

BRIEFING NOTE

The Iran-U.S. Trigger List

09 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

4 August

The IRGC announces 31 July detention of an Iraqi tanker near Farsi Island allegedly smuggling fuel.

5 August

Saudi Arabia downs Huthi drones allegedly aimed at civilian airports.

5 August

UK signs on to U.S. maritime security initiative.

5 August

U.S. announces Warsaw Process working groups to be held in October-November 2019.

6 August

President Rouhani asserts that "if the U.S. really wants to negotiate, it must lift all sanctions before any action is taken".

7 August

Two IRGC members killed in skirmish with "terrorist separatists" in north-western Iran.

Cont. overleaf

The Funding Fallacy

Israel's UN envoy on 5 August cited reports of increased Iranian financial support to Hamas to the tune of \$30 million per month; previous Israeli estimates put Iran's annual support to Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad at around \$120 million per year.

WHY IT MATTERS: A core supposition of the "maximum pressure" strategy is that the economic impact of sanctions will drive Iran into changing its behaviour. As Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reiterated in a 6 August USA Today op-ed, an aim of U.S. policy is "to deprive the Iranian regime of the money it needs to support its destabilising activities". While Iran's overall resources have declined, historical precedent demonstrates – and if true, the alleged increase to Hamas would underscore – that Tehran conducts its policies based on threats and opportunities more than on the health or depletion of its treasury. As the USA Today's editors put it on the same day, "Trump's erratic Iran policy has allowed the clerics to scapegoat Washington, provoked Tehran's aggressive pushback, established that America won't keep its word, and potentially reignited a nuclear crisis that had been quelled at least into the next decade. If that's winning, we'd hate to see what losing looks like".



President Rouhani visits a defence industry ceremony, 15 April 2017., <http://president.ir/>

Actions of Note

8 August

Incoming head of INSTEX withdraws from the post.

8 August

President Trump tweets that the Iranians “want desperately to talk to the U.S., but are given mixed signals from all those purporting to represent us... nobody speaks for the U.S. but the U.S. itself”.

What to Watch

24-26 August

G7 meeting in Biarritz, France.

30 August

G7 meeting in Biarritz, France.

6 September

Next quarterly IAEA report on the JCPOA's implementation.

17-30 September

UN General Assembly; general debate begins on 24th.

Bolstering the Arsenal

A senior Iranian military official on 5 August indicated that “our missile power... deters any regional and extra-regional acts of aggression, and the range of the missiles is also increasing constantly”.

WHY IT MATTERS: Iran has inferior conventional military capabilities compared with its neighbours, let alone the U.S.; ballistic missiles provide what Iran claims to be its sole reliable conventional military deterrent. Occasional tests, the most recent of which reportedly took place in late July, have been a point of contention not just between Iran and the U.S. but between Iran and some European governments as well. Iran has generally rebuffed recent attempts to put its missile program on the negotiating table, and its potential acquisition or export of conventional arms could become a growing point of contention as a UN Security Council-imposed embargo should, under the terms of the JCPOA, be lifted in October 2020. At that point, as President Rouhani noted on 1 August, “we can start buying or selling any kinds of weapons that we want”.

Undiplomatic Immunity

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif on 5 August claimed that the U.S. blacklisted him after he turned down a meeting with President Trump.

WHY IT MATTERS: Earlier this year, Zarif temporarily resigned after not receiving an invitation from the IRGC to attend meetings between senior Iranian officials and Bashar al-Assad in Tehran; now his apparent refusal to accept one in Washington has seen the Islamic Republic's political and military elite close ranks behind the country's oft-embattled top diplomat. The Revolutionary Guards on 1 August issued a statement thanking Zarif for his services, and on 5 August Qods force commander Qassem Soleimani paid a visit to the foreign ministry with warm words for the “chief of the country's foreign policy”. Iranian hardliners have long criticised the Rouhani administration, and Zarif in particular, over the JCPOA and engagement with Europe. The designation may briefly dampen this, but it is likely to pick up again in the run-up to Iran's February 2020 parliamentary elections.

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.