

Forum: Security Council (SC)

Issue: Addressing the crisis in the Strait of Hormuz

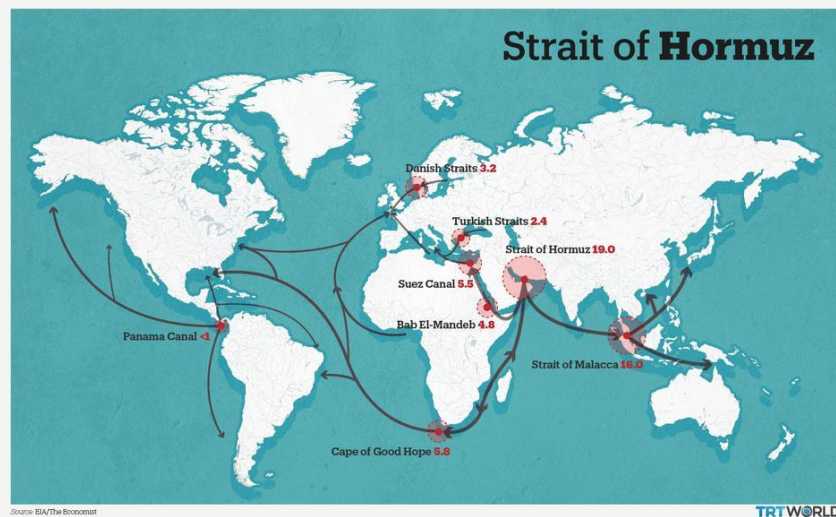
Student Officer: George Ermis Ioannou Makrynikolas

Position: President

INTRODUCTION

Up to now, the world's economy has been based on oil. The so called black gold, which is extracted from the depths of Earth, has been the cause of innumerable political

conflicts. Due to oil some countries gained enormous power and subjugated others. The crisis in the Strait of Hormuz is one of these battles for the "black gold". The Strait of Hormuz connects the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman constituting the world's most important chokepoint for oil trade. According to reports



PICTURE 1: THE STRAIT OF HORMUZ COMPARED WITH OTHER OIL CHECKPOINTS

published by the Reuters and the BBC in

2018, 25% of oil exports worldwide was conducted with huge tankers crossing these troubled waters and transporting this valuable commodity to hundreds of states.¹ Therefore, a geopolitical crisis in the area would pose an imminent threat to global economy and peace. The political tensions and sometimes the military skirmishes between Iran, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Saudi Arabia and other countries sow the seeds of anxiety and insecurity in the whole region.

Due to the more aggressive foreign policy of the Trump administration towards Iran, a sworn enemy of the US, unsteadiness is the most suitable word to describe the main characteristic of the situation in the region during the last two years. The US withdrawal from the Nuclear Deal Framework with Iran and Europe's forced support to their transatlantic ally's unpredictable leader has been the basis of the Islamic state's argumentation and justification of its actions in the Strait of Hormuz, which deteriorates even further the diplomatic relations of the countries involved.

The eternal political conflict between the most powerful military nation in the world and its biggest enemy in the Middle East in combination with the stances of many other countries, including the European, which has led to the dramatic situation in the Strait of Hormuz, will be the subject of following sections of this Study Guide. More specifically,

¹ "What Makes Strait of Hormuz a Maritime Flashpoint?" *What Makes Strait of Hormuz a Maritime Flashpoint?*, 1 July 2019, www.trtworld.com/business/what-makes-strait-of-hormuz-a-maritime-flashpoint-27876.

this regional problem has its roots in the 20th century. Therefore, a historic analysis is necessary for the correct understanding of the issue.

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Barrel

A barrel is the unit in which the amount of transported oil is measured. Each barrel equals 119 liters of raw oil.

Oil Tanker

An oil tanker, also known as a petroleum tanker, is a vessel which transports raw oil. Most of the attacks in the area are directed against these gigantic ships. Oil tankers carry daily about 21 million barrels through the Strait of Hormuz.

Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, also known as the Nuclear Deal Framework, is a treaty ratified in November 2013 by the P5 countries, the European Union and the Islamic Republic of Iran concerning the nuclear program of the latter. According to the treaty, Iran would limit its uranium enrichment program and allow international inspectors to monitor whether it complies with the terms of the agreement.

Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps was instituted after the Islamic Revolution in order to preserve the Islamic power in the State of Iran. The organization is formed by 160.000 members and also develops a navy, army and air force. One of its most important responsibilities is to control the Strait of Hormuz detaining many ships over the last years and conducting many operations across the sea through a specific group called "Quds Force".

Drone

A drone is an unmanned aircraft, which is often used by many states for espionage or direct attacks. It is guided and controlled by remote control. As will be explained later, both the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran conduct many operations with such vehicles.

Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)

The Exclusive Economic Zone is a sea zone over which a state has special rights to explore and exploit marine and energy resources. According to international law, EEZ stretches from the coast out to 200 nautical miles.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Iranian-American Relations: From the coup through the Gulf War to the Nuclear Deal Framework

During the Cold War, the international community watched the accession of Mohammad Mosaddeq to the post of prime minister of Iran after a democratic election. During his term, he decided to nationalize the oil industry of the country, a move that would go against the US and English interests in the area. Despite the pressure, he put his plan

into force with the support of the parliament until the coup on August 19th, 1953 orchestrated by the United States' Central Intelligence Agency and the United Kingdom's Secret Intelligence Service (MI6).

The coup led to the imprisonment of Mossadeq and the execution of one of his ministers. The oppressive Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi replaced Mossadeq as an



PICTURE 2: PROTESTORS IN THE STREETS OF IRAN DURING THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION BURNING AN AMERICAN FLAG.

underling who did the dirty job for the US and the UK.² Nevertheless, the power of the people once again showed its potential. In 1979, an Islamic Revolution broke out which overthrew the US-backed up ruler. Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran and announced the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In retaliation for the USA's acts, 52 workers of its embassy in Tehran were held hostages for 444 days and underwent many psychical and physical tortures. The constant pressure by the US government forced the Iranian regime to free the embassy's personnel.

Later on, following an arms scandal, the Iran-Iraq war broke out, which constituted the biggest crisis in the region. The US supported Iraq which initiated the so called Tanker War. In a series of events, many vessels were hit either by mines or by other ships. Operations of the US navy against Iran turned out to be brutal. Due to the heavy attacks against three Iranian oil platforms, the US was brought before the International Court of Justice in which it failed to prove its innocence.

The relations between the two countries continued to deteriorate and, after George Bush's very hostile speech in 2002, the US and many other countries imposed serious economic sanctions on Iran because of its uranium enrichment program.

During the Barack Obama's presidency, there was a new beginning in the relations between Iran and the US. This was translated into a Nuclear Treaty, ratified by the P5 (United States of America, France, the United Kingdom, China and Russia), the Islamic Republic of Iran and the European Union.

The Trump administration and the fragility of the region

The Trump Administration followed a more conservative and nationalistic policy the Republican voters were promised during the electoral campaign. The United States of



America renounced its position as the world's sole superpower that unifies nations and resolves conflicts and was converted into a clearly imperialistic state serving

[erg.com/news/articles/2019-11-02/iran-](https://www.erg.com/news/articles/2019-11-02/iran-)

PICTURE 3: THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA DONALD TRUMP ANNOUNCED THE WITHDRAWAL FROM THE NUCLEAR DEAL IN 2015.

above all its interests without taking into account international relations and sometimes the inevitable consequences of its acts in other regions of the world.³ In an attempt to retrieve the old policy against the Islamic Republic of Iran, President Donald Trump announced in 2018 the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (Nuclear Deal Framework), since Iran was not supposed to act in accordance with it. Sanctions were also imposed.

For Iran, however, the unrest in the Strait of Hormuz is the only means to put the European Union and the US under pressure. It is no coincidence that international politics to a great extent revolves around the most important place for the most important commodity —the Strait of Hormuz and oil.

Twenty one millions of barrels are shipped every day through the Strait of Hormuz. Efforts to bypass this chokepoint have failed multiple times. Saudi Arabia, for example, attempted to avoid the Strait choosing a more secure and peaceful way of transportation: pipelines. Nevertheless, the Saudis did not always take into account the tensions in the countries through which the pipelines would have to be constructed. In one case, the pipeline was bombed and destroyed by drones sent from Yemen. This action aggravated the situation in the Gulf with the US accusing Iran of triggering the attack. As shown in this example, stability in the Strait of Hormuz is so fragile that can easily be disrupted even by a single event taking place far away from that region. In the following section the current events and tensions will be presented.

2018- today: The situation in the Strait of Hormuz⁴

The present Study Guide under the title “The crisis in the Strait of the Hormuz» is referring to the events of the last year (2019). As explained above, the Trump



PICTURE 4: AN OIL TANKER ON FIRE AFTER AN ATTACK IN THE STRAIT OF HORMUZ.

administration adopted a very harsh and stiff policy against the Islamic Republic of Iran. Therefore, on May 8th, 2019, his Iranian counterpart Hassan Ruhani responded that his country would now reinstate its nuclear program. Besides, the Iranian leader threatened the European countries setting a 60-day deadline for them to stop the US hostile actions. The Trump administration proceeded with tightening the sanctions, a legally controversial move, since

³ "Donald Trump Announces US Pulling out of 'horrible' Iran Nuclear Deal." *ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation)*, 9 May 2018, www.abc.net.au/news/2018-05-09/donald-trump-pulls-us-out-of-iran-nuclear-deal/9741446.

⁴ "Tankers Struck Near Strait of Hormuz; US Blames Iran." *AP NEWS*, 14 June 2019, www.apnews.com/d67714ab8ac344a3b3af19cca1c20192.

sanctions have to be approved by the Security Council and in this case the United States of America justified its action by claiming that Iran violated the Deal, a strategy that draws even more criticism. The crisis had just begun.

On May 12th, 2019, two Saudi-Arabian, one Norwegian and one Emirati flagged oil tankers were harmed by mines or small speedboats in the Strait of Hormuz. The United States accused Iran of attempting to harm other countries' oil transportation, while Iran vehemently denied all the accusations. Moreover, on June 13th, two other vessels were hit in the Gulf of Oman and the US blamed the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps publishing photos to prove its claims. Later on, the Iranian military forces downed an American drone accusing the US of operating within Iran's Exclusive Economic Zone and conducting espionage. The US claimed that it was flying over international waters.

In July 2019, Iran lifted all the limitations concerning its nuclear program and started to enrich uranium to 4, 5%⁵ disregarding the 3, 67% boundary. Then, on July 4th, 2019, British forces detained an Iranian oil tanker that was supposedly heading to Syria — action in breach of the sanctions. Iran disclaimed the accusations describing the incident as "piracy". After 15 days, on July 19th, Iran seized a British-flagged oil tanker. Both ships were released after 2 months of negotiations.

Since the Islamic Republic of Iran stopped complying with the former Nuclear Deal Framework concerning the uranium enrichment and the centrifuges, United States and British forces started escorting ships in the Strait of Hormuz with the situation reminding of the old Tanker War.

Following the escalation of tensions between the US and Iran due to the assassination of an American contractor by the Iranian backed up Iraqi organization Kata'ib Hezbollah and the missile attacks launched by the US as retaliation that ended up killing 25 people, Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, was brutally murdered by US missiles. President Donald Trump claimed that the Iranian general was planning an attack against the US. In retaliation, Iran launched missiles against the American military camp stationed in Iraq with no casualties. According to analysts, the need for revenge will not diminish in the Strait of Hormuz, with the consequence that the oil trade with many countries, like China, is in danger to be disrupted.

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED

United States of America

The United States of America constitutes one of the two main belligerent parties in the dispute that triggered the recent crisis in the Strait of Hormuz. After World War II, the US enforced its imperialistic policy in an attempt to extend its influence in geopolitically important states. Iran with its enormous potential of oil extraction was therefore victimized. The relations between the two countries deteriorated after the Islamic Revolution and during the Tanker War. The Bush administration favored the escalation of the conflict, which was later on eased during the Presidency of Barack Obama. His phone call to the leader of Iran and the Nuclear Deal Framework were two important diplomatic steps in the approach of the two countries. Nonetheless, the nationalistic

⁵ "Why Do the Limits on Iran's Uranium Enrichment Matter?" *BBC News*, 14 Jan. 2020, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48776695.

policy of the Trump administration and its offensive stance against some of the Middle East countries, especially Iran, culminated in the recent crisis in the Strait of Hormuz.

Islamic Republic of Iran

The Islamic Republic of Iran is the other main belligerent party. The need for revenge and the firmly rooted hatred against the United States of America date back to the organized coup against Iranian people's will. This was expressed throughout the hostage crisis. But also later the US took a very hostile stance. Furthermore, Iran fosters hopes of developing a nuclear program —the major cause of conflict with the US and the European Union. The fulfillment of these hopes after the US withdrawal from the Treaty is the fundamental reason for the outbreak of the recent crisis in the Strait of Hormuz which can afford Iran the leverage it needs to influence the situation in the region. But this leverage is in danger of being lost for fear of breaking off relations with many of its important trading partners. Apart from this, the Islamic Republic has suffered a lot by the sanctions imposed on the country over the years.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia borders Oman which forms the land around the Strait of Hormuz. The country's oil production is the most important source of revenue. The whole financial sector is based on oil and therefore the state maintains perfect relations with the United States. A huge number of American soldiers are stationed in the country which has a strong interest in maintaining the stability in the Strait, since this is the only passage for transporting oil around the world. It should be noted that many Saudi vessels have been hit by mines or speedboats.

Kuwait

Kuwait, which borders Saudi Arabia as well, is one of the most important oil exporters in the world. Many of its vessels are escorted by American military ships offering them protection. Nevertheless, many of its tankers have been hit causing a significant damage to its oil industry.

European Union (EU)

The European Union supported the American government's decisions but tried to avoid any kind of conflict. A few voices of criticism were against the Trump administration. Furthermore, states, like France, Germany and the United Kingdom, strongly condemned the Iran's uranium enrichment program. Nevertheless, after the detainment of a tanker by British marines in Gibraltar, which violated the sanctions, they have attempted to negotiate with Iran.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

DATE	DESCRIPTION OF EVENT
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19 August 1953	The coup in Iran.
1979	Islamic Revolution in Iran.
1984-1987	The Tanker War.
2002	American President George W. Bush delivers a speech attacking the Islamic Republic of Iran. As a result, the relations of the two countries deteriorated.
November 2013	The P5 countries, the European Union and the Islamic Republic of Iran ratify the Joint Declaration Plan of Action (Nuclear Deal Framework).
2018	American President Donald Trump announces the US withdrawal from the Nuclear Deal Framework.
May 2019	The President of Iran Hassan Rouhani threatens that Iran's nuclear program will be continued and the US government imposes sanctions.
May-June 2019	More than six vessels were hit by mines or speedboats in the Strait of Hormuz.
4 July 2019	British marine forces detain an Iranian oil tanker accusing the Islamic Republic of Iran of transporting oil to Syria, thus breaking the economic sanctions.
19 July 2019	Iran seizes an English vessel in the Strait of Hormuz in retaliation for the detainment of the Iranian oil tanker.

3 January 2020	The commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (Qasem Soleimani) is murdered by a US missile attack.
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RELEVANT UN RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

Resolution 616, 20 July 1988

This resolution of the Security Council passed after the shooting down of an Iranian airplane by the United States of America, which was declared an accident, in order to calm things down in the Strait of Hormuz that could easily escalate after the fresh wounds of the Tanker War.⁶

Resolution 2231, 20 July 2015

This resolution endorses and affirms the Joint Declaration Plan of Action between the P5 members, the EU and the Islamic Republic of Iran. This could also be characterized as the biggest success in the history of diplomatic relations between the U.S.A. and Iran.⁷

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO RESOLVE THE ISSUE

As it will have already been understood, the crisis in the Strait of Hormuz has its deeper roots in the constant deterioration of the US-Iran relations. Those two countries racing for increased influence and economic-political power turned, after much unrest, into “eternal enemies”. Therefore, any attempt to combat the issue should be initiated by one of the belligerents or at least be accepted by both.

Although no official ceasefire or peace has even been declared, there were some steps taken by the international community or by the two parties that should be noted.

First and foremost, despite the endless skirmishes and verbal attacks between high ranking officials of both states, the situation has never got out of hand. This should be seen as a way of tackling the problem. The political and economic differences are huge, but they have never led to an armed conflict. If Iran had not a significant leverage to control the most important chokepoint for oil transportation in the world and if the United States had not so many vital interests in the area, the decisions of both countries would have been more radical. The control of this narrow sea passage offers the parties involved significant compensation —a vital ingredient contributing to the maintenance of international peace and stability.

However, during the last 30 years the provocations and the show-offs by both parties have frequently escalated. The biggest step towards normality was taken by the Obama administration with the “Joint Declaration Plan of Action”. This eased to a degree the situation in the Gulf and especially in the Strait of Hormuz. Initially, the sanctions were loosened and then lifted and everyone thought that the two countries had turned the page. Nonetheless, President Donald Trump decided to adopt the old foreign policy.

It should also be mentioned that, after the US withdrawal from the Nuclear Deal Framework and the latest events, there has been no further attempt to tackle the issue.

⁶ Security Council Resolution 598 - UNSCR. <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/616>

⁷ S/RES/2231(2015). [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2231\(2015\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2231(2015))

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The massive cut of oil production right now due to the current situation of the world economy attenuated the crisis immediately. No more oil tankers are being hit by mines or attacked by speedboats. The United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran have focused on their internal problems caused by the pandemic. This makes it the perfect time for proposals and discussions concerning the issue.

At first, a possible solution would be negotiations between the European Union, Iran and the United States. Following President Trump's decision to withdraw the USA from the Nuclear Deal Framework claiming that Iran was not abiding by it, a huge retaliation crisis broke in the Strait of Hormuz. A new deal could now be negotiated, under which no superfluous critic and attacks would take place. Iran would continue to a certain extent its uranium enrichment program easing US and EU's fears that could implement its nuclear program.

Furthermore, courts in Iran and other states involved or even the International Criminal Court could prosecute those behind deadly attacks and other crimes against vessels in international waters or industrial facilities. The drastic legal actions could reduce the number of incidents witnessed in 2019. This proposal, in conjunction with the United Nations Security Council condemning any kind of use of force, could be proven very helpful.

Last but not least, just like in the Gulf of Guinea, which is suffering from piracy, the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) could patrol the area around the Strait of Hormuz with its neutral ships. This measure could prevent further attacks, solve the controversy problem when it comes to accusations and contribute to serving justice.

All these proposals combined with many others could eventually turn the page forever in the Strait of Hormuz and create a climate of peace, stability and security in one of the most important regions for the global economy.

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