

Forum: Security Council

Issue: Ensuring Maritime Security and Freedom of Navigation in the Strait of Hormuz

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Note: This report reflects the situation as researched in late September 2026. Given the fast-moving nature of this crisis, delegates are strongly encouraged to verify developments closer to the date of the conference.

Introduction

Roughly 33 kilometers separate Iran from Oman's Musandam Peninsula at the narrowest point of the Strait of Hormuz, and the shipping lanes inside that gap are only about 3 kilometers wide in each direction. Almost everything the Persian Gulf exports by sea has to pass through them. In a normal year about a fifth of the world's oil goes through the strait, along with a similar share of its liquefied natural gas, which is why it is usually called the most important chokepoint in global energy trade.

Tension over Hormuz has come and gone for decades, but the present crisis is of a different order. On 28 February 2026 the United States and Israel launched a joint military campaign against Iran, and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was killed in the opening strikes. Iran struck back at Israel and at the Gulf states that host American forces, and it moved to shut the strait. Commercial ships were attacked and mines were reported in the lanes. When a ceasefire took hold in April, Iran started trying to charge tolls for passage instead of reopening the waterway. More than twenty vessels have been attacked, thousands of seafarers are stuck aboard ships in the Gulf, and traffic has fallen by over 90 per cent. The UN has warned that the loss of fuel and food supplies could push tens of millions of people into acute hunger.

The Security Council has managed to act only once. Resolution 2817, adopted in March, condemned Iran's attacks on its neighbors, but a second resolution authorizing defensive measures for shipping was vetoed by China and Russia in April. As of late September the ceasefire is fragile, the strait is only partly open, and new drafts are being negotiated. This report covers the legal framework, how the crisis unfolded, the parties involved, and the options open to the Council.

Definition of Key Terms

Chokepoint

A chokepoint is a narrow stretch of water that a large share of global trade must pass through, with no easy way around it. Hormuz is the biggest one for oil, and the Strait of Malacca and the Bab-el-Mandeb are other well-known examples. Because traffic is bunched into a small space that is easy to watch, a blockade, a few mines, or even a credible threat can move energy prices across the world. The effects reach far past the region itself.

Freedom of Navigation

Freedom of navigation is the principle that ships of every state may use international waters, and straits used for international shipping, without interference from coastal states. It comes from customary international law and is written into the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Navies sometimes sail through contested waters specifically to assert the right, and the United States has done this for decades against what it sees as excessive coastal claims. In the middle of an active conflict, though, a transit like that is easily read as a provocation.

Transit Passage

Under UNCLOS a coastal state controls a territorial sea of up to twelve nautical miles. Hormuz is narrower than twenty-four, so the territorial waters of Iran and Oman overlap and cover the entire strait. UNCLOS handles straits like this through transit passage, which lets ships and aircraft, warships included, move through continuously and quickly without asking permission. It is a stronger right than the innocent passage that applies in ordinary territorial waters. Iran signed UNCLOS but never ratified it, and it has argued that only innocent passage applies. The United States and most maritime states disagree.

Sea Mine

A sea mine is an explosive device placed in the water to damage ships that touch it or pass close by. Mines are cheap and easy to lay in secret, and they stay dangerous long after they are placed. In a narrow and busy channel like Hormuz, even a rumor of mines can keep ships away and push up insurance costs. Several states have accused Iran of laying mines in the strait during this crisis, and Iran denies it.

Flag State and Reflagging

A flag state is the country under whose laws a merchant vessel is registered and whose flag it flies, and which bears primary responsibility for that vessel's safety and regulation. Reflagging, the practice of registering a vessel under a different state's flag, has historically been used during periods of Gulf tension, most notably when Kuwaiti tankers were reflagged as American vessels during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, to extend a naval power's protection to commercial shipping that would not otherwise qualify for it. The practice remains legally and politically significant in the current crisis, since a vessel's flag state can determine which navy is entitled, or willing, to escort or defend it.

Background

Geography and the Legal Status of the Strait

The Strait of Hormuz has been a site of naval confrontation before. During the Iran-Iraq War both sides attacked neutral shipping in what became known as the Tanker War, and the United States responded by reflagging Kuwaiti tankers and escorting them through the strait. In 1988 the US Navy fought Iran directly in Operation Praying Mantis, its largest surface battle since the Second World War. The episode left behind a widely shared expectation that outside navies will step in if the strait is closed, and Washington and the Gulf states have both pointed back to it throughout this crisis.

Iran's legal position has stayed fairly consistent over the years. Since it never ratified UNCLOS, Tehran argues that it may regulate passage through waters it controls, and it has threatened more than once to close the strait when relations with the West soured. The United States and most maritime states answer that transit passage is customary international law, and that it binds Iran whether or not Iran ratified the Convention.

Volume of crude oil, condensate, and petroleum products transported through the Strait of Hormuz (2018–1H23) million barrels per day						
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	1H23
Total oil flows through Strait of Hormuz	21.3	19.9	18.3	18.8	20.8	20.5
Crude oil and condensate	16.4	15.0	13.5	13.7	15.2	14.7
Petroleum products	4.9	4.9	4.8	5.1	5.6	5.8
World maritime oil trade	77.4	77.1	71.9	73.2	75.2	76.3
World total petroleum and other liquids consumption	100.1	100.9	91.6	97.1	99.6	100.3
LNG flows through Strait of Hormuz (billion cubic feet per day)	10.3	10.6	10.4	10.6	10.9	10.8

Figure 2: Volume of Crude Oil, Condensate, and Petroleum Products Transported Through the Strait of Hormuz, 2018-1H23

The February 2026 War and Iran's Closure of the Strait

Nuclear talks between the United States and Iran, mediated by Oman, had already broken down when the crisis began on 28 February 2026. The United States and Israel struck Iranian nuclear sites, missile programs, and military leadership, and Khamenei was killed. Iran answered with missiles and drones aimed at Israel and at Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, all of which host US military facilities, and it began closing the strait. Nothing like that had happened in the waterway's modern history.

About forty days of fighting ended on 8 April with a ceasefire mediated by Pakistan and announced by President Trump, but the strait did not reopen. Iranian forces kept attacking and seizing commercial ships, mines were reported in the lanes, and in the following months Iran tried to collect tolls from vessels passing through waters it says it controls. Tehran ties all of this to its own demands. It wants the United States to lift its naval blockade of Iranian ports and to pay compensation for war damage, which Iran's government puts at \$270 billion. By late summer Iran had carried out at least 21 attacks on commercial vessels and more than ten crew members had been killed, while around 20,000 seafarers sat stranded in the Gulf. Traffic through the strait had dropped by more than 90 per cent from prewar levels. The UN has warned that as many as 45 million people could be pushed into acute hunger.

The Security Council's Initial Response

Resolution 2817 came less than two weeks into the war, on 11 March. Bahrain drafted it for the Gulf Cooperation Council and Jordan, and a record 135 member states co-sponsored it. The text condemned Iran's attacks on its neighbors, recognized the right of individual and collective self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter, and demanded that Iran stop interfering with navigation through the strait. It passed 13 to 0. China and Russia abstained, saying the text ignored the US and Israeli strikes that started the war.

Getting anything further proved much harder. In early April Bahrain, again for the GCC and Jordan, tabled a resolution that would have authorized defensive measures to protect shipping and set up monitoring by the Secretary-General. The sponsors had already dropped language on offensive force to win broader support, yet China and Russia vetoed the draft on 7 April regardless. The UAE's mission later said it was disappointed that the Council had failed to act while the crisis kept growing.

Major Parties Involved

Islamic Republic of Iran

Iran considers the Strait of Hormuz to fall within its territorial and security jurisdiction and has long maintained that its consent is required for foreign, and particularly military, vessels to transit the strait, a position rooted in its non-ratification of UNCLOS. Since the February 2026 war, Iran has framed its closure of the strait, its attacks on commercial shipping, and its attempted tolling regime as legitimate responses to what it calls an unprovoked act of aggression by the United States and Israel, and has conditioned any further de-escalation on the lifting of the US naval blockade on its own ports and on reparations for war damage. Iran's continued actions in the strait, however, have drawn condemnation even from states, such as China and Russia, that have shielded it from binding Security Council action.

United States of America

Along with Israel, the United States started the February campaign, and it has led the push to reopen the strait ever since. It has worked with Bahrain and other Gulf states on Security Council drafts that would authorize defensive measures, and it has floated a multinational naval coalition called the Maritime Freedom Construct. Washington holds that transit passage through Hormuz is guaranteed by customary international law whatever Iran says about UNCLOS. Its navy has also disabled Iranian vessels that it accuses of violating the blockade.

Kingdom of Bahrain, on Behalf of the Gulf Cooperation Council

Bahrain, holding the Security Council's rotating presidency for parts of this crisis, has repeatedly led draft resolutions on behalf of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, together with Jordan, framing the closure of the strait as a direct threat to the economic security of states that had no part in the decision to go to war. Bahrain's diplomatic strategy has shifted between drafts, from language authorizing the use of force to a more cautious approach still invoking Chapter VII of the UN Charter, reflecting an attempt to secure Chinese and Russian acquiescence after the failure of the April resolution.

People's Republic of China and Russian Federation

China and Russia have positioned themselves as the Council's most consistent skeptics of measures targeting Iran specifically, arguing that resolutions addressing the strait's closure cannot be divorced from the US and Israeli strikes that precipitated the war. Both states abstained rather than block

Resolution 2817's condemnation of attacks on Gulf states, but vetoed the more far-reaching April resolution, which would have authorized defensive military measures. Both maintain significant economic relationships with Iran, including as purchasers of Iranian oil despite sanctions, giving them a direct interest in the outcome of negotiations over the strait's future status.

French Republic

France joined the diplomacy in September, working with the United States on a new Council resolution. The idea is an international mission to restore movement through the strait without taking an offensive posture toward Iran. French officials see it as a way to find wording that the Gulf states, the United States, and the more skeptical permanent members could all accept, something no draft has managed since March.

Sultanate of Oman

Oman's territorial waters, together with Iran's, make up the entire Strait of Hormuz, and it has simultaneously served as the primary mediator between Iran and the United States, both in the nuclear talks that collapsed into war in February 2026 and in subsequent efforts to negotiate safe passage and a longer-term framework for managing the strait. Muscat's neutrality, maintained even as Washington pressured it to cut ties with Tehran, including a threat from President Trump to take military action against Oman if it assisted Iran in administering or tolling the strait, has made it the only channel through which de-escalation talks have continued. Oman has also sought to position its own ports at Duqm and Sohar, which lie outside the Gulf, as alternative routes for regional trade able to bypass the strait entirely.

State of Israel

Israel launched the February strikes together with the United States and has linked its continued operations against Iran to reopening the strait. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has accused Iran of trying to blackmail the world over Hormuz and said Israel backs the American push to reopen it. Israeli strikes have also gone after Iranian naval commanders tied to the blockade, and Defense Minister Israel Katz has claimed a strike that killed the head of the IRGC Navy. Israel matters to the strait's future mostly because its military actions can break the ceasefire that any stabilization depends on.

International Maritime Organization (IMO)

The IMO is the UN agency responsible for shipping safety, and in this crisis it has acted as a technical voice instead of a political one. It has repeated that no state may block innocent passage through

an international strait, and it has worked with Iran and Oman to get stranded crew off their ships. Its Council condemned Iranian threats to shipping in March. The IMO has no enforcement power, so enforcement stays with the Security Council and individual states.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of Event
28 February 2026	The United States and Israel launch coordinated strikes on Iranian nuclear, missile, and military targets. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei is killed. Iran retaliates against Gulf states hosting US forces and begins closing the Strait of Hormuz.
11 March 2026	The Security Council adopts Resolution 2817, condemning Iran's attacks on Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Jordan (13-0-2, China and Russia abstaining).
7-8 April 2026	A Pakistan-mediated ceasefire ends the 40-day war. A Bahrain-led follow-up resolution authorizing defensive measures to secure the Strait is vetoed by China and Russia at the Security Council.
April-August 2026	Despite the ceasefire, Iran continues attacks, mining, and attempted tolling in the Strait. More than 20 commercial vessels are attacked; over 20,000 seafarers are stranded; transit falls by more than 90 per cent.
10 September 2026	The United States and Bahrain circulate a new draft resolution and propose a multinational "Maritime Freedom Construct" to help secure the Strait.
22 September 2026	France begins drafting a parallel Security Council resolution in coordination with the United States on restoring movement through the Strait.

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

The Security Council's response to the crisis has so far produced one adopted resolution and one failed follow-up, alongside continuing diplomatic efforts.

- Resolution condemning Iranian attacks against Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Jordan, 11 March 2026 (S/RES/2817)

The resolution passed 13-0 with China and Russia abstaining. It affirmed the Gulf states' right of self-defense, condemned Iran's interference with navigation, and kept the Council seized of the matter. Because it created no enforcement mechanism, everything depended on Iran changing course, and Iran did not.

- Draft resolution authorizing defensive measures to secure passage through the Strait of Hormuz, 7 April 2026 (vetoed)

Sponsored by Bahrain on behalf of the GCC and Jordan, this draft would have authorized member states to take exclusively defensive measures to protect shipping and established monthly Secretary-General reporting on the situation. Language explicitly authorizing offensive force had already been removed from earlier drafts in an attempt to secure broader support. Despite eleven votes in favor, China and Russia vetoed the measure, arguing it risked entrenching a one-sided military posture toward Iran.

Outside the Security Council, the IMO's governing Council condemned Iranian threats and attacks against commercial vessels on 19 March 2026, and as of September 2026 both a US-Bahrain draft proposing a new "Maritime Freedom Construct" coalition and a separate French-led initiative remain under discussion, though neither has yet been put to a vote.

Possible Solutions

Delegates may wish to consider the following directions in drafting a resolution, while developing the specific mechanisms and safeguards required to secure sufficient support in Council negotiations.

- A phased reopening plan in which restrictions on both sides are eased step by step, tied to independently verified drops in attacks, mine-laying, and tolling. This avoids requiring every dispute to be settled before any ship moves.

- A monitoring and reporting mechanism run by the Secretary-General or supported by the IMO, building on the reporting provision in the vetoed April draft. It would give the Council a verified picture of conditions in the strait that does not depend on what the parties claim.
- A multinational mine countermeasure and escort mission operating under a defensive, clearly bounded mandate, structured to be politically acceptable to Council members wary of any action that could be read as authorizing offensive operations against Iran.
- Renewed attention to the underlying nuclear and sanctions disputes between Iran and the United States, since resolutions focused solely on the strait are unlikely to hold if the broader conflict that produced the closure remains unresolved.
- Confidence-building measures between Iran and its Gulf neighbors specifically, distinct from the broader Iran-US track, given that Resolution 2817 already secured near-universal support when it addressed threats to Gulf states directly rather than the wider war.

None of these approaches addresses every dimension of the crisis on its own, and any resolution will need to balance the Gulf states' urgent economic interest in reopening the strait against the risk of deadlock that has defeated every proposal since March 2026. Delegates are encouraged to think carefully about what combination of measures could secure the nine votes and no veto needed for adoption, given the positions already staked out by Council members over the course of this crisis.

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