


WORLD **IRAN**

What Is the Strait of Hormuz and Why Is It at the Center of the Iran War?

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by **Callum Sutherland**

REPORTER

MAR 18, 2026 1:06 PM CUT

A crucial passage between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman through which around a fifth of global oil production flows has become a key focal point of the Iran war.

Under the direction of the new Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei, the Strait of Hormuz is being used as “leverage” in Iran’s retaliation against the U.S. and, by extension, the rest of the world.

In his first statement since succeeding his father, Khamenei last week vowed to keep blocking t
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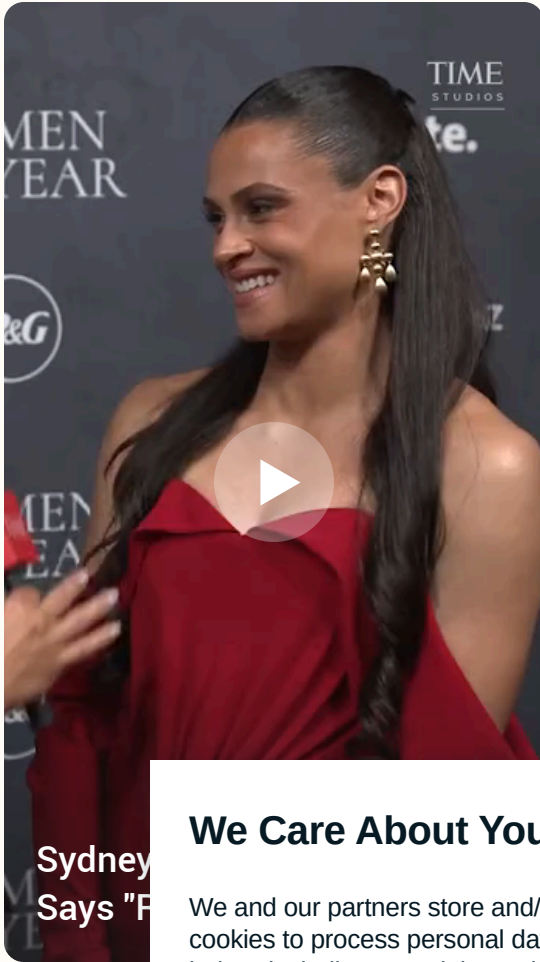
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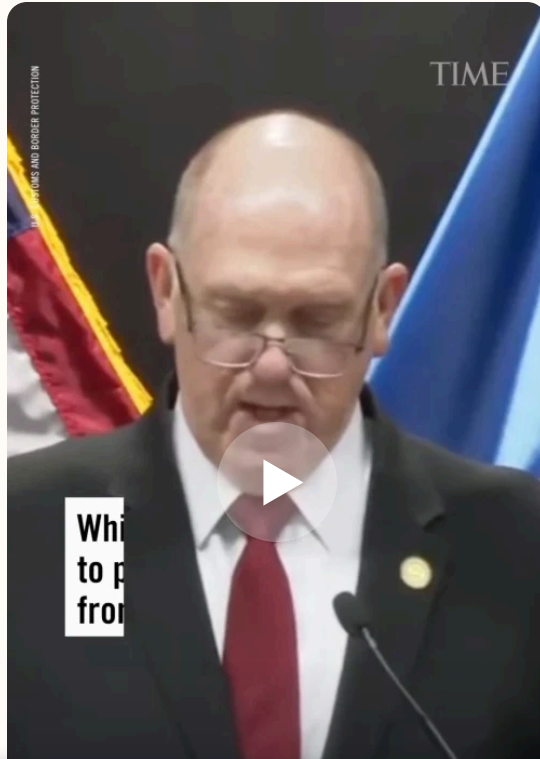
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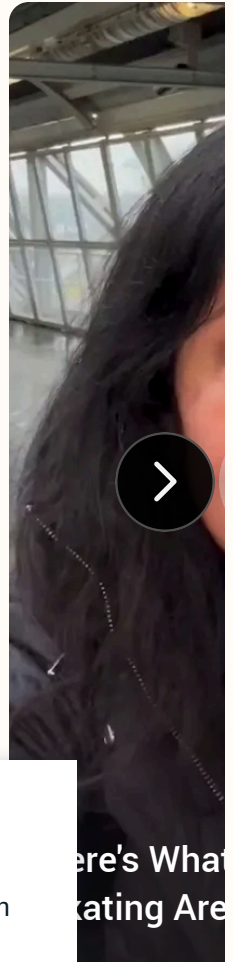
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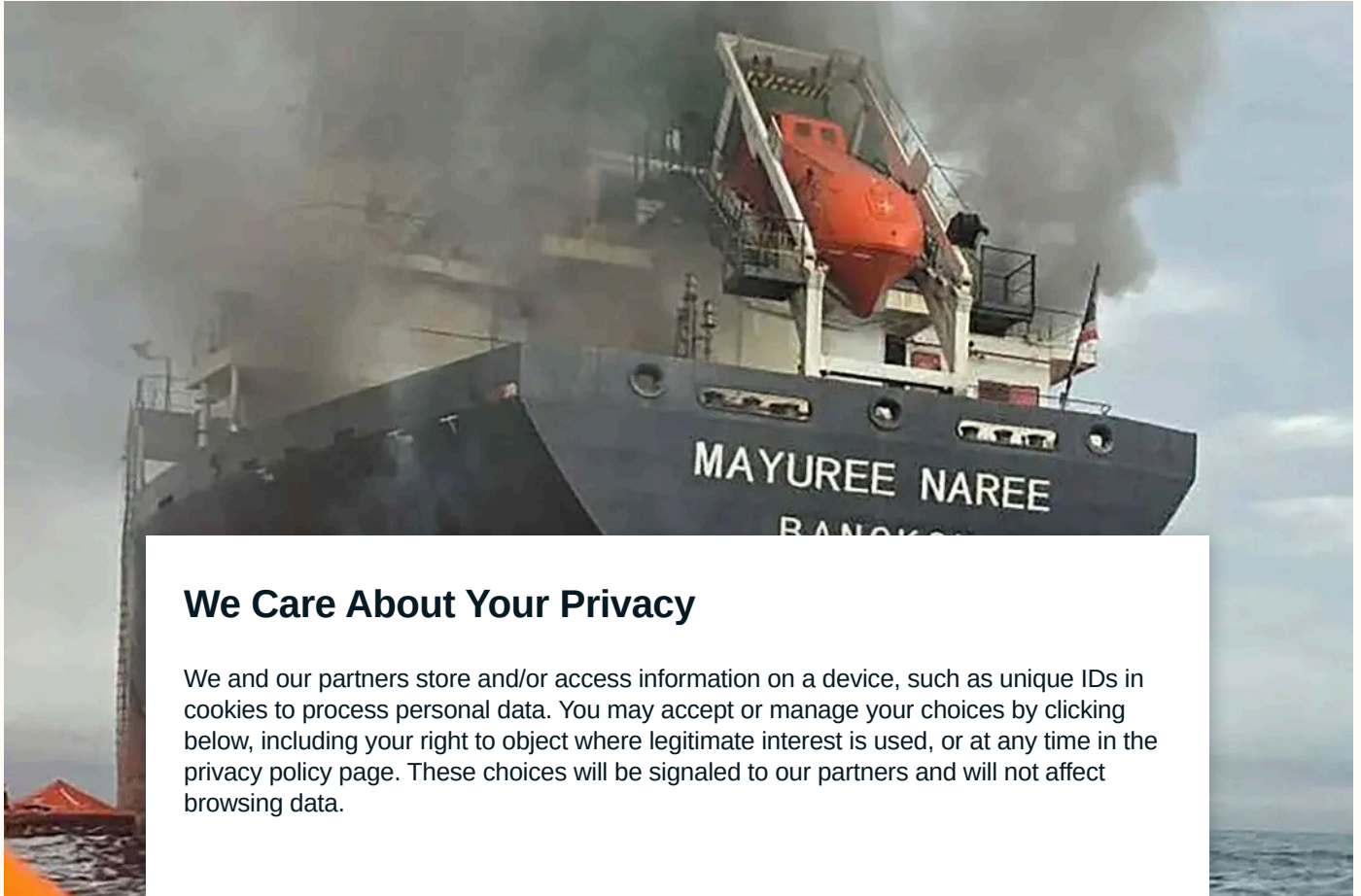
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As global leaders deliberate on their next steps, here's what to know about the Strait of Hormuz, its grave and far-reaching importance, and the threat to the global economy if the passage is disrupted for an extended period of time.

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A Thai vessel on the Strait of Hormuz.

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“It's a critical node in the global economy for all sorts of commodities, energy and otherwise,” says Jim Krane, a fellow for energy studies at Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy.

Krane notes that the Strait also transits around 45% of global sulfur exports, which is needed in the production of fertilizer, and the refining of metals including copper, cobalt, and nickel.

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Why is Iran blocking the Strait of Hormuz—and how can it control the oil flow?

The Strait’s importance for global trade, especially for crucial resources, makes it a key geopolitical bargaining chip for Iran amid the ongoing conflict.

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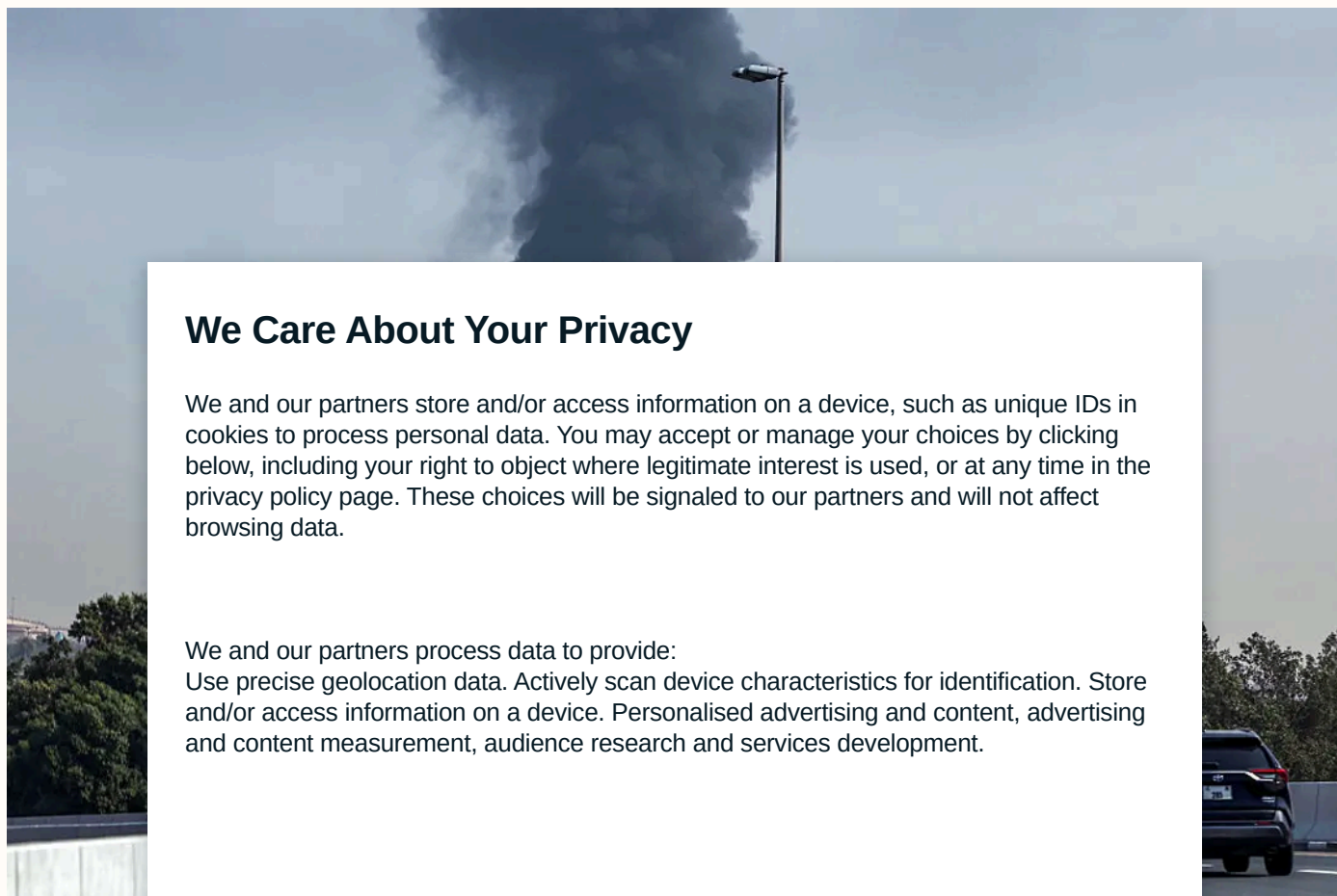
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Amid reports that Iran has begun laying sea mines in the region—something the country’s officials have denied—attention has turned to how to best destabilize such threats. The U.K. said it has already deployed “autonomous mine hunting systems” in the region.

Should Iranian mines be present in the Strait, this would pose another major obstacle.

“De-mining is really laborious, painstaking work. It’s much easier to lay some mines than it is to get rid of them,” says Krane.

And it's not only upstream production and exports being disrupted, as numerous oil refineries and facilities have closed due to strikes or fear of potential attacks.



A smoke plume
2026. AFP—Ge

s on March 16,

How has the disruption to the Strait of Hormuz impacted the price of oil?

According to the [International Energy Agency \(IEA\) oil report](#), Gulf producers exported 3.3 million barrels per day (mb/d) of refined products and 1.5 mb/d of LPG in 2025. At present, more than 3 mb/d of refining capacity in the region has already shut due to attacks and a lack of viable export outlets.

As a result, since the conflict began on Feb. 28, the price of crude oil has jumped to above \$100 per barrel on several occasions, up from around \$67 before the first U.S.-Israeli strikes.

The price of crude oil hit [as high as \\$98](#) per barrel on Tuesday, slightly down from the figures reached in days prior, but still alarming for consumers and markets worldwide.

Joel Hancock, an energy analyst at investment firm Natixis CIB, says that oil price rises are already being felt at gas stations, particularly in the U.S.

“Within Europe, U.S. gasoline

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In short, even if journeys can be adjusted, alternative routes simply can't handle the same volume of oil.

So far as insurance concerns, many companies have dropped war risk protections amid the conflict and the ongoing supply disruptions means that "oil is actually being lost from the market."

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Oil storages in the Gulf region are approaching capacity, with production halting as a result.

The U.S. gets very little oil through the Strait of Hormuz. Why are gas prices still going up?

Despite the U.S. being a net export of petroleum products, gas prices across the country have been hit with sharp increases since the start of the conflict, sitting at around \$3.84 per gallon nat

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Cacace—Getty

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In an attempt to secure the Strait, Trump also called on world leaders to provide assistance by sending warships to the region. He has since accused NATO allies of making a “very foolish mistake” after several countries resisted his call to take action.

In a further attempt to aid the flow of oil, the White House announced Wednesday that Trump has signed a 60-day waiver of the Jones Act, temporarily permitting foreign-flagged vessels transporting oil and gas to travel between U.S. ports. The move will "allow vital resources like oil, natural gas, fertilizer, and coal to flow freely," according to press secretary Karoline Leavitt.

The Jones Act, which refers to Section 27 of the Merchant Marine Act of 1920, requires that vessels transporting cargo between one U.S. port to another must be U.S.-built, as well as owned and crewed by U.S. citizens, aiming to serve as protection for domestic merchants.

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“It's just too easy to disrupt the Strait of Hormuz... the simplicity of disrupting the Strait is turning out to be almost like a nuclear deterrent from Iran,” says Krane.

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“This is really what we always refer to as [Iran’s] nuclear option in a figurative sense. Before, it wasn't really a usable option, because they are also vulnerable [if the Strait is disrupted],” adds Eisenstadt.

“The U.S. could easily totally destroy [Iran’s] oil production capability,” he continues, but that threat might not work. “Iran could say ‘if we can't export oil, nobody does.’”

Has Iran blocked the Strait of Hormuz before?

Iran has threatened to close and restrict the Strait on numerous occasions.

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Years later, in 2011, Iran’s then-Vice President Mohammad Reza Rahimi declared that oil would not pass through the waters if Western sanctions against Iran were widened. The sanctions were issued as a result of concerns over Iran’s nuclear capabilities.

The same issue ignited during last year’s conflict, dubbed the “12-day war,” which ultimately saw the U.S. join Israel in launching strikes on three key Iranian nuclear facilities.

During that conflict, Iran’s parliament voted to close the Strait—a largely symbolic gesture, given that it doesn’t have official authority over the passage.

The move, however, did cause jitters in the markets, with the price of crude oil futures jumping to \$80 per barrel in the immediate aftermath of the vote—somewhat serving as a warning sign for the economic and trade turmoil that was yet to come.

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