

The Iran–U.S. Escalation: Causes and Prospects

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This piece is translated from Arabic

Introduction

Following secret negotiations pursued with unusual intensity by Washington and Tehran, the two sides signed a nuclear agreement under the supervision of the UN Security Council, Germany, and the European Union in 2015. The agreement was also legally strengthened by a Security Council resolution (resolution 2231)¹, through which it became part of the international law. However, this did not prevent the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump from breaking the deal and re-imposing sanctions on Iran and making 12 additional demands before the sanctions will be lifted. As a result, the Iranian–American relationship has fast deteriorated just two years after the signing of the agreement.

Despite its importance, the breakdown of this agreement is not the sole reason behind this escalation. In fact, internal disagreements in the United States and conflicts between regional axes in the Middle East have also affected the current escalation between the two countries. In this paper, we will discuss the reasons behind the escalation in hostility between Washington and Tehran and the powers affecting it at the regional and international levels. The paper will also examine the possible ways out of the current escalation.

Reasons for this Escalation

Iran–U.S relations have not been as harmonious as in the period that followed the signing of the short-lived nuclear agreement at any other time since the Islamic revolution of 1979. The return to hostile relations was not only caused by the nuclear agreement and Washington's retreat from its commitments, but were the result of a number of causes, the most important of which are as follows:

The U.S. retreat from its commitment to the nuclear agreement: Although this is only one of the reasons, Washington's renunciation of the nuclear deal is the main reason behind the escalation of hostility between the two sides. Most discussions in Tehran, Washington and elsewhere have focused on the nuclear agreement as the core of the growing hostility. In fact, discussions between members of the Trump administration have focused mainly on three parts of the agreement, which include provisions called the "sunset provisions", considered "totally unacceptable" by President Trump.²

According to the U.S. administration, these provisions should be set up to prevent Tehran from moving towards producing an atomic bomb in the future. Secondly, the agreement should be expanded to include Iran's ballistic missile program and to prevent Iran from producing, developing and testing such missiles because they pose a serious threat to Washington's interests in the region. Thirdly, Washington states that it is necessary that the agreement limits Iran's regional policy and its regional power and influence as well. These conditions were put forward in addition to others by the U.S. administration in a list of 12 conditions which Tehran must accept or "face serious consequences", the Trump administration says.³

U.S. Escalation Goals: There is an internal discussion inside Iran about the objectives of the Trump administration behind the withdrawal itself and escalation against Tehran. One group, which could be considered a minority, believes that the goal is to reach a consensus over a structure for the nuclear agreement that satisfies President Trump's desire to show his bargaining power is stronger than that of former U.S. president Barak Obama. This assumption holds the possibility of negotiating with President Trump only if he retracts his superior and provocative rhetoric against Iran.

A broader group, however, believes that the goal is to bring about a profound change inside Iran that renders it subject to American authority. In other words, the Trump administration aims to rob Iran of its independence. This group is divided between those who subscribe to one of two assumptions. Some say that

the main goal of the US administration is to change Iran's behaviors both internally and across the region. Others believe that the ultimate goal is changing the Iranian regime, even if the change of conduct was first offered by it. Faced with this goal, the Iranian elite sense a sort of poison in negotiating with the U.S. as it would necessarily be built on an Iranian retreat, which would definitely be followed by other retreats. But in the face of continued Iranian rejection, American pressure is increasing.

Discussion of resistance and steadfastness in Iran: After Trump's withdrawal, a discussion has emerged in Tehran over the updates on the American political scene and the best ways to deal with it. This discussion has shrunk quickly to focus on what can be done on the Iranian side and a consensus among the elite on the need not to appease Washington. Therefore, the domestic debate has turned into a debate over what would be the most effective and least dangerous way to vex Washington.

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The arguments raised by the U.S. administration have been answered as well. Regarding its opposition to the "the sunset provisions", it has been said that the agreement focused on reassuring the international community about Iran's nuclear program, and under the continued strict control of the International Atomic



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Energy Agency (IAEA), which will last even after the expiration of the provisions, the international community will ensure that Iran will not produce nuclear weapons.

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In fact, Iran’s refusal to negotiate is down to two main reasons. The first is the downplaying of Trump’s violation of the new-born trust that started during the era of Barack Obama. The second is the new concessions expected from Iran in any negotiations with Washington. Tehran considers any negotiations an act of surrender and, according to President Rouhani, Iran will not surrender even if it is bombed.⁵

Pushing the anti-Iran front to confront: While Tehran seeks to deter Washington in order to limit the possibilities of war, despite President Trump’s moves that appear to

be based on a version of the Cold War-era “madman theory”, the anti-Tehran front in the region is pushing towards a confrontation between Washington and Tehran. This front, which includes Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, sees the policies of President Trump as an opportunity to narrow the gap between their power and that which Tehran has achieved over the past years, which has translated into its rising influence all over the Middle East. Although the anti-Tehran countries are aware of the reluctance of both countries to go to war, they are encouraging Washington to target Tehran, even if in a limited way, in order to force it to retreat. In fact, Iran’s “enemies” are already attempting this through targeting Iranian forces in Syria in order to prompt them to retaliate, presenting the “Iranian threat” as a danger threatening U.S. interests in Yemen, Iraq and other areas. Pressuring Tehran is a positive game – especially for Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, as targeting it could reduce its regional influence – or so these countries hope. And with the increasing pressure through sanctions, Tehran may be overwhelmed by the challenges on the domestic scene which will lessen its focus on regional affairs. In both cases, both countries’ incomes and share of the global energy market will increase in the absence of Iranian oil and gas, according to these countries’ calculations.

The Continuous Escalation Circuit

While Washington increases the extent of its sanctions and hostility towards Tehran, sometimes threatening it and sometimes negotiating with it, Tehran responds confrontationally to this policy, with its politicians convinced of the necessity of



resisting American unilateralism. This cycle of action and reaction creates a security dilemma. Each party sees the other as a threat and sets out measures to repel it and neutralize it. For example, Tehran has viewed Washington’s moving some marine equipment into the region as a threat that needs to be confronted. As a result, it took military actions to prepare itself in case of any confrontation. In return, Washington considered these actions a threat, leading it to issue warnings and begin counter measures such as withdrawing diplomats from Baghdad.⁶

This security dilemma has recently escalated, bringing the two sides closer to the possibility of direct confrontation.

While the reasons behind this escalation extend the security dilemma, internal calculations deepen its causes. Party considerations in Washington have also had a clear impact on the escalation against Tehran. Since the signing of the nuclear agreement, the conflict between parties prevented the Congress, which has a Republican majority, from supporting the agreement. President Trump was elected according to a political program based on undermining the achievements of his predecessor, President Obama, leading to Washington’s denunciation of its obligations in the nuclear agreement. The conflict between these parties manifested in the announcement by the majority of Democratic presidential candidates in the United States about their intention to return to the nuclear deal.⁷ This means that Iran and the nuclear agreement have become part of internal party competition in the United States between the president

and a Republican administration that supports the subjugation of Iran to the U.S. and a Democratic Party that sees the nuclear agreement as one that must be preserved. One of the projections of this disagreement is the emphasis of the White House on pressuring Tehran to negotiate aggressively, showing the

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“effectiveness” of Trump’s policy.

The upcoming presidential elections in Iran could be seen as a confounding variable. Between those who criticized the administration of President Hassan Rouhani for signing an agreement that was not implemented by any of the signatory parties except Tehran and those who support the agreement stating that it has saved Iran from the burden of the 7th provision, the Rouhani administration is trying to hold on to the internal consensus which rejects any negotiations with Trump under pressure and threats. This administration, described as moderate and reformist, aims to demonstrate its strength to the “enemy”, as it has previously demonstrated its negotiating ability in order to increase its chances in the upcoming elections. Meanwhile criticisms of the government focus on its weakness in the face of Washington. Thus, in the midst of the anti-Washington debate in Tehran, the impasse in the Rouhani government’s program of “constructive engagement”



with the international community could face criticism and pressure in order to attack the reformist current in the upcoming elections. This may lead the government to focus on confrontational engagement with Washington to prove its power in the eyes of Iranian voters.

National and International Stances

In the face of potential escalation, the Trump administration is problematic in convincing the world of the need to confront Tehran, which has already committed itself to the nuclear agreement. The Trump's administration has speculated that Iran might withdraw from the nuclear deal to create an international consensus against it and to re-open its nuclear dossier in front of the Security Council, forcing it to negotiate in accordance with the U.S. agenda. However, the continuous commitment of Tehran to the nuclear deal presents an obstacle to the U.S. plan. Thus, Washington has moved to Plan B, which involves increasing pressure on Tehran and getting it out of the deal by strangling it economically. This was suggested by President Trump himself, who said that he would fight Iran economically⁸ which Tehran considered to be a sort of economic terrorism.⁹ The unprecedented sanctions that have been imposed increasingly on Tehran have speeded up the opening

of INSTEX by some countries of the EU. President Rouhani's announcement of the possibility of a gradual withdrawal from the agreement could change the current international stances regarding the Iran–U.S. escalation.

The main international and regional stances can be summarized as follows:

International support for Tehran's position: Tehran's commitment to the agreement violated by the Trump administration allowed it to claim the moral high ground and international support. While Washington escalates its hostility towards Tehran, the international community tries to deter it by putting obstacles – such as Europe's INSTEX – in the face of the U.S. unilateral move. And whilst the parties which signed the agreement have agreed to support Tehran's stance in face of Washington, this support is on the condition that Tehran remains committed to the nuclear deal.

China and Russia are considered to be the countries closest to and most supportive of Iran. In addition to political support, these two countries continue to resist the U.S. sanctions by buying (China) or exchanging (Russia) oil with Iran and carrying out other economic projects. However, although economic and financial sanctions are being fueled by mounting pressure on Tehran in general, the international support for Iran against U.S. unilateralism has not translated into international sanctions or clear international stances against the U.S. The only support that materialized was that of Russia and China, as previously mentioned.

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That is why Europe’s commitment to the nuclear agreement against Washington’s hardline stance does not mean anything to Tehran, as the Supreme Leader has mentioned.¹⁰ Therefore, President Rouhani has announced Tehran’s gradual steps towards breaking its commitment to the nuclear agreement.

Regional Division over the Escalation: In contrast to the international situation, differences and confrontations in the regional politics have extended to include new stances towards the U.S. policy. Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are considered to be encouraging and even supportive of Washington’s position vis-a-vis Tehran. While other countries are critical of U.S. escalation, such as Qatar, Jordan, Egypt in addition to a number of resistance movements in the region.

These countries see the U.S. escalation and mounting pressure on Tehran as a ground for increasing tensions and instability in the Middle East. Attempts to mediate between Washington and Tehran have increased with the escalation. In general, however, it can be argued that U.S. policy is exacerbating and widening the region’s crises by intensifying the differences between its two main axes and thus its ramifications for regional stability.

The Tools of Pressure and Resistance

The United States is using its economic power and control over the global financial system as ways to pressure Tehran. According to President Trump, sanctions are Washington’s favorite tools to pressure Tehran. The U.S. is increasingly forcing the international community

and regional states to fall in line with this policy. This burden is placed on the U.S. traditional allies as well as its friends and is causing resentment and unprecedented criticism in terms of breadth and publicity. Therefore, the U.S. administration is finding it difficult to seriously negotiate its policy with its traditional allies – this was evident during the U.S. Secretary of State’s visit to Brussels.¹¹

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Nevertheless, the U.S.’s unilateral policy continues as its president talks about Washington fighting an economic war against Tehran to get it to retreat and negotiate according to his administration’s agenda. The military buildup, which is also a tool to pressure Tehran to retreat by exaggerating the danger, increases when Tehran refuses to submit under the economic pressure.

Faced with Washington’s policy of “maximum pressure”, Tehran relies on a range of elements and factors for resistance. The first among them is based on the international isolation of American policy. Tehran hopes that this isolation will allow it to break part of the sanctions, especially those over its oil exports. Tehran is also betting on its allies and neighbors, such as Iraq and Turkey, to evade these sanctions. Tehran is also betting on its domestic economic capabilities to bear the pressure of the increasing sanctions. All Iranian leaders, from the Supreme Leader



and the President to the lowest level of authority, have spoken about the need to address U.S. policies by emphasizing Iran’s capabilities. However, a debate is going on within Iran about its ability to resist the economic pressure by relying on its domestic capabilities. Some say it is not only difficult, but impossible. That is because Iran’s economy heavily depends on oil and gas exports. On the other hand, some see that these sanctions could be a great opportunity for Iran, albeit with great difficulty, to decrease its economic dependence on energy exports.

The Expected and The Probable

Given the American pressure, the Iranian resistance, and the continued escalation between the two countries, several important factors should be taken into consideration in order to predict the future and sort out what could be expected and what could be excluded from any future scenarios.

The first of these variables is the possibility of Tehran retreating or holding onto its principled position of not negotiating under pressure. The second variable is the extent of the seriousness of the U.S. administration in going to the farthest extremes – such as air strikes or war – to get Tehran to accept its conditions. Adding to these two possibilities, there are intermediate variables of escalation or truce between the two sides, like the forms of confrontation desired by the anti-Tehran axis in the region. The other variable is the potential impact of Tehran’s allies and friends on the current policy of brinkmanship taking place between Tehran and Washington in the Middle East. Any escalation by Tehran could lead to a confrontation – even if limited – between the two parties.

In light of these key and sub-variables, we can speak about three main scenarios that will be discussed in the following paragraphs, starting from the most likely to the least likely to happen.

The first scenario is the continuation of the current situation, between a gradual escalation and truce, followed by another phase of escalation. In this scenario, Washington increases its sanctions on Iran and its pressure on the international community to stand against Tehran. And the anti-Tehran axis continues to encourage the move against Iran, while Tehran and its allies emerge from time to time to deter the growing threat. This scenario is unstable and its instability could extend sporadically to other regions. In this scenario, Tehran hopes that the effect of the sanctions reaches its final range where the indicators of the miscarriage of justice and the extent of the international repudiation of these sanctions show. Washington, meanwhile, hopes that the sanctions and increased military uncertainty will destabilize the Iranian interior and force its regime to comply with what is required by the U.S. Needless to say, this scenario is not long-lasting but may last for a year or two.

In the second scenario, the level of escalation between both sides increases. The probability of this scenario happening has increased due to the apparent lack of the sanctions’ ability to fuel tensions against the regime in Iranian society. Thus, Washington moves, along with economic pressure, to show the potential for military action through the ongoing military mobilization in the Middle East. The latest indicator on this is the agreement of President Trump to send 1,500 troops to the region.¹²



While the sanctions imposed on Iran and the pressure practiced by Washington on the international community to isolate Iran and damage its economy more effectively keep increasing, Iran, on the other hand, is entering into a new phase of power projection in order to deter the rising threat of the U.S. All of this increases the pace of the security dilemma and brings the parties closer to direct confrontation.

These sub-variables are a major driver of the clash. The allies of either side may make a limited security or military move on one of the region’s issues causing a larger confrontation that extends to the U.S. and Iran. In this policy of brinkmanship, each side hopes that the other will retreat first.

In the third scenario, which is the least likely to materialize in the coming two years because of Iran’s adherence to the principle of non-negotiation under threat and the absence of U.S. flexibility, the level of escalation and tension between both sides declines by or without mediation. The attempts by Iraq¹³ and Oman¹⁴ to mediate have increased the initial likelihood of such a scenario. While the U.S. sanctions continue to take effect in this scenario, Washington stops its ongoing drive to impose new sanctions on Iran. Tehran continues its economic policy based on the sanctions imposed and does not seek a security or military balance against Washington in order to deter it. And although Iran’s enemies continue to create tensions, both Tehran and Washington avoid further escalation.

Summary

Despite the continuing debate in Tehran, the principle of “no negotiation under pressure” remains a consensual principle among all members of the current regime. The Supreme Guide has expressed this position by stating that the negotiations with the Trump administration are “double poison”.¹⁵

U.S. flexibility is still absent, as for them there is no alternative to the “maximum pressure” policy. This was clearly stated during the Trump administration’s speech – Iran must backdown and surrender to U.S. demands.

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That’s why the escalation is continuing and the vow of military escalation might be possible if the “maximum pressure” did not lead to the outcome desired by the U.S. – which might be possible in the shade of the Iranian resistance. While Iran’s regional enemies are pushing for confrontation, the international community remains supportive of Tehran’s political position, as long as it stays committed to the nuclear deal. Existing indicators do not point at any willingness for confrontation from either side – at least at the moment. Therefore, the best scenario is the continuation of the current situation with the possibility of escalation at the next stage. And although some regional actors have attempted to pacify the tension, the prospects for a truce remain unlikely within the current context.



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