

# Prospects for an Iranian “July Surprise” During Biden’s Gulf Trip

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Brief Analysis

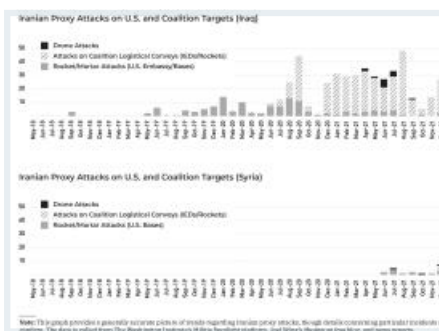
**Tehran may see the president’s attendance at the GCC+3 summit as a tempting opportunity to scuttle a U.S.-Gulf reset, perhaps by using a cyber or military provocation to humiliate the hosts and demonstrate America’s inability to protect them.**

**F**or a number of reasons, Iran may attempt to disrupt and upstage Joe Biden’s imminent trip to the Middle East, his first as president. When President Trump conducted his first foreign trip in May 2017—to Saudi Arabia for a joint summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation—the Iran-backed Houthi rebel group in Yemen launched a missile strike on Riyadh just hours before his arrival (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/houthi-rebels-fired-missile-riyadh-hours-trump-arrived-n763156>). In response, Trump proposed killing ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/killing-of-soleimani-reflects-an-aggressive-national-security-team-not-inclined-to-curb-trump/2020/01/12/a83f5346-333c-11ea-898f-eb846b7e9feb\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/killing-of-soleimani-reflects-an-aggressive-national-security-team-not-inclined-to-curb-trump/2020/01/12/a83f5346-333c-11ea-898f-eb846b7e9feb_story.html)) Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani, the commander of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF)—an idea he eventually acted on three years later. (Tellingly, the United States also tried to kill Abdul Reza Shahlai ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/on-the-day-us-forces-killed-soleimani-they-launched-another-secret-operation-targeting-a-senior-iranian-official-in-yemen/2020/01/10/60f86dbc-3245-11ea-898f-eb846b7e9feb\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/on-the-day-us-forces-killed-soleimani-they-launched-another-secret-operation-targeting-a-senior-iranian-official-in-yemen/2020/01/10/60f86dbc-3245-11ea-898f-eb846b7e9feb_story.html))—the QF commander in Yemen—on the same day Soleimani was targeted.) On July 15-16, President Biden will be attending a similar event in Jeddah: a summit of the GCC+3, a collective that includes Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan along with the council’s six member states. Might Iran or one of its proxies try to disrupt this event, and if so, how?

## Conflicting Trends and Considerations

**O**ver the past six months, Iran appears to have gradually, though unevenly, reined in proxy activity against U.S.

targets in Iraq and Syria. As Tehran continues to [advance its nuclear program](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-nuclear-explainer) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-nuclear-explainer>), entrench itself militarily in Syria, and support Lebanese Hezbollah’s precision missile project—and while its Iraqi proxies [pummel Turkish forces](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/muqawamas-duel-turkey) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/muqawamas-duel-turkey>) and [Kurdish oil infrastructure](https://www.state.gov/attacks-on-iraqi-kurdistan-region/) (<https://www.state.gov/attacks-on-iraqi-kurdistan-region/>)—overall proxy attacks against U.S. interests in Iraq and Syria are down by about 80 percent from [peak levels](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/making-sense-militia-attacks-iraq-and-syria-early-2022) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/making-sense-militia-attacks-iraq-and-syria-early-2022>) in December 2021-January 2022, when pro-Iran militias intensified attacks after threatening to expel U.S. forces from Iraq if they did not leave by the end of 2021. With the exception of an April-May spike in rocket and drone incidents, most claimed attacks in Iraq over the past six months have involved the use of improvised explosive devices against coalition logistical convoys manned by local contractors—acts of performative resistance that pose little risk to American personnel. Rocket attacks against U.S. personnel in Syria have continued at low levels (about once a month) through most of this period.



(/sites/default/files/2022-07/iran-proxy-attacks-iraq-syria-chart-POL3628.jpg)

Iranian and proxy activities ebb and flow regularly due to varied and often obscure factors, and there are several possible reasons for the current downward trend:

- To reduce friction with Washington while stringing out the nuclear talks and pushing ahead with its nuclear program. This could help it gain further leverage over the United States while obtaining more expertise and experience, whether prior to returning to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or as a prelude to a slow-motion nuclear breakout.
- To repair its image in Iraq, where an anti-Iran backlash emerged after its militia partners played a central role in repressing the Tishrin protest movement in October 2019. This backlash found its fullest expression when pro-Iran parties performed poorly in the October 2021 parliamentary election.
- To avoid overextending itself militarily as it intensifies efforts to retaliate against Israel’s escalating covert action campaign, which has targeted the nuclear program, the Qods Force, and industrial infrastructure inside Iran. Most recently, these efforts have included a series of strikes against Israeli shipping in the Gulf region (which succeeded) and a plot to kill Israelis in Turkey (which failed).
- To (temporarily) heed U.S. warnings that have followed each spike in attacks—warnings that may have been reinforced by various [unacknowledged activities](https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/attacks-iran-backed-militias-us-target-are-us-hasnt-responded-force-20-rcna32892) (<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/attacks-iran-backed-militias-us-target-are-us-hasnt-responded-force-20-rcna32892>)—pending renewed attempts by Tehran to test U.S. risk and response thresholds.

Indeed, a return to higher levels of activity against U.S. interests is certainly possible. In the present case, Iran will likely see the GCC+3 summit as both a provocation on its doorstep and a tempting opportunity to scuttle a possible U.S.-Gulf reset. An attack during the summit could hold several benefits for Tehran: humiliating U.S. officials and their Saudi hosts; demonstrating that Washington cannot protect its friends even while the president is visiting, thus

undermining efforts to create a new regional security architecture; causing Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to think twice about acceding to U.S. requests for increased oil production, while underscoring that Iran is the ultimate arbiter of Gulf (and thus global) energy security; and providing Tehran with a much-needed win after its numerous recent setbacks in countering Israel's humiliating and damaging covert campaign.

If Iran takes direct action, this would not be the first time it has done so while a foreign leader is visiting the region. In June 2019, IRGC naval forces conducted a limpet mine attack on a Japanese tanker in the Gulf of Oman, just as the late Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe was visiting Tehran in an unsuccessful bid to ease U.S.-Iran tensions.

## What Might Tehran Do?

Iran has a large, diversified military toolkit and a target-rich environment from which to choose—and while Saudi defenses have been beefed up since the September 2019 Aramco attack, significant gaps remain. Iran's leadership tends to work from a well-worn playbook, relying on a limited repertoire of actions and repeating what has worked well in the past (or even what has not worked so well). Thus, a symbolic missile launch into an unpopulated area on the eve of the summit is certainly possible. Alternatively, Tehran might see a destructive cyberattack against Gulf oil infrastructure as a less provocative but still effective way of accomplishing its goals.

But Tehran also generally prefers to make a connection between perceived challenges and how it responds to them. Hence, given recent U.S. efforts to support the creation of regional air and missile defense and maritime security architectures to counter Iran, and to increase the supply of Gulf oil in the hope of lowering prices at home, Tehran might opt to attack oil transport or infrastructure at sea or on land—its targets of choice in recent years. Diverting oil tankers, conducting limpet mine attacks on such vessels, or launching nonlethal but destructive drone and missile strikes on oil infrastructure would enable Iran to demonstrate the weakness of regional defenses and the vulnerability of the world's oil supply.

## Who Might Do It?

The UN-mediated ceasefire in Yemen would seem to prevent the Houthis from playing a role in any summit drama. Houthi forces have not launched a cross-border attack into Saudi Arabia since the start of the ceasefire on April 2.

But Iran retains a stable of Iraqi proxies it could use, and some have conducted attacks against Saudi oil targets in the past, such as the Kataib Hezbollah drone strike on the East-West Pipeline in May 2019. Iran could also conduct drone and/or cruise missile strikes on its own as it did in September 2019, operating from launch sites in Iraq (as it has in the past) or at sea while using convoluted flight paths to create ambiguity about the strikes' point of origin.

Indeed, Iran has conducted [a growing number of unilateral cross-border attacks](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-cross-border-strikes-pattern-search-policy) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-cross-border-strikes-pattern-search-policy>) using drones and missiles; the rise of IRGC Aerospace Force commander Brig. Gen. Amir Ali Hajizadeh in the years since Soleimani's death might reinforce this trend.

## Policy Implications

Washington should be prepared for the possibility that Iran or one of its proxies will try to upstage the president's visit, as happened in 2017. To this end, the United States should:

- Quietly warn Tehran that there will be assured, costly consequences for Iran should it engage in military action before, during, or after the summit
- Increase surveillance of Iranian assets in and around the Gulf, since the knowledge that it is being watched has sometimes deterred Iran (<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/Transcripts/Article/2027273/>)
- Respond swiftly and decisively to any Iranian action, lest inaction undermine U.S. credibility and claims to leadership.

This is also the best way to ensure that Iran's move backfires.

Finally, Washington should quietly remind Tehran that its last attempt to disrupt a U.S.-GCC summit set in motion a series of events that ultimately did not end well for the Islamic Republic, and had long-term consequences that it still has not recovered from.

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