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Introduction

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United Nations Security Council's (USSC) Western permanent members have been tense at best, and outright hostile at worst. From the Iran Hostage Crisis of 1979 and the so-called "Tanker War" of the 1980s, to its alleged support of the Houthi rebels in the Yemeni Civil War, Iran has seen both active and passive conflict with the West and continues to do so today.¹ The regional power struggle with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and ongoing challenges with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) mean that Iran and its actions will remain a prominent topic for discussion and potential action by the Security Council for the foreseeable future.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and Iran's Nuclear Program

On January 16, 2016, the JCPOA entered into force with Iran and the P5+1 parties.² The agreement limited the amount of uranium Iran was able to enrich and to what degree, closed specific nuclear reactors and converted others to purely research facilities, curtailed centrifuge development and use, submitted aspects of its nuclear program to inspections, and relieved economic sanctions from the United States (US) and European Union (EU).³ The JCPOA was designed to operate for a period of ten years, with various aspects of it (such as missile research limitations) being relieved throughout its enforcement.⁴ The UNSC endorsed the agreement with S/RES/2231 on July 20, 2015.⁵

In May 2018, the US announced its intention to withdraw from the JCPOA and re-impose sanctions on Iran.⁶ While other Member States remain parties to the agreement and have taken steps to try and uphold it, this exit has eroded the effectiveness of the JCPOA.⁷ In July 2019, Iran breached two central commitments it made when under the agreement: it increased its stockpile of low-enriched uranium beyond 300 kilogram (kg), and it began enriching uranium beyond the limits allowed under the agreement.⁸ Following these moves, which have been reported as calculated attempts aimed at persuading the European members of the JCPOA to bring the US back into the agreement, the EU has warned that the violations might force it to extricate itself from the agreement as well; it warned Iran that it "would put the issue of Iranian non-compliance into the agreement's formal dispute mechanism if the next Iranian move away from the deal is significant."⁹

The breakdown of the JCPOA has created grave consequences for the Middle East and the world and may produce still more in the future. Though Iran's steps away from the agreement are framed as maneuvers designed to push European states to bring pressure to bear on the US, Iran might continue developing nuclear material past the limits of the JCPOA if it concludes that more drastic developments might achieve that aim. Worries now exist that if Iran's

¹ Sune Engel Rasmussen, "Iran-Aligned Houthis Strike Major Saudi Oil Field," The Wall Street Journal, Dow Jones & Company, August 17, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-aligned-houthis-strike-major-saudi-oilfield-11566043672>.

² "The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance," Arms Control Association, May 2018, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/JCPOA-at-a-glance>.

³ "The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance."

⁴ "The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance."

⁵ "Resolution 2231: Endorsing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," UNSCR, 6 November 2018, [https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/2231\(2015\)](https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/2231(2015)).

⁶ "The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance."

⁷ Zachary Laub, "What Is the Status of the Iran Nuclear Agreement?," Council on Foreign Relations, July 31, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-status-iran-nuclear-agreement>.

⁸ Laub, "What Is the Status of the Iran Nuclear Agreement?"

⁹ Patrick Wintour, "EU Warns Iran It May Be Forced to Withdraw from Nuclear Deal," Guardian News and Media, September 26, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/27/eu-may-be-forced-to-withdraw-from-nuclear-deal-iran-told>.

nuclear program continues to proceed unchecked, and if the sanctions re-imposed by the US do not succeed in forcing Iran to renegotiate the agreement, other Middle Eastern states might begin developing their own nuclear programs, potentially creating a dangerous nuclear arms race in an extremely volatile region. Indeed, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has said that his Member State will pursue nuclear weapons if Iran obtains them, and in late 2017, the US Department of Energy issued approval to six companies to begin "preliminary work on nuclear power ahead of any deal but not ship equipment that would go into a plant."¹⁰ Other Member States may feel compelled to take action as well. In 1981, Israel bombed the Osirak nuclear reactor just miles outside of Baghdad, and in 2007 they conducted airstrikes against a suspected nuclear reactor in eastern Syria.¹¹ If Iranian development continues beyond the thresholds set by the JCPOA, it remains possible that Israel or another Member State might decide that the risk of its obtaining a nuclear weapon is unbearable and take similar actions.¹²

The Collapse of the JCPOA and Rising Regional Tensions

The sanctions imposed by the US after its withdrawal from the JCPOA have dramatically impacted the Iranian economy. The EU, which Iran hoped would continue to grant sanctions relief so long as it abided by the JCPOA's terms, has so far not proved to be a significant outlet for Iranian goods.¹³ Trade between Iran and the EU declined by nearly 83 percent in just one year, as the 28 state bloc sharply reduced the quantity of Iranian oil purchased.¹⁴ Oil exports, Iran's most significant source of national revenue, have decreased to under one million barrels per day from a capacity of over 2.5 million barrels per day in 2018.¹⁵

As Iran's economy contracts and its government is left with fewer options, tensions in the Middle East have begun to mount, creating new worries that direct armed conflict between the US or US-aligned states and Iran would occur.¹⁶ In May 2019, for example, the Iranian government seized the British-flagged oil tanker *Stena Impero* in the Strait of Hormuz, in what many consider a retaliation for the detention of the Iranian tanker *Grace 1* in Gibraltar.¹⁷ The US has also blamed Iran for attacks on oil tankers that occurred in and around the Persian Gulf in May and June.¹⁸ In September, the Abqaiq oil refinery and Khurais Oil Field, two of Saudi Arabia's largest oil production facilities, sustained damage from what were later confirmed as strikes via cruise missiles and suicide drones. The damage temporarily reduced the facilities' output by nearly six million barrels of oil per day, decreasing global oil

¹⁰ Timothy Gardner, "U.S. Approved Secret Nuclear Power Work for Saudi Arabia," Reuters, March 28, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-saudi-nuclear/us-approved-secret-nuclear-power-work-for-saudi-arabia-idUSKCN1R82MG>.

¹¹ "38 Years Later, Pilots Recall How Iran Inadvertently Enabled Osirak Reactor Raid," The Times of Israel, July 10, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/38-years-later-pilots-recall-how-iran-inadvertently-enabled-osirak-reactor-raid/>; "MKs Warned about Syria's Nuke Plans Years before 2007 Reactor Strike – Report," The Times of Israel, June 6, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/mks-warned-of-syrias-nuke-plans-years-before-reactor-strike-report/>.

¹² Jack David, "The Coming Israel-Iran Confrontation," Hudson Institute, February 8, 2012, <https://www.hudson.org/research/8714-the-coming-israel-iran-confrontation>; Whitney Raas and Austin Long, "Osirak Redux? Assessing Israeli Capabilities to Destroy Iranian Nuclear Facilities," *International Security* 31, no. 04 (2007): pp. 7-10.

¹³ Alex Vatanka, "Stuck in the Middle With Iran," Foreign Affairs, Council on Foreign Relations, June 25, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2019-06-25/stuck-middle-iran>.

¹⁴ Vatanka, "Stuck in the Middle With Iran."

¹⁵ Alex Lawler, "Hit by Sanctions and Rising Tensions, Iran's Oil Exports Slide in July," Reuters, July 30, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-oil-iran-exports/hit-by-sanctions-and-rising-tensions-irans-oil-exports-slide-in-july-idUSKCN1UP1UD>;

¹⁶ Dan De Luce, Abigail Williams and Robert Windrem, "Escalating tensions put U.S. and Iran on collision course, experts fear," NBC News, June 14, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/escalating-tensions-put-u-s-iran-collision-course-experts-fear-n1017421>

¹⁷ "Iran Tanker: US Issues Warrant to Seize Grace 1 Supertanker," British Broadcasting Corporation, August 17, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-49379144>.

¹⁸ John Davidson and Mark Hosenball, "U.S. Pulls Staff from Iraq, Says Iran Gave 'Blessing' for Tanker Attacks," Reuters, May 15, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-iran-iraq-embassy/u-s-pulls-some-government-employees-from-iraq-idUSKCN1SL0SX>.

production by five percent.¹⁹ In addition, Iran and the US have shot down one another's reconnaissance drones, nearly resulting in American airstrikes against Iran that were aborted at the last minute.²⁰

Tensions have been further heightened by new deployments of American forces to Saudi Arabia. In response to attacks on its aircraft, Saudi oil facilities, and oil tankers, the US has sent B-1B strategic (nuclear-capable) bombers, F-22A stealth air superiority fighters, EA-18G electronic warfare aircraft, MIM-104 Patriot missile batteries, and a unit of Terminal High Altitude Air Defense missiles, which are designed to shoot down intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) to the area.²¹

Attacks in the Middle East as a result of the rising tensions caused by the collapse of the JCPOA have not been one-sided. Unconfirmed reports indicated that in early October, an Iranian oil tanker was struck by what appear to be missiles in the Red Sea, just off the coast of Saudi Arabia.²² While no state has claimed responsibility, Iran has denied a report that Saudi Arabia was behind the incident, and posited that a terror group was behind the attack.²³ American officials have also recently claimed credit for cyber operations against Iran that are said to be a response to attacks that the US has blamed on the Islamic Republic.²⁴

Conclusion

This report underscores the vitality of continuing the UNSC's efforts to bring peace and stability to the Middle East. As agreements endorsed by S/RES/2231 fall apart, regional tensions continue to rise, bringing with them the possibility of conflicts that could involve not only Middle Eastern Member States, but Member States from all over the world, including superpowers with competing interests. As the world's leading body devoted to international security, the UNSC must act to uphold international law and the safety of all Member States. It is imperative that tensions in the region not be allowed to reach the point of open conflict. To achieve this end goal, the committee should consider the following questions: What measures can be taken to protect safe passage for civilian vessels in the region's international waters? What can be done to identify those responsible for attacks against civilians and Member States and bring them to justice? What role did international agreements and institutions such as the JCPOA play in reducing tensions, and might they play a similar part in settling the situation that exists today? It is this committee's directive to review these and other questions and establish recommendations that will advance this goal, in hopes of fostering a safer and more secure global environment for all its Member States.

¹⁹ Summer Said, Jared Malsin, and Jessica Donati, "U.S. Blames Iran for Attack on Saudi Oil Facilities," The Wall Street Journal, September 14, 2019, https://www.wsj.com/articles/drone-strikes-spark-fires-at-saudi-oil-facilities-11568443375?mod=article_inline.

²⁰ Thomas Gibbons-Neff, David E. Sanger, and Richard Pérez-Peña, "Trump Says U.S. Shot Down Iranian Drone as Both Nations Dig In," The New York Times, July 18, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/18/us/politics/iranian-drone-shot-down.html>.

²¹ David Cenciotti, "Photos of US B-1 Bombers Deploying to Saudi Arabia Give More Details about the US Military Buildup There," Business Insider, October 28, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/b1-bombers-saudi-arabia-more-detail-about-us-military-buildup-2019-10?r=US&IR=T>.

²² Parisa Hafezi and Sylvia Westall, "Iranian Oil Tanker Hit off Saudi Coast, May Have Been Missiles: Iranian Media Reports," Reuters, October 11, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-iran-tanker/iranian-oil-tanker-hit-off-saudi-coast-may-have-been-missiles-iran-reports-idUSKBN1WQ0G0>.

²³ Hafezi and Westall, "Iranian Oil Tanker Hit off Saudi Coast, May Have Been Missiles: Iranian Media Reports."

²⁴ Sean Lawson, "What Will Be the Effect of the Latest US Cyberattack on Iran?," Fifth Domain, Sightline Media Group, October 24, 2019, <https://www.fifthdomain.com/thought-leadership/2019/10/23/what-will-be-the-effect-of-the-latest-us-cyberattack-on-iran/>.