

## CSAG INFORMATION PAPER:

# Is CENTCOM Prescribing the ‘Suitable Medicine’ to Deter Iran?

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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:** Is CENTCOM Prescribing the ‘Suitable Medicine’ to Deter Iran?
2. **Purpose:** To present CSAG analysis of the recent deployment of additional US troops and assets in the Middle East (ME) to deter Iran, within the context of the current strategic and operational environment, and to draw pertinent conclusions for US CENTCOM.
3. **Introduction:** Iran's desire to establish itself as the dominant power in the ME through a variety of means, including by operating in asymmetric and gray zone domains, has contributed to regional instability.<sup>1</sup> Since 2021, Iran harassed or seized nearly 20 merchant vessels, presenting a clear threat to regional maritime security and the global economy, which the US and its allies have not deterred.
4. **Reviewing the Recent Deployments through a Historical Lens:**
  - a. The current US disposition against Iran’s threat may draw some parallels with the tanker wars 35 years ago.
  - b. Three maritime operations<sup>2</sup> were launched in the 1980s by the US against Iran’s attempts to disrupt commercial sea lines of communication (SLOC).
  - c. During Operation Earnest Will, the US did not deploy the military on the tankers being escorted — the US hasn't put troops on merchant vessels since WWII.
  - d. **Key Consideration:** Iran has progressed considerably in the military and technological domains. However, it is telling that Iran has chosen not to use advanced missile systems or its arsenal of sea mines to disrupt shipping despite considerably less US maritime presence poised for deterrence in the Arabian Gulf. Iran’s most recent seizures could simply be to goad the US into belligerence or demonstrate capability and assert authority regionally.

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<sup>1</sup> Operating in the Gray Zone: Countering Iran's Asymmetric Way of War; The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Jan 7 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/operating-gray-zone-countering-irans-asymmetric-way-war> (accessed on 23 Aug 23)

<sup>2</sup> Deterrence Without Escalation, *National Defense University Press*, Jul 27 2022, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3106465/deterrence-without-escalation-fresh-insights-into-us-decisionmaking-during-oper/>(accessed on 23 Aug 23). Operation Earnest Will, involved deployment of US warships in the Gulf (1987 to 1988) to escort Kuwaiti tankers that Iran was targeting during Iran-Iraq War. Operation Prime Chance was launched to expose and prevent Iranian minelaying in the Gulf. Operation Praying Mantis, which the US launched four days after guided-missile frigate USS Samuel B. Roberts struck an Iranian mine on April 14, 1988. It was the US.'s largest naval action since WW II

## 5. Reading the Environment / Timing of the Decision:

- a. The idea of mobilizing more US capability in the region is externally perceived as seeking multiple dividends, including deterrence against Iran's hostile actions at sea and countering the abandonment perception to regain the confidence of Gulf partners upset with the US' previous force reductions in the region.<sup>3</sup>
- b. Despite recent initiatives<sup>4</sup> to deter Iran, the US has not been able to fully curtail Iranian malign activity and Iran continues to enjoy considerable freedom of action and initiative.
- c. Regional partners have begun to communicate with Iran overtly. It is likely that this is to assume a fresh start and runs counter to US intentions to isolate Iran.
- d. The Iran-KSA détente has constrained how Iran can assert dominance in the region. However, its recent diplomatic overtures towards multiple countries are aimed at showcasing itself as a 'defying state', challenging its isolation by the West.<sup>5</sup>
- e. US reinforcements in the ME coincides with the deadline for the October 2023 expiration of the UN / EU sanctions against Iran under the 2015 nuclear agreement.<sup>6</sup>
- f. Reported back-channel communication between the US and Iran on a 'potential lesser agreement' to dilute nuclear stockpiles may not progress. However, the news of the prisoner exchange between Iran and the US is a positive development.<sup>7</sup>
- g. The Ukraine war created strategic space for an isolated Iran to seek Russian and Chinese overtures.
- h. UAE recently withdrew national representatives from a US-led maritime security coalition (created to deter Iran's activities) due to inaction by the US against Iran after the seizure of a commercial ship.<sup>8</sup>
- i. Iranian claims to the Al-Durra gas field jointly developed between Kuwait and KSA<sup>9</sup> could affect the recently improved relations between the two former belligerents.
- j. The Biden Administration is endeavoring to normalize relations between KSA and Israel; the proposal will focus on US security guarantees against threats from Iran.<sup>10</sup>
- k. The shadow war<sup>11</sup> between Iran and Israel continues; Israel seeks to avoid a potential multi-fronted conflict, including Iran and Hezbollah, amid concerns about Iran's nuclear program.
- l. Challenge to US hegemony and general disaffection with the West is not just manifest in the ME but is in evidence elsewhere. The latest political events in African countries (neighboring the ME), suggest a shift in influence away from the former colonial power

<sup>3</sup>UAE No Longer Participating in U.S.-led Maritime Coalition Against Iran, HAARETZ, May 31, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/2023-05-31/ty-article/uae-no-longer-participating-in-u-s-led-maritime-coalition-against-iran> (accessed on 23 Aug 23).

<sup>4</sup> Actions like targeted killing of Qasem Soleimani, deployment of Task Force TF-59 and constituting framework like Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD)

<sup>5</sup> Iranian President, undertook almost 14 foreign trips in the 21 months since the start of his presidency, MAZIAR Motamedi, ALJAZEERA June 12 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/12/irans-raisi-after-strategic-ties-in-south-america-tour> (accessed on 23 Aug 23)

<sup>6</sup> The EU sanctions "called upon" Iran not to develop ballistic missiles that could carry nuclear weapons; The Guardian, Jul 2, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/02/uk-to-breach-iran-nuclear-deal-with-refusal-to-lift-sanctions> (accessed on 23 Aug 23)

<sup>7</sup> Iran, U.S. advance deal to swap prisoners, free oil funds, The Washington Post, Aug 10, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/08/10/iran-releases-americans-evin-prison-house-arrest/>(accessed on 23 Aug 23)

<sup>8</sup> UAE withdraws from US-led maritime coalition, Aljazeera, May 31 2023, [UAE withdraws from US-led maritime coalition | News | Al Jazeera](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/05/31/uae-withdraws-from-us-led-maritime-coalition)

<sup>9</sup>Saudi Arabia, Kuwait's gas dispute with Iran tests recent detente, Al-Monitor, Jul 9, 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/07/saudi-arabia-kuwaits-gas-dispute-iran-tests-recent-detente> (accessed on 23 Aug 23)

<sup>10</sup> US says no framework agreed yet for Israel-Saudi normalization deal, ALJAZEERA, Aug 9, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/9/us-says-no-framework-agreed-yet-for-israel-saudi-normalisation-deal>(accessed on 23 Aug 23)

<sup>11</sup> Iran claims to nab 14 members of 'terrorist team' linked to Israel, The Times Of Israel, Aug 24, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-claims-to-nab-14-members-of-terrorist-team-linked-to-israel/>(accessed on 23 Aug 23)

France and the West in general while getting closer towards Russia.<sup>12</sup>

**6. Assessment:** There are significant complexities related to the recent US increased presence in the ME:

- a. The recent US deployment is seen as an attempt to 'raise the bar' and showcase its presence back in the ME, while neutralizing China's recent diplomatic move between Iran and KSA.
- b. By deploying force elements to the region, the US may succeed in sending a clear message to China and Russia that it is still very engaged in the ME and does not intend to give up its status of global power.
- c. The US' application of both diplomatic and military pressure no doubt work in tandem to signal to Iran to use restraint. Response / opinion among the regional partners has been muted.
- d. There has been limited success in expanding regional partners' ability to defend themselves, with the US having to deploy its own capabilities, exposing its own forces to risk.
- e. The US buildup can be interpreted as the US pre-occupation with Israel, both joined against Iran; US-Israel visits / exercises may be perceived as a pre-cursor for either a joint attack or an Israeli-led, US-supported attack on Iranian nuclear facilities.
- f. There are alternatives to the deployment of the US military as a tanker guard force; tanker companies could be encouraged to deploy civilian armed security forces trained by the militaries of their respective countries.
- g. It is not clear where the threshold for force levels lies to deter Iran. Increasing force levels may result in escalation rather than de-escalation.
- h. An increase in US force elements in the ME is considered as an attempt to ward off two future challenges to US leadership, namely an Iranian proposal for a regional maritime construct and a possible increase of Chinese forces in the Gulf.
- i. Additional US forces could be an outcome of Iran's 'offensive baited gambit'<sup>13</sup> luring the US; a joint Russian-Iranian plan to deeply embroil the US in ME, seeking to distract attention from its Ukrainian front.
- j. The varying deductions drawn from the most recent increase in US forces in the Gulf region suggest that any STRATCOM efforts are not effective in signaling US intent.

**7. Consequences:**

- a. The US reinforcement affords greater operational flexibility and deterrence; however, it may also be counter-productive, subject as those assets are to possible direct confrontation with competitor force elements.
- b. US presence may entice hostile actors (Russia, Iranian proxies, ISIS) in the ME without beneficial outcomes.
- c. The positioning of additional US troops may force Iran into limited cooperation with the UN nuclear inspectors. Conversely, it could encourage an 'irrational Iran' to continue to maneuver toward nuclear 'breakout'.

<sup>12</sup>'Down With France': Former Colonies in Africa Demand a Reset, The New York Times, Apr 14, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/14/world/africa/france-macron-africa-colonies.html> (accessed on 23 Aug 23)

<sup>13</sup><https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/combats-studies-institute/csi-books/deep-maneuver-lsco-volume-5.pdf> (accessed on 23 Aug 23)

- d. The idea of placing US Marines and sailors on civilian tankers could be perceived as unprecedented and may embroil other neutral host countries.
- e. To counteract the recent increase in the US presence in the Gulf, Iran may be adopting a multifaceted, hybrid strategy:
  - (1) It conducted a naval drill on Abu Musa Island, featuring the use of combat troops, drones, missiles, vessels, and electromagnetic warfare; more such drills may ensue.
  - (2) It has equipped its navy with drones and long-range missiles (600-mile).
  - (3) Iran may focus on more engagement with the Gulf countries to challenge US influence while amplifying the narrative that peace, stability and progress in the region can be attained without the presence of foreigners.

## 8. Conclusions:

- a. An additional US presence can be seen as a positive step and as a 'credible deterrence' that could push Iran to seek a diplomatic alternative, instead of maintaining a hostile approach; a 'delicate balance' is vital for the US to avoid conflict and prevent the region from trending towards instability.
- b. The latest force projection can readily be perceived as the much-needed reassurance of the US commitment towards regional security, in contrast to the absence of a US response to missile attacks on UAE in the past<sup>14</sup> However, the regional partners expect this force to act with restraint against any Iranian aggression.
- c. Whether the deployment of additional forces will deter Iran or bring more instability to the region is finely balanced; the US may have to remain prepared for the risks and possible 'tit for tat' actions of Iran threatening the SLOCs.
- d. The positioning of US Marines on civil ships against a hostile state in international waters is unprecedented; if approved, it may require comprehensive consultation across the region to ward off unwanted second order consequences. A simple brief to the representatives of the AOR partner countries at CENTCOM would be a pragmatic step to avoid skepticism, doubts about US aims, objectives pursued and the end state of the 'present build up plan'.
- e. A well-articulated and prudent STRATCOM is essential to convey US intentions and counter propaganda and narratives by hostile elements.

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<sup>14</sup> [https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Wild-Blue-Yonder/Article-Display/Article/3071639/three-broken-teacups-the-crisis-of-us-uae-relations/#\\_ftn2](https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Wild-Blue-Yonder/Article-Display/Article/3071639/three-broken-teacups-the-crisis-of-us-uae-relations/#_ftn2)