

Our View

Poisoning the Oil Well – as well as Natural Gas, Fertilizer, and Aluminum

Philip Verleger
May 19, 2026

Donald Trump is getting ready to resume bombing Iran. The fossil fool's patience has been exhausted, according to Bloomberg:

President Donald Trump threatened to resume strikes on Iran in the coming days as part of the push for a deal to end the war, after he said he had just called off a US attack.

"I hope we don't have to do the war, but we may have to give them another big hit," Trump told reporters on Tuesday. When asked how long he would wait, he said: "Well, I mean, I'm saying two or three days, maybe Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Something maybe early next week—a limited period of time."¹

The New York Times reported that the Pentagon is planning to resume Operation Epic Fury. Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, told the paper that he speaks often to Trump and that "we are prepared for any scenario."²

We wonder whether they really are prepared. That is, are they ready to react in case Iran floods the Persian Gulf with oil volumes twenty or fifty times larger than the 2010 BP Macondo spill? Can Israel, the United States, and other countries stop Iran before any oil hits the water? If not, the game is lost. Iran will have defeated President Trump by shutting down economic activity in the area for years.

The wartime strategy of "poisoning the well" has been used since antiquity, both offensively to disrupt and depopulate a target area and defensively as a scorched earth tactic to deny invading troops clean water.³ In medieval times, Wikipedia explained, this was done by throwing rotting corpses down wells to make the water undrinkable.

While that technique would not work on a large scale today, Iran can achieve similar results by dumping crude into the Persian Gulf to foul the desalination plants relied on by most nations in the region. There is precedent for this. As the Arab Center's Manal Shehabi explained, Saddam Hussein deliberately released oil into the Gulf as the Iraqis withdrew from Kuwait, forcing many water plants

¹ Skylar Woodhouse and Omar Tamo, "Trump Threatens Iran With 'Big Hit' If There's No Deal Soon," Bloomberg, May 19, 2026 [<https://tinyurl.com/4duyhbr4>].

² Aaron Boxerman, "Trump Threatens Iran as Tensions Surge Again in Middle East," *The New York Times*, May 18, 2026 [<https://tinyurl.com/yk8dmdbbx>].

³ "Well poisoning," Wikipedia, retrieved May 19, 2026 [<https://tinyurl.com/bd3z4s4m>].

there to shut down.⁴ The result was catastrophic: “Kuwait’s groundwater and aquifers were contaminated, leaving the country almost entirely without fresh water, reliant on emergency tanker deliveries, and forced to ration household supply to a few days a week. Full recovery took years.”

There are now 3,401 desalination plants operating on the Gulf, according to David Michel of CSIS.⁵ Supplies from these facilities meet seventy-three percent of Qatar’s water use, sixty-seven percent of Bahrain’s, fifty-two percent of the UAE’s, forty-two percent of Kuwait’s, thirty-one percent of Oman’s, and eighteen percent of Saudi Arabia’s. Michel also made this observation:

Desalination plants are especially important for meeting drinking water needs. Qatar derives 99 percent of its drinking water supplies from its network of desalination facilities, and Bahrain over 90 percent. For Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, the figures are 90 percent, 86 percent, 70 percent, and 42 percent, respectively. Cities such as Doha, Dubai, Manama, and Kuwait City would not be possible without desalination....

The Seawater Reverse Osmosis (SWRO) technologies predominating in today’s desalination plants could be markedly more vulnerable to clogged intakes and fouled filtration membranes than the thermal processes common in the 1990s. Tellingly, in 2008-2009, a massive “red tide” algal bloom shut down several installations in Oman and the UAE for up to two months due to this risk.

Today, May 19, *Financial Times* published an article describing Iran’s oil stockpiles on tankers anchored in the Gulf.⁶ The authors focused on Iran’s need to put oil on ships to keep the country’s production going and the reason for doing this: “Iran is being forced to store oil on aging tankers anchored in the Gulf as the US blockade puts a squeeze on Tehran’s ability to export to the Far East.”

The authors chronicled the barrels on ships, noting that 42 million barrels of crude were now afloat near Iran’s major oil terminal:

The most dramatic rise in parked-up tankers has occurred around Kharg Island, Iran’s main export hub in the north of the Gulf, where 20 vessels are now resting—up from six a month ago.

The *FT* writers, however, failed to deduce the strategic purpose of the ships moored off Kharg Island. These vessels are smack in the middle of the current that circulates around the Gulf. The danger lies in the direction of the flow. In an undated report, Navy Lieutenant Commander Marc Eckhardt observed that the northern portion of the Gulf “is dominated by consistent wind-driven transport to the south, which creates upwelling on the Iranian coast and downwelling on the Saudi coast.

⁴ Manal Shehabi, “War on Iran: The Dangers of Attacking Water Desalination Plants in the Gulf,” Arab Center, April 28, 2026 [<https://tinyurl.com/2z5bf5sc>].

⁵ David Michel, “Could Iran Disrupt the Gulf Countries’ Desalinated Water Supplies?” Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 19, 2026 [<https://tinyurl.com/3rbher67>]

⁶ <https://www.ft.com/content/0f556bb8-3370-4405-8969-bae8b20d816e?syn-25a6b1a6=1>

Freshwater river runoff has a small impact on the circulation and can be seen by the river plume that remains to the south.”⁷

In lay terms, should the Iranian tankers dump their cargoes into the Gulf, the spill would impair or disable desalination plants in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE, especially if Iran went all out and released oil in amounts ten or twenty times greater than the three million barrels blown out during the Macondo disaster.

In her paper, the Arab Center’s Shehabi described the possible consequences of these countries losing their water supplies:

A severe shortage would necessitate population evacuations within just a few days—in larger numbers in the more populous UAE and Saudi Arabia, and possibly in southern Iran. Population displacement, including in Saudi Arabia, would put increased pressure on infrastructure, water transmission, and electricity demand in receiving regions. The water-dependent agriculture and tourism sectors could collapse, and manufacturing, petrochemicals, and energy sectors also likely would be disrupted. The financial costs of welfare support and water systems restoration would be substantial and last for years.

President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu may discover that their “next big hit” has sent not only Iran but all Middle Eastern oil production “back to the stone age,” not to mention the collateral damage to those who depend on the region’s natural gas, aluminum, fertilizer, and helium exports.

The possibility of Iran poisoning the Persian Gulf well explains why prudent governments have avoided going to war there for over forty years.

(Note: Thanks to Roger Marolt for suggesting that Iran has the capacity to “poison the well.”)

⁷ LCDR Marc C. Eckhardt, USN, “Currents and Eddies in the Persian Gulf,” Naval Post Graduate School, retrieved May 19, 2026 [<https://tinyurl.com/8f76e7x3>].