



## **The US-Iran Face-Off**

**Yossef Bodansky**

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### **Executive Summary**

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- \* The US deployment and warnings of May 5 stunned Tehran. Hence, Tehran resolved to reduce the direct confrontation with the US while preparing quietly for the forthcoming struggle for the greater Middle East.
- \* Meanwhile, Iran escalates and expedites the preparations for regional confrontation with the Gulf States, both in al-Jazira and in the Arabian Peninsula, as well as with Israel, in accordance with the long-term doctrine adopted back in early 2019. In early April, Tehran concluded that time was ripe to move to the next phase of the campaign to control the greater Middle East.
- \* In early May, it is back to the drawing board in Tehran. There is no question of Iran stopping its regional ascent in the face of the US-Israeli opposition. Yet, Tehran is apprehensive about the impact of the economic crisis on the Iranian population and the specter of minorities' instability.

### **About ISPSW**

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## Analysis

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On 5 May, US National Security Adviser John Bolton announced that the US was deploying the USS Abraham Lincoln Carrier Strike Group and a bomber task force (starting with four B-52Hs) to the Persian Gulf area. The deployment is in reaction to “a number of troubling and escalatory indications and warnings,” he explained, and is intended to send a message that the US will use “unrelenting force” in response to “any attack” on US or allied forces. “The United States is not seeking war with the Iranian regime, but we are fully prepared to respond to any attack, whether by proxy, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps or regular Iranian forces,” Bolton stated.

One reason for the deployment was intelligence warnings passed, in late April, by a team of intelligence experts led by Israel’s National Security Adviser Meir Ben Shabbat on a special visit to Washington. The Mossad acquired sufficient amounts of warning data to warrant raising the alarm. “It is still unclear to us what the Iranians are trying to do and how they are planning to do it, but it is clear to us that the Iranian temperature is on the rise as a result of the growing US pressure campaign against them, and they are considering retaliating against US interests in the Gulf,” a senior Israeli official told Barak Ravid of Israel’s Channel 13 News.

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The US deployment and warnings stunned Tehran. The uppermost Mullahs believed that, US rhetoric notwithstanding, the US was reticent to confront Iran militarily. This perception was defined in late-April when Tehran learned about a closed-door meeting Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had with 15 Iranian-American community leaders at the Renaissance Dallas Hotel in Dallas, Texas, back in mid-April. Pompeo told them that the US would not confront Iran directly. He acknowledged that there is “no such thing as a moderate inside the Iranian regime anywhere today,” and that Washington’s “best interest is a non-revolutionary set of leaders leading Iran.” However, the US remains “careful not to use the language of regime change.” Pompeo stated that the Trump Administration is “not going to do a military exercise inside Iran” in order to expedite a regime change, and in principle “would not intervene militarily in Iran.” A detailed report of the meeting made its way to Tehran very quickly.

Hence, Tehran resolved to reduce the direct confrontation with the US while preparing quietly for the forthcoming struggle for the greater Middle East. Iranian declaratory policy reflected the decision.

On 22 April, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani urged US President Donald Trump to seek peace with Iran rather than confrontation. He recommended that the US reassess its regional policy because it has no real allies. “The regional states are either afraid of the US or do not trust it.” Hence, he urged the US to refrain from confronting Iran in the name of helping ostensibly threatened allies. “Mr. Trump! Do not twist the lion’s tail because you will regret. You are not able to provoke the Iranian nation against Iran’s security and interests.”

Instead, the US should pursue peace with the region’s leading power - Iran - if only because war would be futile. “The Americans should come to realize this point well that peace with Iran would be the mother of all peaces and war with Iran would be the mother of all wars. We do not quiver from threats and we have a deterrent power. Today our internal unity is more than before, threats make us more coherent and we will definitely beat the US,” Rouhani said. “We would sustain costs, but will earn greater interests.”



On 25 April, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif (then visiting the UN in New York) repeated the invitation for the US to talk to Iran over the regional posture because the US “must dialogue with those who defend it” - namely, Iran. Significantly, Zarif doubted that Trump wants war with Iran. “I don’t think he wants war,” Zarif observed. “But that doesn’t exclude him [from] being basically lured into one. ... Those who have designed the policies that are being pursued do not simply want a negotiated solution. But let me make it clear that Iran is not seeking confrontation, but will not escape defending itself.” Zarif drew the line on Iran’s ability to export oil. “If the United States takes the crazy measure of trying to prevent us from doing that, then it should be prepared for the consequences,” Zarif warned.

This cautious approach was manifested in the quick evolution of Tehran’s declaratory policy vis-a-vis the Strait of Hormuz in the last week of April.

On 22 April, after the US threatened to prevent Iran from exporting oil by tankers, IRGC Navy Commander Rear Admiral Alireza Tangsiri asserted Iran’s policy and threatened to block the Strait of Hormuz. “According to international law, the Strait of Hormuz is a marine passageway and if we are barred from using it, we will shut it down. In case of any threat, we will have not even an iota of doubt to protect and defend the Iranian waters. We will defend our prestige and embark on reciprocal acts when it comes to defending Iran’s right,” Tangsiri stated.

Tehran moved quickly to mollify the message. On 28 April, the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, Major General Mohammad Hossein Bagheri, elaborated on Tehran’s policy. “Officials have several times said that the Islamic Republic of Iran’s Armed Forces establish security in the Strait of Hormuz and we want its security and want it open,” he stated. “As oil and goods of other countries are passing through the Strait, our oil and goods should also pass through the Strait and our officials have said that we will certainly confront anyone who wants to foment insecurity in the Strait of Hormuz.” The key is reciprocity. “If our oil fails to go through the Strait, others’ crude will not either,” Bagheri warned. Blocking the Strait of Hormuz will be Iran’s last resort. “We do not intend to close the Strait of Hormuz unless enemies intensify their hostility to such extents that we do not find any other way, and we are able to do that and enemies know it.” Bagheri further explained that the US failed to mobilize the regional states to confront Iran directly. Hence, Bagheri concluded, “since [the US] enemy is disappointed from military aggression, it has resorted to imposing economic sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran.”

As well, Tehran broadcasted confidence that there was no imminent crisis. In late April, military delegations led by senior commanders traveled overseas. Navy Commander Rear-Admiral Hossein Khanzadi led a delegation to Beijing, and Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Amir Hatami to Moscow. Hatami discussed the expansion of military cooperation and inviting the Russians to joint naval maneuvers in the mouth of the Persian Gulf. “Based on negotiations with the Russian Navy, the force will dispatch a fleet to the southern regions of Iran this year,” Khanzadi announced upon his return from China. No date was set. The maneuvers will take place in an area with frequent presence of the US Navy.

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Meanwhile, Iran escalates and expedites the preparations for regional confrontation with the Gulf States, both in al-Jazira and in the Arabian Peninsula, as well as with Israel, in accordance with the long-term doctrine adopted back in early 2019. Iran committed to ultimately dominating the Muslim World, consolidating control over the Lebanon-Syria-Iraq region, and actively containing Israel. Tenets of this doctrine were first aired



publicly during the commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution between mid-February and mid-March.

Historically, most important is the triumph of Shiite Islam over Sunni Islam. "The Imam [Khomeini] successfully melded the Islamic and Iranian civilizations," explained former IRGC Commander Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi. "Today, the heart of Islamic culture and civilization beats in Iran, and Wahhabi Islam in Saudi Arabia and al-Azhar in Egypt cannot dominate the Islamic World." This development has tangible consequences. "Today, a united Islamic army has been created in Syria. Today, we have succeeded in reaching the Mediterranean by using our ideological strength." IRGC Aerospace Force Commander Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh concurred that the Islamic Revolution's "doctrine is expanding to the farthest corners of the world, and in countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen. At one time the enemies attacked and we were on the defense. But today we attack and they are on the defense." The IRGC's Qods Forces Commander Major General Qassem Soleimani was more pragmatic. "Today, if the Islamic World feels that it has deterrence and significant power, and an enemy like the Zionist regime does not dare attack the Islamic [Republic], it is thanks to the existence of the HizbAllah stream in Lebanon and Islamic streams such as HAMAS in Palestine. And they, as clarified by the great architect of the Revolution [Imam Khomeini], are an outcome of the Islamic Revolution." The ultimate objective of the new doctrine is to transform the entire Muslim World and put it under Iran's influence.

In early April, Tehran concluded that time was ripe to move to the next phase of the campaign to control the greater Middle East - first as part of "the Middle Eastern Entente" and, ultimately, by itself. In this context, Tehran decided to gradually start escalating the protracted wars-by-proxy with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States (in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan-Pakistan, etc.) into a direct confrontation aimed to destroy the House of al-Saud. The first step would bring Saudi Arabia's oil exports "down to zero" through sabotage and strikes by the Qods Force and Saudi-Shiite Jihadists. As well, Iran escalated the effort to encircle and contain Israel through the use of Lebanese and Palestinian proxies so that Israel could not intervene and attempt to prevent the collapse of the regional order to its detriment. The key caveat in the decision to audaciously implement the new doctrine is for Iranian Intelligence to ascertain that the US will either not intervene at all to protect Saudi Arabia from Iran or that US intervention will be symbolic at best. In mid-April, the Iranian intelligence assessments were that the US would abandon Saudi Arabia, and Tehran resolved to accelerate the preparations for the next phase of the regional ascent.

On 21 April, Ayatollah Sayed Ali Khamenei announced the nomination of Major General Hossein Salami as the new IRGC Commander - replacing Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari after twelve years in office. Salami was the commander of the IRGC Air Force (2005-2009) that is responsible for Iran's nuclear and ballistic missiles program, and then Deputy Commander of the IRGC (2009-2019). He is known as a close ally of Soleimani.

The change of command took place on 24 April with only a few senior officers and officials in attendance. Salami outlined the coming missions of the IRGC. "The Qods Force, led by a brave commander, could advance to the east of the Mediterranean and the Red Sea to end the US' domination," he explained. In the process, Iran "should convert Islam's sovereignty into a civilization and [the] IRGC should become ready to play its role to reach this goal. ... We must expand our influence sphere from the region to the world to leave no secure region for the enemy across the globe."

Tehran seized the strategic initiative. Senior commanders started articulating the new strategy in closed meetings.



On 29 April, Soleimani addressed a closed forum of senior security and police officers in Tehran. He ruled out the possibility of a diplomatic engagement with the US and stressed the importance of a region-wide strategy as the only viable option for Iran. “The enemies seek to hit a blow and damage us and our country’s security through pressures and economic sanctions, and they use all their capacities to this end. But today, enemy’s costs go higher to the very same degree that it poses threats,” Soleimani explained. “The enemy wants to make us sit to the negotiating table by economic pressures and such a negotiation is an instance of surrendering, but our people are vigilant and wise and believe that negotiation with the enemy under the present circumstances means complete surrendering and we will definitely not accept this humiliation.” Soleimani explained that the key to victory is in regional dynamics. In contrast with Iran’s network of loyal streams (proxies), “the US and its allies do not have any powerful stream in the West and East Asia” and they therefore “rely on illegitimate governments” to further their interests in the region. The enemies will not withstand a clash with Iran. Consequently, Soleimani concluded, “Iran is now a powerful country at high levels of maturity in military and security fields.”

On 30 April, Hatami stressed that Tehran was not rushing to react to Washington. “The US move will not affect the Islamic Republic and IRGC’s strategy in the region at all,” he stated. There was no reason to act in haste. “We enjoy the power to safeguard our vital interests in the Strait and [will] take necessary decisions in due time.” In principle, Iran is already prepared for any escalation. “We have other powers too, including missile power among too many others, and we can adopt the necessary decisions promptly and implement them,” Hatami noted.

On 1 May, the Commander of the Khatam ol-Anbia Headquarters (the construction and commercial arm of the IRGC), Major General Gholam Ali Rashid, addressed senior commanders of the Army Ground Forces and outlined Iran’s strategic outlook. “We do not welcome war in the region because it will definitely benefit the US and the Zionist regime, but we are men of war and [we] will stand against any aggression and will defeat [the enemy] with God’s help and [we] warn that the costs of war will not be paid only by our nation.” Rashid stressed the importance of Iran’s regional allies and highlighted Iran’s “common interests with the neighboring countries in safeguarding regional stability, security and development.” To avoid carnage, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States must “desist from behaviors that serve the interests of the US and Israel which do not have any goal but sowing discord and war in the region” before it was too late. “All the regional people should pay the costs of war in the region and it will harm common life in this region,” Rashid concluded.

Meanwhile, Iran continued active coordination with its regional allies. On 1 May, Iraqi Navy Commander Rear Admiral Ahmed Jassim al-Ma’arij visited Tehran for consultations with the Commander of the IRGC Navy Rear Admiral Alireza Tangsiri. Welcoming al-Ma’arij, Tangsiri emphasized the importance of Muslim solidarity against external threats. “Definitely, foreigners are sad about unity among Muslims in the region and therefore, if this unity is materialized, then the presence of foreigners in the region will be fruitless; therefore, we should deepen and bolster our unity and brotherhood day by day,” Tangsiri said. The closed-door discussions centered on closer cooperation and joint operations in case of a confrontation with the US in the Gulf area. Formally, Iran and Iraq agreed on “promoting naval cooperation by forming a joint commission, holding joint educational, scientific and research courses, sharing academic experiences, and staging joint naval exercises.” In reality, they decided to establish joint naval headquarters that will enable both navies to “work together to ensure border security, and provide each other with training and logistical, technical and military support” particularly in times of crisis and war.



The Iranians are also conducting discussions with Oman on naval cooperation, including joint operations and exercises.

Meanwhile, Salami started a series of high-level coordination meetings with his counterparts in the Iranian security leadership. They are convinced that Iran is in control of the escalation process. One reason for the confidence of the elites was a just submitted intelligence report about the US written by a group of experts led by senior political analyst Saadollah Zareyee. He pointed out that Washington had assured Tehran of their "intention to remain in a no-war situation with the country." Tehran received explicit assurances to that effect. "Recently, senior US government officials have sent an official message to the high-ranking Iranian officials stressing that they have no plan for military conflict with Iran under any circumstances," Zareyee wrote.

On 4 May, Salami and Hatami met to discuss the next phase of the confrontation. They still did not anticipate a major escalation initiated by the US. "Our enemies are fatigued today. They look sturdy but have decayed from within. They will crumble sooner rather than later although they are trying to deny that fact," Salami opined. It is therefore imperative to exploit the current transitional period to improve Iran's strategic posture. "Current juncture is the season of building up power and we should try to tip the balance in our favor through finding strategies determining radius of impact," Salami said. Hatami agreed with the assessment and committed to providing the IRGC, that will spearhead the forthcoming confrontation, with all necessary weapons, equipment, supplies and reinforcements from the resources of the Ministry of Defense.

The next day, 5 May, Salami met Intelligence Minister Sayed Mahmoud Alavi at the IRGC HQ. Hossein Taeb, the Chief of the IRGC Intelligence Unit and a few IRGC and other intelligence senior officials attended. Salami and Alavi discussed tighter cooperation in order to meet the forthcoming challenges - from a regional war to growing secessionism and restlessness of Iran's minorities. "The Intelligence Ministry and the IRGC Intelligence Unit are the two vigilant sharp eyes of the Islamic Establishment and Revolution and complete each other at the time of missions [and] complement each other on the battlefield," Salami said. Although Iran's intelligence community is "usually moving ahead of the enemy," this must not be taken for granted. "Today, we are engaged in a serious, global round-the-clock intelligence war with enemies. ... Today, the intelligence factor contributes to the country's prestige and if the enemy faces our strong will, it will back down." Alavi agreed that the seniors of the intelligence community should "hold regular and constant meetings to defend the Islamic Establishment" and further Iran's vital interests. "We hope that, hand in hand with our IRGC brothers, we can accomplish our critical mission to protect the country and the Islamic Revolution in the best possible manner," Alavi concurred.

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Meanwhile, Tehran remained convinced it was in control of the time-table for the coming crisis, and so told the HizbAllah. Writing in the 15 April issue of the Lebanese *Al-Nahar*, Ibrahim Haidar explained that an eruption of violence in Lebanon would be a component of a wider US-Iran war. "HizbAllah is taking into account the possibility that the US-Iran conflict will ignite, and it knows that it will be part of it," Haidar wrote. "Therefore, according to sources close to [the HizbAllah], it is planning for any possibility, issuing threats [to Israel], and outwardly escalating [its positions] while seeking to maintain calm in the domestic arena" of Lebanon.



Indeed, in mid-April, IRGC Intelligence briefed HizbAllah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah about the impending crises. Tehran anticipated a marked escalation, including a war with Israel, later in the summer. In a 21 April article in the Kuwaiti *Al-Rai*, Elijah Magnier reported that Nasrallah convened the most senior commanders in great secrecy and warned them “to prepare for a hot summer because Israel plans to launch a surprise war against Lebanon.” Nasrallah expected a devastating first strike. “I may not remain among you for very long; it is possible that the entire first level of leadership could be killed, including myself. Israel may succeed in assassinating many leaders and commanders. The death of some key personalities will not be the end of HizbAllah, because the party doesn’t rely merely on individuals but rather on the entire society that is an essential part of its existence” Nasrallah told the gathering.

“This is the first time Sayyed Nasrallah has offered such a bleak perspective, raising the chances of war with Israel from 50/50 to 70/30”, a knowledgeable HizbAllah source told Magnier. He expects both Iran and the HizbAllah to take drastic measures short of a preemptive strike. “But how will HizbAllah and Iran react? Both are on the defensive and are not expected to take the initiative and attack first. Iran may develop its nuclear capability and surprise the world with an ultimate step to turn the tables and stop the war. But HizbAllah is not going to sit and watch.”

On 23 April, Nasrallah publicly denied Magnier’s reporting. “What was published in the newspapers about a war with Israel was mistaken and badly timed,” he said. “I personally eliminate any possibility for a Zionist war on Lebanon.” Still, Nasrallah said, the HizbAllah intends to “participate in liberating occupied Palestine and pray at Al-Aqsa Mosque” in Jerusalem. “Although the Resistance always prepares for the worst possibilities, I personally tend to rule out the possibility of witnessing an Israeli war on Lebanon because the enemy’s ‘home’ front is not ready for that,” Nasrallah explained. Tehran concurred. On 24 April, during the IRGC change of command, Bagheri noted that “the IRGC has enhanced its capabilities, shaped the axis of resistance, and forced the Israeli regime to worry about its survival rather than pursuing the dream of gaining control over the lands from the Nile to the Euphrates.”

Therefore, Iran decided to put Israel on the defensive through a brief surge of violence around the Gaza Strip. It was a safe bet for Tehran and its local allies - the HAMAS and Palestinian Islamic Jihad - because they knew that Jerusalem would rush, together with Cairo, to contain the fighting and accept a cessation of hostilities till the next eruption. Egypt and Israel cannot afford to block the Iran-controlled weapons smuggling routes from Yemen and Libya-Sudan via the Gulf of Suez and into western Sinai for fear of alienating the local Bedouin tribes (who profit immensely from the smuggling) and send them to join the Jihadists in northeastern Sinai that Egypt cannot defeat. Israel does not want to occupy the Gaza Strip (even though the IDF can now do so rather quickly and with few casualties) because Israel does not want to rule Gaza, and, even less, to hand it over to the corrupt and inept Palestinian Authority (which is what the “international community” is likely to demand). Jerusalem’s desire to stop the fire before the Independence Day celebrations and the Eurovision contest added incentives for Israel to be flexible (as was the case in the 25 March clashes on the eve of the Knesset elections). So, it was safe for Tehran to predict that a brief intense cycle of violence will end up with a new compromise and cessation of hostilities until the next round erupts.

The brief fighting of early May were a joint undertaking of the Islamic Jihad and the HAMAS, particularly their Izzadin al-Qassam Brigades. The fighting was run from a joint operations room under the command of Muhammad Dief, the supreme military commander of the Brigades. To minimize the danger of Israeli target killing, the fighting was provoked when HAMAS’s Gaza chief Yihya Sinwar, Islamic Jihad Chief Ziad al-Nakhalah



and their Gaza field commander Bahu Abu al-Ata were all in Cairo for negotiations with Egyptian Intelligence. Islamic Jihad is tightly controlled by IRGC Intelligence and Qods Force, while the HAMAS closely cooperates with the IRGC and is beholden to them for weapons supplies and significant financial support. Neither organization would have acted without Iranian instructions or, at the very least, permission.

On 3 May, an Islamic Jihad sniper fired on Israeli officers visiting the Gaza border. The sniper attempted to kill a senior officer, and two officers were wounded. The IDF's retaliatory fire sparked the preplanned barrages of missiles and rockets. A total of about 700 rockets were launched on 4-6 May - causing four civilian fatalities and about 250 injured in Israel. The Islamic Jihad and the HAMAS introduced a new Iranian missile - the Badr 3 - with a range of 160km and air-bursting shrapnel-warhead. Abu Obeida, the spokesman of the Izzadin al-Qassam Brigades, claimed that they "succeeded in overcoming the so-called Iron Dome by adopting the tactic of firing dozens of missiles in one single burst," and consequently "succeeded in causing great losses and destruction to the enemy." To send a message, Israel target killed Hamed Ahmed Hamdan al-Khodari - one of Iran's senior men in the Gaza Strip who was responsible for distributing funds from Iran. The Israeli Air Force conducted widespread bombing of buildings - causing some 30 fatalities, most of them fighters, and a few hundred wounded.

As expected, Egyptian Intelligence, with Israel's blessings, immediately started negotiating with Sinwar, al-Nakhalah and al-Ata the cessation of hostilities. Israel agreed not to punish the HAMAS for the surge of violence and restore all the concessions made at the end of the previous burst of violence in late-March. Qatar, now an ally of Iran, announced the donation of half a billion US dollars to be distributed among Iran's proteges in the Gaza Strip. Egyptian Intelligence is already expecting additional humanitarian concessions by Israel during Ramadan (5 May - 5 June) and soon afterwards.

Meanwhile, early May saw the beginning of the next phase in Soleimani's build-up against Israel. Back in early 2019, Soleimani directed Nasrallah to work together with the head of the HAMAS terrorism arm Saleh al-Aroui and the head of HAMAS in Lebanon Osama Hamdan on the building of a Sunni-Palestinian force that will deploy together with the HizbAllah in south Lebanon. The new force will be called "The HAMAS Return" - in reference to the "March of Return" violent riots on the Gaza border. HAMAS quickly recruited 2,500 youth (out of the 3,000 Soleimani wanted) from the refugee camps in southern Lebanon. They were sent for three-month training in HizbAllah bases in central Lebanon and the Beqaa Valley. The training included infantry courses and the use of artillery/mortars and short-range rockets. The first units were declared operational in early May and are being sent to the Israeli-Lebanese border. Soleimani's plan calls for "The HAMAS Return" forces to spearhead the Iran-sponsored offensive into the Galilee, Israel - thus giving it a Sunni-Palestinian character rather than Shiite-HizbAllah.

Having returned to Beirut from Cairo on 7 May, Ziad al-Nakhalah gave an interview to the HizbAllah-linked Al-Mayadeen news channel. He stressed the emerging Palestinian unity against Israel. "Between us and HAMAS there is agreement on everything," Nakhalah said. "The coordination between us and Fatah is [also] at the highest level." He described the recent fighting as a prelude to a bigger war in the summer, thus echoing the Iranian-HizbAllah assessment. "I anticipate a war to erupt in the summer," he said. Nakhalah stressed that the Palestinian Jihadist organizations "will continue [fighting] until all our objectives are met. What happened in the most recent escalation was a preparation for the next major battle. From now on, the rocket fire will focus primarily on Tel Aviv and other large cities."

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But now, rather suddenly, the US decided to act on the intelligence warnings and start deploying significant forces. Hence, it is back to the drawing board in Tehran.

On 7 May, the Iranian leadership started the formulation of an adapted strategy. Several meetings of senior officers and officials took place in Tehran. Their main objective was assuring Ayatollah Khamenei and senior officials of Iran's ability to fight and triumph under the new circumstances. Zarif argued that the US cannot rely on its regional allies as a springboard for attacking Iran. "If [the] US and [its] clients don't feel safe, it's because they're despised by the people of the region, [and] blaming Iran won't reverse that." Brigadier General Hossein Dehghan, a military aide to Khamenei, remains confident in the intelligence assessment of US reticence to confront Iran. "Americans are unwilling and unable to carry out military action against us," Dehghan explained, "and their unwillingness stems from their inability to drag the region into tension or wage military action against Iran." Hatami was apprehensive about the impact of the economic crisis on the Iranian population and the specter of instability. He warned of "plots hatched by enemies to undermine the country's power" and explained that the US is "seeking to damage the national morale by waging a soft war and psychological operations." Hatami urged drastic action before instability spreads further. In conclusion, Salami vowed that the enemies of Iran will face unforgettable defeats. "The IRGC is determined to see off enemies of Islamic Iran to the graveyard of history with unforgettable defeats and humiliations," he assured the top leaders.

On 8 May, Khamenei made the first public statement about the brewing crisis. "The US and Zionism are plotting and acting [against Iran] in all areas," he said. Iran should prepare for a military confrontation even if there was not an imminent military threat. "In the face of the enemy's battle formation against the Iranian nation, the nation should take up battle formation likewise. The enemy apparently has no battle formation in the military sphere, but our military forces are vigilant nonetheless," Khamenei instructed.

Meanwhile, internal consultations continued. In a closed meeting in Tehran, Salami observed that "the confrontation between Iran and the arrogant powers has reached its highest point." Salami believes that "the adversaries have exhausted all of their possibilities against Iran and have no more capacity or power to activate." Therefore, a direct military confrontation with the US might be averted. "The enemies of the Islamic Revolution have today taken up an inclusive battle formation in the economic, cultural and social spheres, not necessarily physical," Salami explained. There is no question of Iran stopping its regional ascent in the face of the US-Israeli opposition. Salami stressed that "the IRGC has the power that is fit enough to defeat an enemy with global coalition."

In Baghdad, on 7 May, Sheikh Akram al-Kaabi, the Secretary General of Nojaba Islamic Resistance militias and a close ally of Soleimani, reiterated that "the Islamic resistance front [that is, the coalition of Iran-sponsored Shiite militias] will spare no efforts to force the US, Zionist forces out of the Islamic territories." The Iraqi and other Shiite forces "will not rest until they cut off the head of US and Zionist viper." Al-Kaabi focused his ire on Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States whom he considers to be both allies and proxies of Israel. Al-Kaabi declared that the Islamic resistance front wants to "inform the Zionist regime that we will not allow their puppet Takfiri groups to shed Muslims' blood with the Zionists' support."

And then, US Secretary State Mike Pompeo arrived in Baghdad for an emergency visit.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

### About the Author of this Issue

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