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**The United States Decision to Designate the Revolutionary Guards as a
Terrorist Organization**

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On April 8, 2019, the United States announced its decision to add the Iranian Revolutionary Guards to the list of terrorist organizations. This decision followed other decisions by the administration on the Iranian issue, in the spirit of its promise to intensify the policy of “maximum pressure” on the Iranian leadership. While the decision does not have many economic ramifications or add to the economic pressure already leveled on Iran, it represents heightened measures that the administration is prepared to take against Iran. Thus, it presumably will raise tension between the countries significantly. In response to the decision, Iran’s Supreme National Security Council declared the United States Central Command (CENTCOM), which is responsible for US military activity in the Middle East, a terrorist organization, and Iran is liable to seek other ways of exacting a price from the United States. In any event, it does not appear that the administration’s policy will compel Iran to agree to specific concessions, even though it forces the leadership to contend with a series of challenges.

On April 8, 2019, the United States announced that as of the following week, Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) will be added to the State Department’s list of terrorist organizations (which to date includes 67 Middle East groups). A statement issued by President Donald Trump described this as an “unprecedented step [that] recognizes the reality that Iran is not only a State Sponsor of Terrorism, but that the IRGC actively participates in, finances, and promotes terrorism as a tool of statecraft.” A White House announcement said that the State Department regards the Revolutionary Guards as “the Iranian government’s primary means of directing and implementing its global terrorist campaign.” This is the first time that a US administration has imposed sanctions on a governmental arm of another country. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the United States would continue to impose sanctions on Iran and pressure it to “behave like a normal nation,” and called on US allies to do likewise.

As it had warned in advance, in response Iran’s Supreme National Security Council declared the United States Central Command (CENTCOM), which is responsible for US military activities in the Middle East, a terrorist organization. In parallel, most members of the parliament (Majlis) published letters in support of this designation of CENTCOM,

some wore Revolutionary Guards uniforms as a sign of solidarity, and the announced decision was ratified as law. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif blamed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whom he accused of inflaming tensions. In addition, to mark National Nuclear Energy Day on April 10, President Hassan Rouhani ordered the installation of a cascade of advanced 20 IR-6 centrifuges at Natanz. That step is in keeping with the nuclear agreement and does not constitute a breach. As in the past, so too this time, a blow from the West to the regime, and especially at such a core component, has united Iranian political moderates with extremists, closing their ranks around the anti-American and anti-Israeli position.

The administration's decision follows other decisions on the Iranian issue over the last two years and upholds its promise to intensify the policy of "maximum pressure" on the Iranian leadership. The current decision does not spell significant economic consequences beyond the economic pressures already leveled on Iran. Individuals and entities with links to the Revolutionary Guards were previously included in broad sanctions against Iran. Nevertheless, this decision reflects the heightened measures that the administration is prepared to take against Iran. It follows a debate within the administration that apparently focused on the possible consequences for the security of US forces, specifically those deployed in the Middle East, given concern that Iran might take action against them, either directly or through proxy groups. Also discussed were limitations that the decision was liable to place on the ability of American officials (military and diplomatic) to maintain contacts with counterparts in countries like Iraq and Lebanon with ties to Revolutionary Guards elements.

Statements by the administration emphasize that the decision is intended to impress upon Iran the costs of its support and involvement in terrorism. It is one component in a range of actions that the administration hopes will achieve its Iran objectives, and will impede any future effort to restore Iran to the international community and the global finance system. Furthermore, the administration has already announced its intent to impose additional economic sanctions, and next month will decide whether to continue granting waivers to countries whose main oil supply is from Iran. The administration recently announced that of the eight countries that received waivers six months ago, three have now reduced their Iranian oil purchases to zero. According to the administration, 23 countries that formerly imported oil from Iran have ceased doing so.

On a declarative level at least, the administration continues its demands, as stipulated in the 12 points published by Secretary of State Pompeo, that Iran comprehensively change its conduct in a range of areas: in nuclear technology, ground-to-ground missile development, and regional activity. President Trump has repeatedly voiced his interest in opening a dialogue on these issues with the Iranian leadership – if and when it decides

that it is willing to make concessions. That said, the administration's determination to intensify measures against Iran, even if it declares that these are meant to pressure the leadership and not the civilian population, could attest to additional intentions, not publicly acknowledged – above all, to see the pressure generate sweeping protests that would destabilize and possibly topple the regime (although the administration appears to lack the knowledge and tools required to effect a new reality in Iran). Alternatively, there may be a belief/hope that cornering the leadership would prompt it to reverse its consistent policy and leave the nuclear agreement in a manner that would compel the other parties to the deal – chiefly the Europeans – to admit the deal's failure and thereby intensify Iran's isolation and the pressures upon it.

Until now, the top Iranian echelon, with the approval of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, has supported the decision to remain within the nuclear agreement, despite the US withdrawal and the additional steps taken by the administration, in the understanding that the agreement serves Iran's interests, and, apparently, in the expectation that the situation will change when the Trump administration ends. However, the intensification of American measures will stoke internal pressure by conservatives to change policy and go back to advance the nuclear program.

Iran presumes that Trump's measures are part of preparations for his reelection campaign, and they hope that the administration will recognize that pressure tactics are useless, especially if they fail to make Tehran yield to the administration's demands. In any event, it appears that the decision to add the Revolutionary Guards to the terrorism list, compounding the intensification of sanctions and the previous blows to the Iranian economy, will not lead Iran to concede to United States demands. However, even if the latest measure does not prompt Iran to violate the nuclear deal, it will significantly increase tension with the United States and could encourage the leadership to seek other ways of exacting a price from the United States. It is doubtful that the Iranians would be interested in direct involvement in terrorist attacks on American forces, but it is possible that they would give a green light to proxy forces (specifically in Iraq, where they have done so in the past) to demonstrate the seriousness of their intentions.

The bottom line is that the administration's policy of maximum pressure on Iran has indeed posed a series of challenges to the Iranian regime – mainly, the need to contend with intensified economic constraints. However, the American policy is still far from achieving objectives – whether declared or tacit – defined by the administration. Furthermore, for all the administration's focus on pressure, it is doubtful that it has a Plan B in the event that Iran does not yield to its demands. This, and the absence of a desire on the part of the administration in general and President Trump in particular to consider military actions, raises a question mark as to whether there are options at hand should

Iran heighten its own responses, inter alia by violating the nuclear agreement. It is unlikely that designating the Revolutionary Guards as a terrorist organization will lead the United States to attack the corps directly, as it has with other terrorist organizations – e.g., al-Qaeda, the Islamic State – that it regards as directly threatening the United States. It is also clear that this decision will not reduce the threat that the IRGC poses to Israel through activity with Hezbollah in Lebanon, as well as in Syria.