



## Expert Briefing Sounds Alarm on Trump's Iran Policy

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July 23, 2018

“Career U.S. officials have told me there’s no policy coherence, no strategy. They’re throwing Jello at the wall to see what will stick,” said Reza Marashi, Research Director at the National Iranian American Council, discussing the Trump administration’s Iran policy. Marashi spoke on a panel hosted on Capitol Hill last week by NIAC regarding the future of the Iran nuclear deal – also known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). He was joined in dialogue by Kelsey Davenport, Director of Non Proliferation at the Arms Control Association, and John Glaser, Director of Foreign Policy at the CATO Institute.

Jamal Abdi—the panel moderator as well as NIAC’s current Vice President of Policy—kicked off the discussion, asking “There seems to be the open question of: Is America’s policy towards Iran regime change?”

“They want capitulation, they want regime change—plain and simple,” answered Marashi. Throughout the panel, speakers agreed that if the United States is actively seeking regime collapse, its motivations aren’t fueled by an urge to “spread democracy” as they claim. If that was the case, destabilization efforts would not be fueled by Saudi Arabia, who are even less democratic than their Iranian counterpart. Instead, Marashi speculated, “The metric for [invasion and sanctions] is: Do you accept American hegemony?” Since the fall of the Shah, Iran has been one of the only regional power that doesn’t, and as such, tensions have only grown.

Glaser noted on the decision to withdraw from the nuclear deal, “I think [Trump] has an intense hate for the (JCPOA) because it was a success of his predecessor. I’m sure, to this day, he has never read it.” The snapback of sanctions—which according to Glaser will “hurt the Iranian people far more than the government”—can be used as political leverage towards a set objective. As Marashi put it, “What people don’t tell you in this town is you’re either on the path to war or diplomacy—everything else is leverage.” Given that the administration walked away from the diplomatic path, it stands to reason that they’re on the path to war.

While American sanctions are bad enough, panelists were skeptical that the Trump administration could create a sanctions coalition as broad as that which existed under the Obama administration. Davenport expressed that without global support for sanctions, it seems unlikely that Iran will come back to the bargaining table for a better deal. And as such, “The Europeans are going to be more creative—as well as the Russians and the Chinese—to find more secure

banking channels, so that transactions can be facilitated without touching American financial systems.”

No matter the amount of economic cushioning Europeans can provide, however, Iran has lost substantial benefits envisioned under the deal. As such, hardliner officials—who were largely skeptical of the deal in the first place—are going to push for retaliation. According to Davenport, if the deal falls apart, Iran will likely build more centrifuge facilities, ramp up research, and even potentially enrich uranium up to 20%—but still short of the threshold where it could be used for a weapon.

Even if he wanted, there is very little Trump can do to remedy the situation. He has effectively scared off investment in the country through both threats and his at-times erratic behavior. “If the Trump administration said tomorrow that they would be back in compliance with the Iran deal, who would believe them?” asked Davenport. “Given his long history of broken promises in the foreign policy space, I just don’t think you would have business entities that would be willing to trust that the Trump administration would stay the course.”

When asked for best and worst case scenarios, the panelists had very similar answers. At best, Iran will have just enough incentive to let the agreement “limp through” in the months ahead. At worst, our nations could go to war, spurring another decades-long conflict where we have nothing to gain but everything to lose.

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