

PROJECT SYNDICATE

US-Iran Tensions: The Gulf of Deniability



JOHN ANDREWS

WHAT will constitute yet another act of war in the Middle East? On May 12, four oil tankers in the Gulf—two of them Saudi Arabian, one from the United Arab Emirates, and the other Norwegian—were attacked with explosives as they lay at anchor near the Strait of Hormuz. Then, on June 13, in the Gulf of Oman, just beyond the Strait, two more tankers (one Japanese and the other Norwegian) were hit by mines. The US government regards Iran as the obvious culprit, whereas Iran claims it is a victim of what US President Donald Trump might call “fake news.”

Regardless of who is to blame, the risk of a dangerous escalation is obvious. Following Iran's subsequent downing of a US surveillance drone, the mutual recrimination has intensified and the risk of an all-out war has grown.

The Strait of Hormuz, leading from the Persian/Arabian Gulf (even the choice of adjective is politically sensitive) to the Gulf of Oman and then to the Indian Ocean, is a 21-mile-wide choke point through which one-fifth of the world's crude oil passes. Economic logic says that closing, or even narrowing, the Strait will lead to higher oil prices and a global recession. Political logic says threatening the supply of the world's economic lifeblood will lead to military intervention by the United States and other outside powers, thereby adding another regional conflict to those in Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan.

But none of that is inevitable. Although two acts of sabotage in a month can certainly be a *casus belli*, the saboteurs have not been clearly identified. So far, the US has produced a grainy, black-and-white video and a few colour photographs of a patrol boat from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary



A staff member removes the Iranian flag from the stage during Iran nuclear talks at the Vienna International Centre in Vienna, Austria, July 14, 2015. PHOTO: REUTERS/CARLOS BARRIA

Guard Corps removing an unexploded limpet mine from the Japanese tanker. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo says the video proves Iran's guilt. Iran says it was rushing to prevent more damage and to rescue 44 innocent seamen.

Conclusive proof is unlikely to emerge. Both France and Britain say the evidence points to Iran, but critics of US foreign policy argue that Iran may be blameless. One such sceptic is Britain's opposition Labour Party leader, Jeremy Corbyn, who could soon be his country's prime minister and who now demands “credible evidence” of Iranian responsibility. Corbyn, of course, tends to support any opponent of America, from Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro to Russian President Vladimir Putin (he initially refused to accept that Russia was involved in the poisoning of a Russian

defector in the English city of Salisbury in 2018). Where Corbyn leads, others on the far left will doubtless follow.

If credibility is the issue, who benefits? Iran might seem the likeliest candidate. Its economy has been squeezed ever more tightly by US sanctions following Trump's decision a year ago to withdraw the US from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal—officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Those sanctions have reduced Iran's oil exports to a relative trickle of 400,000 barrels per day (bpd), compared with 2.5 million bpd in April 2018. Meanwhile, the European Union's attempts to provide Iran with a financial escape route from the sanctions have proved futile, owing to the threat of punitive US action against European banks.

On June 17, Iran underlined its dismay at the lack of European support by threatening to exceed within days the JCPOA's limit on the country's uranium enrichment. That would mean the death of the deal—and would heighten the risk that Iran will strive to acquire nuclear weapons. Given this background, it would not be surprising if Iran, bereft of other weapons for now, were to demonstrate its ability to create havoc in the Gulf.

Yet Iran has a counter-narrative. The Trump administration, along with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel, fears the Islamic Republic's regional influence and its intent on engineering regime change. Perhaps, the argument goes, the US and its allies confected an incident that could be blamed on Iran and further stain its international reputation. Moreover, as the Iranian regime (with support from state-controlled Russian media) points out, it is odd that a Japanese ship should be attacked just as Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, making the first visit to

Iran by a Japanese premier in 40 years, was meeting Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and reportedly conveying a message from Trump.

In that case, and given Trump's apparent readiness to talk with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, perhaps the spotlight should be shined on Pompeo and Trump's hawkish national security adviser, John Bolton, who frequently called for regime change in Iran before joining the administration last year. Like many in Washington, Bolton and Pompeo share the view of the Saudi, Emirati, and Israeli governments that Iran is intent on becoming the Middle East hegemon by leveraging its support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and its links to Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen. Trump seems to agree, but is far less eager to commit US troops to forestall Iran's ambitions, let alone change its regime.

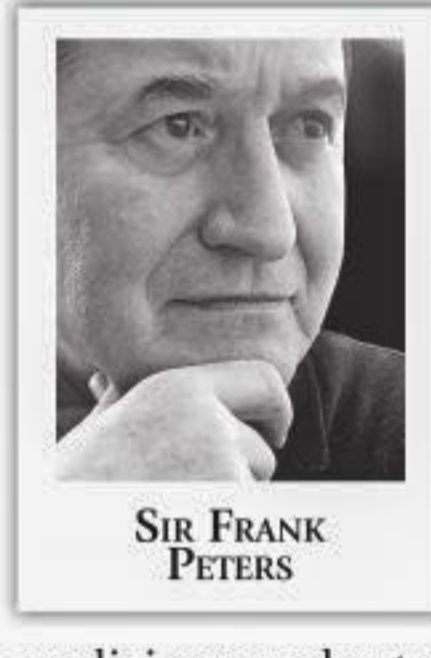
The comforting thought, therefore—reinforced by Trump's decision not to retaliate for the drone downing—is that the current crisis will not provoke a more dangerous conflict. As it showed during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, America has the military means to ensure safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz: its Fifth Fleet is based in Bahrain. In addition, Qatar, whose hostile relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE now seem to be easing, hosts a large US airbase. As long as oil and gas exports continue, it makes little sense for Iran's enemies to be drawn into an escalating game of chicken with the hardliners in Tehran.

If Iran is responsible for the recent attacks, it has made its point. The sensible course now is for all players in the region to invoke that staple of political life—“plausible deniability”—in the service of avoiding war.

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John Andrews, a former editor and foreign correspondent for *The Economist*, is the author of *The World in Conflict: Understanding the World's Troublespots*. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2019. www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to *The Daily Star*)

Five-day school week can do wonders



SIR FRANK PETERS

THERE can never be enough emphasis given to the importance of education. It's a well-known fact that children who learn to read, write, add, and subtract provide a much better future for themselves, but even the superlative

medicines are best served in adequate beneficial dosages. While there's no doubt that schooling is important, life is like an orange and schooling is a mere segment. Too much schooling and there's no time for children to pursue other equally important activities that fashion and mould their lives for the better. With the combined pressure of school, there's very little time for children to actually experience the wonders and joys of being what they are—children.

School makes an indelible mark on both teacher and child and should be a place where both want to be. A place where learning (and teaching) are fun and rewarding—a Jamuna Fun Park of sorts. Every day there should be daily rewards, something new to be absorbed... a new joy ride to enjoy... something that makes being at school all the worthwhile that a child (or teacher) doesn't want to miss.

The fact is, children (and people in general) learn best when they're happy, stress-free, and the lessons are delivered in a non-violent multicoloured fun environment. I've come into contact with many admirable and noble teachers in the city, suburbs and villages. Over the years, these teachers have become accustomed to

the five-and-a-half-day school week, but I have yet to meet a single teacher who actually applauds or agrees with it. In these modern, advanced times, the five-and-a-half-day school week just doesn't make good sense and, in my opinion at least, is counter-productive to the development of Bangladesh.

The five-and-a-half-day school week is a family-size inconvenience and irritation. It affects not only the teacher and child, but also their entire families. It's detrimental to the advancement of the nation. Why? Because it causes colossal unnecessary inconvenience and puts senseless strain on teachers, pupils, and their families who need a 48-hour meaningful break to unwind, refresh and recuperate after a stressful week.

A two-day free weekend is powerful, invigorating, and beneficial to body, soul and mind, and allows the individual to be recharged in readiness for the following week. The benefits of a five-and-a-half-day school week as opposed to a five-day week are none!

In bygone years when there was a high illiteracy rate in Bangladesh, a five-and-a-half-day school week might have been justified—just *might*—but times have changed. Bangladesh has advanced and systems need to adjust accordingly.

Teachers, meanwhile, are no different from other government workers who work only five days a week. Teachers, too, want to spend time and relax with their families and friends, participate in their children's activities, visit their in-laws in distant locations, pursue hobbies and interests and generally clear their minds of the daily hurdles they face trying to teach a classroom of 100 or more pupils (in some cases). In all fairness, they probably need, and deserve,



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the rest much more than the majority of other government workers.

At present, six days a week, they take the school home with them, perch themselves in dimly-lit corners to correct and grade papers and prepare the following day's lesson plans. Even when they're not in school, they're in school! They get to enjoy diminished quality time with their loved ones (and vice versa) and this can—and does—manifest in frustration, stress and non-intentional corporal punishment of innocent children both in their homes and their classrooms.

With a two-day free weekend, teachers would get the time to leisurely buy their

frustrated, and pulling out their hair—or, worse, that of the pupils!

Similarly, if children attend school only five days a week, they would get to spend more time with their friends, family, visiting their grandparents, playing sports, travelling, relaxing and having fun. There would be more time to develop their minds and broaden their education. Their attitude towards school and learning would be measurably more positive and less stressful. Be mindful of the adage, “all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.”

With so much of his/her time demanded by school and tutorial activities, it is difficult for a child to enjoy the wonders of childhood nowadays and experience the magnificence and beauty of the greater world... the bigger picture. Childhood is a child's most precious destination they get to visit only once. Many adults would give all their wealth to experience it again.

There is little to no wisdom in attending school for a half-day, especially during the rainy season. It's something teachers and pupils do, but they totally resent it. Sitting for a half day in damp-soaked clothing, soggy school shoes, and feeling miserable is not conducive to good learning or good teaching.

In summary, the five-and-a-half-day school week has passed its use-by date and needs to be abolished. It lacks justification, imagination, and vision of what a person's life could be... what it should be... and screams for change. Overseas they're moving towards a four-day school week. Bangladesh should take note.

Sir Frank Peters is a former newspaper and magazine publisher and editor, a royal goodwill ambassador, a humanitarian and a foreign non-political friend of Bangladesh.

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

JUNE 25, 1998
Microsoft's "Windows 98" is released to the public

Windows 98 was the second major release in the Windows 9x line of operating systems. It was released to retail on June 25, 1998 as the first entry in 6th generation of operating systems. Windows 98 was the successor to Windows 96.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	30 Sub sinker	8 Report card signer
1 "Beat it!"	31 Singing Sandra	9 Carry too far
6 Train stop	32 Exalted poem	10 Towel material
11 Origami creation	33 Parsley servings	16 Great American Ball Park team
12 Yucca's kin	35 Fit for a king	20 Populated area of multiple cities
13 Singer Bonnie	38 Kudrow and Bonet	21 Spots on TV
14 Tree-harming beetle	39 Old market	24 Catchy music
15 Ad section	40 Ham it up	25 Urban grocery
17 Slip	41 "Sully" star	26 Salem's state
18 Cobbler's cousin	42 Odorless gas	27 Menlo Park whiz
19 "I need you today, --" (Manilow lyric)		28 Smoothly, in scores
22 Smidge	DOWN	29 Reduce
23 Must	1 List of lines	30 Sacred scroll
24 Computer jacks	2 Brain cases	34 Frost
25 Child of the 1950s	3 Brought up	36 Bible boat
1950s	4 Pay to play	37 -- Palmas
27 Annex	5 Rhythm marker	
	6 Bit of ointment	
	7 Sense of self	

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

P	A	C	T	S	S	T	A	R	E
U	H	U	R	A	E	S	S	E	X
B	A	S	I	N	P	U	P	A	E
T	O	D	D	N	I	P	S		
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BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

I'M TRYING TO CUT BACK ON MY COFFEE HABIT

THIS IS MY AFTERNOON TEA

I THINK YOU SHOULD CUT BACK ON YOUR CRUMPET HABIT, TOO

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

WHAT'S THIS?

"THE FURBY WUBBIES," IT'S WREN'S NEW FAVORITE SHOW.

FURBY!

CAN I CHANGE IT TO BASKETBALL...?

SURE...

...IF YOU WANT TO RISK LOSING A HAND.

DID I JUST SEE FANGS?

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

I'M TRYING TO CUT BACK ON MY COFFEE HABIT

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