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NATO Brief No. III: NATO's Relationship with Iran

The 1979 Islamic Revolution saw Iran begin to expand its ideological aims beyond its borders and into the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East.¹ Iran first began to provide logistical assistance to Lebanon's Hezbollah in an attempt to "act as a proxy army against Israel," but the 1980s saw a war with Iraq followed by the United States' (US) policy of dual containment in the 1990s, which stunted the geopolitical influence that the state was attempting to establish.² However, upon the collapse of the Baathist regime in Iraq, a power vacuum was opened up in the region, one that was accelerated by the 2011 departure of US troops.³ Iran saw this not only as a now-secured western flank, but also as an ability to engage in interference in local affairs.⁴ Iran's support of Syria President Bashar al-Assad led to years of involvement in Syria's civil war, culminating in their joined success in Russia in recapturing Aleppo from anti-government forces and securing Assad's victory.⁵ Iran has expanded its use of militant proxy groups as well, with the government providing military support for Shia militia groups in Iraq and for Houthi insurgents in Yemen.⁶ These alliances that Iran has formed has repeatedly put them at odds with such Western powers as the US.⁷ Tensions were further inflamed in 2018 by the US' withdrawal from the 2015 Nuclear Agreement with Iran and implementation of sanctions; Iran responded by refusing to abide by several of the key commitments in the nuclear agreement.⁸ These strains would begin to substantially increase following several attacks on oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman since May 2019, with Iran facing accusations that they were behind the blasts.⁹ Both the US and the United Kingdom (UK) strengthened their presence in the region in response to these attacks, but on July 4, 2019, Iran intercepted and seized a tanker flying a British flag in the Strait of Hormuz, seemingly in retaliation for the UK's detaining of an Iranian tanker near Gibraltar.¹⁰ The hostile actions and rhetoric of Iran have not abated, with the US playing a major role in the continued intensification of the clashes.

While NATO has not had many direct interactions with Iran, its operations in proximity to the state as well as the activities of some of NATO's Member States have set up scenarios in which NATO could very well be forced to confront Iran directly. After the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan in the mid-1990s, NATO and the US intervened in 2001.¹¹ Originally, Iran worked with the US to help Afghanistan establish a new government after the Taliban was ousted, but its relationship with the Taliban began to change when it became apparent that the US and NATO were going to stay in Afghanistan for some time.¹² As Iran's relationship with the US began to sour, it began to view the Taliban as a "useful tool to counter US influence on its borders" and provided military aid to the Taliban.¹³ The most significant link between NATO and Iran is not the organization itself, but its members.

¹ Emmanuel Karagiannis, "The Rise of Iran as a Regional Power: Shia Empowerment and its Limits," *NATO Review*, last modified February 24, 2016, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2016/02/24/the-rise-of-iran-as-a-regional-power-shia-empowerment-and-its-limits/index.html>.

² Karagiannis, "The Rise of Iran as a Regional Power."

³ Karagiannis, "The Rise of Iran as a Regional Power."

⁴ Karagiannis, "The Rise of Iran as a Regional Power."

⁵ Itamar Rabinovich, "Order from Chaos: How Iran's Regional Ambitions Have Developed since 1979," *Brookings*, last modified January 24, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/01/24/how-irans-regional-ambitions-have-developed-since-1979/>.

⁶ "The Top Conflicts to Watch in 2019: Iran," *Council on Foreign Relations*, last modified January 15, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/top-conflicts-watch-2019-iran>.

⁷ "The Top Conflicts to Watch in 2019: Iran."

⁸ "The Top Conflicts to Watch in 2019: Iran."

⁹ "Iran and the Crisis in the Gulf Explained," *BBC*, last modified August 19, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-49069083>.

¹⁰ "Iran and the Crisis in the Gulf Explained."

¹¹ Scott Worden, "Iran and Afghanistan's Long, Complicated History," *United States Institute of Peace*, last modified June 14, 2018, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2018/06/iran-and-afghanistans-long-complicated-history>.

¹² Worden, "Iran and Afghanistan's Long, Complicated History."

¹³ Worden, "Iran and Afghanistan's Long, Complicated History."

While the UK and the US have both been entwined in skirmishes with Iran this year, the relationship between the US and Iran has quickly become one of the most antagonistic. On May 8 2018, the US withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which had created the end of sanctions that had been placed on Iran in exchange for tight restrictions on Iran's nuclear program.¹⁴ The US placed the harshest sanctions that Iran had ever experienced in 2018, leading to Iran seeing almost 83 percent of their trade with 28 European Union (EU) Member States drop between January 2018 and January 2019; European states also ceased buying oil from Iran, further threatening considerable harm to their economy.¹⁵ US President Donald Trump announced on April 8, 2019, that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), an arm of the Iranian military, would be designated as a "foreign terrorist organization," leading to economic and travel sanctions on the IRGC that went into effect on April 15.¹⁶ In May, the US announced a plan to send an aircraft carrier strike group and Air Force bombers to the Middle East, and in June, 1,000 additional troops were approved to be deployed to the Middle East.¹⁷ Upon the shooting down of an unmanned US drone by Iran, President Trump approved a military strike on Iran that he called off shortly before it was about to begin on June 21; Iran responded by emphasizing its preparedness to respond to any threat by the US against them.¹⁸ Tensions only increased when the US issued a warrant to seize an Iranian tanker that had been suspected of violating EU sanctions by bringing oil to Syria but was set to be released, claiming that it was linked with the IRGC.¹⁹ At this time, there has yet to be any substantial talks between the two states to deescalate the situation, and there is little indication that there will be any cooling down in the near future.

As tensions between Iran and the US have escalated, NATO Member States have been relatively hesitant to get involved in the conflict. The US' acting Defense Secretary, Mark Esper, met with the alliance in June 2019 in an attempt to gain support for a "global effort to secure international waterways against threats from Iran," but left with little success.²⁰ NATO Member States have publicly expressed a hesitance to engage in any military efforts against Iran, with the European states instead wishing to place more emphasis on "minimizing the chances of war," especially after Trump had approved and then withdrawn an order for a military retaliation against Iran's strike against the drone.²¹ Upon the seizure of the British-flagged tanker by Iran, NATO released a statement condemning the action taken by Iran, calling it a "clear challenge to international freedom of navigation," but emphasized that they supported diplomatic efforts to resolve the situation.²² NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, when asked about the tensions regarding the Strait of Hormuz, told reporters that while there were NATO allies present there, NATO itself was not part of the presence, but noted that "we are following the situation very closely because freedom of navigation is of course important for NATO."²³

With no end in sight to the tensions between Iran and the US and with the increasingly aggressive maneuvers taken by Iran in the Strait of Hormuz, NATO finds itself in a precarious situation. Should outright conflict break out between Iran and the United States or Iran and any other NATO ally, the obligations outlined in Article V of NATO's Charter will undoubtedly be invoked. Should this happen, the expectation of military responses from NATO's Member States will be realized, something that has not happened since the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001. Despite that fact that NATO and a majority of its Member States are actively

¹⁴ "US-Iran Standoff: A Timeline of Key Events," *Al Jazeera*, last modified September 25, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/06/iran-standoff-timeline-key-events-190622063937627.html>.

¹⁵ Alex Vatanka, "Stuck in the Middle With Iran," *Foreign Affairs*, last modified June 25, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2019-06-25/stuck-middle-iran>.

¹⁶ "US-Iran Standoff: A Timeline of Key Events," *Al Jazeera*, last modified September 25, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/06/iran-standoff-timeline-key-events-190622063937627.html>.

¹⁷ "US-Iran Standoff."

¹⁸ "US-Iran Standoff."

¹⁹ "US Issues Warrant to Seize Iranian Tanker off Gibraltar," *CNBC*, last modified August 17, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/17/us-issues-warrant-to-seize-iranian-tanker-off-gibraltar.html>.

²⁰ Lolita C. Baldor, "U.S. Gets No Commitment from NATO for Help on Iran Threat," *PBS*, last modified June 27, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/u-s-gets-no-commitment-from-nato-for-help-on-iran-threat>.

²¹ Baldor, "U.S. Gets No Commitment from NATO for Help on Iran Threat."

²² "Statement by the NATO Spokesperson on the Seizure of Two Ships in the Strait of Hormuz," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, last modified July 20, 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_168036.htm?selectedLocale=en.

²³ "Joint Press Point with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and Australian Defence Minister Linda Reynolds," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, last modified August 7, 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_168346.htm?selectedLocale=en.

advising taking diplomatic steps only, the increased military presence of Member States such as the US and the UK in the Middle East and the continued escalation of both reactionary measures from Iran and the United States pose a very real threat of setting off an armed conflict. NATO Member States are thus tasked with both attempting to advise their fellow Member State who are involved with Iran to solve issues diplomatically while also preparing themselves for any potential crisis that could erupt from the ongoing confrontations and the implications for NATO's involvement should this occur.