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President Trump's Speech on Iran: Goals without Clear Means of Implementation

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Despite any desire President Trump might have to “rip up” the nuclear agreement with Iran, as he avowed during the election campaign, he is now compelled to allow it to remain in force, along with the United States’ continued suspension of sanctions. Although the President stated that he cannot confirm that Iran is complying with the agreement, administration officials hurried to avoid any misunderstandings and stressed that the United States remains in the agreement. Notwithstanding the desire to undermine Iran’s conduct in the Middle East, Trump did not mention any American actions to reduce/eliminate Iranian influence in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Despite the desire to declare the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) a terrorist organization, the administration, out of concern over how such a declaration might impact on US soldiers stationed in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, is forced to make do with imposing additional sanctions on the IRGC by virtue of legislation that was enacted already under the Obama administration. And despite Trump’s rhetoric during the initial days of his presidency about replacing the regime in Iran, the administration – like the administrations of the preceding two decades – is now talking about changing Iranian policy.

At this stage, some of the policies that President Trump presented are contingent upon other elements – the US domestic arena, Congress, the international arena, the five other partners to the JCPOA, and the US allies in the regional arena.

In the domestic context, the administration will ask Congress to amend the current legislation, so as to mandate the imposition of automatic sanctions on the Islamic Republic if Iran breaches specific provisions relating to nuclear armament and, apparently, to add provisions to the legislation relating to Iran’s missile program. The goal is that the legislation will include immediate retaliatory measures if, during the final years of the agreement, Iran decides to accelerate its enrichment program in order to have enough material to assemble a bomb in less than one year.

In addition, the administration will ask the US Treasury Department to impose additional economic sanctions (by virtue of existing legislation) on people and entities affiliated with the IRGC, both in the context of activities relating to nuclear armament and surface-to-surface missiles, and in the context of human rights violations. In addition, the definition of terrorist activities will be expanded beyond the Quds Force to include the entire IRGC.

In practical terms, these measures are directed at the American domestic arena and for the time being have no impact on the agreement itself. Presumably the administration understands that it cannot force either the world powers that are partners to the JCPOA or Iran to amend the agreement. Consequently, Trump's intention is to give the United States leverage, through legislation that is already being drafted in Congress, to deter Iran from exploiting shortcomings in the agreement, including Iran's ability to expand the scope of nuclear buildup during the final years of the agreement and certainly after its expiration, to increase the supervision, particularly inspections of military bases, and to add provisions relating to Iran's ballistic missile program. The administration also hopes that the legislation will launch a process with Europe to forge parallel accords to resolve the problems in the agreement. In any event, the threat of terminating the agreement in the future is relegated to a back burner and will be used to apply significant pressure on Congress and to convince opponents in Congress and elsewhere (mainly in Europe) that the alternative to the new legislation is liable to be far worse.

In the international context, the administration found itself isolated immediately after Trump finished delivering his speech, when the leaders of France, Britain, and Germany published a joint statement that they are determined to uphold their commitment to the JCPOA and to its full implementation by all parties, and emphasized that upholding the agreement is "in our shared national security interest." In their announcement, the leaders stressed that the agreement is "the culmination of 13 years of diplomacy" and expressed their concerns about possible negative implications that the US measures might have if understandings are undermined. Nevertheless, in an attempt to respond to the administration's concerns, the E-3 leaders stressed that while upholding the agreement, in light of their shared concerns about Iran's missile program and its regional activities, they are willing to engage in a dialogue with the United States and with Iran in order to promote measures to strengthen regional stability. In this context, an announcement has already been made about the French foreign minister's upcoming visit in Tehran, and it was also announced that High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini will arrive in Washington in early November to meet with members of the administration and Congress. The Russian deputy foreign minister also clarified his country's position, which considers upholding the agreement a key mission, and stressed that Russia deplores threats and belligerence during diplomacy.

As to the US regional allies, who are expected to cooperate with the administration, Saudi Arabia announced that it welcomes Trump's efforts to work with allies in the region to contend with the shared challenges, particularly Iran. Saudi Arabia also emphasized its commitment to assist President Trump with promoting his objectives. In contrast, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who is situated precariously between the United States and Hezbollah and Iran, clarified that he understands the US position toward Iran, but did not commit to take any action to promote it. He also stressed that Lebanon is obliged to tackle dangers and maintain the country's stability (in other words, it must avoid confrontation with Hezbollah).

For its part, Iran employed a variety of diplomatic efforts to dull the negative impact of the policy outlined in President Trump's address. The fiery speech by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani that immediately followed Trump's address indeed reflected considerable anger and recounted the "United States' sins" (including the overthrow of Mohammad Mosaddeq), yet mainly expressed a sigh of relief that for the time being the agreement has not been breached and that Iran need not take any immediate action in response. Rouhani stressed that as long as Iran's interests are protected it will remain faithful to the agreement and will continue its cooperation with the IAEA. In a telephone conversation with France's President Macron, Rouhani reiterated that the agreement is not open to negotiation. The evident Iranian policy – to denounce and condemn, while refraining from any action that might harm the agreement – is to sidestep any measures that might play into the hands of the US or harm the coordination with the Europeans and with Russia that Iran has conducted for some weeks now, because without international support, the Trump administration will have a hard time promoting its policy. Nevertheless, Iranian leaders are also likely considering the possibility that President Trump might eventually terminate United States participation in the agreement and reinstitute the sanctions.

The most important key change in the new US strategy is Trump's reference to Iran's regional policy – beyond the nuclear issue – as a key threat to regional security and to United States interests. Essentially, Trump changed the nonproliferation paradigm that holds that the nuclear agreement will lead to a more moderate Iran and perhaps even to regional cooperation with it, while relying on the common interests of all partners to the agreement, headed by the United States, to refrain from measures that are liable to undermine the deal. According to the new paradigm, continuation of the agreement (which the administration does not consider advantageous to the United States) must serve efforts to find solutions to issues left untouched by the agreement, while relying on the clear interest that Iran and the European allies have in maintaining the agreement.

In the final analysis, President Trump's statements on the possibility of terminating the agreement leave this option on the table and, in fact, the decision on this matter has merely

been put off for the time being. The US efforts to focus attention on Iran's negative regional policy and its surface-to-surface missile programs are also important and may receive support from United States allies. However, implementation will require precise coordination with the allies, as well as willingness to take concrete independent actions in Syria and in Iraq where the Iranians are consolidating their presence. There is no evidence of any impetus to such action at this time.

From Israel's perspective, the administration's decision to promote new legislation opens a window of opportunity to influence the "trigger points" for increasing sanctions, mainly relating to the agreement's weakest and most problematic issue, which legitimizes Iran's extensive unlimited nuclear program after about a decade. The focus on this issue will probably not lead to termination of the agreement or to an adverse impact on critical components of the agreement in the short term, but it might enable the agreement to be improved in the long term. Furthermore, the evident willingness on the part of the Europeans to hold a dialogue on Iran's regional conduct and its surface-to-surface missile program opens an opportunity for Israel to promote its interests, including all matters pertaining to Iran's future presence in Syria. Nevertheless, Israel must ensure that it is not perceived in Europe or in any other relevant country as encouraging the Trump administration to terminate the agreement. Therefore, Israel should present its demands within the relevant context, without their being perceived as demands that seek to eventually torpedo the nuclear agreement – with all of the ramifications that this might have on the stability of the Middle East and the world.