



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on June 13, 2019

Are Attacks on Oil Tankers at Hormuz Strait a Prelude to War?

Following reports of suspected attacks on two oil tankers moving through the vitally important Strait of Hormuz early Thursday morning, [crude oil prices jumped four percent](#). [Following that initial spike, oil prices settled back slightly](#).

The Strait is the only water passage from the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Sea and ultimately the Indian Ocean, and as a result a third of the world's LNG (liquefied natural gas) and almost 20 percent of the world's crude passes through the 21-mile-wide channel.



The early reports from the *British Daily Telegraph* were ambiguous, repeatedly noting that the attacks were “suspect” and resulted not only in the spike in crude oil prices on exchanges in London and the United States but also raised “the already heightened tensions in the Middle East.” According to Taiwan's state-owned oil company, one of the tankers, the *Front Altair*, was “suspected of being hit by a torpedo.” Other reports suggested the attack was from limpet mines, incendiary devices that can be attached to a ship's hull by strong magnets and then triggered remotely.

Initial photographs suggest that the damage inflicted on both tankers was far from fatal, being above the water line of each ship. Smoke and fire obscured the views, but the owner of the other tanker (the *Kokura Courageous*), Bernhard Shulte, issued a statement that the damage sustained was minor and that all crew members were safe. He said the ship “is not in any danger of sinking [and] the cargo of methanol is intact.”

The views of the damage are not the only things that are obscure. The circumstances surrounding last month's attacks on four other ships traversing the Strait of Hormuz also “remain murky,” according to the *New York Times*. But John Bolton, President Trump's national security advisor, was quick to blame Iran, claiming that the rogue country was “almost certainly” responsible for those attacks, asking rhetorically “Who else would you think is doing it?”

The timeline of escalation of rhetoric and action from early May is revealing. On May 5, Bolton announced that the United States was deploying the USS *Abraham Lincoln* carrier strike group and a bomber task force to the Middle East in response, he said, because of “a number of troubling and escalatory indications and warnings” but without providing any details.

Three days later Iran announced its intention to abrogate the nuclear agreement that limits its uranium stockpile to low-grade uranium. It was a move intended to signal the European Union that it was being crushed by U.S. sanctions and was seeking relief through “work-arounds” of U.S. sanctions.

On May 9, the European Union urged Iran to respect the nuclear agreement but agreed to continue trading with Iran despite U.S. sanctions.



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The next day the United States announced it would be moving a Patriot missile battery into the Middle East to “counter threats” from Iran. President Trump added that his sanctions put “other nations on notice that allowing Iranian steel and other metals into your ports will no longer be tolerated,” and added that Iran could “expect further actions unless it fundamentally alters its conduct.”

On May 12, the UAE (United Arab Emirates) said that four commercial ships off its eastern coast “were subjected to sabotage operations” just hours after Iranian and Lebanese media outlets aired reports of explosions at a nearby Emirati port. Those reports later proved to be false, but the attacks on the ships were real but minor.

On May 13, President Trump warned Tehran that if Iran does “anything” in the form of an attack “they will suffer greatly.” European foreign ministers urged both Trump and Iran to stand down.

One day later the *New York Times* reported that the White House was reviewing plans to send 120,000 U.S. troops into the area if Iran attacks any American interests, or if it steps up work on its nuclear capabilities. President Trump called the *Times*’ report “fake news” but added that he “absolutely” would be willing to send American troops into the Middle East “if necessary.”

On May 15, the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad ordered all “nonessential” government workers to leave Iraq immediately.

The next day Saudi Arabia blamed Iran for a drone attack on one of its pipelines, while calling for the United States to launch a “surgical” strike on Iran in retaliation. When the president was asked directly if the United States was about to go to war with Iran, he responded, “I hope not.”

On May 19, a rocket landed near the U.S. Embassy in Bagdad — harmlessly — but Trump responded, “If Iran wants to fight, that will be the official end of them. Never threaten the United States again!”

The next day Iran announced that it had already quadrupled its production of low-enriched uranium.

On May 24, President Trump announced that the United States would increase its military presence in the Middle East by 1,500 troops, claiming that they would have a “mostly protective” role.

Over the weekend of May 31 to June 2, Saudi Arabia’s King Salman hosted three high-level summits for heads of various Arab and Muslim countries to present a “unified” front opposing Iran.

All remained relatively quiet until early Thursday morning in the Strait of Hormuz. Coincidentally U.S. naval forces were close by and assisted in rescuing some of the workers aboard the two tankers.

This is how wars begin: inch by inch and incident by incident. Stephen Walt, professor of international relations at Harvard University, explained how President Trump is ramping up war fever in the Middle East: Trump claims 1) that the threat from Iran is grave and growing; 2) that any confrontation will be easy, cheap and successful; 3) that Iran is evil, or crazy, or maybe both; and 4) that a war with Iran will solve the Iranian “problem.”

Just as successful, perhaps, as the 1953 Iranian coup d’état, the first U.S. covert action to overthrow a foreign government during peacetime.

Image: [Screenshot of a video by the Telegraph \(U.K.\)](#)

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