

Distinguished Professor Amin Saikal

Iran and Saudi Arabia: proliferation pressures

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President Donald Trump's refusal on 13 October 2017 to re-certify to the Congress the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or the 'nuclear agreement', signed between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, plus Germany (P5+1) on 14 July 2015, is a serious blow to the cause of non-proliferation, and that of diplomacy over confrontation. Whilst all the other signatories have remained committed to the agreement and have, along with the UN nuclear watchdog (the International Atomic Energy Agency - IAEA), confirmed that Iran has complied with the agreement, President Trump's action has thrown a spanner in the works. In the event of the US Congress failing to ask for a renegotiation of the agreement to 'fix' it in accordance with Trump's preferences or reimposing sanctions on Iran within 60 days or the president cancelling the agreement, as he has threatened, Tehran may react in one of two ways. One is to keep the agreement as it is, which Iran has said is non-renegotiable. Another is to return its nuclear program to the pre-JCPOA position at an even higher level. Neither of these will be acceptable to Trump and both carry the risk of a military confrontation between the two sides, with devastating consequences.

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Under the JCPOA, Iran has agreed to curb its nuclear program until 2025, with implications for renewal, in return for the lifting of international sanctions against it. The agreement came into full effect six months after its signing, when the IAEA verified Iran's full compliance through a very stringent regime of inspections. The JCPOA was the fruit of nearly two years of hard-hitting negotiations. They commenced in secret discussions between Iranian and American officials in the Sultanate of Oman, leading to direct negotiations between US Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif in Geneva under the auspices of the High Representative of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, with the participation of Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China.

The ice-breaker preceding the Geneva negotiations was a meeting of the minds between US President Barack Obama (2009-2017), who had made overtures to the Iranian Islamic regime for improved relations, and President Hassan Rouhani (2013-), who came to power on the platform of a reform agenda, primarily to resolve the dispute over Iran's nuclear program as a prerequisite to lifting the international sanctions and addressing Iran's dire economic situation. Backed by Iran's supreme religious and political leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Rouhani made a goodwill telephone call to President Obama on his way home from attending the UN General Assembly in September 2013—the first direct contact between an American and Iranian leader since the overthrow of the pro-Western

monarchy of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and its replacement by the Islamic Government of Ayatollah Rohullah Khomeini as an outcome of the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79. Within weeks, in another unprecedented occurrence, Kerry and Zarif intensified their negotiations to achieve historical compromises.

Washington had persistently accused the Islamic Republic of having a secret plan to produce nuclear weapons, which Tehran had rejected, claiming that its program was only for peaceful purposes, that nuclear weapons are “un-Islamic”, and that its activities were not in violation of its obligations as a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Israel and Saudi Arabia and its partners in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) had shared Washington's accusation.

To conclude the JCPOA, both sides had to move substantially from their original positions, with the US abandoning its insistence on Iran foregoing its entire nuclear program, and with Iran giving up its resolve to continue its uranium enrichment at a high level. Under the JCPOA, Iran agreed to expand the IAEA's oversight, to halt its production of highly enriched uranium and plutonium, to reduce its stockpile of uranium from 7,500 kilograms to 300 kilograms low-enriched uranium at no more than 3.67 per cent, to not build heavy water reactors for the next 15 years, and to reduce the number of its centrifuges from 19,000 to 5,060 IR-1 (first generation) gas centrifuges over the next 10 years.

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In return, the US and other signatories agreed to lift all the nuclear-related sanctions. The UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2231 endorsing the JCPOA on 20 July 2015, rescinding all previous Security Council resolutions regarding sanctions. There was no mention in the resolution of any UN oversight of Iran's non-nuclear military arsenals or sites. The implementation of the JCPOA began in mid-January 2016. The US supported Resolution 2231, but only in relation to the lifting of nuclear-related sanctions, and therefore not those concerning America's allegations of Iranian support of terrorism and human rights violations.

The nuclear deal had strong American, regional and Iranian critics prior to—and after—its conclusion. The conservative forces in the US mounted a vehement opposition to it. This opposition was also shared and deeply fanned by right-wing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Leading the GCC, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia also expressed deep apprehension. The main objection of the critics was that it did

not contain a stricter inspection regime, that it was not valid indefinitely, and that it let Iran earn more revenue by resuming its oil exports to Europe and by enhancing its trade and economic ties that would enable it to engage in more destabilising activities and expansion of its regional influence. They contended that the agreement simply freed up and enriched Iran to augment its support for radical Shia groups in Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, as well as the dictatorship of Syria's Bashar al-Assad as Iran's only Arab strategic partner in the region, and one that the US and its Western and regional allies, most importantly Israel and Saudi Arabia and its GCC partners, wanted to see overthrown.

The most adamant critics included the presidential aspirant, Donald Trump, who called it the “worst deal ever negotiated”, vowing during his campaign to scrap it should he become president. In a similar vein, Netanyahu, along with a chorus of Israeli senior figures, who have abhorred the Iranian Islamic regime and wanted to preserve Israel's nuclear monopoly

in the region, denounced the agreement as “capitulation”. Netanyahu declared: “Iran is going to receive a sure path to nuclear weapons. Many of the restrictions that were supposed to prevent it from getting there will be lifted. Iran will get a jackpot, a cash bonanza of hundreds of billions of dollars, which will enable it to continue to pursue its aggression and terror in the region and in the world. This is a bad mistake of historic proportions.” He pledged to do whatever possible in his power to reverse it, with an implied threat of military action to disable Iran’s nuclear and military capability—something that the Obama administration worked hard to prevent.

Riyadh had already repeatedly urged Washington to take punitive measures against Iran as Saudi Arabia’s arch sectarian and geopolitical rival. In 2010, whilst referring to Iran, the late King Abdulla had exhorted the Obama administration “to cut off [sic] head of the snake”. Whilst disappointed with President Obama’s overtures to Iran, Riyadh had sought to deepen its historical de facto strategic ties with the predominantly Sunni, nuclear-armed Pakistan. In early 2014, Crown Prince Salman ibn Abdul-Aziz, who became king in January of the following year, had made a celebrated visit to Pakistan, where he had announced US\$1.5 billion aid to the country to help balance its budget and pledged another US\$1.5 billion assistance, which triggered media speculation that this may have been a down payment for a Pakistani tactical nuclear bomb in the event of Iran developing such an arsenal. In a private conversation, this was confirmed to the author by a senior official in Washington in May 2015.

Meanwhile, the JCPOA had its Iranian detractors. President Rouhani’s conservative opponents, who have dominated the levers of power ever since the advent of Iran’s Islamic regime, remained resolutely opposed to any opening up to the US. They had historically viewed the US as a hegemonic world actor, which had persistently conspired to have the highly strategically valued oil-rich Iran in its orbit following the Second World War. Shaping this view have been a number of variables, including most importantly, the overthrow by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the elected, reformist and nationalist government

of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in favour of re-installing the pro-Western Shah (who had fled Iran a week earlier in August 1953) on his throne to rule Iran at the US’s behest for the next 25 years, and America’s numerous military interventions in Iran’s neighbourhood and threats to change the Islamic regime. Rouhani has had the backing of Iran’s Supreme Leader in resolving the nuclear dispute, but always with a warning not to trust the US and to be vigilant of its hegemonic ambitions and actions.

While nothing short of substantially revising the JCPOA, including removing the sunset clause and instituting a more intrusive inspection regime, as well as imposing strict limitations on Iranian ballistic missile development and military capability, will satisfy the US, Israeli and Saudi leaders, the Rouhani government has made it abundantly clear that it will not renegotiate the agreement. In contrast to Trump’s description of Iran as a “corrupt regime” dedicated to spreading violence, terror and instability, and to Netanyahu’s and the Saudi King’s hailing of Trump’s decision as bold, brave and necessary, the other five world powers and the European Union have been joined by most leaders around the world in rejecting Trump’s admonitions. Mogherini has summed up the European and, for that matter, global attitude by stating that the JCPOA is “working and delivering” with Iranian compliance, that the agreement is not a unilateral but a multilateral deal, and that it is not in the hands of any one president to terminate. Meanwhile, Rouhani has vowed that the Iranian nation will never give in to any American pressure whatever the cost, and has condemned Trump’s action as “more than ever against the Iranian people.”

Trump’s diabolical decision, which has been taken against the advice of his Secretaries of Defense and State, as well as America’s formal European and non-European allies, more relevantly Australia, entails serious implications, the most of important of which are four.

First, it constitutes a mortal blow to non-proliferation and the credibility of the US as a reliable and dependable negotiator. This can only provide more reason for a state like North Korea to remain very distrustful of the US and not to negotiate with it seriously

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regarding its nuclear status. It also sends a similar message to all other countries, including America’s allies, which have already been bruised in different ways by Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, to give only two examples.

Second, it emboldens Iran’s regional adversaries, especially Israel, and Saudi Arabia and some of its GCC partners, to continue to treat Iran as enemy number one, and it obscures how their behaviour has also contributed to regional volatility. The Gulf and its wider environs badly need a degree of regional cooperation in order to address some of the conflicts which cannot be resolved without Iranian assistance. The division of the region between enemies and friends may suit the Trump administration by making the latter dependent on and vulnerable to US dictates, but it is detrimental to stabilising the region.

Third, it causes a serious rift between the US and its allies, particularly Britain, France and Germany, which remain dedicated to the preservation of the JCPOA for reasons of their own collective security. Trans-Atlantic relations have never been so low. It also opens up more space for adversarial powers, such as Russia and China, to fill the gap in world leadership at a cost to the United States.

Fourth, it could affect the texture of the Iranian domestic political scene, pushing it in a confrontationist direction. As the Supreme Leader and the conservative clusters, including the powerful Revolutionary Guard, which Trump has especially targeted as an evil force, have all along been highly sceptical of the US, they

can now remind their moderate and reformist counterparts that they “told them so”. Given their strong hold on the power structure, they are now in a position to harden their attitude in response to Trump’s provocative actions. They may opt for restoring and accelerating Iran’s nuclear program that could lead to a military showdown with the US and its regional allies, with debilitating consequences not only for Iran, but also for its neighbourhood and American interests in the area. The Islamic Republic has built sufficient hard power capability and a regional network of activist groups to make any attack on it very costly for its perpetrator and its affiliates. Despite their political divisions, the Iranian public can be expected to unite behind the Islamic Government against an external intervention in a display of their devotion to resistant Shia Islamism and fierce nationalism, as they have repeatedly proved in history.

President Trump and the Congress will serve the best interests of the US and that of global security by not tampering with the JCPOA. The risk of trying to reshape it according to American ideological and geopolitical preferences is much higher than keeping it in place and building on it to strengthen the hands of the moderates and reformists in Iranian politics and to improve US-Iranian relations. The Islamic Republic is now as much of a pragmatic as an ideological player, and thus can be a critical force for good in its region.