



Iran just said it won't comply with parts of the landmark nuclear deal

Alex Ward

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Iran will no longer comply with parts of a landmark nuclear deal that prevented the country from potentially making a bomb. It's a move that will almost certainly increase tensions with the Trump administration during an already dangerous moment.

In a Wednesday morning speech — exactly one year after Trump ended the US' commitment to the Iran nuclear deal — Iranian President Hassan Rouhani announced two steps partly to end his country's commitment to the accord.

First, Iran would start stockpiling extra low-enriched uranium and heavy water, the kind used in nuclear reactors that could be used to produce a bomb. The agreement compels Tehran to export those materials to other countries.

Second, Rouhani gave the deal's signatories 60 days to end US-led financial pressure on Iran's oil and banking sectors or make a new deal altogether. If not, Tehran will enrich uranium to previously banned levels — which could bring it closer to gaining a nuclear weapon.

“There will no longer be a set level of enrichment,” he said. The regime might also reconstruct the Arak nuclear reactor, which was shuttered and partly torn down as part of the deal.

The 2015 nuclear agreement between Iran, the US, European powers, and China put tight restrictions on Tehran's nuclear efforts in exchange for sanctions relief. The Obama administration's goal was to block Iran's path to a nuclear weapon diplomatically, instead of by force. But President Donald Trump withdrew America from the deal on May 8, 2018, reimposed financial penalties on Iran, and asked European countries to cease their business with the country.

There's no evidence to show Iran has ever produced materials for a nuke, but it's possible it may want to have that option available due to the Trump administration's hardline stance.

Rouhani's dramatic address seemingly was meant both as a rebuke to the US and as a way to relax the mounting pressure on Iran's economy.

“The path we have chosen today is not the path of war,” Rouhani said, “it is the path of diplomacy.” He made clear to note that his country has still not left the nuclear deal, known

officially as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), but added that his country has a right to end its obligations if others don't abide by theirs, too.

Iran's proposal, so to speak, will likely be seen by the Trump administration as an aggressive move by a country that secretly wanted nuclear weapons all along. But the feeling in European capitals may more mixed.

"It puts particularly the Europeans in a difficult situation: They want to keep the deal alive, but they can't force their companies to do business with Iran," says Emma Ashford, an expert on America's Middle East policy at the libertarian Cato Institute. "If Iran actually violates the JCPOA, it will become harder politically for them to justify sticking to the deal."

Which means Iran's gambit could potentially work and give it much-desired sanctions relief — or further instigate a confrontation with the United States.

The US and Iran are in the midst of a dangerous standoff. Iran's announcement won't help.

The US is already inching closer to a military confrontation with Iran, so Rouhani's speech couldn't have come at a worse time.

Starting on Sunday, the Trump administration indicated it had credible intelligence that Iran and groups it supports in the Middle East might attack US personnel based there. Two days later, reports of Iran's specific plans surfaced: They apparently intended to target US troops in Iraq and Syria, or use drones against Americans in a key waterway near Yemen.

A US defense official confirmed to me the existence of credible intelligence of specific Iranian threats, but wouldn't expand further.

Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, the top US military officer for the Middle East, requested additional military assets in the region after reading intelligence of Iranian provocations. Acting Pentagon chief Patrick Shanahan authorized the request, expediting the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln's preplanned trip to the Middle East along with B-52 bombers.

Though it might seem sudden, an escalation like this was always possible.

US-Iranian relations, which have historically been pretty bad, tanked even further when America left the nuclear deal last year and reimposed tough sanctions on the country.

Last month, the Trump administration took things a step further when they decided to label the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps — Iran's hugely influential security and military organization responsible for the protection and survival of the regime — as a "foreign terrorist organization." That's the first time the US named any part of another government as terrorists.

It's therefore not a surprise to some analysts that Iran is considering retaliating in a severe manner. "To counterattack in response to pressure is a standard part of the Iranian playbook," Suzanne Maloney, an Iran expert at the Brookings Institution in Washington, tweeted on Monday.

Rouhani's announcement may be part of that pushback as well, just in a more diplomatic form. But some experts worry the US will respond even more forcefully to Tehran's provocative actions this week, which could lead to a confrontation.

“Trump’s behavior isolates us, enhances Iran, Russia and China, drives our European partners away, and increases the risk of conflict and all-out war,” Jon Wolfsthal, a former Obama administration official working on nuclear issues, tweeted Wednesday morning.