

CSAG INFORMATION PAPER:

Pirates of the Middle East Gulfs

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.

1. **Subject.** Pirates of the Middle East Gulfs
2. **Purpose.** This paper aims to present the CSAG’s analysis regarding how Iran is using a calculated provocative approach, to enhance their bargaining power by creating leverage during negotiations, to achieve what is in Iran’s best interest.¹
3. **Introduction.** In July 2023, Iran attempted to seize two oil tankers in international waters near the Strait of Hormuz. Iran has a long history of using the maritime domain to achieve its aims. An integral part of Iran’s negotiation strategy is to first increase its bargaining power in pursuit of their interest. Harassing SLOCs, and specifically capturing tankers has become part of their playbook.
4. **Facts.**²
 - a. Following the seizure of an Iranian tanker by the UK, which was suspected of breaking EU sanctions, Iran seized a British-flagged tanker in the Strait of Hormuz in July 2019, claiming the tanker was seized for “breaking three regulations: shutting down its GPS, going through the exit of the Strait of Hormuz rather than the entrance, and ignoring warnings.”³
 - b. In January 2021, Iran seized a South Korean tanker, accusing it of “polluting the waters with chemicals.” Its release came after South Korea promised to try to secure the release of Iranian funds frozen in South Korean banks under US sanctions.⁴

¹ Bargaining power is the relative ability of parties in a negotiation to influence, persuade or secure an agreement with terms that best suit their objectives. The bargaining power of each party rests on several factors and can change during the negotiation process due to changing circumstances; Kuhn, James W., Lewin, David, McNulty, Paul J. (July 1983). “Neil W. Chamberlain: A Retrospective Analysis of His Scholarly Work and Influence.” *British Journal of Industrial Relations*. 21 (2): 143–160. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8543.1983.tb00127.x.

² These are only a few examples.

³ BBC News, “Iran Seizes British Tanker in Strait of Hormuz,” July 20, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-49053383> (accessed July 11, 2023).

⁴ Jake Kwon, “Iran Releases Seized South Korean Tanker Hankuk Chemi,” *CNN*, April 9, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/09/asia/south-korea-iran-tanker-intl-hnk/index.html> (accessed July 11, 2023).

- c. According to Iran, the attempted seizure of one of two tankers on July 5, 2023, was initiated by a court order, after the tanker “allegedly collided with an Iranian vessel.” A forthright US Navy response prevented the seizure of the tankers.⁵
- d. On July 6, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) forcibly seized a tanker allegedly holding smuggled fuel (No further details about the vessel are publicly known).
- e. Recent Iranian activities have been more aggressive. In the July 2023 incident, the US Navy also responded more firmly to Iranian aggression.
- f. There appears to be an uptick in maritime incidents coinciding with the nuclear negotiations talks including 2013 (JCPOA), 2021 (“JCPOA 2.0”), and 2023 (“JCPOA 3.0”).

So what: Iran is clearly using the maritime domain “to collect more bargaining chips.” By using a thin veil of international law as pretext it sends a clear signal of its intent while attempting to minimize “blow back” by remaining sub-threshold.

5. Assessment.

- a. Harassing SLOCs is a tried and tested low cost, high payoff play by the Iranian regime.
- b. The high payoff is derived from the fact that the Arabian Gulf SLOCs are strategic waterways, through which pass 30 percent of the global crude oil trade. A part of the low cost is the length that this strategic chain runs past Iranian territorial waters, increasing vessel vulnerability with the challenge of physically defending them.
- c. Other methods, like the capturing of coalition drones and kidnapping of journalists and tourists may support their modus operandi of gaining bargaining tools for negotiations, could be higher cost in terms of opportunity and complexity of execution.
- d. CENTCOM Commander’s priority #1 is to deter Iran. The IRGC commander’s priority may be to challenge the US. His #1 option for doing so appears to be harassing SLOCs.
- e. The KSA-Iran rapprochement, brokered by China, may bring a reduction in Iranian malign activities. Iran has proposed a maritime security construct with regional countries.⁶ There is a danger that this construct is used as a pretext to further harass SLOC.

So what: The seizure of tankers bolsters Iran’s bargaining power and serves its broader geopolitical objectives. Iran is sending a message that it is capable of disrupting international trade and the global energy market, projecting power beyond its immediate borders. In this way, Iran is influencing the negotiation environment and allows Iran to shape the regional/global dynamics in its favor. China will be watching action and counteraction closely.

6. Conclusion.

- a. Iran’s increasing malign activities in the maritime domain pose a challenge not easily met with current force levels. This could weaken the US position in the region.
- b. With China watching, a weakened regional position could have global consequences.

⁵ Reuters, “Iran Seizes Tanker with 900 Tons of ‘Smuggled Fuel’, Fars Reports,” July 6, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-seizes-tanker-with-900-tons-smuggled-fuel-fars-news-2023-07-07/> (accessed July 11, 2023).

⁶ Agnes Helou, “US Says Iran’s Claimed Naval Alliance with Saudi, Gulf Nations Defies Reason,” *Breaking Defense*, June 3, 2023, <https://breakingdefense.com/2023/06/exclusive-us-says-irans-claimed-naval-alliance-with-saudi-gulf-nations-defies-reason/> (accessed July 11, 2023).

- c. Given the consequences, USCENTCOM must see defense of the SLOCs as a “no fail” mission and communicate it as such.
- d. Consistently calling out Iranian malign activity and encouraging allies and partners to do likewise, while encouraging allies and partners to find novel solutions to the challenge, will assist.
- e. By investing in partners, USCENTCOM can foster collective deterrence and improve response options through sharing intelligence and combined action. Based on the success of TF-59, TF-39 and TF-99 will be important platforms to encourage allies and partners to provide this collective response.
- f. Emphasizing the importance of constructs like the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) creates a tangible construct which forges partner cohesion in the US-led Gulf Maritime Coalition.