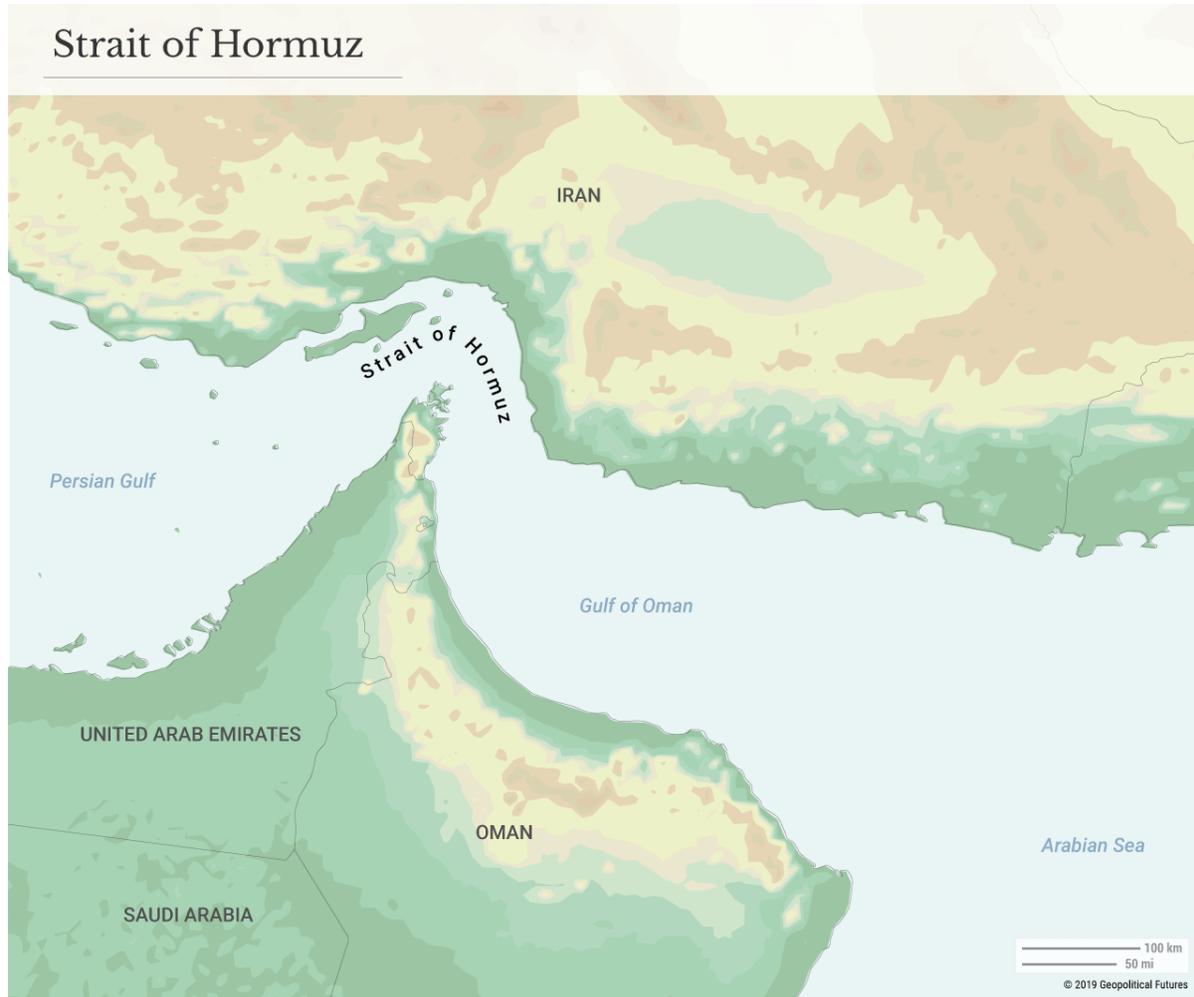


# Escalations in the Gulf of Oman

by **Caroline D. Rose** - July 31, 2023

Tensions are rising as Iran and the United States beef up their presence in Middle Eastern waters. The Pentagon said it would deploy a destroyer, the USS Thomas Hudner, and F-35 fighter jets to the Gulf of Oman and Strait of Hormuz, having deployed F-16 fighter jets, an A-10 attack aircraft, and a guided-missile destroyer, the USS McFaul, last week. Washington has yet to indicate how long these vessels will be in the region, saying they are there to monitor security and support protection efforts for local shipping lanes.

Iran responded by staging not-so-subtle military exercises simulating an attack in the strait. Far offshore deep into central Iran, the exercise included more than 90 aircraft, including fighter jets, drones and bombers, pulling heavily from Bandar Abbas base, which sits at the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz, hinting that the drills could help personnel prepare for attacks against foreign actors protecting commercial vessels passing through and monitoring the Gulf of Oman.



[\(click to enlarge\)](#)

Aside from the general tension and distrust that characterize U.S.-Iran relations, the recent buildup started after Iran attempted to seize two oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz – one of the most strategic chokepoints in the world. Conflict here would wreak havoc on global supply chains, sending supply costs and energy prices through the roof. Iran acknowledges the strait’s importance and has sought to leverage its proximity accordingly, periodically threatening and outright seizing foreign-flagged tankers. In just two years alone, Tehran has seized more than five commercial vessels (that we know of). But the recent incident was different. As the two vessels approached the strait, Iranian personnel opened fire. When the USS McFaul arrived, the Iranian ships reportedly ran off, and the fact now is that the U.S. and its allies feel the urgent need to provide air cover in this crucial energy hub.

The sudden escalation shows that despite all de-escalatory measures of the past, tensions are still fraught, and both countries’ interests remain divergent. It also demonstrates new risk-accepting

behavior from Iran in a sign that the government means to build leverage against the U.S., its partners and regional actors to pursue its interests, all while keeping the door open for normalization and de-escalation through dialogue with traditional rivals in the Gulf.

Tehran is building on a delicate balancing act. Hampered by years of Western sanctions and resulting commercial isolation, it's searching for immediate sanctions relief. The U.S. and its partners will consider lifting sanctions only if Iran moderates its behavior and offers concessions related to its nuclear program and/or forward presence of proxy militias that threaten U.S. interests throughout the Levant. While Iran has approached the negotiating table countless times, it has stopped short of the permanent changes the U.S. and its partners demand, at least partly because it can't afford to lose credibility at home. The government is fresh off of months of nationwide, anti-government demonstrations over the killing of Mahsa Amini – the largest challenge to Iranian leadership since the revolution of 1979. Though the current leadership has been able to maintain its grip on power through a curated mix of internet blackouts, crackdowns, mass arrests and executions, its grip is still tenuous, convincing the government that it cannot back down, implement major reforms that appease the opposition, or look weak in the face of Western offenses.

Attempts are still being made to revive talks over Iran's nuclear program, but they aren't working. Just this week, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammad bin Abdulrahman Al Thani spoke on the phone to discuss ways to bring new momentum to the talks, and a flurry of diplomatic activity has meanwhile taken place between Iran and Arab Gulf states to ease tension, prompted by a decreased U.S. presence over time and long-term questions about regional security. Though attempts are frequent, discussions have gone nowhere as both sides' red lines remain largely unchanged. This has created greater space for bolder behavior and limited escalation, particularly for Iran, which wants to break out of its economic isolation, exploit regional hotspots where U.S. presence is winding down, and maintain its influence abroad.

Neither wants a direct, large-scale conflict, but with dead-end nuclear talks and slow-moving regional normalization efforts, there are fewer constraints and a greater imperative to rattle some sabers. For the next few months, expect limited escalations like these, wars of words between diplomats, maritime posturing and frequent tanker seizures in the Gulf of Oman, and tit-for-tat strikes between U.S. personnel and Iran-aligned militias in the Levant.

**Author: Caroline D. Rose**

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