



The Brewing Crisis in The Persian Gulf: New Rules for Old Games

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Executive Summary

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* The US keeps escalating its covert war with Iran - both in the Persian Gulf and in Syria. The extent of the escalation and the focusing on objectives of great importance for Iran cannot but lead to Iranian harsh reaction.

* Qassem Soleimani continues traveling clandestinely throughout the Middle East - preparing his vast and growing forces, both Iranian and Iran-Proxy, for the fateful clash with the US and its allies should Khamenei give the order.

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Analysis

Although the unfolding crises throughout the greater Middle East are increasingly driven by, and unfold according to, heritage-based frameworks and dynamics¹ - the outcome of the Moscow Summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping will have disproportionate influence over the next phases of these crises, and, consequently, the future of the region. The escalating confrontation between Iran and the US is both influencing and influenced by the mega-trends set by Russia and China.

Although the key meetings took place on 5 June, the seeds of the new joint strategy were already outlined during the 13 May summit in Sochi between Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi. They went over all the key topics in preparation for the Putin-Xi summit.

On 5 June, Presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping met in Moscow and decided to not only markedly upgrade the bilateral relations and alliance of their countries, but to use the new relations in order to shape the long-term posture of the entire Eastern Hemisphere in their favor. Emphasis will be put on the Eurasian Sphere (the Kremlin's high priority) and the New Silk Road (the Forbidden City's high priority), as well as the Korean Peninsula that is most important for both. The two presidents are cognizant of the mammoth magnitude of these undertakings and their tremendous grand strategic and macro-economic significance. Xi and Putin are therefore ready to confront the US in order to ensure non-interference in the pursuit of these undertakings.

One of the first and very bitter confrontations with the US will be over the greater Middle East. The main reason is the advance negotiations with all key oil producers - including Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran - on substituting the Petro-Dollar with a basket of currencies where the Yuan, the Euro and the Ruble dominate. Using the currency basket will enable the sellers and buyers to go around the US-imposed sanctions and quotas. Indeed, Beijing and Moscow are enticing the oil producers with huge, long-term export deals that are both financially lucrative and politically tempting by offering guarantees for the well-being of the participating governments. The crux of the proposal is regional and includes flagrant disregard of the US sanctions on Iran.

However, the key to the extent of the commitment of both Beijing and Moscow lies in the growing importance and centrality of the New Silk Road via Central Asia. Persia had a crucial role in the ancient Silk Road, and both China and Russia now expect Iran to have a comparable key role in the New Silk Road. The growing dominance of heritage-based dynamics throughout the developing world, including the greater Central Asia and the greater Middle East, makes it imperative to rely on historic Persia/Iran as a western pole of the New Silk Road. It is this realization that led both Beijing and Moscow to give Tehran, in mid-May, the original guarantees that Washington would be prevented from conducting a regime change.

Therefore, even though both Russia and China are not satisfied with the Iranian and Iran-Proxy activities and policies in the Iraq-Syria-Lebanon area - it is far more important for them to support Iran, and also Turkey for that matter, in their confrontations with the US in order to expedite the consolidation of the New Silk Road.

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¹ For details and background see: Yossef Bodansky, The Crisis in and Around the Persian Gulf: Business as Usual in a New Era, ISPSW Issue No. 619, May 2019; Yossef Bodansky, Khamenei's War, ISPSW Issue No. 617, May 2019; Yossef Bodansky, The US-Iran Face-Off, ISPSW Issue No. 616, May 2019; Yossef Bodansky, Escalation – Iran Against the Regional Order, ISPSW Issue No. 614, April 2019; Yossef Bodansky, The New Bloc: "The Middle Eastern Entente", ISPSW Issue No. 612, March 2019.



Tehran and its key allies in “the Middle Eastern Entente” - Turkey and Qatar - are cognizant of the core positions of Russia and China. Since mid-May, Tehran and, to a lesser extent, Ankara and Doha, were appraised by Moscow and Beijing of their overall direction of political decisions. Hence, since early June, Tehran felt confident to start building momentum of Iranian assertiveness and audacity.

Tehran has been raising profile in the region. Tehran insists that it is now impossible to make decisions, or do anything else, in the greater Middle East without Iran’s approval. On 2 June, the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, Major General Mohammad Bagheri, touted the new strategic posture of Iran. “The Islamic movement has affected the entire world and on top of that, it has succeeded in intimidating the American hegemony and Zionism,” he explained. Bagheri attributed the new influence of Iran to the acquisition of regional strategic depth - that is, reaching the shores of the Mediterranean. “At the advent of the fifth decade of Revolution, it should be noted that the expansion of the strategic depth of Iran has brought about new and undisputed conditions that today, no issue in West Asia can be solved without Iran’s participation.” No outside pressure, particularly American pressure, can compel an Iranian withdrawal and a reversal of its surge. “The Iranian nation will not retreat in the slightest from its position on the country’s defensive capabilities and will turn enemy’s threats to golden opportunities to develop core achievements of the Revolution, especially in the defensive and missile sectors.”

Senior IRGC commanders with political affiliations repeated the message over the coming days. On 7 June, Brigadier General Morteza Ghorbani, an adviser to the Chief of the IRGC, called on the region’s Muslim countries to join Iran. Instead of “seeking the wishes and objectives of the global Arrogance and the Zionists,” all Muslim countries should back Iran, Ghorbani explained, because “together, we can establish an Islamic superpower.” On 10 June, Mohsen Rezaei, the Secretary of Iran’s Expediency Discernment Council and a former Chief of the IRGC, stressed Iran’s regional prowess. The Americans “are aware that Iran’s military strength is at a point where if they take the smallest action, the whole region will be set on fire. ... We are moving towards becoming a regional power and that is costly for America.” On 12 June, Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi, the Top Military Aide to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, stressed that with Iraq and Syria, Iran has created an unassailable bloc. “The pivot of Iran, Iraq, Syria and the Mediterranean [region] is an economic, political, security and defensive axis against the Zionist regime and the US,” Safavi explained. “Iraq and Syria strategically play a complementary role to Iran.”

Little wonder that Tehran has also made clear that Iran intends to stay in Syria long after the war is over despite the misgivings of the Kremlin. Damascus accepts Tehran’s position, and resolved to reject all US-Israeli pressure to compel Iran to withdraw or even reduce the size of its forces. “Damascus has no intention of turning away Iran’s military assistance or demanding an Iranian troop withdrawal,” Syrian senior officials told their Russian counterparts in early June.

At the same time, although he is leery to confront Iran directly, Bashar al-Assad demonstrates his displeasure with the Iranian presence. In early June, for example, he rejected flagrantly Tehran’s initiative for HAMAS and Syria to reconcile on account of the HAMAS cooperation with Iran and the HizbAllah against Israel. Assad justified the refusal by arguing that HAMAS remains part of the Muslim Brothers’ networks that have been fighting Damascus since the late-1970’s and continue to sponsor Jihadist forces.

Meanwhile, the IRGC’s Qods Force continues to expand the Iranian strategic deployment in Syria. Most important was the completion, in the first week of June, of the pushing forward of ballistic missile deployment in addition to the deployments in southern-western Iraq and nearby in Iran. The Iranians maintain Qods Force



missile sites (as distinct from storage sites for the HizbAllah) - mainly Fatah-110 and Zulfiqar SSMs - in the T-4 airbase in Homs province, in Jubb al-Jarah east of Homs, in al-Safira near Aleppo, and in the al-Kiswah area south of Damascus. In early June, the Qods Force brought Toophan-1 anti-tank missiles to the T-4 airbase. These are all areas and installations that Israel has bombed repeatedly. Yet, the Qods Force keeps repairing the damage and redeploying new weapons and missiles - an expression of their growing importance to the forthcoming regional war.

Russia accepts the Iranian presence up to a point. Back in early 2019, the Kremlin formulated a worst-case scenario focusing on presence along the eastern shores of the Mediterranean (beyond the Aleppo-Damascus highway) while blocking US/Western encroachment. Moscow is cognizant that such an area of influence along the shores of the Mediterranean also means blocking the vital arteries of transportation both Iran and Turkey are determined to establish. In early June, the Russians demonstrated the point that the western zones are Russia's, and only Russia's. Toward this end, the Russians compelled the Syrian military to kick the Pasdaran, HizbAllah and Afghan Fatemiyoun units out of the Syrian base in Latakia.

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Meanwhile, the cooperation between Iran and Turkey has expanded as agreed, but faster than expected. Starting late-May, senior officials of both countries increased the number of bilateral visits in a concentrated effort "to find common ground in which Turkey helps Iran overcome the consequences of US sanctions". By 1 June, Iran and Turkey established a "new anti-sanction financial mechanism" with priority given to increasing the imports of natural gas and oil from Iran (with some of the oil laundered as Iraq-origin from Kirkuk). Iran and Turkey also agreed to protect mutual trade and economic ties, including the establishing of a joint bank, in the face of US sanctions. As well, both countries finalized an agreement to restart direct cargo train and passenger/tourist train services between Tehran and Ankara.

On 8 June, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani had a lengthy phone conversation with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan. They finalized and formulated the new era in bilateral relations - from economic cooperation to effecting regional dynamics.

Rouhani opened by emphasizing the importance of the expansion of relations between Iran and Turkey in the global and all-Islamic spheres. "Development of relations and cooperation between Iran and Turkey, as two powerful effective countries in the World of Islam, is important for stability and security of the region." He pointed out to the instability and bloodshed in countries such as Sudan, Libya, Yemen and Afghanistan, and invited Erdogan to work together in order to resolve conflicts throughout the Muslim world. "Together, Iran and Turkey can cooperate with other friendly, brotherly countries to put an end to this regretful process and resolve the issues of the region and the World of Islam as well." Rouhani said that Iran was most interested in markedly expanding bilateral economic cooperation, including providing highly-subsidized oil and gas to Turkey, while using national currencies in trade transactions in order to avoid the US sanctions.

In his response, Erdogan largely agreed with Rouhani and reiterated Turkey's commitment to confronting the US. Closer bilateral cooperation is a must. "As two brotherly, friendly countries, cementing of relations between Iran and Turkey can be beneficial for both nations and the region." Erdogan concurred it is imperative to "enhance bilateral relations in all fields, especially in economy and trade," and agreed with Rouhani on "the importance of using national currencies in trade." He termed the US "unilateral sanctions against Iran" to be "tyrannical". Hence, Turkey "will never accept these cruel sanctions and seek to increase



our friendships and cooperation with Iran.” Erdogan agreed that both countries must influence the region and “the World of Islam”. Erdogan concluded that “Iran and Turkey can play a greater role by expanding their engagement and cooperation in the development of regional stability and security and counter-terrorism.”

Both Presidents agreed to escalate their joint anti-Kurdish campaign, as well as better coordinate their activities in Iraq and Syria.

By the time of the Rouhani-Erdogan conversation, Turkish and Iranian forces were already engaged in a comprehensive anti-Kurdish offensive for more than a week. The raids and bombings were conducted both in northern Iraq and along their mutual border. At first, the heaviest fighting took place in Turkey’s Igdir province, close to the borders with Armenia and Azerbaijan’s Nakhchivan Autonomous Region. The Turkish forces then moved to the Aralik district that is close to the Turkish-Iranian border. At that point, the IRGC conducted a parallel operation in Chaldoran County that borders Igdir-Aralik. The Turkish and Iranian forces continue to move southward along the border, destroying the Kurdish pockets between them.

Meanwhile, Turkey launched a major offensive into Iraqi Kurdistan called “Operation Claw”. As a separate element of the operation, the Turkish forces conduct deep raids closely coordinated with the Iranian forces. Most important are the attacks against PKK positions in the Hakurk mountainous region near the Iraqi border with Iran. The Iranian forces are preventing the Kurds from escaping across the Iranian border as in previous Turkish raids. IRGC forces also clashed with Kurdish groups - both the Iranian-Kurdish PJAK and the Turkish-Kurdish PKK forces usually based in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Iranian raids, that include crossing of the Iraqi border, are coordinated with heavy air-strikes by the Turkish Air Force of the nearby regions of Zap and Qandil.

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Concurrently, Qatar, on behalf of the bloc, challenges and effectively neuters the Mecca summits from within. The Qatari Prime Minister Abdallah bin Nasser bin Khalifa Al Thani participated in all three summits on 30-31 May. Despite the Saudi-led GCC boycott on Qatar, he had a most courteous exchange with Saudi Arabia’s King Salman al-Saud. The main reason for Qatar’s presence in Mecca was to deliver messages from Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman al-Saud (aka MBS) and his close partner the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Muhammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan (aka MBZ) to Tehran. The key message was that Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States do not want war with Iran, and will do whatever they can to prevent the US from launching one. Both MBS and MBZ noted that the US is stopping short of direct confrontation with the Lincoln aircraft carrier remaining out in the Arabian Sea rather than venturing across the Strait of Hormuz and into the Persian Gulf as US carriers had done in the past.

Tehran, however, would not legitimize any stand of either MBS or MBZ even though Tehran welcomed their message as transferred by Doha. Therefore, within days after the end of the summits, Qatar started to openly criticize and contradict their resolutions and communiqués. Doha flagrantly shattered the delicate consensus that Riyadh had worked so hard to pretend in Mecca - including the Saudi statement that “reconciliation with Qatar [is] possible” given the right circumstances.

On 2 June, Doha asserted that the Mecca communiqués reflected “America’s policies on Iran” and not the self-interests of the region’s states. Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, who also attended the Mecca summits, criticized the declaratory refusal to negotiate with Iran even though Doha passed secret messages throughout. “The statements condemned Iran but did not refer to a moderate policy to speak with Tehran,” he said on Al Jazeera TV. “They adopted Washington policy towards Iran, rather than a



policy that puts neighborhood with Iran into consideration.” Al Thani argued that any cooperation with Tehran should be based on “non-interference in other countries.”

On 5 June, Rouhani coordinated policies in a phone conversation with the Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. Rouhani reiterated that Iran was not interested in a war with the US or anybody else. However, should “any foolish anti-Iranian act start in the region,” Iran will deliver “a firm response” that will harm the Arabian Peninsula more than anybody else. War will be futile, he noted. “Regional problems don’t have a military solution and we believe that threat, pressure, blockade, and economic sanction are wrong approaches in relations between governments.” Rouhani hailed Qatar’s stance because it contributed to easing regional tensions. “Certainly, any meeting will be ineffective, unproductive and even harmful, if it doesn’t draw regional countries to each other,” Rouhani affirmed Doha’s policy.

Al Thani responded by emphasizing that the policies and stances of Tehran and Doha are “close to each other” on most issues. He reiterated that Doha believes that “dialogue is the only way to ease tensions,” and that Doha wants “to expand ties with Iran in all areas.” Al Thani concluded that all Qataris are “appreciating Tehran for supporting [Qatar] during the blockade.”

Apprehensive about the specter of an American escalation, Foreign Minister Al Thani traveled to London on 9 June in order to try and get “a friendly message” across to Washington. He warned the US not to fall into the trap set by MBS and MBZ. He explained that the “Saudi and Emirati plan to impose stability on the region by supporting authoritarian governments and military councils in Africa, Egypt, Libya and throughout the Arab world was a recipe for chaos.” These “policies are [only] creating more terrorism, conflict and chaos in the Middle East and Africa.” For its own good, the US must not be part of the scheme. Discussing the situation in the Persian Gulf, Al Thani noted that “while Qatar respects US policy towards Iran, it cannot fully support it because Qatar views the matter from a regional perspective.” He criticized Washington’s stance. “The current US position on Iran, lacks any indication of a way forward, or any type of positive or constructive message.” Doha does “not want to see any confrontation between the two powers, US and Iran, because we are stuck in the middle,” Al Thani concluded.

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Alas, the US keeps escalating its covert war with Iran - both in the Persian Gulf and in Syria. The extent of the escalation and the focusing on objectives of great importance for Iran cannot but lead to Iranian harsh reaction.²

First came escalation of the campaign against the transfer of oil along the long desert road stretch between Deir ez-Zor and Damascus. Since the beginning of the war, Damascus has been purchasing oil from whomever controlled the oilfields east of the Euphrates - be it DI’ISH or the US-sponsored Kurdish PKK/YPG/SDF forces. As well, with the opening of the road from Iran via Iraq, the Iranians increased the shipment of oil in tanker-trucks. Since the SDF would not strike and shut down the lucrative oil trade - the US chose to rely heavily on the Jihadist forces being trained and equipped in the al-Tanf area.

According to tribal leaders in the Deir ez-Zor area, the US launched at first “a campaign ... to prevent smuggling [oil] from areas under SDF control in Deir ez-Zor to the Syrian regime by way of ferries across the river.” The first major escalation took place in the early morning hours of 31 May. Jihadist forces near al-

² For background see Yossef Bodansky, *The Crisis in and Around the Persian Gulf: Business as Usual in a New Era*, ISPSW Issue No. 619, May 2019



Shuhayl opened heavy machine-gun fire on four tanker-barges ferrying oil across the Euphrates. When the ambush failed to cause any tangible damage, US combat helicopters and strike aircraft showed up and strafed the barges - blowing up three of them and causing at least four fatalities.

Although the US denied that the May 31 attack took place, the mere involvement of US forces compelled the US to change tactics. The emphasis moved to on-land raids and ambushes along the desert stretch north of al-Tanf - the vast Badiyah al-Sham (eastern desert) area. There, properly trained and equipped light forces could, on their own, strike and burn the tanker trucks moving in small convoys. As well, there was no question of conflict of interests with the US-proxy Kurdish forces. According to Syrian military officials, "the ISIL's movements have taken place in line with US' objectives to exert pressure on the Syrian Army and its allies in Syria." The officials stressed that "the US is trying to help the ISIL block roads leading to Badiyah due to Badiyah's strategically important oil and gas reserves."

The main Jihadist operations are taking place between Eastern al-Sukhnah and Deir ez-Zor, including the important T-3 Pumping Station and the Palmyra area. Some of these Jihadist forces are using HUMMER-type vehicles in addition to the ubiquitous Japanese-made light trucks. Starting 3 June, the Jihadists use US-made TOW anti-tank missiles to strike Syrian armored combat vehicles escorting the tankers. The first such strike took place in the Jabal Bishri area.

Comes 7 June, the Jihadists escalated their concentrated attacks on the traffic in the main desert route - hitting both Syrian and Iranian vehicles, and not just oil tankers and their escorts. The Jihadists deployed several hundred fighters from the camps in the al-Tanf area - compelling the Syrian military to divert forces from their anti-DI'ISH operations in the Baqouz region in Eastern Euphrates province. The Jihadist forces operate over wider areas including the area of Jabal al-Bashri in southeastern Raqqa, al-Dafinah in southern Deir ez-Zor, between Palmyra and al-Sukhnah, and the surrounding areas of al-Tanf in Eastern Homs. On 11 June, the Jihadists launched their first attack on the western axis of the T-3 Pumping Station near Palmyra. The Jihadists also stormed army positions near the desert road east of Palmyra - causing heavy damage and numerous casualties.

By mid-June, the intensity and frequency of Jihadist ambushes have further increased. These ambushes, Syrian defense officials explained, "are well-coordinated and [a] proof that the terrorist group possesses the ability to wreak havoc inside the country." By now, according to these officials, there are some 2,000-3,000 Jihadist fighters in the entire Badiyah al-Sham region who are living off the main US-sponsored bases in the al-Tanf area. The escalation has strategic impact because the Syrian military has had to divert reinforcements earmarked for the major offensive in Idlib (the last major pocket of the US-sponsored al-Qaida affiliated Jihadists - both Syrian and foreign) to secure the desert roads.

Then, as promised to the Jihadist fighters by the US recruiters back in March 2019, on 2 June, the US-proxy Kurdish authorities running the al-Hawl camp released over 800 women and children - all families of DI'ISH fighters - and handed them to their families who happen to live in the al-Tanf area. This is the first such transfer of non-combatants and more are expected soon.

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Meanwhile, "mysterious" escalation took place in the northern part of the Persian Gulf.

On 5 June, huge fire consumed a storage facility for oil products at the Shahid Rajaei port in southern Hormozgan Province. Located west of Bandar Abbas, the Shahid Rajaei port is Iran's largest container shipping



port. Reportedly, a vehicle used for transporting shipping containers exploded and caught fire. Since there were oil products near the site of the explosion - the blaze spread quickly to several tanks and storage sites and caused heavy damage to the port. The spreading fire set off huge explosions that shot fireballs and heavy smoke sky high.

On 7 June, six Iranian merchant ships were set ablaze almost simultaneously in two Persian Gulf ports. First, five ships “caught fire” in the port of Nakhil Taghi in the Asaluyeh region of Bushehr Province. Three of these ships were completely burned and the two others suffered major damage. Several port workers and sailors were injured. As well, at least one cargo ship burst into flames and burned completely at the port of Bualhir, near Delvar. The fire is attributed to “incendiary devices” of “unknown origin”. The local authorities in Bushehr Province called the fires a “suspicious event” and went no further.

In Tehran, senior Iranian officials first attributed the incident to “fires caused by high temperatures”. Subsequently, they pointed out to statements by Iranian opposition activists in Europe (NOT the MEK) who “made the connection between the mysterious fires that hit the Iranian ships and the sabotage” of the tankers in Fujairah. Several diplomats in Tehran reported that the local grapevines were attributing the fires to “expert mercenaries” of “unknown origin”. “Knowledgeable Iranians” opined, the diplomats reported, that “ferocious revenge” was only a question of time.

Indeed, in the early morning hours of 13 June, two large tankers were repeatedly attacked and set aflame in the middle of the Gulf of Oman. Both tankers were subsequently abandoned by their crews and left to drift, burn and sink. By end of the day, there were conflicting reports whether they already sank.

Both tankers were subjected to repeated attacks over three hours in order to ascertain their destruction. The Norwegian owned MT Front Altair was first hit by a torpedo attack that stopped it and started a small fire. The Front Altair was then subjected to two cycles limpet-mine attacks that caused at least three major explosions and set the tanker aflame. The Japanese owned Kokuka Courageous was also subjected first to a torpedo attack that breached the hull above the water line. Over the next three hours, the Kokuka Courageous was subjected twice to limpet-mine attacks that also set the tanker aflame. Both tankers were first hit in the engine-room area so that they stopped. The main tanks were then repeatedly bombed until they burned out of control.

The predominantly Russian crew of the Front Altair was rescued by Iranian vessel and brought to a nearby port in Iran. The predominantly Filipino crew of the Kokuka Courageous was rescued by local tugboats and then moved to the US destroyer Bainbridge. Tehran continues to insist that all 44 crew members of both tankers were rescued by the Iranian Navy and safety authorities.

The initial expert analysis of the attacks strongly suggested a professional operation. “These appear to be well planned and coordinated attacks,” wrote shipping experts in the Gulf States. They noted that the two tankers were first hit in close proximity to the engine room and thus were stopped. They were then subjected to strong explosions at or below the waterline. Such explosions were most likely caused by limpet-mines similar to these used in Fujairah on 12 May. The Bainbridge reported that they saw “an unexploded limpet mine on the side of one of the ships attacked in the Gulf of Oman.” The experts concluded that “a state actor is responsible” for the attack.

In all likelihood, the strike was carried out by members of the Sepah Navy Special Force, an independent Takavar unit of the IRGC Navy, and/or foreign Shiite Jihadists trained by them. The attackers operated from



the military port in Bandar-e-Jask in the Southern Hormozgan Province. The mother ship of the Fujairah attackers is believed to have sailed from Bandar-e-Jask. The IRGC Navy base was established in 2008. Several years later, it was expanded to include the headquarters of the Iran Navy's 2nd Naval District. Bandar-e-Jask is the home base of a unit of the IRGC's Ghadir midget submarines, a wide variety of IRGC fast attack boats, and long-range UAVs used for operations over the Persian Gulf. The Ghadir midget submarines are equipped with the Jask-2 anti-ship missiles and Valfajr torpedoes (that might have been used to attack the two tankers).

The initial media coverage of the incident is of significance. The first reports came rather quickly on the Iranian Al-Alam News Network that broadcasts in Arabic and covers the entire Arabian Peninsula. Al-Alam reported that two "giant oil tankers" had come under "attack", that "two explosions" took place, and that the tankers were aflame. These reports were then picked up by the Persian-language Iranian media - first the IRGC-affiliated Tasnim News and then the propaganda channel Press TV that broadcasts in several languages worldwide. Only then the media in the Middle East and the global media started to pay attention to the strike.

Subsequently, official Tehran began addressing the issue - warning Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States against hastily attributing the attack to Iran. "All regional states should be careful not to be entrapped by deception of those who benefit from instability in the region," Iranian Government Spokesman Ali Rabie said. "The Iranian government is ready for security and regional cooperation to guarantee security, including in the strategic waterways."

The attacks on the tankers in the Gulf of Oman cannot be seen in isolation. They were part of a comprehensive policy against Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, but timed in the aftermath of the attacks on the Iranian ports. Back in early April, a three-phase escalating war plan was drawn under Major General Qassem Soleimani in order to deprive the West of access to the Arabian Peninsula's oil if US sanctions persisted and Iran could no longer sell oil. The first phase is signaling Iran's resolve and might; the second is sinking tankers transferring oil from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, as well as blocking the Strait of Hormuz; and the third is destroying the entire oil and gas infrastructure throughout the Arabian Peninsula. In late-April, Major General Mohammad Hossein Bagheri alluded to the Iranian resolve. "If our oil fails to go through the Strait, others' crude will not either," Bagheri warned. The Fujairah attack and the Gulf of Oman attack correspond with the first two phases of Soleimani's plan. The third will also come.

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The attack on the Japanese owned Kokuka Courageous was fortuitous because it happened just as Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was visiting Tehran in effort to convince Tehran that US President Donald Trump was serious about comprehensive negotiations with Iran. On 13 June, Abe met with Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei who set the tone for Iran's harsh policies.

After pleasantries, Abe told Khamenei that the primary objective of his visit is to convey a special message from Trump. "I would like to give you a message from the President of the United States," Abe told Khamenei. Khamenei exploded and told Abe his mission was doomed and futile from the very beginning. "We have no doubts about your goodwill and seriousness, but with regard to what you relayed from the US president, I see no merit in Trump as a person to deserve the exchange of any messages, and I do not have any answer for him and will not give him any either," Khamenei replied.

Khamenei then addressed the nuclear issue, repeating the falsehood of his own fatwah forbidding nuclear weapons. However, Khamenei stressed that the US or the EU have no say in whether Iran will or will not have



nuclear weapons. “We are against nuclear weapons and my fatwah bans their development. However, you should know that if we decide to develop nuclear weapons, the United States will be unable to do anything,” Khamenei told Abe.

According to the Mehr News Agency, Abe delivered five specific requests from Trump to Khamenei. Mehr cited “Trump’s five requests and the Leader’s direct answers to them:

“Trump: The US is not intended to change the regime in Iran.

“Leader: This is a lie for if the US could do that it would but this is what US is not capable of doing.

“Trump: We want to re-negotiate nuclear issues.

“Leader: Iran held talks with the US for five to six years over nuclear issues and reached a conclusion but the US withdrew from the deal. This is not reasonable to re-negotiate things with a country who has ruined all the agreements.

“Trump: The US seeks to prevent Iran from achieving nuclear weapons.

“Leader: We disagree with nuclear weapons and I have announced it Haram in a Fatwah but you should know that if we wanted to make nuclear weapons the US could not prevent us.

“Trump: The US is ready to start honest negotiations with Iran.

“Leader: We do not believe in that, since honest negotiations are far from a person like Trump. Honesty is rare among American officials.

“Trump: Holding talks with the US will make Iran improve.

“Leader: Under the mercy of God, we will improve without having negotiations with the US and despite the imposed sanctions.”

The other important meeting Abe had was with Rouhani. According to Rouhani, they discussed “stability and security of the region.” Most important was Abe’s reiteration that Japan remained interested in purchasing Iranian oil despite the sanctions. “Japan’s willingness to continue purchase of oil from Iran and to boost financial, scientific and cultural cooperation will be a guarantee for development of ties,” Rouhani stated.

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Ultimately, the Russians and the Chinese are the prime long-term beneficiaries of the brewing crisis in the Persian Gulf. Both Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping are in Bishkek for the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Rouhani is also participating. After the attack on the tankers, the US attention again focused on the Persian Gulf and away from the escalation of the confrontation with China and Russia. Meanwhile, both Putin and Xi lead the dramatic strengthening of both the Eurasian Sphere and the New Silk Road in Bishkek. The US handling of both the trade/tariff war with China and the Persian Gulf crisis, as explained by Rouhani, have convinced India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Central Asian leaders in attendance to seek closer ties with Russia and China. The SCO is further enthused by the decision, announced by Xi Jinping, to divert major Chinese investment funds from the US to Central Asia and the New Silk Road. Indeed, Russian and Chinese officials defined the Xi-Putin-Modi meeting in Bishkek as being “vital for re-shaping the world order” and as a major setback to the US attempt to dominate the forthcoming G20 summit in Osaka, Japan.



Meanwhile, Qassem Soleimani continues traveling clandestinely throughout the Middle East - preparing his vast and growing forces, both Iranian and Iran-Proxy, for the fateful clash with the US and its allies should Khamenei give the order.

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

About the Author of this Issue

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