

HORMUZ 'TOLL'

A legally risky route for shippers

AFP, London

Here are the latest facts about Iran's control of the Strait of Hormuz, a crucial trade waterway virtually closed off by its forces in the Middle East war.

HOW ARE SHIPS CROSSING?

Maritime trackers indicate that a handful of vessels are still crossing daily through the strait, which is guarded by Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) — most of them leaving the Gulf. Some have taken a new Iranian approved route through its waters, dubbed the "Tehran Toll Booth" by leading shipping journal Lloyd's List. At least one vetted vessel paid \$2 million to use the corridor around Larak Island just off Iran's coast, it reported.

WHO USED THE CORRIDOR?

Lloyd's List reported Monday that it had tracked more than 20 ships using the emerging route, most of them Greek-owned but others Indian, Pakistani



owned or linked to China. In a sign that commodity vessels were gaining approval to use the route, since the start of last week four that crossed the Strait of Hormuz kept their AIS transponders on while using the corridor, while at least five more that crossed sent signals in close proximity to the passage, an AFP analysis of Kpler data showed.

WHAT HAS IRAN SAID PUBLICLY?

In a statement dated Sunday and released late Tuesday via the International Maritime Organization, Tehran reiterated its stance that the strait was open, but only to some. It said "non-hostile vessels" and those not "belonging to or associated with" Israel, the US and other "aggressors" could cross "subject to compliance with... the realities arising from the ongoing conflict".

IS IRAN ACTING ILLEGALLY?

Charging fees to cross strait would "lack a valid legal basis", Roscini said. Transit passage rights through straits remain applicable during conflicts and suspending commercial navigation through Hormuz "cannot be lawful" barring exceptional circumstances, he added.



Israeli emergency services, security officials and onlookers gather at the site of a missile strike after Iranian barrages on Israel, amid US-Israel tensions with Iran, in central Israel, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

POTENTIAL US GROUND ATTACK

Iran fortifying Kharg Island defences: US intel

CNN ONLINE

Iran has been laying traps and moving additional military personnel and air defenses to Kharg Island in recent weeks in preparation for a possible US operation to take control of the island, according to multiple people familiar with US intelligence reporting on the issue. The Trump administration has

the Iranians have moved additional shoulder-fired, surface-to-air guided missile systems known as MANPADS there in recent weeks, the sources said.

"I would be very worried about this," said retired Adm James Stavridis, the former Nato Supreme Allied Commander who now serves as a CNN military analyst. "Iranians are clever and ruthless. They will do everything they can

"Iranians are clever and ruthless. They will do everything they can to inflict maximum casualties on US forces on the ships at sea."

Retd. Admiral James Stavridis



been weighing using US troops to seize the tiny island in the northeastern Persian Gulf — an economic lifeline for Iran that handles roughly 90 percent of the country's crude exports — as leverage over the Iranians to coerce them to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, CNN has reported.

But US officials and military experts say there would be significant risks involved in such a ground operation, including a large number of US casualties. The island has layered defenses, and

to inflict maximum casualties on US forces both on the ships at sea, and especially once ground troops are anywhere in their sovereign territory."

Iran has also been laying traps including anti-personnel and anti-armor mines around the island, the sources said, including on the shoreline where US troops could possibly stage an amphibious landing if Trump moved forward with a ground operation.

Some allies of the president are raising serious questions

about whether there is a need to attempt such an operation, since successfully taking the island would not, on its own, resolve problems related to the Strait of Hormuz and Iran's stranglehold on the global energy market, the source added.

US Central Command declined to comment on Iranian actions on Kharg. The US military had already targeted Kharg with strikes on March 13, with Central Command saying that 90 targets had been hit, including "naval mine storage facilities, missile storage bunkers, and multiple other military sites." Trump had announced the attack by saying that US forces had avoided hitting oil infrastructure on the island "for reasons of decency."

An Israeli source said there is concern that taking control of Kharg would lead to attacks by Iranian drones and shoulder-fired missiles, leading to the deaths of American troops. The speaker of Iran's parliament on Wednesday warned the country's "enemies" against attempting to occupy any Iranian islands.

Israel removes Araqchi, Qalibaf from hit list

Pak source says after Islamabad's request to US

REUTERS, Islamabad

Israel removed Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi and Parliamentary Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf from its hit list after Pakistan urged Washington to press Israel not to target them, a Pakistani source with knowledge of the discussions told Reuters yesterday.

"The Israelis had their coordinates and wanted to take them out, we told the US if they are also eliminated then there is no one else to talk to, hence the US asked the Israelis to back off," the source said.

Pakistan's foreign office did not immediately respond to requests for comment. Israeli Prime Minister's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The Wall Street Journal first reported that the two top Iranian officials had been temporarily removed from Israel's list of officials to eliminate as they explore possible peace talks. The two officials have been removed from the list for up to four or five days, the Journal said, citing US officials, but did not mention any Pakistani role in it.

MOVE TO END WAR

US, Iran outline starkly different demands

CNN ONLINE

Almost exactly one month ago, US Special Envoy Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner met indirectly with the Iranians in Geneva as the Trump administration continued to claim diplomacy was its preferred option. Two days later, the US and Israel launched their war against Iran.

Now, the United States is again seeking to return to talks after President Donald Trump's about face on Monday when he announced the two countries were negotiating an end to the conflict — but there are significant hurdles on the path back to the negotiating table despite public optimism voiced by the White House.

The specter of continued military action by the US and Israel looms large over potential discussions. Meanwhile, Tehran perceives itself to possess a key tool that it did not have prior to the outbreak of the war: virtual control over the Strait of Hormuz. "The very basics must be agreed on before the two sides board and take off for negotiations," one regional source, told CNN adding that Iranians have now given "a maximum no to a maximalist offer."

Earlier this week, the US conveyed, via Pakistan a 15-point list of demands for Iran. Many of the demands echo those made by the US before the war began: Iran committing to no nuclear weapons, the US taking possession of Iran's highly enriched uranium, limits on Tehran's defense capabilities, and an end of Iran's support for proxies.

If that is truly the US' position, "there is no world where there'll be successful negotiations," Nate Swanson, a former career US government official who served as director for Iran at the National Security Council, told CNN.

The other key player in the war, Israel, is concerned that the US may declare a one-month ceasefire in order to facilitate negotiations with Iran, two Israeli sources told CNN. However, the country remains skeptical about the prospect of a breakthrough, according to one of the sources.

"The maximum Iran might be willing to give does not meet the minimum the US is demanding," the source said, adding that Israel views several elements of the US framework as "positive and good for Israel" — in particular those regarding Iran's nuclear program and the activities of its regional proxies.

On Wednesday, an Iranian official outlined the country's own list of demands, according to state-run media outlet Press TV. They include a complete halt to "aggression and assassinations," establishment of concrete mechanisms to ensure the war on Iran does not resume, guaranteed and clearly defined payment of war damages and reparations, an end to military operations across all fronts and for all Iranian proxies throughout the region, and a guarantee that Iran can exercise sovereignty over the Strait of Hormuz.

Tehran's ability to snarl the key waterway, despite US progress degrading Iran's military capabilities, has caused the price of fuel to skyrocket and set global markets on edge. It is also a potential edge for Iran in future negotiations.

Still, the potential for further US military action is looming. Approximately 1,000 US soldiers with the Army's 82nd Airborne Division are expected to deploy in coming days to the Middle East, according to two sources familiar with the matter, adding to the growing military firepower in the region as the Trump administration says it is in talks with Iran to end the conflict.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt warned Wednesday that if "Iran fails to accept the reality of the current moment," Trump "is prepared to unleash hell."



Mullally, first female Archbishop of Canterbury

AFP, Canterbury

A former nurse made history Wednesday when she was enthroned as the Archbishop of Canterbury, the first woman to lead the centuries-old mother church of the world's 85 million-strong Anglican community.

Sarah Mullally, 63, formally steps into the role after an abuse scandal led to the departure of her predecessor.

The former midwife was formally installed in the historic ceremony at Canterbury Cathedral in southeast England in front of around 2,000 people, including heir to the throne Prince William and his wife Catherine.

In accordance with tradition, the ceremony began with Mullally knocking three times with a staff on the cathedral's west door to request admission.

Dressed in deep yellow-gold robes, she was greeted by local school children who asked why she had been sent.

"I am sent as archbishop to serve you, to proclaim the love of Christ and with you to worship and love him with heart and soul, mind and strength," she responded.

The ceremony then culminated with Mullally being seated on two different thrones.

The seats symbolise the dual responsibilities of the role — as a bishop in the diocese of Canterbury and as the spiritual leader of Anglicans worldwide.

Mullally's predecessor Justin Welby announced his resignation as head of the Church of England in November 2024 over failures in handling an abuse scandal.



Taliban security personnel speak with Afghan woman Samira Muhammadi as she searches for her son, Aref Khan, killed in a Pakistani airstrike on a drug rehabilitation centre, during a mass funeral at the Eid Gah Mosque in Kabul yesterday. Pakistan is continuing military operations against Afghanistan after the end of a temporary pause, the spokesperson of Pakistan's foreign ministry said.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Madagascar's Gen Z left out of new govt

AFP, Antananarivo

Madagascar's interim leader on Wednesday unveiled the make-up of the island nation's new government, still without representatives of the Gen Z movement that helped topple the president last year.

Colonel Michael Randrianirina, who seized power in the wake of the youth-led protests against persistent water and power shortages, fired his prime minister and cabinet on March 9 without explanation.

The career military officer tapped Mamitiana Rajoanarison, a former police officer who has led Madagascar's anti-money-laundering body since 2021, as his replacement head of government on March 15.

Since then, both men have been working to recruit for the new government — with all prospective cabinet members forced to submit to a lie detector test.