

International

Is a new US-led war looming with Iran? Gulf tensions soar

Washington and Tehran locked in a standoff

DUBAI: The United States is deploying troops in Saudi Arabia as tensions soar with its arch-rival Iran raising concerns over navigation in the Gulf's strategic Strait of Hormuz. It will be the first deployment of its kind since 2003, when American forces withdrew from the kingdom after a 12-year presence and two US-led wars with Iraq that culminated with the toppling of dictator Saddam Hussein. Is a new war looming in the region?

Is this preparation for war?

Separate statements from Riyadh and the US Central Command, or CENTCOM, say the Saudi deployment aims to ensure stability in the turbulent Gulf. "Based on mutual cooperation between Saudi Arabia and the United States of America, and their desire to enhance everything that could preserve the security of the region and its stability... King Salman gave his approval to host American forces," the Saudi defence ministry said.

CENTCOM said the deployment "provides an additional deterrent, and ensures our ability to defend our forces and interests in the region from emergent, credible threats". But for Andreas Krieg, a professor at King's College London, the troop movement "is part of posturing and the US trying to increase its military options in case of a strike on Iran". Washington and Tehran have been locked in a standoff since May 2018, when US President Donald Trump withdrew from the 2015 nuclear accord with Iran and began ratcheting up sanctions against the Islamic republic.

Trump and his oil-rich Saudi ally have also accused Iran of attacking tankers and drones in the Gulf since last May. Iran denies the charges and has threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz—a chokepoint for around a third of the world's sea-borne oil—if attacked. Riyadh and Washington have not revealed the number of troops that will be deployed in the kingdom, which lies about 200 kilometers from Iranian shores. But US media reports said 500 American troops will be based at the

Prince Sultan military air base, south of Riyadh.

"Five hundred US troops in Saudi Arabia are hardly a buildup, particularly when we are thinking about a war with Iran," said Krieg. "These troops are there to prepare the Prince Sultan air base for potential deployment of an air squadron," he added. The base housed thousands of US troops and squadrons of jet fighters from 1991, starting with Operation Desert Storm after Iraq invaded Kuwait, to 2003 when the US-led invasion of Iraq toppled Saddam.

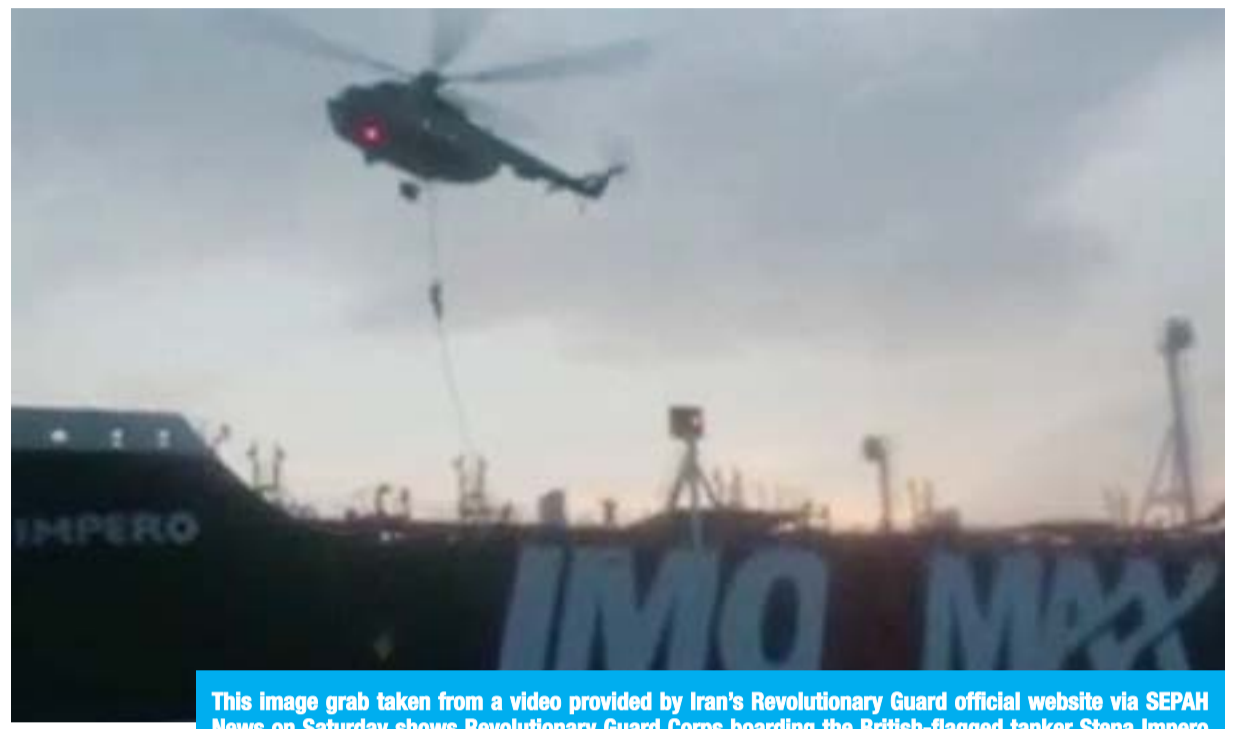
What is the message?

Analysts say the deployment is aimed at bolstering ties between Washington and Riyadh—particularly military relations—strained in the past year. "The Saudis... are saying: if you stick with us we will stick with you," said James Dorsey, a researcher at Singapore's S Rajaratnam School of International Studies. "The Americans are trying to say: we have your back," he added. Trump's administration has faced anger from lawmakers at home for not doing more to punish Saudi Arabia over last year's killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the kingdom's consulate in Istanbul.

CENTCOM chief Kenneth McKenzie pledged to work "aggressively" to ensure maritime safety in the strategic Gulf waterway during a visit Thursday to Prince Sultan air base. The visit came a day after the US House of Representatives voted to block \$8.1 billion in arms sales to the kingdom and other allies, in a move likely to be vetoed by Trump. There has been growing outrage in the US, and around the world, over American arms sales to Saudi Arabia, with critics saying they are being used for its offensive in Yemen. The UN says the Yemen conflict is the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

Is MBS a reliable partner?

Despite the criticism, Trump has repeatedly hailed Saudi Arabia's powerful crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, who is also the kingdom's defense minister. For



This image grab taken from a video provided by Iran's Revolutionary Guard official website via SEPAH News on Saturday shows Revolutionary Guard Corps boarding the British-flagged tanker Stena Impero in the Strait of Hormuz. —AFP

the crown prince, also known by the acronym MBS, the deployment "is about showing that the US is still an important security guarantor and committed to Saudi security", said Krieg. MBS, he said, has long been trying to divert some US troops from Al Udeid air base in Qatar, home to Washington's largest Middle East military base. "It is important for MBS to get some US assets to show that he is relevant as a security partner for Washington," said Krieg.

Around 10,000 US troops are deployed in Al Udeid, from among some 35,000 stationed in Gulf states including Kuwait and Bahrain, the latter being the home base of the US Fifth Fleet. Al Udeid was set up in 2005 when the US was looking for a new air base in the region after it pulled troops out of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia and its allies cut relations with Qatar in 2017 over Doha's alleged support for Iran and Islamist movements—charges Qatar staunchly denies. —AFP

Bats hang where Israeli soldiers once stood in Jordan Valley

HEMDAT: The whoosh of wings disturbs the quiet of an abandoned, pitch-black maze of corridors next to the Jordan River in the occupied Palestinian territories. It is the hallmark of what this former Israeli military outpost on a dusty, yellow marlstone hill in the West Bank has become: a man-made bat cave.

The outpost is one of a dozen or so mini-fortresses that were built among the hills above the Israel-Jordan border after the 1967 Six-Day War and abandoned by Israel following a 1994 peace accord between the countries. It wasn't long before they became full-time bat sanctuaries, helped along by Israeli rangers and ecologists in an effort to help the species whose habitats had been reduced.

Israel and the Palestinian territories are home to some 33 bat species, all but one insectivores, which are at global extinction risk—in many cases due to human activity, said Amos Sabah, an ecologist for the Israel Nature and Parks Authority. In the area dotted with outposts, roadworks and other development has damaged natural caves, said Shmulik Yedvab, director of the mammal department at the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI). The thinking was to "create alternative spaces" by repurposing the outposts, Yedvab said. Palestinians see these kinds of projects very differently. They accuse Israel of harming their environment in the Jordan

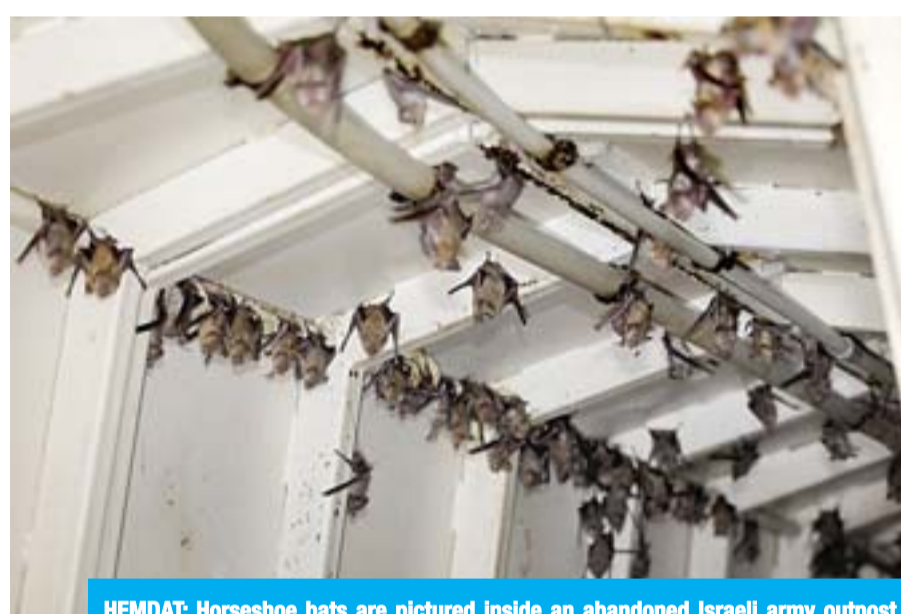
Valley, including through the use of water resources. Anton Khalilieh, executive director of Nature Palestine Society, said while any individual project to protect animals was to be welcomed, this was taking place in the occupied Palestinian territories and could not be divorced from politics.

"If the Israelis are doing any conservation activities to protect animals, in my opinion as a conservationist this is fine," he said. "But this is the Jordan Valley, which is a part of the West Bank—an area that should be under complete Palestinian control. "So it should be the Palestinians doing the conservation activities in this area. How can Palestinians do conservation here? We can't, it is impossible."

'Like the heat'

With walls and ceilings of sheet metal or smooth concrete, the conditions in the outposts were not ideal for bats. The SPNI worked with the Israel Nature and Parks Authority and the army—still the landlord of the vacant structures—to provide footholds for the bats using plastic netting, construction foam, thin ropes and plaster scraped with a fork. The winged mammals now hide from the day's harsh sun in the corridors and cavernous rooms of the former outpost, coming out at night to feast on the area's rich variety of insects. At least a dozen types of insectivore bats can be found in the oppressively hot Jordan Valley from spring to autumn.

"They like the heat," said Sabah, during the visit to the first of the three former military positions he showed AFP. Some outposts are now home to populations in the dozens to hundreds during peak bat season, with approximately 30 lesser mouse-tailed bats living in one complex AFP visited halfway between the Dead Sea and the Sea



HEMDAT: Horseshoe bats are pictured inside an abandoned Israeli army outpost next to the Jordan River in the occupied West Bank. —AFP

of Galilee. Hundreds of trident bats roost in another outpost further to the south, while an abandoned civilian structure near the border is now home to an estimated 5,000 greater mouse-tailed bats.

Environmental signals

Most of the outposts that have become bat lairs are in fenced-off property controlled by the Israeli military and barred to civilians, leaving the creatures largely undisturbed. Gaining access to the outposts is rare, as even the mere presence of humans can disrupt the bats and their routine, according to Yedvab.

The environmentalists' cooperation with the army includes advising forces on when, and how, to approach the structures, still used

from time to time for training. "We try to disturb them as little as possible," he added. While bat populations grow slowly and the six years of close monitoring are "a footnote" in the relatively long life-cycle of the species, the area has "a stable population with a small increase", Yedvab said.

As "bio-indicators" bats provide valuable information to scientists on the local ecosystem as a whole, said Sabah. "They are essentially our indication to the condition of the bugs, which are one of the important foundations of the ecological system," he added. "If the bats aren't in the territory, or the population is diminishing, the meaning is that the ecological system is not healthy, something here is wrong." —AFP

SOS Mediterranee relaunches migrant rescue missions

PARIS: Humanitarian group SOS Mediterranee said yesterday it has relaunched rescue efforts off Libya seven months after it abandoned operations using its ship Aquarius and despite a refusal by European ports to accept the migrants. The Norwegian-flagged Ocean Viking will "conduct search and rescue activities in the central Mediterranean" for SOS Mediterranee and Doctors Without Borders (known by its French initials MSF), the group said in a statement.

"As people are still fleeing Libya on one of the most perilous sea crossings in the world, and with almost no available rescue assets present in the central Mediterranean, it has been an imperative for both SOS Mediterranee and MSF to return to at sea following the ending of their operations with the Aquarius in December 2018."

After nearly three years of operations in which it rescued some 30,000 migrants, the Aquarius was forced to cease operations because of what the group said was obstruction by some European countries. The International Organization for Migration says at least 426 people have died trying to cross the central Mediterranean this year. SOS Mediterranee said the migrants were attempting "to escape the escalating conflict in Libya and the deplorable conditions

of Libyan detention centers".

The new operation comes a month after the arrest in Italy of Carola Rackete, the German captain of the Sea-Watch 3, for docking without permission to land rescued migrants. Rackete was held for several days after the Sea-Watch 3 hit an Italian police speedboat while entering the port of Lampedusa island despite being banned from entering Italian waters. She argued she was compelled to avert a human tragedy and bring ashore 40 migrants who had been rescued in the Mediterranean on June 12.

'Harsh campaign'

"For a year now we have been witnessing a deterioration in the European Union's response in the evolving human tragedy in the central Mediterranean," said the head of operations at SOS Mediterranee, Frederic Penard. EU states have "continued a harsh campaign of criminalization against civil society rescue ships and most importantly, there is still no coordinated, sustainable and shared mechanism of disembarkation in accordance with maritime law". He told AFP the Ocean Viking would not enter Libyan territorial waters.

"Our presence at sea is to save lives. We hope that the countries will understand and join with us as there is no other solution in the central Mediterranean. "To say that it's the rescue vessels that are encouraging (migrant) crossing is false. Even without the boats, the departures continue and huge number of a drownings are reported." Funded in partnership with MSF, the Ocean Viking has 31 people on board, including 13



AT SEA: File photo shows a rigid inflatable boat at the Aquarius rescue vessel, chartered by French NGO SOS-Mediterranee and Doctors Without Borders (MSF) in the open sea, some 46 km south of Lampedusa. —AFP

search and rescue team members from SOS Mediterranee, nine MSF staff and nine marine crew.

Libya, which has been wracked by chaos since the 2011 uprising that killed dictator Muammar Gaddafi, has long been a major transit route for migrants, especially from sub-Saharan Africa, desperate to reach Europe. Italy has become increasingly hardline against accepting undocumented migrants on its territory under a populist government. Interior Minister Matteo Salvini has been outspoken about the burden Italy has had to bear, being the point of entry for many migrants arriving by sea

while the rest of the EU is divided on attempts to redistribute asylum-seekers among member states.

In a Facebook post yesterday, Salvini railed against what he said was France and Germany setting EU migration policy. "Enough of making choices only in Paris and Berlin. Italy is no longer willing to accept all the migrants that arrive in Europe," he wrote, accompanied by a letter sent to his French counterpart. "France and Germany cannot decide migration policy by ignoring the demands of the most exposed countries such as us and Malta," the far-right minister wrote. —AFP

37 villagers killed in Nigeria's North

KANO: Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari yesterday "strongly" condemned recent attacks by cattle raiders on three villages in the country's northwest that officials said killed 37 people. He offered commiserations to the survivors and vowed a firm response to "these brutal and remorseless enemies of humanity".

"These frequent and large scale killings of poor villagers by gangs of mass murderers must be met with the fiercest force the government can mobilize," presidential assistant Garba Shehu quoted Buhari as saying. On Wednesday, armed men on motorcycles raided three villages in the district of Goronyo in the Nigerian state of Sokoto, district chief Zakari Chinaka said. "The bandits opened fire on the villages and set shops and grain stores ablaze. They took away all the cattle in the villages," he said.

"They operated for two hours unchallenged (by any security forces) because of the difficulty of the terrain which makes it hard to access," said the chief. Alu Ibrahim, a resident of the village of Kamitau, where 23 people died, said villagers had pursued the bandits in a bid to recover their stolen cattle — key to survival in the poor, remote region. "The bandits turned their guns on them and killed many. This was the reason for the high death toll from Kamitau," said Ibrahim.

Criminal gangs of cattle rustlers have increasingly targeted rural communities in Sokoto state. Last month, motorcycle-riding bandits killed 43 people in two days of attacks on five villages in Rabah and Isa districts, according to police and locals. Rural communities in the north of Nigeria have for years been terrorized by gangs who raid villages, stealing cattle, kidnapping for ransom and burning homes after looting food supplies.

Villagers have taken up arms to defend themselves, but these vigilantes are now accused of extra-judicial killings of suspected bandits. The bandit gangs are one of a string of security challenges facing Nigeria, including attacks from an Islamic State-backed Boko Haram faction and renewed clashes between livestock herders and farmers. This has left the military overstretched and Buhari criticized for failing to protect lives and property, despite promises to boost security. —AFP

Twitter blocks accounts of Iran media

WASHINGTON: A day after Twitter suspended the accounts of several Iranian state media outlets, the social networking service said Saturday it acted after harassment of people linked to the Baha'i faith. Amid soaring tensions in the region, heightened by Iran's seizure on Friday of a British-flagged tanker, some of the affected media outlets had speculated that the suspensions were related to their coverage of the seizure. But Twitter cited what it said was the coordinated and targeted harassment of people linked to the Baha'i faith, a religious minority that has long faced persecution in Iran.

It did not name the suspended accounts, and said it was continuing to investigate the matter. "Account suspended," Twitter suspends accounts which violate the Twitter Rules," read English-language messages on each of the Iranian media outlets' accounts. Mehr news agency, which is close to moderate conservatives in Iran, said its Farsi-language account appeared to have been blocked late Friday following its reports on the seizure of the tanker Stena Impero in the strategic Strait of Hormuz.

Iran's Revolutionary Guard said it seized the Swedish-owned tanker for breaking "international maritime rules" in the strait, a chokepoint for around a third of the world's sea-borne oil. Mehr's Farsi-language Twitter page was inaccessible on Saturday, along with those of the official IRNA news agency and the agency of the Young Journalists' Club. —AFP