commando operation, a seizure, a U.S. warrant, a release, a renaming, a sanctions designation, a failed financial inducement and a sighting off the Syrian coast, the 2.1m barrels aboard the Iranian tanker have apparently found a home. But while Tehran trumpeted the sale "despite all the malicious attempts" to block it, there will almost certainly be consequences: the UK – one of Iran's three European JCPOA interlocutors – on 10 September protested that "Iran has shown complete disregard for its own assurances" and plans to pursue the matter at the UN. The setback is also unlikely to deter continued U.S. efforts to disrupt Iran's evasion of its unilateral sanctions, leaving the hatch open to future rounds of intrigue on the high seas.

Exit John Bolton

President Donald Trump on 10 September announced that he had "informed John Bolton last night that his services are no longer needed at the White House", adding that "I disagreed strongly with many of his suggestions".

WHY IT MATTERS: In the hours before President Trump announced his sacking, National Security Advisor John Bolton fired off two tweets. The first contended that "two weeks from the UN General Assembly, you can be sure Iran is working overtime on deception", while the second declared that "we stand strong against regimes that sponsor terror". As the White House debates whether and how to respond to French proposals to de-escalate tensions ahead of the General Assembly, the departure of perhaps the most hardline voice on Iran inside the administration could move the needle toward U.S. acceptance of limited sanctions relief, which Trump has been considering and which Bolton opposed, in return for Iran returning to compliance with

What to Watch

12 September

Prime Minister Netanyahu in Sochi for meeting with President Putin.

16 September

President Rouhani in Ankara for Syria summit with Presidents Erdoğan and Putin.

17 September

Elections in Israel.

17-30 September

UN General Assembly, which Iran has announced Rouhani will attend; JCPOA Joint Commission meeting on the sidelines.

22 September

39th anniversary of start of Iran-Iraq war.

5 November

Iran's next announced deadline for further reducing its JCPOA commitments.

the nuclear accord and agreeing to enter into negotiations over a broader deal. Some reduction in sanctions was one of Iran's prerequisites for a meeting between Trump and President Rouhani on the margins of the General Assembly. A package deal would still need to be agreed, and Tehran appears very leery of such an encounter. But Bolton's departure could mean more flexibility on the U.S. part, and greater confidence on Iran's.

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.

MAPPING MIDDLE EAST TENSIONS

The Iran-U.S. Trigger List

An early-warning platform to monitor, analyse, and provide regular updates on the key and increasingly tense flashpoints between Iran and the U.S. or their respective allies that could lead to a direct or indirect confrontation, or generally to a dangerous regional escalation. [Read more...](#)

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