

Developing



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JAN
9:26 UTC

MENA SITUATION UPDATE: Risk of US military action against Iran not abated amid continued American force deployment to Middle East as of January 21; continue being prepared for escalation scenarios

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Executive Summary:

- Despite some de-escalatory rhetoric and backchannel communications, and the apparent loss of momentum in Iran's anti-government protest movement, tensions between the US and Iran remain elevated, and the risk of US military action against Iran persists.
- This assessment is compounded by an ongoing and significant US force build-up in the region, and inflammatory discourse between President Trump and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.
- Overall, current US actions underscore a policy that compounds Washington's Maximum Pressure campaign vis-a-vis Iran, which would further destabilize amid its economic and political crises. Stakes will remain high in the MENA region as a result of that.
- **Update and implement business contingency plans (BCPs) and security protocols across the MENA region to ensure business continuity in potential conflict scenarios. Continuously conduct timely arena-specific risk assessments.**

Current Situation:

- On January 16, US President Donald Trump stated that Iranian authorities had cancelled over 800 scheduled hangings that were to take place the previous day, expressing appreciation for the decision.
- According to a US-based Iranian human rights group, on January 19, protest fatalities in Iran reached 4,029, while more than 9000 other cases are under investigation. At least 5,811 individuals reportedly sustained severe injuries, while the total number of arrests rose to 26,015.
- On January 17, the US Department of State's Persian-language social media account stated that the US "has heard reports that Iran is preparing options to target US bases," emphasizing President Trump's warning that all options remain on the table and that any attack on US assets would be met with a powerful force.
- As of the early hours of January 20, a nationwide internet blackout was still being experienced in Iran.
- On January 19, National police chief Ahmad-Reza Radan called on protestors who were "deceived into joining riots" to turn themselves in within three days to receive a lighter punishment for their crimes.

Notable statements

- On January 18, Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian stated that "any aggression against the Supreme Leader of our country is tantamount to all-out war."
- In a speech at the Knesset (parliament) on January 20, Israeli Prime Minister (PM) Benjamin Netanyahu threatened Iran again, stating that "if Iran made the mistake" and attacked Israel, the latter would operate with a force that it has yet to have witnessed.

Military movements

- Reports from January 20 indicate that the USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier and its strike group recently passed the Malacca Strait on its way to the region. It is estimated to arrive in the region within 72 hours.
- Unconfirmed reports suggest that another US Aircraft Carrier, particularly the USS Gerald R. Ford, may also be moving closer to the region in the Atlantic.
- On January 18, reports indicated the movement of 12 F-15E Strike Eagle fighter aircraft and refueling aircraft from the UK to the Middle East. On January 20, the US Central Command (CENTCOM) corroborated the information, suggesting the arrival of these aircraft, assigned to the 494th Expeditionary Fighter Squadron, at an undisclosed base in the Middle East.
- On January 19, the US Embassy in Qatar stated that Washington had resumed normal operations at the al-Udeid Air Base and that consular services were continuing as usual. It further noted that it continues to closely monitor regional tensions.
- Israel is reportedly still on high alert amid anticipation of potential American military action in Iran.
- A report from January 20 citing US officials indicated that President Trump is still pushing his aides to avail "decisive" military options vis-a-vis Iran. The report indicated that, in addition to the F-15E fighter aircraft and the USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier, air defense assets (Patriot and THAAD batteries) will also be deployed to the region.

Assessments & Forecast:

Purported American off-ramp

1. Following the [accumulation of multiple telling signs](#) of an imminent US military action against Iran, particularly on January 15, no such action materialized. President Trump's rhetoric, parallel reports, and the visible lowering of alert levels, such as at Qatar's al-Udeid Air Base, pointed toward a purported off-ramp by the President. Tehran also dedicated efforts to diminish Washington's interest in taking action as it was operating to suppress nationwide unrest. This manifested not only in threats issued by Iran but also in some efforts to placate President Trump. For example, Iranian Foreign Minister (FM) Abbas Araghchi gave an interview to the American Fox News channel, publicly denying that Tehran is planning to execute protesters. Reports also pointed to continued backchannel dialogue, particularly between FM Araghchi and US Special Envoy Steve Witkoff. The maintenance of these channels, despite President Trump's claim that meetings with Iranian officials had been halted, highlights that Washington has not written off the potential for a negotiated solution.
2. Washington's decision-making to refrain from a kinetic attack, at least over the past few days, was likely also based on additional factors. The feasibility of an operation that could deliver a substantial strike campaign while also retaining the ability to secure US forces and allies in the region could not be ascertained. This is likely due to the limited US military deployments in the region.
3. Reports also suggested that the decision to delay strikes followed reluctance signalled by several regional partners of the US. According to reports, this pertains particularly to Turkey and several Gulf allies, who were concerned about the regional destabilization effects and retaliatory strikes, highlighting at least partially Iran's success in its deterrence posture.

Force build-up continues, potential for conflict persists

1. Despite some de-escalatory rhetoric and backchannel communications, public exchanges between President Trump and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on January 17 underscored that tensions remain elevated, despite the apparent US restraint thus far. President Trump stated that Iran requires "new leadership," while Ayatollah Khamenei blamed him for the unrest and casualties in Iran, stating that the US "must be held accountable." He also compared President Trump to a modern-day "Pharaoh," stating that Trump will be overthrown just like other "tyrants like these...at the peak of their pride." This highlights how bilateral friction is also manifesting in direct, personalized exchanges between the two leaders, thereby increasing the symbolic and reputational stakes of the confrontation. This may still be an inflammatory influencing factor in President Trump's decision-making processes, especially as US restraint thus far was interpreted among some circles as a US retreat from its pledges to Iranian protesters.
2. The still-elevated potential for conflict has also manifested in the latest US military deployments, which are notable and reflect the amassing of significant power-projection capabilities. This lends credence to the January 20 report, which cited President Trump's pressure on his aides to enable him to launch a significant military action if he decides to do so. In this context, the [scenarios outlined in our previous analysis](#) remain viable, even if there has been a loss of momentum vis-a-vis the nationwide unrest, which likely reduces, to some extent, President Trump's appetite for a full-scale military action aimed at collapsing the Islamic Republic.
3. While protest activity in Iran appeared to have declined following the authorities' intensified crackdown and a sustained communications blackout, the underlying drivers of instability have not been addressed, especially the country's economic crisis. This creates a sustained risk of protester resurgence, which is rendered more likely if imprisoned protesters are executed. Funeral cycles could also reinvigorate protests, with the seventh and 40th days after death constituting important milestones in Shia Islam. These prompted renewed demonstrations in previous rounds of unrest, including in 2022. In the current situation, a resurgence of protests and a potential renewed crackdown by authorities could increase the impetus for the US to take direct action.

4. Against this backdrop, even if Washington does not sanction immediate-term strikes, the military build-up increases pressure on Tehran, which, together with the US's actions against Venezuela, compounds Washington's Maximum Pressure campaign against Iran. The stakes will therefore remain elevated over the coming days and weeks.

Recommendations:

MENA:

1. Avoid travel to military installations in the region, especially those hosting US personnel. Adhere to authorities' updates and advisories.
2. Update and implement business contingency plans (BCPs) and security protocols across the MENA region to ensure business continuity in escalation scenarios. Conduct arena-specific risk assessments, incorporating the risks involving the potential eruption of regional hostilities.
3. Remain cognizant of and take precautions against the potential resumption of Houthi maritime attacks in the Red Sea, as well as extensive GPS/GNSS disruptions in the Arabian/Persian Gulf, should armed conflict break out in the region.
4. **MAX Security has strong on-the-ground capabilities across several arenas in MENA, including secure transportation, the provision of safe havens, and contingency consultation and planning. Contact us at operations@max-security.com or +44 20-3540-0434.**

Iran:

1. Avoid all travel to Iran at the current juncture, given the economic and political crises in the country, the risk of arbitrary detention, and prospects for a US military escalation against Iran.
2. Foreign nationals operating in Iran are advised to leave the country at this time due to the above-mentioned risks.
3. Avoid all travel to hotspots of protest activity due to the elevated risk of violence and arbitrary arrests, and refrain from discussing protest activity in conversations and on social media. Maintain a low profile and avoid any public support for the protesters, including on social media, due to the heightened risk of arbitrary arrest and detention by Iranian authorities.
4. Allot for continued and extensive disruptions to business continuity, including internet and telecommunications shutdowns.
5. Monitor the situation and update business contingency plans, accounting for scenarios such as the escalation of nationwide unrest and armed conflict.
6. In the event of military strikes against the country, shelter in place and avoid the vicinity of government, law enforcement, and military installations.

Israel:

1. Consult with us prior to nonessential business travel to Israel at this time.
2. In the country, adhere to all security precautions regarding armed conflict, militancy, and civil unrest.
3. Continue monitoring regional developments and promptly adhere to all Home Front Command (HFC) notifications. Ensure that the HFC or other "Color Red" alert applications, such as "Tzofar", "Tzeva Adom", or "Cumta-Red Alerts", are downloaded to receive timely alerts.
4. Refresh and retain business contingency plans (BCPs) and security protocols, and ensure shelters' preparedness for extended periods to increase resilience in escalation scenarios.

