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The United States Withdrawal from the Nuclear Deal with Iran:
Lessons from a Simulation
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In the coming few days President Donald Trump is due to decide whether to authorize the continued suspension of the sanctions on Iran that were lifted following the achievement of the JCPOA. This move is required by the law passed by Congress in 2015, as part of the attempt by opponents of the deal to compel the president and the administration to address the issue of Iran's compliance with the agreement and its contribution to United States national security. Failure to extend the suspension means the automatic reinstatement of the American sanctions on Iran, which contravenes the commitments stipulated in the agreement, and therefore constitutes a breach of the deal and in practical terms an American withdrawal from it.

This scenario was examined in a simulation that took place recently at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), in collaboration with the RAND Corporation. The purpose was to consider Iran's conduct and the responses of other relevant parties should the United States withdraw from the deal, and the consequences of such a development for Israel. The main advantage of a simulation over conventional discussions in order to brainstorm and analyze politics and situations is the interaction between different groups as they try to simulate the considerations and policies of the countries they represent. Of course, the outcome does not necessarily reflect the most likely scenario in reality, but it does highlight ideas and options that experts may have missed, and thus the responses to the scenario and the emerging policy might well be realized.

The United States, whose moves in the simulation (as in reality) drove the developments, set as its strategic objective improvements to the nuclear agreement and stronger wording that would be more binding regarding the sunset clauses, the halt of research and development by Iran on advanced centrifuges, increased supervision – including of military installations, and limits on the Iranian missile program. However, apart from setting these goals, the US did not present any plan to achieve them, and it quickly became clear that the American administration wanted other international actors – the European partners to the agreement (France, Britain, Germany) and Russia – to exert pressure on Iran as a way of forcing it to meet the administration's demands. (This dynamic is reminiscent of American conduct during the North Korea crisis.)

The European partners to the agreement were prepared to take on the role of mediator, but their opening position accepted the Iranian argument that it is not possible to renegotiate the deal. Therefore, their main interest was to preserve the JCPOA and avoid damaging the economic relations that they have begun to develop with Iran. However, the Europeans, who understand the need to address the Iranian missile program and to restrain Iran's policy in the Middle East, tried in the simulation to create a kind of "deal," namely, preserving the agreement in return for some concessions by Iran regarding its missile program and regional policy; they were even prepared to exert economic pressure on Iran if necessary. This European position was not acceptable to the United States, and the strong disagreements between the parties was underscored in the simulation.

Russia cleverly positioned itself as the only realistic option mediator within the simulation, which is how it was perceived by the American administration, to the dismay of the Iranian representatives. Russia demanded that the agreement be extended for another 10 years, but also had demands regarding the missile program and limitations on the Iranian presence in Syria. However, as is usually the case with Moscow, it demanded a quid pro quo from the West – lifting the sanctions imposed on Russia in response to its policy in Ukraine. Israel's good relations with Russia and the US enabled it to convey the Russian message to the Americans – a move that reflected the Israeli interest in avoiding termination of the agreement at this stage. However, the Russian attempt at mediation failed.

Two other regional elements, representing conflicting interests – Saudi Arabia and Hezbollah – were represented in the simulation. Although the Saudi interest was to undermine the agreement and harm Iran, while the Hezbollah interest was to help Iran and prevent a breach of the agreement, neither party had a significant impact on the simulation. With no independent means of exerting pressure, Saudi Arabia tried to encourage Israeli and American moves but without much success, even though Israel saw the chance for military cooperation with Saudi Arabia as an important achievement and was ready to use it in order to signal to Iran that it had a military option. Hezbollah, for its part, although it was prepared to use force and create points of violent conflict, was in fact restrained by Iranian policy, which expressed a desire to avoid any move that played into the hands of Washington.

Iran based its policy on what it saw as its main interest, namely, preserving the international consensus for continuing the agreement. Following intensive contacts with the other partners to the agreement, it estimated that none of them wanted to upset the deal. This was the root of the Iranian policy of restraint, intended to prevent moves that would lead to accusations that it was harming the agreement. This policy did indeed facilitate mediation attempts by European countries, as well as Russia. During these

attempts, the outline of Tehran's policy emerged, centered on determined opposition to reopening the agreement and a certain limited willingness to discuss the missile program and the extent of its presence in Syria. The level-headed Iranian policy made it hard for the American administration to recruit support for its policy, and led to serious disputes between Washington and Europe. At the end of the simulation, Iran resumed the enrichment activity of before the agreement, but only when it was clear that it would not be accused of torpedoing the agreement, while the imposition of secondary sanctions meant that the United States was the party in breach.

Israel found itself obliged to support President Trump's policy, even though its immediate interest was the Iranian missile program and presence in Syria – issues that only arise in the second stage of improving the JCPOA, which is in its early stages and postpones them for later. Israel's position rests on the assessment that at this stage it is not possible to renegotiate the agreement, and focusing on this aspect could detract attention from more urgent issues. Israel also does not want to be on the front line of activity against Iran, but instead supported President Trump's steps and even decided to renew its military preparations, which it presented as a bargaining card that the United States could play against the other parties to the agreement. However (in the framework of the simulation), Israel did not manage to advance Washington's aim of recruiting the support of Europe, Russia, and China for the move, nor was it able to influence decisions taken by the administration in this context.

In terms of the positions of the main actors in the simulation, there were a number of striking conclusions:

- The American administration has no clear plan on how to achieve its goal with Iran – improvement of the JCPOA. Its one-sided move relied on other elements, mainly European countries, hoping they would take action against Iran. However, since the US move was contrary to the interests of its European partners, and without prior coordination with them, it will be hard to get their support for this decision and to navigate the ensuing developments.
- The crisis created by the administration could be exploited to promote issues important to Israel (mainly Iran's missile program and presence in Syria). The European countries and Russia were prepared for this. However, American insistence on amending the agreement and the problematic relations with Russia prevented realization of advancing Israel's positions on these issues.
- Israel found itself in a situation where the agreement was breached, Iran resumed advancing its nuclear program and continued its missile program, there was no agreed change to its regional conduct, and it was very doubtful that the current American administration was prepared to make serious moves against Iran.

- On the time axis (which could continue for several months), although all the parties to the nuclear deal except the United States want it to continue, the departure of the US, particularly if it imposes secondary sanctions that would make European companies cease their activities in Iran, would in effect neutralize the deal, and Iran would continue working on its nuclear program.