

Local Media Report
21 May, 2019



Competitors

Publication	Oilprice.com
Page	1
Date	21/05/2019
Value (\$)	3250

On The Cusp Of War: Why Iran Won't Fold

By [Yossef Bodansky](#) - May 19, 2019, 2:00 PM CDT



Iran's Supreme Leader, *Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei*, on May 14, 2019 — a week after US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had visited Baghdad and reportedly met with a senior Iranian official — determined the course of his country's current crisis involving the US and issued directives to the pertinent authorities.

Khamenei convened a closed meeting with "the heads of power branches", key senior officers and officials, jurists and *Majlis* members. He discussed and analyzed the current situation, and then outlined Tehran's next moves. Iran would do its utmost to avoid war with the US while relentlessly pursuing its ascent as a prominent regional power.

Throughout, he said, there would be no further negotiations with the US.

"Iran's refusal to negotiate with the US," Khamenei explained, stemmed from the realization that "negotiating with current US Government is toxic". It was through negotiations that "the US seeks to take Iran's strengths away"; meaning to have Iran unilaterally "surrender its defensive power" and "its strategic regional influence".

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Khamenei described a US offer to discuss the range of Iran's ballistic missiles. "Reduce the range so you would not be able to hit our bases," the US demanded, according to Khamenei. He emphasized that "talks on Iran's strengths, including the missile power and regional influence [are] foolish".

Khamenei was confident that "there was not going to be any war" between the US and Iran, and thus the confrontation would not be "a military one". Khamenei stressed that "there will not be a military confrontation as neither Iran nor the US seeks war because the Americans know that the war will not be beneficial for them". Under these circumstances, Iran would continue its surge relying on proxies — "the resistance" — as the main instrument for confronting all foes. "The resistance is Iran's only absolute choice," he emphasized. "The Iranian nation's definite option will be resistance in the face of the US, and in this confrontation, the US would be forced into a retreat," Khamenei explained. "Neither we nor they, who know war will not be in their interest, are after war."

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The Iranian nation was, he said, mobilized behind Tehran. Khamenei observed that "as a result of the US threats, hatred towards the US among the Iranians has increased by more than 10 times".

Khamenei concluded by stating that "the Iranian military forces are more prepared and vigilant than ever." He repeated that in pursuing its "policy of confrontation with the Islamic Republic too, the US will definitely suffer defeat, and [the outcome] will end up to our benefit."

Khamenei and official Tehran have every reason to be confident, given the reaction of the US, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States to the series of violent provocations against their oil infrastructure which began on May 6, 2019.

The first confirmed attack took place on May 6, 2019, in the Saudi Arabian port of Yanbu on the Red Sea. A number of powerful explosions rocked the port area and heavy black smoke billowed. Reportedly, an unmanned, remotely-controlled bomb-boat hit an oil loading pier, setting it and nearby facilities aflame. There were also unconfirmed reports that Yanbu was struck by rockets fired from the Red Sea.

Riyadh was able to suppress most reports through tight control over the electronic media.

On May 8, 2019, a small cargo ship carrying about 6,000 gallons of diesel, 300 tires and 120 vehicles burst into flames in the Sharjah Port in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). All 13 crewmembers were rescued but the ship was completely destroyed. Arson or sabotage were suspected because explosions were heard, and the fire started at three spots almost simultaneously and spread rapidly.

Once again, the Saudis helped the UAE authorities to quickly suppress most reporting.

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On May 12, 2019, four or five tankers were hit by underwater and/or near-waterline explosions near the port of Fujairah in the UAE. Fujairah is the distribution end of the key oil and natural gas pipeline-corridor aimed to alleviate the need for tankers to use the Strait of Hormuz. Two Saudi tankers suffered “heavy structural damage” in the attack. Additional strikes were launched against oil tanks in the main tank farm, but these were blocked by the protective facilities so that the damage was minimal or negligible. The expert assessment is that the attacks were carried out by highly-trained and well-equipped frogmen who most likely arrived from the Iranian side of the Gulf. The attackers were trained and equipped by members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC: *Pasdaran*) Special Forces — particularly the *Sepah* Navy Special Force — an independent *Takavar* unit of the IRGC Navy based on the Greater Farur Island in the Persian Gulf — and the *Imam* Hossein [Marines] Brigade based in Bandar Abbas.

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As before, even though multiple explosions were heard all over the area, the Fujairah authorities initially insisted that "there had been no fire or explosion at the port". This time however, the perpetrators were ready. The *HizbAllah*-linked *Al-Mayadeen* news channel aired a detailed report with maps, as well as the names and hull numbers of the attacked tankers. They were accurate. *Al-Mayadeen* and other Shi'ite outlets were persistent, despite the initial denials by UAE officials, and ultimately the UAE had to acknowledge that "four commercial vessels" were hit by "acts of sabotage" at Fujairah. The next day, Saudi Energy Minister Khalid al-Falih conceded that two Saudi oil tankers suffered "significant damage" in the "apparent sabotage attack".

In the early morning hours of May 14, 2019, seven "suicide" bomb-drones — most likely the Iranian *Qasef-1* unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) — struck two oil pumping stations in Dawadmi and Afeef, west of Riyadh. Fire broke out and put the stations out of order. Reconnaissance UAVs broadcast images of the strike to the Sanaa area. The drones were controlled from IRGC-controlled facilities at the Sanaa Air Base in Yemen. (Unconfirmed reports suggested that the UAVs were launched from the ABS airport in north-western, Yemen closer to the Saudi border.)

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Throughout, there has been a marked escalation of the shooting and sabotage clashes with Shi'ite jihadists in eastern Saudi Arabia, especially the Qatif area, and neighboring Gulf States. In principle, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi acknowledge clashes only when the security forces suffer fatalities. Other incidents are concealed.

However, these incidents were sufficient for Riyadh to secretly declare an emergency in the entire al-Sharqiyah (eastern) region. According to Saudi opposition leaders, Riyadh ordered full mobilization of all Ground Forces and National Guard units. They published an order issued by Col. Mohammed bin Nasser al-Harbi, a Ground Forces commander in al-Sharqiyah, that all forces be put on high alert within the next 72 hours. As well, National Guard Forces were dispatched to al-Sharqiyah from central Saudi Arabia in order to protect oil wells, refineries and oil ports. All military and Guard leave was cancelled.

Official Tehran denied any association with the "mischief" across the Gulf, and even hinted at Israeli false flag provocations aimed to drag the US into war against Iran.

However, as located and translated by MEMRI (Middle East Media Research Institute), several Iranian senior journalists from IRGC-affiliated organs identified the perpetrators in their Tweets. On May 12, 2019, Amin Arabshahi, the director of the IRGC-affiliated Tasnim news agency in Khorasan Province, tweeted about the importance of Fujairah as "the sole lifeline for the export of oil from the UAE and Saudi Arabia", and added that "the guys of the Islamic Resistance set fire" to the port. The US "should know that the war started years ago. We are in its final moments."

Also on May 12, 2019, Hamed Rahim-Pour, the editor of the international section of the IRGC-affiliated Khorasan Daily, noted that "all our options are on the table" in the aftermath of the attacks on both Yanbu and Fujairah. The oil exported through these two ports was meant "to replace Iranian oil. They received such a blow that they didn't understand where it came from!"

On May 14, 2019, he addressed the coming escalation. "The scope of the [US] war against Iran should not be defined only by gigantic US aircraft carriers, or [its] strategic bombers stationed in Qatar, or the F-35 fighter planes. The range and scope of the possible war against Iran may be defined by quiet infiltrations at Fujairah, Yanbu, and Golan, and dozens of other points in the region."

Also on May 14, 2019, Hesameddin Ashena, a senior political adviser to Iranian Pres. Hassan Rouhani, responded to a Tweet from US Pres. Donald Trump. "You wanted a better deal with Iran. Looks like you are going to get a war instead. That's what happens when you listen to the mustache. Good luck in 2020!"

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Ultimately, and even if for only a short time, Iran and its proxies were able to shut down completely the oil exports of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States from non-Strait of Hormuz venues. With the viable Iranian threat to shipping via the Strait of Hormuz undisputed, Tehran had proven its point: Iran could shut down the export of oil from the entire Arabian Peninsula.

Tehran's overall approach is based on the "war on oil" doctrine adopted in the Summer of 2005. Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, then the Expediency Council Chairman and Iran's most influential strategist, articulated the importance of a national oil war strategy. He called for a comprehensive war plan — a "Big Bang" strategy — which would drastically alter the strategic posture in the Middle East and the global confrontation with the US-led West, by depriving the West of stable oil supplies. The "war on oil" was adopted as the national strategy by then Pres. Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad.

The strategy is still valid.



The strategy was based on a three tiering approach.

The first Tier/Ring — The Core — aims to attack and disrupt the production and transporting of oil and gas in the areas immediately surrounding Iran. Tehran planned on implementing its contingency plans through various forces, from overt and covert acts of war by Iranian forces to a myriad of terrorist strikes and covert operations by a web of both Shi'ite and Sunni Islamist-jihadist groups. The main missions of the Iranian forces and their proxies included blocking the Strait of Hormuz and destroying oil installations in the Persian Gulf, sinking tankers in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, shelling oil installations in the eastern parts of the Arabian Peninsula (should terrorism fail), and covertly assisting Iraqi forces in destroying Iraq's energy infrastructure.

The special training programs which were established in Winter 2005-06 to facilitate implementation of the "war on oil" have vastly expanded since then.

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The region's states are cognizant of the Iranian designs and Tehran's determination to implement them. Even Iran's closest allies are concerned about the consequences of a major escalation in a clash with the US. Hence, on May 12, 2019, Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani went to Tehran on what was supposed to be a secret visit. According to Qatari senior officials, he came "to help head off the deepening crisis between the US, Iran and regional powers". He offered Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif to "open new avenues to resolve the growing crisis between Iran and the United States and ease the volatile situation" before it was too late.

Acknowledging the importance of the new *bloc* created between Iran, Turkey, and Qatar, Foreign Minister Mohammed al-Thani promised to work out modalities for preventing the US from using the Al-Udeid air base. He pleaded for time to defuse Washington, and urged Iran to refrain from escalating the war on oil in the near future — particularly in the Persian Gulf area.

For Tehran, however, there remains an unresolved issue: How to handle the US forces deployed throughout the Middle East, and not just in the Persian Gulf area.

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Indeed, US forces take an active part in blocking the advance of Iranian and Iran-proxy forces in Syria, Iraq, and, increasingly, Yemen. US forces train and equip local proxies which clash with Iran's Shi'ite militias. In many cases, the US provides heavy artillery and air support to proxy forces in both Syria and Iraq when they confront Shi'ite militias.

The question arose in early April 2019, once Tehran committed to escalating the confrontation with Saudi Arabia, including toppling the House of al-Saud. Until the Spring of 2019, the Iranians and their proxies were extremely cautious when confronting US forces, but the anticipated assertiveness necessitated a new policy.

By mid-April 2019, the multitude of the Iranian and Iran-proxy operations envisaged by Qods Force Commander Maj.-Gen. Qassem Soleimani and his staff strongly suggested the possibility of localized friction with US forces throughout the greater Middle East. Having consulted with the top leadership in Tehran, Soleimani authorized Iranian and Iran-proxy forces to clash with US forces if they operated as a trip-wire aimed to prevent Iranian operations and Iran's ascent, and if the US forces actively supported (especially by artillery and air strikes) local anti-Iran forces.

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The reverberations of this decision were the crux of the intelligence warnings the US received from Israel.

By early May 2019, Tehran became even more confident in its ability to withstand localized fighting with US forces. On April 28-29, 2019, the Turkish military killed a US soldier in Kobane, northern Syria. He was a member of the 101st Airborne Division. He was killed while with the US-sponsored, predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The Turkish military attacked the Kurdish positions. The next day, the US only rushed to conceal the incident and did not even protest the Turkish attack on the Kurdish forces.

Hence, Soleimani and IRGC Commander Maj.-Gen. Hossein Salami decided to further revisit the restraining orders on the Iranian and Iran-proxy forces. Given the high stakes involved — the strategic Iranian surge to regional prominence throughout the greater Middle East — Soleimani and Salami concluded that the risk of friction and localized clashes was warranted. Khamenei agreed with the IRGC commanders and endorsed their audacity. With a stronger mandate from Khamenei, Soleimani has been traveling in Iraq and Syria since early May 2019, coordinating with his allies and proxies the next moves.

In lieu of Khamenei's instructions, the Iranian surge seems likely to keep expanding and escalating.

Tehran is capitalizing on the need for Iranian and Iran-proxy forces in Idlib as the Syrian offensive escalates. Tehran is also emboldened by the growing vulnerability and coming implosion of Saudi Arabia as a result of the new purges by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman al-Sa'ud. Indeed, Saudi opposition officials concluded after May 10, 2019, that Saudi Arabia could not face Iran successfully.

A study by current and former Saudi senior officials stated that "Saudi Arabia is not prepared for an international confrontation with Iran, because the economy, military, and internal front [the tribal population] are not in the support of the government." Tehran obtained a copy of the study. Hence, as Iran is getting more audacious and assertive, the likelihood of a clash with US forces is growing.

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By May 15, 2019, Tehran was undoubtedly not only in its ability to withstand the US hostility, but also to withstand political-economic US pressure.

This is because of the latest developments in Saudi, Russia. On May 10, 2019, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi issued a joint statement. It stated: "To strengthen the comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination between the two countries."

A key issue was addressing the freezing US sanction price in the Persian Gulf. Russia and the PRC decided not to permit the US to impose the nuclear Administration in Tehran. Both countries agreed to their long-term interests and the economic prosperity of a friendly neighbor as a coastal power in the Persian Gulf and the consolidation of the Islamic Republic. According to Russian and PRC senior officials, in the next part of their talks, Lavrov and Wang Yi decided to give Iran "guaranteed" of support in the event the US moved to strengthen and attempt a "regime change" "the bottom line," the senior officials asserted, was that "Russia China will not allow Iran to be destroyed." Significantly, Lavrov consulted with Putin's nuclear policy before consulting to the past guidelines with Wang Yi.

According to the PRC senior officials, before leaving Beijing, Wang Yi was provided with a report about Iran. A study of Iran's economy concluded that "oil sanctions helped Iran's economic recovery" and that there was no danger of imminent collapse. A study by the PRC's PLA General Staff and Military Intelligence concluded that "The US cannot afford to engage Iran, and it likely to be a strategic mistake." The report stated that "Washington does not estimate to control over this risky process and possibly undermine the determination of countries to defend their core interests." Another senior official asserted that Wang Yi should "not underestimate US wealth, military power, and its potential as a dangerous nation."

Hence, there was the danger of an escalation of violence unless the US was contained and contained.

These studies convinced the PRC to join the US in the US in adopting a strong policy to guarantee Iran's survival. Iran's leaders were immediately notified in the Russian PRC "guarantee."

On May 14, 2019, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo held meetings in Saudi with Putin and Lavrov. They held lengthy and largely unfrustrated discussions on a host of issues in which both countries strongly disagreed. According to Russian senior officials, both Putin and Lavrov expressed Russia's strong opposition to the US activities in the Persian Gulf and reiterated the Russian and PRC's commitment to the Administration in Tehran. Pompeo shrugged off the Russian position and emphasized the US' resolve to address the Iranian threat seriously. After Pompeo left Saudi, Russian presidential aide Yuri Ushakov suggested that the discussion on Iran was "interesting."

Meanwhile, Tehran's late on the reports from Saudi was that the US would not abandon the confrontation and that the Russian and the PRC would prevent serious damage to Iran if there were major setbacks. Under such conditions, Iran could be more assertive, without a higher risk of escalation.

Hence, on the night of May 15, 2019, senior commanders made sudden assertions in closed meetings with senior officials about Iran's readiness for an inevitable war. Iranian Defense Minister Farzad Karubi conveyed confidence: "Today the Islamic Republic often needs the peace of defense, military expenditures to counter any threat or act of aggression," he said. He believed that US setbacks in the Gulf region were the reason for the nuclear crisis. "The defeat of the recent battle against Israel in the region in periods in Iraq and Syria, dealt a heavy blow to the image of the US and the regional governments regarding Israel, and after the situation and before the Americans indicated an easing of tension, all and all are not nation through using economic tools." Once sanctions lifted, the US would be a military confrontation. Whatever the case, Karubi concluded: "The Islamic Republic would defend the American Jewish state."

IRGC Commander Salami was an Iranian training camp in the United States and said: "We are on the edge of a full-scale confrontation with the enemy," he said. "The Islamic Republic is at the most decisive moment of its history because of enemy pressure." He dealt with this aspect: "This moment is historic — because the enemy has stepped into the field of confrontation with us with all its possible capacity — to the most decisive moment of the Islamic Republic," Salami asserted. "This war is against the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, it's against the American empire."

Meanwhile, Qasbi Force Commander Salami continued to travel around, consulting with his commanders — both Iranian and Iranian — and preparing them for the next phase of the strategic surge of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

By 'Israel' Daily News via Defense & Foreign Affairs (Special Analysis)

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