

# Options to protect Kuwaiti oil tankers in Persian Gulf a top Pentagon priority

**Associated Press**

WASHINGTON — The Defense Department has begun an internal study to determine how the United States should best protect Kuwaiti oil tankers plying the Persian Gulf, Pentagon officials said yesterday.

Among the options being considered are such things as sending carrier-based jet fighters into the gulf for escort work; asking Kuwait or Saudi Arabia for the right to use land-based facilities for aerial operations, or increasing the number of U.S. ships assigned to gulf patrols.

The study has become a top priority within the Pentagon and is receiving the personal attention of Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger, said the officials, who asked not to be named.

Officials from the State Depart-

ment and the White House's National Security Council are participating in the work, but the Pentagon "is taking the lead role," said one official.

This source added that a decision would have to be made soon because "we expect to begin this operation sometime next month."

Earlier this week, the White House said an agreement in principle had been reached with Kuwait to allow 10 or so of that country's oil tankers to switch to U.S. registry. By flying the U.S. flag, the tankers would have to be skippered by U.S. citizens and would automatically be entitled to U.S. military protection.

Kuwait is a key ally of Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war, which has been raging for about seven years. Both Iran

and Iraq have been attacking commercial ships in the gulf in a bid to cripple the other's economy, and Kuwaiti tankers have become a special target of Iranian attack.

The White House has said it intends to go ahead with the Kuwaiti agreement despite the devastating attack on the USS Stark on Sunday by an Iraqi warplane. That attack, however, has raised serious questions on Capitol Hill about the safety of U.S. warships as well as what might be required to protect Kuwaiti tankers.

The Pentagon officials interviewed yesterday acknowledged the Middle East Task Force currently assigned to the gulf was not large enough to protect U.S. ships as well as the Kuwaiti tankers.