



Crisis in the Persian Gulf

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How the crisis unfolded

Recently, an article published in the New York Times (NYT), claimed that a briefing was given to top national security advisors of the Trump administration who were considering the deployment of 120,000 troops in the Middle East in case Iran attacked American or allied troops in the region¹. The publication of this article raised serious concerns that the United States (U.S.) was about to start another war. Soon thereafter, the withdrawal of non-essential staff from the U.S. embassy in Iraq and the subsequent decision to send 1,500 extra troops² further raised concerns that an Iranian attack or U.S. military action could be imminent³.

When reporters approached President Trump regarding the briefing published in the NYT, he initially denied it and claimed it was “fake news”⁴, and even went on to say that he hoped he could strike out a deal if the Iranians were willing to talk. This shows a degree of ambiguity in the Trump administration regarding its foreign policy. Though President Trump may not want war with Iran, his closest advisors seem to have a different view⁵.

National Security Advisor John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo have given public statements about regime change in Iran, even at the risk of a military conflict⁶.

¹ Schmitt, E. and Barnes, J. (2019). White House Reviews Military Plans Against Iran, in Echoes of Iraq War. [online] Nytimes.com. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/13/world/middleeast/us-military-plans-iran.html> [Accessed 21 May 2019].

² BBC News. (2019). US to send 1,500 troops to Middle East. [online] Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-48404141> [Accessed 26 May 2019].

³ Wong, E. (2019). U.S. Orders Partial Evacuation of Embassy in Baghdad. [online] Nytimes.com. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/15/us/politics/us-iraq-embassy-evacuation.html> [Accessed 21 May 2019].

⁴ Vandiver, J. (2019). Trump: Report of US plans calling for up to 120,000 troops if conflict begins with Iran is 'fake news'. [online] Stars and Stripes. Available at: <https://www.stripes.com/news/trump-report-of-us-plans-calling-for-up-to-120-000-troops-if-conflict-begins-with-iran-is-fake-news-1.580921> [Accessed 21 May 2019].

⁵ Mecklin, J. (2019). War and Peace: Bolton and Trump tell a confused story about possible military action against Iran - Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. [online] Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. Available at: <https://thebulletin.org/2019/05/war-and-peace-bolton-and-trump-tell-a-confused-story-about-possible-military-action-against-iran/> [Accessed 21 May 2019].

⁶ Spinelli, D. (2019). John Bolton has wanted war with Iran since before you were born. [online] Mother Jones. Available at: <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2019/05/john-bolton-has-wanted-war-with-iran-since-before-you-were-born/> [Accessed 21 May 2019].

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Iran's growing sphere of influence: the real challenge to U.S. influence in the Middle East

There is growing concern in the West that Iran could increase its influence in the region. This is perceived as a risk to U.S. pre-eminence in the Middle East. In the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, the newly formed Iraqi military which was predominantly Shia, was unable to counter threats posed by Sunni terrorist organizations such as the 'Islamic State' (ISIS) and Al-Nusra (Al-Qaeda in Iraq and Syria). The collapse of the Iraqi military provided an opportunity for countries such as Iran to step in. Iraqi government, at least tacitly, requested for Iran's support in combating ISIS and Al-Nusra⁷. Now, as of 2019, ISIS and Al-Nusra are almost defeated, and Iran is a vital stakeholder in Iraq's stability. Furthermore, Iranian proxies in Iraq are assessed to be loyal to the Iranian government. This is a source of disquiet for the US.

Syria is another country where Iranian support may have helped the ruling Assad government. Syrian President Bashar-Al-Assad's position is now fully secure, thanks to the intervention of the Russians and Iranians. Iran's influence through its proxies in Syria is also a sore point for U.S. and Israel. According to Western and Israeli claims, Iran's influence in Syria potentially provides it a staging ground for attacks inside Israel if the need arises⁸. So far, Iran has never attacked any country and has repeatedly disavowed aggression. The same cannot be said about the West and Israel.

Then there is Lebanon, which is the birthplace of the indigenous militant group, Hezbollah.

Hezbollah was founded in the early 1980's and soon thereafter, it managed to unite disparate Shia groups under one umbrella.

Western sources claim that Hezbollah is proxy for Iran and plays an important role for their on-going competition for influence in the Middle East. For the U.S. and Israel, Iran's growing influence in the region is a serious threat, and they are fearful of the possibility that Iran could establish a corridor to the Mediterranean Sea via Iraq, Syria and Lebanon⁹.

⁷ Nada, G. and Rowan, M. (2018). Part 2: Pro-Iran Militias in Iraq. [online] Iranprimer.usip.org. Available at: <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2018/apr/26/part-2-pro-iran-militias-iraq> [Accessed 21 May 2019].

⁸ Gross, J. (2019). IDF: Iranian troops fired missile at Israel as a warning against future attacks. [online] Timesofisrael.com. Available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-iranian-troops-fired-missile-at-israel-as-a-warning-against-future-attacks/> [Accessed 21 May 2019].

⁹ Mojon, J. (2018). US pullout strengthens Iran 'land bridge' to the Mediterranean. [online] Timesofisrael.com. Available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-pullout-strengthens-iran-land-bridge-to-the-mediterranean/> [Accessed 21 May 2019].

The Iranian perspective

For the Iranians, negotiation and dialogue with the West has proved pointless, and recent U.S. actions reaffirms their stance about the U.S. First, the U.S. unilaterally withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which was a multi-lateral agreement designed to halt Iran's nuclear programme. In return, Iran was to get relief from the severe economic sanctions imposed on it.

Second, even though European signatories of the JCPOA are insisting Iran remain and abide by the agreement, recent unilateral-sanctions imposed by the U.S. have made it extremely difficult for foreign companies to invest and trade in Iran. Therefore, Iran no longer has any incentive to follow the discipline set by the JCPOA.

Third, and most importantly, the U.S. has designated the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization, making it the first time in history where the U.S. has proscribed an official entity of a recognized government as a terrorist organization. The designation of terrorist organizations is supposed to be apolitical and preventive. But the designation of the IRGC seems to be political and against the customs of International Law¹⁰.

What options does Iran have?

Conventionally, Iran does not stand a chance against the mighty U.S. military. But Iran may have asymmetrical options.

These could possibly occur in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon against U.S., Israeli, and Saudi interests¹¹. Second, we may see incidents of espionage and assassinations in the Middle East by all sides¹².

Third, Iran may influence the Shia population in Arab countries such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, causing internal friction¹³.

Fourth, in Afghanistan, the Iranians have allegedly supported the Taliban, because backing the Taliban is a relatively cost-free and deniable way to leverage its interests. If pushed to the wall, Iran could consider supply of weapons with profound possible consequences for American interests in Afghanistan¹⁴. This could affect the ongoing peace talks there.

Additionally, war could hazard delays or a halt to shipping traffic in the Strait of Hormuz. Iran's strategic location allows it operational control over one of the world's most vital energy choke point. If Iran disrupts the shipping and trade lines passing through the Strait of Hormuz, oil prices will spike to an unprecedented level, which can cause a global economic crisis¹⁵. However, the closure of the Strait of Hormuz would be a final resort, because of its effect on world economy.

¹⁰ Benjamin, D. and M. Blazakis, J. (2019). Why Trump's Latest Move Against Iran Was Pointless—and Dangerous. [online] Time.com. Available at: <http://time.com/5566817/iran-terrorist-designation-irgc-trump/> [Accessed 21 May 2019].

¹¹ Massaro, C. (2019). US has the military might, but Iran will lean on proxies and militias if they get dragged into conflict. [online] Fox News. Available at: <https://www.foxnews.com/world/us-military-might-iran-proxies-militias-conflict> [Accessed 21 May 2019].

¹² The Iran Observer. (2017). Beware Iranian Sleeper Cells - The Iran Observer. [online] Available at: <http://www.iranobserver.org/beware-iranian-sleeper-cells/> [Accessed 21 May 2019].

¹³ Ostovar, A. (2016). Sectarian Dilemmas in Iranian Foreign Policy: When Strategy and Identity Politics Collide. [online] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/11/30/sectarian-dilemmas-in-iranian-foreign-policy-when-strategy-and-identity-politics-collide-pub-66288> [Accessed 21 May 2019].

¹⁴ Kugelman, M. (2018). Shutting Out Iran Will Make the Afghan War Even Deadlier. [online] Foreign Policy. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/16/shutting-out-iran-will-make-the-afghan-war-even-deadlier/> [Accessed 22 May 2019].

¹⁵ Chang, E. (2019). The Real Iran Military Threat: Close the Strait of Hormuz (Watch Oil Prices Jump). [online] The National Interest. Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/real-iran-military-threat-close-strait-hormuz-watch-oil-prices-jump-57862> [Accessed 21 May 2019].

Can military action bring a change in Iranian policies or its governance dispensation?

If U.S. and its allies believe that military action would change Iranian policies or even the regime there, caution is necessary. Despite internal differences, any attack by a foreign force will only serve to unite the Iranians under its government. The Iran-Iraq war offers an example where the whole population set aside their differences to fight a common enemy. The same will happen if the U.S. were to invade Iran.

If a prolonged engagement occurs, the U.S. may be required to send ground forces, risking casualties and a possible backlash at home. Iran is three times the size of Iraq, a population of more than 80 million, and has a sizeable military. Its difficult terrain is a logistical challenge. Therefore, regime change is a risky goal.

The Israeli and Saudi nexus

Both Israel and Saudi Arabia want to contain Iran's influence in the Middle East, and these shared goals and policy objectives have allowed both countries to form an unofficial alliance. As mentioned earlier, Israel considers Iran's influence a threat to its interests and possible expansion¹⁶. Most recently, when the U.S. designated the IRGC as a terrorist organization, personnel from the IRGC Qudz force present in Syria, were accused of launching rockets inside Israel's territory¹⁷. Therefore, Israel will never allow Iran to establish a permanent presence in Syria or Iraq, and will try to push them out by any means necessary.

As for Saudi Arabia, it considers Iran a threat because Iran poses a challenge to the Saudi Royal household, and is fearful of Iran's ambitions to become a regional power in the Middle East. Additionally, Saudi Arabia fears that Iranian links with Shia populations inside its territory could de-stabilize the ruling monarchs grip on power¹⁸.

Therefore, from a realist perspective, Israel and Saudi Arabia will prefer that a conflict starts between the U.S. and Iran¹⁹, even though they are stating the exact opposite in public²⁰.

Impact on Pakistan if war breaks out

If war breaks out between Iran, the U.S., and its allies, the closure of the Strait of Hormuz is possible. This closure could cause oil prices to skyrocket to an unprecedented level and cause serious complications for the Pakistani economy.

¹⁶ Kaye, D., Nader, A. and Roshan, P. (2011). Israel and Iran A Dangerous Rivalry. [online] Rand.org. Available at: https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG1143.pdf [Accessed 21 May 2019].

¹⁷ Gross, J. (2019). IDF: Iranian troops fired missile at Israel as a warning against future attacks. [online] Timesofisrael.com. Available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-iranian-troops-fired-missile-at-israel-as-a-warning-against-future-attacks/> [Accessed 21 May 2019].

¹⁸ Marcus, J. (2017). Why Saudi Arabia and Iran are bitter rivals. [online] BBC News. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42008809> [Accessed 21 May 2019].

¹⁹ Luce, D. (2019). From Bolton to Bibi, Trump faces calls for confronting Iran. [online] NBC News. Available at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/israel-saudi-arabia-trump-aides-want-confrontation-iran-will-trump-n1005581> [Accessed 21 May 2019].

²⁰ Rashad, M. and Kalin, S. (2019). Saudi Arabia says seeking to avert war, ball in Iran's court. [online] REUTERS. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/saudi-oil-emirates-tanker/saudi-arabia-says-seeking-to-avert-war-ball-in-irans-court-idUSL5N22V00H> [Accessed 21 May 2019].

But the most serious problem for Pakistan is that sectarian friction may arise in the country between Shias and Sunnis. Saudi Arabia has allegedly deep links with religious groups in Pakistan. Some of them may purportedly have targeted Shia communities in Pakistan²¹. On the other hand, Shia militant groups have also been active in Pakistan. For example, the Iranian-backed Shia militia, Liwa Zaynabiyoun (followers of Zaynab Brigade) in Syria, managed to recruit over a thousand Shiites from Pakistan, primarily from the Shia Turi tribe of Khurram tribal agency and the ethnic Hazaras from Quetta²². If war breaks out, and the Saudis decide to join the coalition against Iran, then proxy groups from both sides in Pakistan could start fighting each other. If it were to happen, it could have a destabilizing effect.

On the diplomatic front, it will be extremely challenging for Pakistan to maintain a neutral position. Pakistan has historically been close to Saudi Arabia since the Iranian revolution. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has recently been generous in its financial support to Pakistan²³. If war breaks out, Saudi Arabia may expect Pakistan to provide support. In the recent past, Pakistan has pledged military backing if Saudi Arabia's territorial integrity is threatened²⁴. This indeed would put pressure on the Pakistani government to take sides and will require a well-thought out and sophisticated diplomatic endeavor.

Diplomacy with Iran

As for Pakistan's relationship with Iran, it still continues to remain cordial. The recent visit of Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif to Islamabad, and his meeting with Prime Minister Imran Khan, was extremely positive and both governments reaffirmed the desire to avoid conflict and maintain peace in the region²⁵. Prime Minister Khan expressed his concern about escalating tensions in the Persian Gulf and reiterated his stance that war is not a solution to any problem. Meanwhile, Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Qamar Javed Bajwa's recent statement that "Pakistan is going through an evolutionary process in its journey to enduring peace and stability..."²⁶ demonstrates that both the civilian and military leadership in Pakistan are in no mood for conflict and would prefer to have peace with all its neighbours. They do not wish to have fragile borders, in addition to what is happening on the Eastern and Western borders already. In fact, Pakistan PM has reiterated his country's vision for peace and economic progress in the region²⁷.

Conclusion

Pakistan must make a concerted effort to reinitiate dialogue and negotiations with all parties involved, so that war is avoided at all costs. The meeting between Prime Minister Imran Khan and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif in Islamabad indicates a step in the right direction. Moreover, statements by COAS General Qamar Bajwa also reiterate that both the civilian and military leadership are in no mood to see a conflict at its doorstep.

²¹ Jaffrelot, C. (2017). The Saudi Connection. [online] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/07/05/saudi-connection-pub-71444> [Accessed 21 May 2019].

²² Jaffrelot, C. (2017). The Saudi Connection. [online] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/07/05/saudi-connection-pub-71444> [Accessed 21 May 2019].

²³ The Express Tribune. (2019). Saudi support | The Express Tribune. [online] Available at: <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1979339/6-saudi-support/> [Accessed 26 May 2019].

²⁴ The Express Tribune. (2016). Pakistan will stand by Saudi Arabia if territorial integrity threatened: PM Nawaz | The Express Tribune. [online] Available at: <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1025013/saudi-defence-minister-to-arrive-in-islamabad-today/> [Accessed 26 May 2019].

²⁵ U.S. (2019). Pakistan PM warns against war in region amid Iran tensions with... [online] Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-iran/pakistan-pm-warns-against-war-in-region-amid-iran-tensions-with-us-saudi-idUSKCN1SV06L> [Accessed 26 May 2019].

²⁶ The Express Tribune. (2019). Pakistan on path to enduring peace: COAS | The Express Tribune. [online] Available at: <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1979104/1-pakistan-path-enduring-peace-stability-coas/> [Accessed 26 May 2019].

²⁷ The Hindu, Pakistan PM Imran Khan calls up PM Modi, expresses desire to work together, 27 May 2019,

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/pakistan-pm-imran-khan-calls-up-pm-modi-expresses-desire-to-work-together/article27253806.ece>

Nevertheless, the diplomatic challenges are daunting and call for a sophisticated approach. In a worst-case scenario, if war does break out, Pakistan's diplomatic mettle would be tested. It may need to play the role of mediator between opposing parties and avoid direct involvement in the conflict. Pakistan's financial dependence on the Saudis and earlier avowed assurances of protecting their territorial integrity is a consideration.

On the international front Pakistan should engage with European countries such as United Kingdom, France and Germany who have their own reservations regarding a military conflict with Iran. Other world powers such as Russia and China are also important stakeholders as Iran provides energy resources to both countries. They will prefer not to have their energy supplies disrupted. It would require a combined diplomatic effort to remind the U.S. that war in the region is not an option.

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