

The Strategic Importance of the Strait of Hormuz and Its Impact on the Iranian – American Conflict

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All the Gulf states will be affected by the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, including Iran, as well as major countries, especially China – the first and largest trading partner with Iran in the world – Japan, South Korea, the United States of America, and all European countries. Talk of a military strike on Iran is unlikely to result in action, because oil will be a decisive factor in America's lack of a military option. Closing it would, as many experts see it, push oil prices to more than \$200 a barrel, thereby leading to enormous pressures on the world's economies. This alone could prevent a military strike on Iran

Key words: *United States. Iran. Strait of Hormuz. Arabian Gulf. Strategic strait. International navigation. Conflict.*

Introduction

The importance of the Strait of Hormuz lies in the fact that it is one of the most important international sea lanes in the world; an important strategic corridor that controls the passage of about 40% of oil to international markets. Iran, in turn, will use the Strait as a pressure card – in the event of a threat or war, it will carry out its threats to close the Strait to all ships including oil tankers and warships. On the other hand, US and British forces based in the Persian Gulf will work with all their capabilities and advanced military forces to prevent the closure, or bring about the reopening of the Strait if Iran can close it.

Research Problem

The subject of the study is the threat of closure or obstruction of the Strait of Hormuz, but this cannot happen without reasons. What are the reasons and justifications? What is the purpose

of these actions, which are extremely damaging to the global economy? Especially in light of the application of US sanctions on Iranian oil exports. Thus, Iran is at risk of military strike by the United States and its allies.

Research Hypothesis

The Strait of Hormuz is of great importance to Iran *and* the United States and the threat of its closure by Iran will harm everyone, including Iran, and put it in political, economic and social isolation, as well as putting stress on the Gulf countries and oil-importing countries, especially China, Japan and South Korea. The threat came as a result of US sanctions against Iran over its nuclear and missile program and its interventions in the region.

Research Methodology

To address this issue, it is necessary to use analytical and descriptive approaches through the geographical description of the Strait of Hormuz and its strategic importance.

Research Structure

This research comes with an introduction followed by three investigations and then ends with a conclusion. In the first topic we deal with the geographical location of the Strait of Hormuz. The second section examines the Iranian threat to close the Strait to global navigation. The third topic deals with the effects of the Iranian threat to close the Strait to international navigation, and concludes by showing the most important findings of the study.

Topic 1: Geographical location of the Strait of Hormuz

The Strait of Hormuz is an important waterway for international navigation and for the international economy, and the interests of all nations are intertwined in this important region. Freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf means freedom of navigation in its only outlet, the Strait of Hormuz, which forms the narrow bottleneck of the Arabian Gulf, which in turn links it to the Gulf of Oman.

The word (strait) from the linguistic point of view means: a narrow place/ passage of water. In geographical terms, it means the narrow natural waterway that separates Iran from the United Arab Emirates and Oman. In international law, a waterway is narrow if:

- a. It is a narrow natural waterway that does not exceed twice the territorial sea limit.
- B. It connects two high seas, or a regional sea to a high sea.
- C. It is used for international navigation.

The Strait of Hormuz in south-west Asia is located between latitudes (25°) and (27°) north and between longitudes (55°) and (57°) east. The Strait of Hormuz is a waterway used to transport commercial goods from east to west. It lies between the semi-enclosed Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, an open sea, both of which form a sea tongue connected to the Indian Ocean from its southern coast.

Strait Boundaries

The northwestern border of the Strait of Hormuz starts from the line connecting the head of Sheikh Masood in the Omani (Musandam) peninsula on the Iranian island of Hengam, passing through the island of Qeshm on the Iranian coast. The length of this is 28 nautical miles. This line separates the Arabian Gulf from the Strait of Hormuz and extends to the south-western boundary of the Strait (the head of Dibba) on the coast of the United Arab Emirates to (Dmajh) on the Iranian coast: this line with a width of 52.5 nautical miles forms a strait that separates it from the Gulf of Oman. The strait is 104 nautical miles long if measured from mid-distance between the two shores. The width of the strait is 52.5 nautical miles at the line separating Ras Dibba in Damajah: that is the maximum width. The narrowest point in the strait lies between Oman's largest island of Salama and the Iranian island of Larak, reaching 20.75 nautical miles (Hadeel); (Fian); (Hussein); (Diari); (Abdul Qader Mahmoud Mohammed Al-Aqra).

The most important islands regulated by the Strait.

The Strait contains many islands belonging to the States of Oman and Iran, in addition to a number of islands located on both sides of the Strait that are very small and just a few feet above sea level. The most important islands are:

1. The islands of the Sultanate of Oman:

The most important islands of the Sultanate of Oman are the island (Salama) and its daughters, which is located in the middle of the Strait; the importance of the (Salama) islands and daughters is that the distance of separation from the island (Larak) is the narrowest in the strait. All ships entering and exiting out pass through this route.

2. Islands belonging to Iran:

The most important islands on the Iranian side are Qeshm, the largest of the Arabian Gulf islands. Located in the northeast is the island (Larak), which is completely central to the Strait. The island of Hormuz lies to the north of Qeshm.

3. Islands under Iranian control:

Located on the entrance to the Arabian Gulf in the Strait of Hormuz there are three islands: (Greater Tunb) and (Lesser), and (Abu Musa) that are called the Hormuz Islands. These are important and strategic to Iran's aim to control navigation in the strait.

The importance of the strait

The Strait of Hormuz is important as a sea corridor for the Gulf States and Iran, linking the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Gulf, in addition to its strategic importance as a major entry point for the imports of the Gulf States. It is a crossing for exports of countries with the largest oil reserves in the world, as well as production and marketing to the markets of East Asia, Europe and North America . It is important not only as a vital trade corridor, but also for its own wealth in supporting the economy. It has tremendous economic, oil and financial capabilities – and economic life is the basis of social and political life. Social and political progress cannot be conceived without economic prosperity. The pearl and fisheries trade contribute significantly to the national production of the Gulf states.

The Strait of Hormuz is one of the busiest waterways for ships with transit of more than 40% of the world's oil: it carries with an average of 200-300 tankers daily, ie., at peak hour, one tanker every 6 minutes. So it can be seen that the Strait of Hormuz is of great importance and a key player in the stability of the global economy through its control of over 40% of oil exports to the world. Its safety is vitally important for the countries of the world, especially the major industrialized countries for being the only maritime corridor for many of these countries. (Azhar, 2016); (Jamal, 1996); (Atef, 1993); (Ayad Ayed Wali Al-Budairi); (Wissam Al-Din). The importance to Iran lies in its strategic location, and as the supervisor of one of the key straits in the world. It is known by several names, including (strategic strait), (energy artery), (safety valve) and (international oil corridor).

The Strait contains small inhabited islands in addition to other uninhabited islands: (Larak), (Hormuz), (Qeshm), (Abu Musa) and (Greater Tunb). Navigation also faces difficulties such as tidal storms and strong sea currents, in addition to the impact of navigation traffic dust that limits visibility.

It confirms many of the studies: the strategic importance of the strait lies in its being one of the most important waterways in the world and that for the passage of ships loaded with oil from the main production areas to consumers in Europe, America, Southeast Asia and Japan, it is the strait bottleneck of the Arabian Gulf.

Most Gulf countries export oil across the Strait: as well there is the container trade that transports manufactured goods to the Gulf countries, along with commodities and raw materials

such as grain, iron, cement and others. The strait allows the passage of loads weighing more than two and a half tons per year.

On the importance of oil production in the Arabian Gulf region, Anthony Cordesman points out in a study on this subject: "The contribution of the Gulf states combined (Iran, Iraq, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) is 30% of the world's oil production. The Gulf Arab oil reserves are 57%, Iran alone has 11% of the world's oil reserves, and it has a significant natural gas reserve of 15.3% of the world reserves, while the natural gas reserves in the Gulf States amount to 45% of world gas."

Here we stand on the geographical inevitability of the Strait of Hormuz referred to by many researchers, which gives Iran a comparative advantage that the United States lacks. The naval canal is up to 6 nautical miles wide, not far from the capabilities of Iran's naval forces, and potentially allows it to conduct military strikes against the Fifth Fleet in Manama. There are also geopolitical facts pointing to the control wielded by Iran from the north on the Strait of Hormuz through the islands (Abu Musa) and (Lesser Tunb) and (Greater Tunb), in addition to the narrow channel: were Iran to sink two tankers in this narrow space, this will ensure closure of the strait.

As a result of the blockade on Iranian exports, Iran is likely to harass ships passing through the Strait due to the capabilities of the Iranian navy, indicating that the biggest loss will be on other countries, especially the United States and its allies, which led the Pentagon to increase their Naval presence in this area to manage any emergency. This is indicated by the United States conducting military naval exercises in 2002 under the name of "Century Challenge", acknowledging that the same man who can control the Strait of Hormuz has the ability to control the world economy.

The second topic: the Iranian threat to close the Strait of Hormuz to international shipping.

In this discussion, we will deal with Iran's repeated threats to close the Straits to international shipping. This threatens serious damage to the world economy, especially those major oil importers, in addition to the exporting countries such as the Gulf countries.

Firstly, the reasons for the Iranian threat to close the Strait of Hormuz:

The international community has become accustomed to repeated Iranian threats to close the Straits, whenever Iran came under international pressure and sanctions because of its nuclear program: these sanctions and international pressures have caused great damage to the Iranian economy. Iran's repeated threat coincides with US threats of a military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities, and has led to Iran's response of targeting US bases in Afghanistan and the

Persian Gulf. Iran is signalling oil as an economic weapon to use in negotiations on its nuclear program, in addition to the Iranian parliament voting in favour of the closure of the Strait as a sign of political intimidation of the Gulf states. All of this aims to escalate the political and economic climate in the Gulf States.

Secondly, the seriousness of the Iranian threats to close the Strait of Hormuz

The strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz undoubtedly makes it a pressure card in the hands of Iran who will resort to it whenever it considers that its interests are threatened by the countries that it considers its enemies, but the question is whether Iran is serious in its threats to close the Strait. This question can be answered by examining the Iranian military capability to close the Strait, as well as the implications of this closure.

Admiral Habibollah Sayari's remarks indicate that Iran asserts that it is capable of closing the strait. "It is easier for us to close it than to sip a glass of water," he said. "Everyone knows that it is under our full control, but we don't need to close it because we control it."

In its threats, the Islamic Republic of Iran depends on several factors:

1. The northern side of the Strait of Hormuz is controlled by Iran.
2. It is a narrow strait, especially the entry and exit corridor is 10 and 15 km wide and this means the sinking of two small tankers will close it. In addition there is Iran's naval capability and ability to harass ships.
3. Iran possesses Russian submarines capable of laying mines in addition to speedboats armed with anti-ship missiles, and the Iranian islands in the Strait are suitable for effective attacks.
4. Iran possesses local and British-made military destroyers capable of hitting several targets simultaneously, whether they are land, sea or air targets.
5. Iran possesses a dangerous variety of homemade Russian-Chinese naval mines capable of sinking various types of ships that can be controlled remotely, especially the ability of Chinese type (AM52) mines to sink large naval vessels, including aircraft carriers.

Iran is well aware that the closure of the Strait is tantamount to declaring a world war, with Iran on the one hand, and China, the Persian Gulf and the West on the other, and because Iran is also aware that this means political suicide that only ends with the overthrow of its regime, as its continued closure would cause it to be reopened by the force of the US military and its allies. This points to the collapse of Iran's economic and political infrastructure and the end of the Iranian role in the region, and the world. Therefore, Iran is resorting to other factors short of the closure of the Strait, including obstruction of the oil trade, which would raise the price of crude oil to Iran's advantage. This measure is not a strong reason for waging war.

Iran is now aware of its steps, including the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, as well as its military escalations that bring only more economic sanctions, so it has little to lose from the closure, but has resorted to some economic measures it imposes on others. The great economic damage to the United States and its allies would create a global economic disaster. Such a view would deter Washington from considering a military option to counter Iranian threats to close the Strait of Hormuz.

The third topic: the implications of the Iranian threat to close the Strait to international navigation

Iran has resorted to taking firm measures in the face of the worst possible circumstances, where it has prepared itself to become a major regional power by leveraging its military capacity and modern warfare and advanced equipment, and it has established a firm doctrine and a spirit of combat that cannot be underestimated. It is no secret that Iran allies with major powers such as Russia and China, as well as their military and foreign political arms in several Arab countries, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, etc. This is why Iran's military ability to close the Straits to international shipping cannot be taken lightly.

By closing the Strait, Iran will touch on the vital interests of many countries. Iran, though able to close the strait, cannot close it for long because of the highly developed military arsenal of the countries it will face. This indicates that Iran, even if it closes the Strait, is unable to continue to keep it closed because of the advanced military strength of the countries involved.

Iran, in the event that its strategic interests are at risk, would close the Strait for a short period of time, but even a short period would harm many countries such as Kuwait, Qatar, UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Oman. It is not possible to predict what would happen militarily after that and how long this closure would continue, and whether Iran would simply close the Strait or make it unsafe for maritime navigation, or to strike vital installations of the surrounding countries.

On the other hand, Iran would face direct confrontations with its allies such as China, Japan and European countries, which will be economically affected by the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. which is reflected in its nuclear program, where some of the countries that stand beside its nuclear file, or lose the countries that stand with them neutrality. Therefore, the Iranian regime recognizes that war with the United States is very costly, especially considering the differing air superiority between the two countries, as well as that Iranian naval power does not have the capacity to face its American counterpart, its fifth fleet and the British naval fleet, in the Gulf.

The Importance of the Strait of Hormuz from the American Perspective

The United States has adopted several policies to control the Persian Gulf – which is considered a source of strength and wealth to be protected from the ambition of major competitors such as the former Soviet Union, which was seeking to dominate the warm waters to achieve full control of oil in the region – to maintain the United States of America's continuing hegemony over the region. The US sought to unleash its naval power in the waters of the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Gulf, and strengthened political, military and commercial ties with the Gulf states, as well as establishing so-called rapid reaction forces to protect oil and gas resources. Ruff on its supply starting from the Strait of Hormuz, which is the "jugular vein" by so-called US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance. Under this pretext, the United States has expanded and strengthened its naval fleets in the Gulf waters, sometimes invoking the guise of guaranteeing freedom of navigation in the Strait and at other times to protect oil tankers. Considering the Strait of Hormuz the only waterway and recognising the importance of strategy, the United States of America strives to extend its control over the Strait.

Proposed Alternatives in Case of Closure of the Strait

One of the first countries to seek alternatives in the event of the closure of the Strait of Hormuz is Saudi Arabia, which provided strategic alternatives to export oil instead of via the Strait when it established two pipelines linking the eastern region of the city of Yanbu with a length of 1200 km. – one dedicated to transporting crude oil with the other for gas. Saudi Arabia expanded these two pipelines in 1992 to 4.5 million barrels per day of capacity and 12.5 million barrels of storage capacity in addition to the ability to store and export liquefied gas. Several suggested alternatives can be followed, for example:

1. Laying pipes to the Arabian Sea from Saudi Arabia through Yemen, Oman and the UAE.
2. Using the Habshan-Fujairah pipeline, which connects Abu Dhabi over 370-kilometres with Fujairah port with a production capacity of 1.5-1.8 million barrels of oil per day, which is equivalent to transporting 70% of the UAE's oil.
3. Construction of a line covering the Arabian Gulf through the Kuwait-Fujairah line called the 1480 km Gulf Line, as the flat and sandy nature of the land helps in the effectiveness of this idea and its realisation.
4. Opening a water channel linking the Arabian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman, which is similar to the Suez Canal, provided that the beneficiary countries contribute to the construction of the canal.

Exporting oil through alternatives is not a *real* alternative. It must therefore be protected, and freedom of passage must be maintained. Iran is aware that the closure will cause legal problems and negative effects on the Iranian economy. In addition, the difficulty of any attempt to close

the strait and maintain the closure for a long time could lead to an uncertain military war. The consequences with the United States greatly affect the Iranian economy. However, it can impede navigation in the Strait by increasing inspection and control procedures for tankers passing through it, which in turn slows movement in the Strait.

Therefore, the exclusion of the closure of the Strait by Iran does not mean that traffic in the Strait is not threatened or obstructed. These threats can take many forms:

1. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz by an Iranian military attack on oil tankers passing through could damage global navigation.
2. Closure of the strait by means of armed warships to attack tankers and ships passing through the strait.
3. The threat by planting marine mines is one of the most dangerous methods on ships and submarines. Not to mention the ease of cultivation within a short period.
4. Closure of the Strait by Iranian missiles deployed on the Iranian islands in the Strait in attacking merchant ships in the waters of the Arabian Gulf.

It can be argued that Iran, regardless of whether it has the right to close the Strait or not legally, is aware that freedom of navigation in the Straits has been guaranteed by global navigation laws. Iran cannot close the Strait for a long time and keep it closed or obstruct its navigation, especially considering the possibilities raised by the US forces, especially its fifth fleet in the Persian Gulf, which includes an aircraft carrier, a number of submarines, naval destroyers and fighter jets and bombers. Any attempt by Iran to close the Strait will lead to US military intervention to ensure that its political and economic interests in the Arabian Gulf are not affected (Abdullah al-Ash'al); (Nawar Jalil); (Hamad Jassim, 2013); (Karim Ali).

Conclusion

We can conclude from this study that the Iranian threats remain mere words and speeches at the present time, and it is not possible to predict whether these threats will become realised or actual. It can be said that the Iranian military arsenal and its sophisticated war machines could make the Arabian Gulf a battleground at the price of total economic depletion, but this military power is unable to withstand the American military machine and its allies.

Mutual threats between Iran and the United States are offset by a rise in insurance rates for merchant ships passing through the Strait, as happened during the Iran-Iraq war, where insurance prices have risen by 400%, which in turn leads to the reluctance of major companies to resume trade across the Strait of Hormuz. On the other hand, it can be said that Iran plays a major and essential role in the stability and security of the region in general, and this makes the United States and its allies cautious in dealing with them on the Strait of Hormuz.



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