

BRIEFING NOTE

The Iran-U.S. Trigger List

29 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

24 August: UK Royal Navy announces HMS Defender, a destroyer, heading to the Gulf to participate in U.S.-led International Maritime Security Construct.

24 August: Iran sanctions U.S. think tank and its CEO; State Department responds that "Iran issued a threat ... we intend to hold Iran responsible for directly or indirectly compromising the safety of any American".

24 August: Israel confirms airstrikes south east of Damascus.

25 August: Lebanese army, Hizbollah point finger at Israel after a drone falls and a second explodes in south Beirut.

25 August: Two members of Iraqi pro-Iranian paramilitary group reportedly killed in drone strike close to Syria border.

25 August: Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif goes to France for talks with President Macron and E3 officials as G-7 underway.

Cont. overleaf

The French Connection

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif flew to Biarritz on 25 August for meetings with French President Emmanuel Macron and other European officials in parallel to the G-7 summit.

WHY IT MATTERS: French efforts over the weekend to help defuse U.S.-Iran tensions may be yielding dividends. On 26 August, President Hassan Rouhani asserted that "if I think that meeting with someone can resolve my country's problems, I will not hesitate". Later in the day President Donald Trump, at a press conference alongside his French counterpart, indicated that "I have good feelings about Iran. I have good feelings that it will work". But hints of a breakthrough quickly seemed to dim as both sides staked their ground: Rouhani declared that "if somebody just wants to take a picture with Hassan Rouhani, this is not possible unless they lift all unjust sanctions". Meanwhile, U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton insisted that "the idea that Iran would receive some tangible economic benefit merely for stopping doing things that it should not have been doing in the first place is just a nonstarter". In other words, now comes the hard part: turning the broad contours of a de-escalatory package which the U.S. and Iran have, at least, agreed to consider into a more detailed proposal before the UN General Assembly next month.

Levantine Escalations

The Israeli military on 24 August struck a purported IRGC Qods force facility in Aqraba to foil what it described as a "pending, large-scale attack of multiple killer drones". Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu asserted that the alleged operation "was an initiative of Iran, under the command of Iran, at the behest of Iran".

WHY IT MATTERS: If Israel's official acknowledgement that it had targeted Iran-linked forces in Syria was rare, the operation itself was not. In recent years, concern that Tehran was supplying its ally Hizbollah with advanced weaponry prompted hundreds of Israeli airstrikes in Syria. But in the past several days, Israel appears to have carried out a string of additional and wide-ranging attacks against Iran-backed paramilitary forces in Iraq as well as against Hizbollah and an allied Palestinian group in Lebanon,

26 August: President Rouhani declares that the “hand of power and hand of diplomacy should work together”.

26 August: President Macron expresses hope for U.S.-Iran summit “in coming weeks”; President Trump indicates that “if the circumstances were correct or right, I would certainly agree” to meet President Rouhani.

26 August: Senior Iraqi leaders assert that string of attacks against paramilitary groups “are blatant, hostile acts”; parliamentary group linked to paramilitaries claims Israel responsible.

26 August: Lebanese media report Israeli attack against Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine base in Beqaa.

27 August: President Rouhani calls for U.S. to “take the first step, which is lifting the unjust sanctions”.

27 August: Pentagon asserts that “we support Iraqi sovereignty and have repeatedly spoken out against any potential actions by external actors inciting violence in Iraq”.

28 August: U.S. sanctions what it describes as “procurement networks supporting Iran’s missile proliferation programs”.

which Israel has not claimed but is widely suspected to have executed. In a 25 August speech, Hizbollah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah warned that “if we do not respond to the Zionist attack on Dahiye [the group’s south Beirut stronghold], Israel will repeat the same model used to attack the Hashd al-Shaabi [Iraqi paramilitary] sites in Iraq”. Thus while past Israeli operations in Syria in most cases did not trigger a response from Hizbollah or Iran, their expanded scope risks involving a broader array of actors who may prove difficult to restrain.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speaking alongside IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi on 25 August. Source: Israel Government Press Office.

What to Watch

30 August

Next quarterly report of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on the JCPOA’s implementation.

31 August

Foreign Minister Zarif expected to brief parliament on diplomatic efforts.

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.

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.