



## Why Trump's Iran strategy will backfire

Ishaan Tharoor

November 6, 2018

Last week, with a cinematic flourish, President Trump foreshadowed his administration's latest punitive measures against Iran with a tweet echoing HBO's "Game of Thrones." "Sanctions are coming," it declared — much to the cable network's chagrin.

On Monday, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin followed through, confirming that the United States was applying sanctions to vital parts of Iran's economy, including its energy and shipping sectors. They targeted more than 700 Iranian individuals, banks, aircraft and maritime vessels, all with the explicit goal of ultimately reducing Iran's oil exports to zero. Foreign companies and governments that seek to circumvent these measures risk being sanctioned themselves.

For the Trump administration, which unilaterally withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal earlier this year, it is the start of another campaign of "maximum pressure" on what it views as a rogue regime. Hawks in the White House and Trump's Cabinet believe the sanctions will change Iran's behavior in the region. They have embarked on this course with the enthusiastic support of Israel and the Persian Gulf monarchies, all of whom want to see Iran forced to scale back support for its proxies throughout the Middle East.

"The Iranian regime has a choice: It can either do a 180-degree turn from its outlaw course of action and act like a normal country, or it can see its economy crumble," Pompeo said on Monday.

But Trump's opponents argue the administration's strategy will punish ordinary Iranians while doing nothing to persuade their rulers. In the months since the White House pulled out of the nuclear accord, the Iranian economy has gone stagnant and its currency has tanked. Major multinational companies have either quit the country or extensively drawn down their operations out of fear of incurring U.S. penalties.

The International Crisis Group analyzed four decades of data on Iran's economic performance and found there was little correlation between its national-security policies and economic distress. "The Trump administration hopes that sanctions will force Iran to curb its regional activities. But data shows that outcome is uncertain as changes in Iran's wealth have had little impact on the direction or capabilities of its regional policy," the group noted in a report.

"Like much of Trump's foreign policy walking from Iran accord/piling on sanctions is great politics but not great policy," tweeted Aaron David Miller, a former U.S. diplomat, pointing to the vast difference between the administration's zeal to punish Iran and its willingness to accommodate North Korea. "The Iranian regime is a bad one; but only Trump can praise [North

Korea's Kim Jong Un] — a true authoritarian and threatening nuclear power — and not see hypocrisy in his Iran policy.”

Meanwhile, Iran's leadership highlighted its continued adherence to the terms of the nuclear deal and decried the “illegality” of American actions. The European governments that signed the pact have also rallied in its defense. “Our collective resolve to complete this work is unwavering,” said diplomats from the European Union, Britain, France and Germany in a joint statement. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, who pushed for the deal after his election in 2014, vowed on Monday to “proudly break the sanctions.”

“Iran is gaining ground in the region, and I don't see these sanctions as reversing that,” said Jeffrey Feltman, a top State Department official on Middle East issues during the Obama administration, to the Wall Street Journal.

In fact, the sanctions may help Iran's hard-liners more than anyone. Analysts contend that the Iranian regime itself is well-insulated from the economic turmoil, and that its powerful Revolutionary Guard — the organization that also runs much of Iran's “malign activities” in countries like Iraq and Syria — won't let the sanctions change its posture elsewhere. Indeed, it may feel emboldened to assert itself all the more in defiance.

The many times Trump and Rouhani attacked each other at the U.N.

With insults like “Nazi-disposition” and “brutal,” President Trump and Iran's President Hassan Rouhani traded criticisms at the 2018 U.N. General Assembly. (Joyce Lee/The Washington Post)

As the International Crisis Group pointed out, the sanctions “risk empowering harder-line officials in the Islamic Republic and prompting them to lash out, exacerbating regional tensions.” That's a fear shared by the U.S.'s European allies, who see Rouhani cowed by hard-line forces within the regime that never wanted rapprochement with the West.

In a phone call with reporters last week, Dennis Ross, a former U.S. diplomat who served three administrations, argued that the Obama administration had a far more extensive international coalition in place when it applied economic pressure on the Iranians a half-decade ago. That is not quite the case now, with the European Union exploring ways to shield European business with Iran from American censure — and Washington already issuing waivers to eight countries, including China and India, to carry on importing Iranian oil.

“The Obama administration had a broad international consensus and coalition that worked hand in hand to ensure there wouldn't be evasion of the sanctioned regime,” Ross said. “The Iranians are highly skilled in finding ways to evade the sanctions regime and we are not going to have a large number of partners who are going to be as vigilant as they might have been.”

Trump, experts say, may still be hoping for a repeat of his Singapore summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. The Iranians, though, have shown no interest in treating with this U.S. president and may be intent on bunkering down and waiting out his presidency.

“Tehran played by the rules and the United States broke its promises,” wrote John Glaser of the libertarian Cato Institute. “They are not about to willingly pie themselves in the face again in response to new economic sanctions.”

Meanwhile, ordinary Iranians will face the daily toll of sanctions: the shortages of life-saving medicines, the rising costs of basic goods, the steady degradation of the quality of their lives.

“Today, ordinary Iranians are struggling to answer the question of why sanctions are being re-imposed and why they must suffer,” wrote Iran analyst Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj. “The inevitability of this suffering, and its quotidian dimension, is what makes the U.S. financial war so pernicious.”