

Breaking a big deal

As was long expected, US President Donald Trump announced on Tuesday that he is withdrawing from the Iran deal and re-imposing nuclear sanctions against that country. While being applauded by the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and by the Saudi Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, who have consistently pointed to the dangers of making a deal with Iran, many parties, including the Chinese, Russians and the Europeans, would criticise the Trump administration for ending a functioning arms control deal that prevented an Iranian nuclear bomb and turning it into an international crisis that can lead to war. However, one should not be fooled. Neither the Iranian ballistic missiles issues nor the fact that Trump personally tries to destroy everything that the [Barack Obama](#) administration has achieved, including the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed in Vienna in 2015, are the main reasons for leaving the deal.

Undoubtedly, the main reason for Trump's decision would be Iran's growing influence in the region, especially after the victory of the Bashar al-Assad regime in the Syrian war and the recent victory of the Iran-backed militant Shia group, the Hezbollah, and its allies in Lebanon's first parliamentary elections since 2009. With regard to both the missiles and Iran's regional military activity in Syria and Yemen, the European powers have intervened continuously in the past few months and declared that any Iranian intercontinental ballistic missile development and military support for the Assad regime and Hezbollah would trigger a very strong pushback accompanied by new and more effective sanctions.

Let us not forget that in his state visit to Washington on April 24-26, the French President, Emmanuel Macron, did his best to persuade the American President by offering improvements in each of the areas in which Trump has insisted the deal is flawed. However, at the end of his trip, Macron told reporters that Donald Trump likely will pull out of the deal as part of "a strategy of increasing tension". The tension Macron talked about is now here. Yesterday, the Israeli army sounded the alarm over irregular Iranian movements in Syria, putting its air defences on high alert.

As for the Iranians, they seem to take Trump's move against the deal firmly, but with a great deal of equanimity and precautions. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani declared that his government remains committed to a nuclear deal with world powers, despite the US decision to withdraw, but is also ready to resume uranium enrichment should the new sanctions against Iran become effective. Undoubtedly, the US exit from the nuclear deal comes as a great defeat for Rouhani against the Iranian hardliners who warned him against diplomacy with the Americans.

Also, Rouhani knows quite well that Trump's decision to reinstate US nuclear-related sanctions against Iran could cripple the Iranian economy and most probably create new urban riots around the country. But, worsening domestic problems in Iran could spell widespread geo-political trouble for the whole region. Israeli officials have repeatedly underlined that they will not allow the Revolutionary Guards to use Syria to threaten Israel.

According to some Israeli analysts, Israel has recently destroyed 200 missiles which Iran was trying to transfer into Syria. In addition to this, according to a report by The Times of Israel, the Knesset gave the prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, "the authority to declare war or order a major military operation by consulting only the defence minister, and not via a full cabinet vote as the law had previously required." Moreover, judging by Netanyahu's contacts with President Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo immediately prior to this attack in Syria, it seems that the Israeli military move in Syria and Netanyahu's latest presentation of displayed shelves of binders and CDs, (which he described as containing documents relating to past Iranian work on nuclear weapons) reflect very close US-Israeli coordination.

All these recent manoeuvres and interventions bring us to the conclusion that Trump's decision to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal could make a war scenario much more likely, unless there is a regime change in Iran, which is very unlikely. But while the deal's most vocal opponents, either in Washington DC or in Tehran, see Trump's decision as a grand step ahead, other analysts point to the complexity of the situation within Iran and the Middle East. With Rouhani becoming a lame duck and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards winning their wager, it will be nearly impossible to bring Iran back to a trustful negotiating table.

As a result, we are left with a region where the Iranians and Saudis will have no more opportunities to cooperate to resolve regional crises, starting with those in Syria and Yemen. Which means, that in the near future, the US, the Europeans and other parties involved in the geopolitical game of the Middle East will be left with a difficult choice: Military action against Iran and its proxies, or living with a nuclear-armed hegemonic Iran.

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