

BRIEFING NOTE

# The Iran-U.S. Trigger List

19 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.

## Up in Smoke

A twin attack on Saudi Arabia's Aramco oil company shook the region and once again brought the spectre of a regional war to the fore.

**WHY IT MATTERS:** Iran has rejected U.S. claims that it carried out the 14 September strikes against Saudi energy facilities from its soil, with President Hassan Rouhani on 16 September contending that "the Yemeni people have to respond to ... many acts of aggression" from the Saudi-led, U.S.-backed coalition. But if Iran's responsibility is conclusively determined, and especially if, as U.S. officials are suggesting, the operation was launched from Iranian territory, it would constitute a substantial escalation against a regional rival and major departure from Tehran's standard practice of using local allies to keep a degree of plausible deniability. President Trump on 15 September warned that the U.S. was "locked and loaded" to respond, but subsequently also noted that "I'm not looking to get into [a] new conflict". Trump has also called on the U.S. Treasury Department to "substantially increase" sanctions on Iran; it remains to be seen whether this is a complement to, or in lieu of, a military response. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has invited UN experts to analyse debris from the attack, and on 18 September assessed that while the operation was "unquestionably sponsored by Iran", its precise origin was still to be determined. As Crisis Group has previously argued, the current cycle of U.S. "maximum pressure" and Iranian retaliation on the regional and nuclear fronts is a recipe for growing volatility and a disastrous regional conflagration. Retaliatory strikes by the U.S. would likely prompt a wider response from Iran, as it has threatened. De-escalating tensions along the lines proposed by France remains the best path forward, even as the stakes grow higher and the odds longer.

## Prisoners' Dilemma

The Iranian judiciary on 17 September affirmed that three Australian citizens "have been detained in two cases and indictments have been issued for both".

**WHY IT MATTERS:** On 12 September, the Australian government confirmed that "three Australians are being held in prison in Iran"; media reports identified them as Kylie Moore-Gilbert, Jolie King and Mark Firkin. Moore-Gilbert, a Melbourne University lecturer, has been indicted on espionage charges while King and Firkin are alleged to have photographed "military and banned zones". The trio are the latest cases of foreign and dual nationals whom Iran has disclosed to have detained, including citizens of the U.S., UK and France. Iranian diplomats typically contend that these cases come under the purview of the judiciary, but, as in the case of Foreign Minister Javad Zarif's April 2019 offer of a U.S.-Iran prisoner swap, acknowledge that the rule of Iranian law may be amenable to diplomatic exigencies. Any steps by Tehran to release foreign and dual nationals would help de-escalate tensions between Iran and Western states.

# Actions of Note

## 11 September

President Hassan Rouhani tells President Emmanuel Macron that “negotiating with the U.S. under sanctions is pointless”, adds that Iran’s JCPOA breaches are reversible.

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## 12 September

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reports “very serious upsurge” in attempted Iranian attacks from Syria.

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## 14 September

Riyadh confirms significant attacks against two Saudi Aramco sites, halving its oil production. Huthi rebels in Yemen claim responsibility; U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo contends “Iran has now launched an unprecedented attack on the world’s energy supply”.

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## 15 September

President Donald Trump says U.S. “locked and loaded” following Aramco attack, pending Saudi assessment of responsibility, hinting Iran was behind it.

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## 15 September

Chairman of INSTEX, Michael Bock, begins visit to Iran for meetings with senior trade and finance officials.

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## 16 September

Saudi government says “weapons used in the [Aramco] attack were Iranian weapons”.

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## 16 September

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps detains ship and crew of 11 allegedly smuggling Iranian fuel to the United Arab Emirates.

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## 16 September

President Rouhani calls for U.S. withdrawal from Syria during summit with Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin.

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## 16 September

Taliban delegation and Iranian officials meet in Tehran.

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## 16 September

Iran sends U.S. letter through the Swiss disavowing any role in Aramco attack and warning of reprisal for “any moves”.

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## 17 September

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei asserts that if U.S. rejoins the nuclear deal, Washington can attend P5+1 talks on the JCPOA; otherwise, there will be no negotiation at any level.

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## 17 September

Huthis warn Saudi Arabia that “our long hand can reach wherever we want”.

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## 18 September

President Trump tells U.S. Treasury Department “to substantially increase” Iran sanctions.

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## 18 September

Saudi Arabia signs on to U.S.-led International Maritime Security Construct.

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## 18 September

Saudi-led coalition assesses that the Aramco attack “originated from the north and undoubtedly was supported by Iran”.

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## 18 September

In Jeddah, Secretary Pompeo declares Aramco strike “was an Iranian attack”, adds “we are working to build out a coalition to develop a plan to deter them”.

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# What to Watch

## 22 September

Iran marks Sacred Defence Week on 39th anniversary of start of Iran-Iraq war.

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## 24 September

President Trump addresses the UN General Assembly.

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## 25 September

President Rouhani addresses the UN General Assembly.

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## 5 November

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

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These updates 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.