

Is Trump Preparing for War with Iran over the Nuke Deal?

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On Monday, the Trump administration once again officially certified that Iran is in compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the agreement that rolled back Iran's nuclear program and subjected it to unprecedented levels of inspections and monitoring in exchange for sanctions relief. But, according to multiple reports, Trump was very close to refusing to do so.

Apparently, there is a split in the administration. Some of Trump's national security advisors, along with some hawks on Capitol Hill, are intent on torpedoing the Iran nuclear deal. And Trump was set to officially claim, contrary to the facts, that Iran was not living up to the agreement. At the last minute, another camp in the administration's national security team, including Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, and national security advisor H.R. McMaster, prevailed upon the president to tell the truth and certify that Iran is indeed complying with its obligations under the JCPOA.

These are very ominous signs about the intentions of President Trump. Recall that the president has repeatedly denounced the Iran nuclear deal as a pathetic capitulation that must be reversed. That is not only wrong, but it puts the administration in a difficult spot. The other parties to the agreement – including Britain, France, Germany, China, and Russia, as well as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) – all know that Iran made major concessions and they all concede Iran is so far complying with the deal's stringent limitations on its nuclear program.

If the United States is the one to pull out of the deal, falsely claiming Iran is acting in violation of the agreement, those other major countries won't play along with us. International sanctions won't be re-imposed, and the United States will look like the rogue actor. Up until now, hardliners in the administration have advocated trying to "provoke Iran into being the one to scrap the nuclear deal, [thereby] leav[ing] the United States in a stronger position." Worryingly, it looks like they've just about lost patience with that approach, and intend to effectively pull out of the deal at the next 90-day interval requiring U.S. certification.

Other pressure tactics continue. For example, Trump's State Department yesterday announced a new set of economic sanctions on Iran for behavior unrelated to the nuclear agreement. And this isn't the first time. These actions needlessly ratchet up tensions, bolster the hardline voices inside Iran who believe the JCPOA capitulated too much, and contribute to widespread sentiment

among the Iranian population that they are not seeing the promised economic benefits of complying with the deal.

Here is the ultimate irony of President Trump's reported intention to refuse to re-certify Iranian compliance: it is actually the United States, not Iran, that appears to be in material breach of the JCPOA. At the G-20 summit earlier this month, President Trump repeatedly urged fellow world leaders to stop doing business with Iran. This pretty clearly violates not only the spirit but also the letter of the deal, which says that the United States "will refrain from any policy specifically intended to directly and adversely affect the normalization of trade and economic relations with Iran inconsistent with their commitments not to undermine the successful implementation of this JCPOA."

Add all of this to the bewilderingly chaotic and unstable regional situation in the Middle East. U.S. allies Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates are in a standoff with another U.S. ally, Qatar, in part over the latter's unacceptably cordial relations with Iran. In addition, a flock of external powers, including the United States and Iran, are clustering inside Syria's civil war, mainly to battle ISIS, and have repeatedly clashed militarily. In that environment, a belligerent and impressionable President Trump with top national security advisors pushing to nullify the JCPOA is a dangerous mix that could portend not just the end of a successful diplomatic agreement that has taken Iranian nuclear weapons development off the table for the foreseeable future, but possibly even war.

Despite the perilous instability in the Middle East, when it comes to the JCPOA and U.S.-Iranian relations, America is not a victim of circumstance. Nothing is forcing the United States to increase pressure on Iran. Nothing is forcing the Trump administration to abrogate the deal. This is a choice. If it all falls apart and Iran is consequently freed from its obligations to limit its nuclear development, the United States will be right back on the path to war with Iran, exactly where it was before July 2015 when the JCPOA was signed. If the deal, the sanctions relief, and the opportunity for peace unravel, it will have been elective.

Americans should now be well aware of the dire consequences of permitting hawkish presidential administrations to rush headlong into war and regime change in the Middle East. Iraq cost us, and the region, dearly. A confrontation with Iran would be an order of magnitude worse. All Trump needs to do to avoid that is admit the truth and certify that Iran is complying with the JCPOA.

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