

## Tensions Around the Strait of Hormuz and the Future of US-Iran Talks

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The United States has increased its deployment in the Persian Gulf region since July 2023 in an effort to prevent Iranian interference on foreign merchant vessels navigating in the region. The Iranian navy had in fact seized an oil tanker registered to the Marshall Islands called the Advantage Sweet that was carrying Kuwaiti oil for the US oil giant Chevron in the international waters in the Gulf of Oman at the end of April 2023. US forces condemned Iran for seizing the tanker, calling the Iranian actions a violation of the international law that undermine security and stability in the region.

Iran, in return, also accused the United States of violating international law because around the same time in April 2023, the US military had seized an oil tanker called the Suez Rajan that was carrying Iranian oil off the coast of Singapore to tow the tanker back to Texas in an attempt to sell its oil. The US intention was to use the proceeds of the oil to compensate the families of the victims of "Iranian government-sponsored terrorism," and it is believed that Iran seized the Advantage Sweet in retaliation.

The United States has imposed sanctions on all transactions related to Iranian oil, and has seized tankers carrying Iranian oil based on its own sanctions against Iran. However, these sanctions are US domestic law and differ from UN-authorized Security Council sanctions, which is why Iran is condemning the US seizure of Iranian oil in international waters as a "violation of international law."

### Talks Between the US and Iran

The US has made a number of attempts to seize Iranian oil by capturing tankers. Despite President Trump's announcement of an embargo on Iranian oil in April 2019, US trade statistics record "imports" of Iranian oil in October 2020, March 2021, and January 2022. These "imports" most likely refer to seizures. Iran has intensified its military activities in the Persian Gulf in return, and captured the tanker carrying oil destined for the US in April 2023, further escalating tensions between the United States and Iran.

In response, some Persian Gulf states have increased their diplomatic efforts to ease these tensions. For example, Sultan Haitham of Oman paid a visit to Iran at the end of May 2023, possibly mediating between Iran and the US, for the White House Coordinator for the Middle East McGurk was also visiting Oman around the same time. The officials of Qatar including the emir and the foreign minister also visited Iran to mediate between the two countries.

These under-the-surface mediation proved successful, as on August 10, 2023 it was announced that the United States and Iran had reached a prisoner exchange agreement. It was further announced that Iran's foreign assets that had been frozen due to US sanctions would also be released. It has been reported that around \$6 billion in Iranian foreign exchange funds, which were stuck in banks in South Korea, though had been paid for the imports of Iranian crude oil, will be converted into euros in Switzerland and then transferred to Qatar to be used by Iran. Iran has announced that they will use these funds to purchase food and medicine, which are outside the scope of US sanctions against Iran.

### Future Prospects

There have been reports that Iran is scaling back its nuclear activities in line with the aforementioned agreement with the United States. This move could be the very first step toward reviving the Iran Nuclear Deal, which the Biden administration has been trying to restore.

The Nuclear Deal was reached under the Obama administration and subsequently discarded by President Trump. Attempts have been made by the Biden administration to reestablish the deal since then, but incidents such as the Presidential election in Iran and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have hampered these efforts, delaying the restoration of the deal. Also, the next US presidential election is scheduled for November 2024, and if a Republican candidate is elected, the agreement between the Biden administration and Iran could easily be overturned once again.

Barring military action on nuclear facilities that could possibly lead to a war, the only way to limit the expansion of Iran's nuclear activities is to reinstate this nuclear agreement, which is why the framework of the Nuclear Deal has been kept alive without its substance. The West has imposed sanctions against Iran over its cooperation with Russia in its war against Ukraine over the past year, but the West does not want another war in the Middle East, and it is not in its interests to abandon the Iran Nuclear Deal entirely.

The US has maintained its "maximum pressure" on Iran since the Trump administration, a part of which is the seizure of Iranian oil in international waters. Meanwhile, Iran has approached Eastern powers such as Russia and China to survive the maximum pressure from the US. And now, due to the extremely heightened tensions between the two states, with accelerated efforts from the neighboring countries to avoid any escalation, the US and Iran could finally reach a kind of agreement. Though the road ahead for any agreement between the US and Iran will no doubt have its twists and turns, what is clear from the developments so far is that a US-Iran "agreement" on Iranian nuclear activities is not completely out of scope either.

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