

U.S. Buildup Not Cowing Iran

Bottom Line Up Front

- The top commander for U.S. forces in the Middle East warned that the growing U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf might not be enough to deter Iran from attacking Gulf states.
- The comments by CENTCOM commander Gen. McKenzie followed publication of a Defense Intelligence Agency report that highlights Iran's growing ability to project power throughout the region.
- The U.S. military statements and reports suggest that the Trump administration's 'maximum pressure' policy has had limited effect on Iran's strategic capabilities.
- A key U.S. effort has been to recruit partners to an operation conducting maritime patrols of the Persian Gulf intended to deter further Iranian attacks on shipping in that vital waterway.

Since U.S.-Iran tensions increased in May over the Trump administration's imposition of strict sanctions on Iran's oil exports, the United States has deployed 14,000 additional U.S. forces to various facilities throughout the Persian Gulf. The deployments added to the approximately 60,000 U.S. forces that were already there, including in Iraq and Afghanistan. Also deployed to the Gulf states were additional Patriot air defense batteries and U.S. combat aircraft, including the F-22 and F-35. To counter Iran's attacks on commercial shipping and Gulf state installations, the United States has also recruited several partners to participate in a maritime security operation, the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC), which was formally inaugurated in Bahrain in early November. Joining the coalition thus far have been the Gulf states Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), as well as the United Kingdom, Australia, and Albania, with reported intelligence and monitoring contribution from Israel. U.S. officials reportedly expect Qatar and Kuwait to join the operation soon.

In advance of the 'Manama Dialogue' security conference in Bahrain, which hosted the headquarters for U.S. naval operations in the Gulf, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) commander General Ken McKenzie publicly assessed that the U.S. buildup would deter Iranian attacks on U.S. targets, but that '...it is very possible [that Iran] will attack [Gulf state targets] again' - referring to an attack

similar to Iran's September 14, 2019 attack on critical Saudi energy infrastructure. That attack on two Saudi oil processing facilities penetrated and avoided U.S.-supplied defenses and knocked out half of all Saudi production for more than three weeks. Gen. McKenzie's remarks were particularly significant insofar as they contradicted consistent statements by President Donald Trump and other U.S. civilian officials that the U.S. policy of applying maximum sanctions pressure on Iran is succeeding in weakening Iran strategically. His comments also appear to forecast that the IMSC might not necessarily succeed in deterring further attacks on Gulf shipping, which Iran has used as a strategy to put pressure on the United States and the European countries to ease economic pressure on Tehran. Since mid-November, Iran has been convulsed by domestic protests related to an increase in gasoline prices, with demonstrations being crushed with force, leading to nearly 200 deaths.

Gen. McKenzie's comments reinforced the conclusions of the 2019 Defense Intelligence Agency's (DIA) report on the military power of Iran, which was unveiled in early November. That report indicated that, despite U.S. sanctions, Iran has been able to develop cruise and ballistic missiles, mines, drones, and other weaponry that, when supplied to Iran's many regional allies and proxies, enable Tehran to project power throughout the region. It is the reliance on capable proxies, such as Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia militias that have enabled Iran to largely accomplish its main national security goal - the ability to deter an assault on Iran by threatening to inflict substantial damage on the attacker or the attacker's regional allies and interests.

The DIA report expressed particular concern that Iran might be able to enhance its conventional military power through purchases of combat aircraft, tanks, and submarines when a United Nations embargo on the sale of weapons to Iran ends in October 2020. The potential for the arms embargo expiration to enhance Iran's already improving strategic position has worried U.S. policymakers to the point where Trump administration officials are seeking to press Russia and China to support an extension of that arms ban. Because both of those powers are likely sellers of new arms to Iran and both differ with Washington's policy toward Iran, the chances of such persuasive efforts appear to be minimal. However, even if the arms embargo expires, the purchase of main battle systems such as combat aircraft is vulnerable to the severe financial shortfalls that the maximum pressure campaign has caused. Iran's 2020 budget projects a significant deficit because

Iran's oil exports have fallen to levels not seen since the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war. Yet, U.S. military statements and reports make clear that modernizing Iran's major combat systems is not necessarily pivotal to Iran's thus far successful regional strategy.

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