

## Faced with relentless American pressure, Iran starts to hit back

By [Tamer El-Ghobashy](#) and [Liz Sly](#)  
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Iranians set ablaze an American flag last month in Tehran during a rally following the U.S. designation of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organization. (Rouzbeh Fouladi/NurPhoto via Getty Images)

Iran has made a dramatic shift in how it confronts the United States, abandoning a policy of restraint in recent weeks for a series of offensive actions aimed at pushing the White House to rethink its efforts at isolating Tehran, say diplomats and analysts.

With the Trump administration tightening economic sanctions and intensifying military pressure, Iran is now seeking to highlight the costs it could also impose on the United States — for instance, by disrupting the world's oil supply — without taking actions likely to trigger an all-out war.

When four ships were damaged in the Persian Gulf last week, including two Saudi tankers and an Emirati one, U.S. and Arab officials said they suspected Iran had ordered the sabotage. A Lebanese newspaper supportive of Iran's ally Hezbollah boasted that the attacks were a message from Tehran delivered via "UAE and Saudi mailboxes."

And after a Katyusha rocket landed within a mile of the vast U.S. Embassy complex in Baghdad on Sunday, suspicion immediately turned to Iranian-backed militias in Iraq. Senior Iraqi officials warned Iran against using their territory to target the United States and its interests.

Iranian leaders condemned those incidents and denied responsibility. But diplomats and analysts say they bear Iran's signature and are part of an emerging strategy in response to the crippling sanctions the Trump administration placed on Iran after unilaterally withdrawing from the landmark nuclear deal a year ago. Particularly galling for Iran was the U.S. decision this spring not to renew waivers for eight countries allowing them to import Iranian oil despite the sanctions.



The oil tanker Amjad, shown earlier this month, was one of two Saudi tankers that were reportedly damaged in mysterious “sabotage attacks” off the coast of the Persian Gulf emirate of Fujairah. (Karim Sahib/AFP/Getty Images)

“It is absolutely not surprising if we see Iran start flexing its muscles in the region where it has a pretty strong hand and it has the potential to exact a cost on the U.S. and its allies in the region,” said Ali Vaez, an Iran expert with the International Crisis Group.

Over the past year, the Iranian government had pursued a strategy of relative restraint in the hopes that the 2020 U.S. election would produce a less hostile American president, analysts say.

Before 2017, Iranian naval vessels had routinely approached U.S. Navy ships in the strategic Strait of Hormuz in a threatening fashion, prompting warning shots on several occasions. Those incidents tapered off and by last year had stopped altogether. Iran also largely refrained from retaliating against Israeli airstrikes in Syria targeting Iranian military installations and arms shipments to the Lebanese Shiite militant group Hezbollah, which is closely allied with Iran.

And instead of mobilizing militias Iran supports to confront U.S. forces in Iraq and elsewhere, Tehran put the groups to work conveying Iranian goods into Iraq,

Syria, Lebanon and Afghanistan in an effort to offset the impact of U.S. trade sanctions.

Iranian leaders hoped their restraint might win the battle for world opinion and persuade European countries and others to resist the U.S. campaign to choke the Iranian economy, analysts said. According to inspections made by the International Atomic Energy Agency, Iran continued to adhere to the terms of the nuclear accord, which had been negotiated with the United States and other world powers and placed limits on Iran's nuclear program.

To Tehran's chagrin, it has not seen the kind of economic dividend it expected when the nuclear deal was signed. Nor have European efforts to maintain business with Iran provided relief.

In a May 8 televised address, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said his country would stop complying with parts of the landmark nuclear deal. (Associated Press)

Earlier this month, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani announced that his country would stop complying with parts of the nuclear deal that restrict the country from stockpiling enriched uranium and heavy water. He also set a 60-day deadline to get relief from the sanctions, pressuring the Europeans in particular to ignore the U.S. embargo, and said Iran would otherwise resume enriching uranium to a higher level than allowed under the accord.

On Monday, Iranian nuclear officials said they have quadrupled their nuclear-enrichment capacity but stayed within the 3.67 percent limit set by the accord. The officials said the increase was a message that Iran is capable of quickly bypassing the cap with its existing infrastructure, according to the official Islamic Republic News Agency.

"If the Europeans want Iran's production capacity to remain at this level, they should take the necessary actions," Iran's nuclear spokesman, Behrouz Kamalvandi, was quoted as saying by IRNA.

The escalating economic pressure — in particular the ending of U.S. waivers for importers of Iranian oil — has strengthened the argument of Iranian hard-liners who see conflict with the United States as inevitable, analysts say.

While still a minority, these hard-liners say it would be best to provoke the United States into military action while Iran is still capable of delivering a robust response, according to Ellie Geranmayeh, an Iran expert with the European Council on Foreign Relations. They fear that sustained economic sanctions could eventually erode Iran's ability to defend itself and argue for accelerating a conflict with the United States while Iran still has "an economy that can manage any potential cost of military confrontation," Geranmayeh said.

Iranians demonstrate last month in Tehran in support of Iran's decision to stop complying with the nuclear deal. (Fatemeh Bahrami/Getty Images)

The goal of this aggressive approach would be deterrence, to prove to the U.S. government that it cannot influence Iranian behavior through force, she said.

Military confrontation could also yield immediate benefits for some factions in Iran, in particular the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The IRGC, an arm of the Iranian military, was designated by the United States last month as a terrorist organization.

With parliamentary elections expected next year, a clash with the United States “would significantly strengthen the hand of the more conservative and hard-line camp” that has been frustrated with the moderate leadership of Rouhani, Vaez said.

Iran’s leaders, for their part, appear keen to avoid a war. From the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, to Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran has repeatedly said it does not seek conflict but has stressed it will not bow to American pressure.

“If the economic situation in Iran as a result of sanctions starts spiraling out of control, that’s when the system in Iran would welcome a confrontation with the U.S. because that would change the subject domestically,” Vaez said.

For now, Iran has calculated that Trump has no appetite for a new military confrontation in the Middle East and that putting pressure on the American economy through the disruption of international trade will deter additional U.S. sanctions, said Sami Nader, director of the Levant Institute for Strategic Affairs.

The sabotage of the tankers in the Persian Gulf “was so well designed to achieve Iran’s objective,” Nader said. “The type of action up until now did not justify a provocation. If you wanted to provoke a war, you would have done something that would justify a military retaliation. Military retaliation is not justified yet.”

On May 21, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani compared relations with the United States to the 1980s Iran-Iraq war, which killed hundreds of thousands of people. (Reuters)

Iran has in previous years directed highly effective campaigns targeting American troops in the Middle East — most notably in Iraq in 2007 through 2011, when Iran funded and armed Shiite militias opposed to the American occupation. The Pentagon has said some 600 American troops were killed by militias linked to Iran between 2003 and 2011.

But such an approach would run counter to Iran’s current strategy of carefully calibrated reactions to U.S. pressure and risk sparking a larger regional conflict, said Karim Sadjapour of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Additionally, he said, Iran does not want to jeopardize relations with European and Asian countries by directly attacking American forces, opting instead for action such as sabotage through proxies in the Persian Gulf that would drive up oil prices while allowing Iran to maintain a distance.

“The goal is to divide the international community, not to unite it against you,” he said. “You want to show the Chinese and the Europeans: ‘Look, you guys are also going to pay a cost for this [American] pressure campaign.’ ”

**[tamer.el-ghobashy@washpost.com](mailto:tamer.el-ghobashy@washpost.com)**

**[liz.sly@washpost.com](mailto:liz.sly@washpost.com)**

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