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Iran and the United States under the Trump Administration

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The new American administration and Iran were on a collision course even before President Trump's inauguration, and the missile tests conducted by Iran (on January 29, 2017), a few days after Trump was sworn in, drew an immediate response. Though not materially different from stances by the Obama administration, the US response took the form of sanctions against 13 people and 12 companies linked to the missile industry, including members of the Revolutionary Guard (a list that was likely prepared in advance). On February 3, 2017, without going into details, then-National Security Advisor Michael Flynn stated that the administration was "officially putting Iran on notice," and after an attack by Iranian-supported Houthi rebels in Yemen on a Saudi vessel, Secretary of Defense James Mattis emphasized that Iran was the biggest state sponsor of terrorism in the world.

Iran took responsibility for the missile test, but emphasized that it did not violate Security Council resolutions and the test was part of its annual testing program. Iran also called on the new administration not to use the test to aggravate the tension between the two countries, and stressed that United States measures would be met with similar measures on its part. At the same time, Iran continued its series of military maneuvers, which it said were part of its annual work program. It is likely, however, that this was also an attempt to establish facts on the ground and test US responses.

In the days following Trump's inauguration, Iran was careful to keep its public rhetoric relatively moderate and did not issue harsh condemnations of the new President. Commenting on Trump's statements, Ali Akbar Velayati, political advisor to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, said, "Iran does not take Trump's behavior seriously." Ali Akbar Salehi, head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, said that Iran should act wisely and consolidate a moderate strategy against the United States. On February 16, Khamenei himself doubted the credibility of Trump's threats to take military action against Iran, arguing that the real war "of the enemy is in the economic sphere, and is designed to make the public despair of the revolution."

Iran's relatively moderate rhetoric was also reflected in the events surrounding the anniversary of the revolution. Together with the traditional cries of "death to the United States" and the trampling of the US and Israeli flags, prominent slogans this year made a distinction between Trump and the US administration and the American people. President Hassan Rouhani argued

that Trump was a “novice in the world of politics,” and in response to Trump’s “threats,” emphasized that they would receive “an appropriate response.” This differentiation between Trump and the American people is likewise reflected in the Iranian media discourse. A number of editorials commented on US participation in the international wrestling championship held recently in Iran, and noted that Iranian attitudes to the American team proved that the Iranian people held no grudge against them.

The brief period that the new administration has been in office suggests that US policy on Iran, at least publicly, signals a change from recent years. There is an emphasis on adopting a tough and threatening line, at least rhetorically, probably in an attempt to make the Iranians understand that in contrast to the Obama presidency, the Trump administration does not intend to ignore Tehran’s provocative measures. This reflects the belief that American deterrence can be improved in this way, and demonstrates to the world that Trump’s criticism of the Obama administration’s policy on Iran sounded during the election campaign has translated into a new American line.

At the same time, it is clear that the administration is acting cautiously in its attitude toward the nuclear agreement, and is certainly not repeating Trump’s declarations on the eve of the elections that he will take steps to cancel it. It appears that the administration is trying to distinguish between its attitude to the agreement and its responses to Iran’s policy in the Middle East. A White House report about a conversation between Trump and the King of Saudi Arabia emphasized that “the two leaders agreed about the need to strictly enforce the agreement,” i.e., an understanding that the agreement remains in effect, which is also probably in accordance with Saudi wishes.

These initial statements aside, the administration is presumably just beginning to formulate its long term policy on Iran. The goal it sets will probably focus on minimizing Iran’s regional influence, while enhancing deterrence against provocative measures and violation of the nuclear agreement. In this context, the administration will have to cope with the complex challenges facing it, headed by the need to back up its tough words with concrete measures that will demonstrate the seriousness of its intentions. It is clear to the administration that not doing so will show the hollowness of its words, and in effect act as a boomerang. The United States can certainly use military force against Iranian targets and/or Iran’s allies. However, it is doubtful whether the administration is willing, certainly at this stage, to be dragged into rapid escalation, which is a likely scenario in the event of a military clash.

One possible scenario is the intensification of the US sanctions in non-nuclear areas, whether by executive order or by Congressional legislation. At the same time, in order to enhance the burden on Iran significantly, the President will have to persuade the Europeans and the Russians to join these measures. However, this effort will likely be rejected, as Europe and Russia are loath to

close the door again on investments and financial dealings with Iran that was reopened once the JCPOA was signed.

The United States might also attempt to divide between Russia and Iran by persuading Moscow to discourage Iran from intervening in Syria, in exchange for American concessions in contexts of importance to Russia. This is a formidable task, given the progress that has taken place in military cooperation between Russia and Iran in Syria. Furthermore, Iran's contribution to the war against the Islamic State, including in Iraq, appears more essential than ever, and the United States is unlikely to jeopardize its achievements in this theater. The Russian are also reiterating that it would be a mistake to exclude Iran from a coalition designed to combat Islamic terrorism.

For its part, Iran does not wish to exacerbate the tension, and it is unlikely, at least at the present time, to adopt a more aggressive line than before. Rouhani's main task in the coming months will be to prevent an escalation of the internal conflict within Iran. Growing threats by the Trump administration against Iran are liable on the one hand to strengthen the extreme conservative faction in Iran, which opposed the nuclear agreement and insisted that the United States cannot be trusted, while on the other hand weaken Rouhani's camp, which tried to promote the policy of openness to the West. This issue will probably be the focus of the various Iranian political parties in the coming months until the elections, scheduled for May 2017.

Radicalization of the dialogue in Iran following a further escalation in American responses is liable to push Rouhani to adopt incendiary rhetoric and measures, fearing that he will be portrayed as yielding to the US and as someone whose policy has failed. Noticeable in this context is that for the first time in years, the reformist faction has had to side with the regime against the threats from the United States, declaring that in view of the external threat, the Iranian people are willing to unite.

Conclusion

Change in the United States' rules of the game against Iran – achieving success in reining in Iran's regional influence without being dragged into a conflict, and without Iran taking retaliatory measures (in other words, deterrence against Iran) – will require the formulation of a new broad strategy, which as of now appears difficult to achieve, given the complexity of the challenges confronting the United States.

In response to the administration's policy, Iran will likely focus on efforts to preserve its regional status and its ability to continue developing its nuclear capabilities without violating the JCPOA. It is possible that the aggressive American line will achieve "local deterrence" and prevent prominent provocative measures at the current time. In time, however, and if pressure from the United States grows, Rouhani's constraints will also increase, and against his will, he will have to fulfill the extremists' demands.

The new US administration and Iran are sizing up one another, without wishing to cause a violent escalation liable to destabilize the Gulf and test their determination to carry out their declarations. At the same time, tension at the rhetorical level, even if not intended to fan any flames, is also liable to cause escalation following a miscalculation by one side of the other's intentions.

The constraints and challenges facing the Trump administration in formulating a policy vis-à-vis Iran require Israel to focus its discussions with the United States on possible ways of achieving the following principal goals: prompting a change in Iran's policy in the Middle East; in the global context, preventing erosion of Iranian compliance with the restrictions imposed on it by the nuclear agreement; and preparing for the period after the agreement expires. Israel should strive to have American policy focus on an effort to strengthen the moderate elements in the Iranian political system, headed by President Rouhani, and to avoid playing into the radicals' hands. A correct combination of deterrent measures on the one hand and openness on the other in cooperation with other international players will have a chance of showing Rouhani – who appears to have the best chances of winning the upcoming elections – that he personally and Iran in general have a great deal to lose from the Trump administration by breaking the rules.

