

BRIEFING NOTE

# The Iran-U.S. Trigger List

16 AUGUST 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

### 9 August

French Foreign Minister Le Drian issues statement defending French efforts to de-escalate tensions with Iran in the face of President Trump's criticism of President Macron's diplomacy.

### 10 August

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei blasts U.S. peace plan for Israel/Palestine; Secretary of State Pompeo hits back, charging "faux concern for the Palestinian people".

### 11 August

Iran reportedly detains a UK-Iran dual national.

### 12 August

Secretary Pompeo tweets countdown clock to October 2020 end of UN arms embargo on Iran, calling for more pressure on Iran.

### 12 August

Explosions hit weapons storage facility used by Iraqi militias.

*Cont. overleaf*

## Maritime Insecurities

Iran's Foreign Ministry on 9 August asserted that Israeli participation in U.S.-led maritime security operations would constitute "a blatant threat to Iran's national security".

**WHY IT MATTERS:** The Strait of Hormuz and surrounding waterways have become the central theatre for rising U.S.-Iran tensions following a string of incidents against commercial shipping. Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz on 6 August reportedly confirmed that Israel was providing intelligence in support of the U.S.-led effort to build up a maritime coalition; the UK has also joined the U.S. mission and on 12 August dispatched HMS Kent to the Gulf as the destroyer HMS Duncan rotates out. But assembling what is now being termed the "International Maritime Security Construct" is proving a challenge: Germany and France are reluctant to participate under a U.S. umbrella, while Japan is reportedly considering the dispatch of naval assets off the Yemen coast but not in the Gulf. German Chancellor Angela Merkel on 14 August indicated that putting wind into the sails of a parallel European initiative is likely to come up at the end of the month, when senior European diplomats and defence officials convene in Helsinki.

## Yemen's Civil Wars

A Huthi delegation was in Tehran for meetings with senior Iranian officials including Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

**WHY IT MATTERS:** There is little doubt that Iran has provided the Huthis with arms, funds and training and that their ties have grown during the conflict between the Huthis and the Saudi-led coalition. Yemen is not a strategic priority for Iran but the war has provided Tehran with a low-cost, high-yield opportunity to bog down its regional rivals. Still, the Huthis reject the notion that they are mere proxies, and direct diplomatic engagement between them and Saudi Arabia to de-escalate cross-border attacks would offer a more constructive path – something the U.S. can facilitate by developing its own channels to Sanaa. Mean-

## Actions of Note

**13 August**

Iranian nuclear official says Iran's enriched uranium stockpile has surpassed the JCPOA's 300kg limit by "60 to 70kg" and "is growing rapidly".

**13 August**

Supreme Leader Khamenei meets Huthi spokesperson in Tehran.

**15 August**

Gibraltar releases Iranian tanker held since 4 July on suspicion of carrying oil to Syria; Iran describes U.S. legal challenge as a "piracy attempt".

## What to Watch

**19 August**

Foreign Minister Javad Zarif travels to Finland, followed by visits to Sweden and Norway.

**24-26 August**

G7 meeting in Biarritz, France.

**28-29 August**

Informal meetings of EU defence and foreign ministers in Helsinki, Finland.

**30 August**

Next quarterly IAEA report on the JCPOA's implementation.

**6 September**

Iran's next announced deadline for reducing its JCPOA commitments if it is not satisfied with Europe's steps to mitigate the impact of U.S. sanctions.

**17-30 September**

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

while, the outbreak of clashes in Aden on 7 August underscored the diverging interests of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, and, as Crisis Group notes in a conflict alert, could spread to other parts of the south and hurt efforts to broker a deal to end the war with the Huthis.

## Bombs Over Baghdad?

Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi on 13 August visited al-Saqr military base in southern Baghdad and called for an investigation into a deadly explosion there the previous day.

**WHY IT MATTERS:** The explosion of a munitions warehouse reportedly used by Iraqi paramilitary units adds to existing challenges of the Adil Abdul-Mahdi government to insulate the country from U.S.-Iran tensions. While it is still unclear if inappropriate storage is the cause of the explosion, the incident gave rise to speculations of an Israeli airstrike. Last month, Asharq al-Awsat, a pan-Arab daily newspaper, claimed that Israel had twice struck Iran-linked targets in Iraq. That Israel has concerns over Iranian precision-guided missile transfers is not new. It has conducted hundreds of (often unacknowledged) operations in Syria to prevent the transfer of such weaponry to Hezbollah. But striking Iranian-linked assets in Iraq would constitute a significant expansion of the arena in which the Israeli-Iranian battle is being waged.



Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi inspects a destroyed warehouse at the al-Saqr military base southwest of Baghdad. Photo: Media Office of the Iraqi Prime Minister – @IraqiPMO.

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](http://www.crisisgroup.org/trigger-list/iran-us-trigger-list).