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Inquiring Minds

Can the Impending U.S. Embargo on Iranian Oil Alter Tehran's Behavior Throughout the Middle East?

Michael Young

A regular survey of experts on matters relating to Middle Eastern and North African politics and security.

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Comments (1)

Sanam Vakil | Professorial lecturer in the Middle East Studies Department at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Bologna, Italy, and senior consulting research fellow at Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs

Despite the predicted pressure and pain of the November oil sanctions, Tehran is unlikely to change its regional posture for the time being. Iran is pursuing a dual track wait-and-see strategy alongside a regional leverage-building exercise, both of which are important for the path of diplomatic engagement.

In the case of the former, Tehran is awaiting the outcome of the November congressional elections in the United States as a measure of President Donald Trump's domestic support and potential 2020

reelection. Tehran will only engage and invest in negotiations with the Trump administration if Trump has the potential to survive such a challenge. Until that calculation is made, Tehran sees the regional landscape as rife with opportunities to build and exact leverage that can be used as bargaining chips in future negotiations.

Hossein Mousavian | Middle East security and nuclear policy specialist at Princeton University

No. because the real U.S. strategy is regime change through a total economic collapse of Iran. Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah 'Ali Khamenei, recently stated that "Trump had recently told a European leader that the Islamic Republic would collapse in the coming months ... Cats will dream of mice."

That's why Iran will resist the U.S. bullying strategy and will not capitulate. Iranians have resisted for four decades and will continue to do so until the United States is ready for a dialogue based on respect. For Iran and the other signatories of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the nuclear deal with Iran, insisting on the deal is a way of countering U.S. unilateralism. The JCPOA was formalized in UN Security Council Resolution 2231. The U.S. unilaterally exited from the JCPOA and is now trying to persuade other nations to abandon implementation of the resolution. Any capitulation to the U.S. on this issue would further consolidate its current approach.

Kenneth Katzman | Senior analyst of Iran and Persian Gulf affairs at the Congressional Research Service, who provides this analysis in his personal capacity

The full panoply of U.S. secondary sanctions, including those on Tehran's exportation of oil, are set to go back into effect on November 5. The reimposition of sanctions will not have any effect on Iran's ability to exert influence throughout the Middle East, because there is virtually no connection between Iran's economic performance and its behavior in its neighborhood. Iran's actions are determined almost entirely by the political environment in the region and the prospects for its various allies and proxies. During the 2011–2015 period, when international cooperation with U.S. sanctions was extensive, Iran's economy was in severe recession. However, that did not in any way prevent it from intervening substantially to help the Assad regime in Syria battle a regime-threatening rebellion.

Similarly, after sanctions were lifted in early 2016 in conjunction with the Iran nuclear deal, Iran's regional activities continued as they had prior to that time. This defied predictions from critics of the accord that an Iran flush with cash would expand its regional influence significantly. We can safely conclude that the reimposition of U.S. sanctions—which this time will not have broad international backing—will not roll back Iran's malign regional influence.

Jarrett Blanc | Senior fellow in the Goeconomics and Strategy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, former deputy lead coordinator and State Department coordinator for Iran nuclear implementation at the U.S. State Department under former president Barack Obama

I don't think so. President Donald Trump is reimposing sanctions on Iran because he didn't like former president Barack Obama's nuclear deal. The administration has post hoc rationalizations for the decision, not an Iran strategy. Predictably, the approach has fatal flaws:

First, unilateral U.S. sanctions will do damage to Iran's economy, but if India and China continue to buy

Iranian oil and Europe and Russia find creative ways to facilitate other Iranian commerce, the effects will be less severe than the broader sanctions that were in place before the nuclear deal was signed.

Second, U.S. goals are over-expansive. Even if these are only intended as a starting point for negotiations, there is little incentive for Iran to come to the table. Negotiating with the United States has political costs back home, and Trump has demonstrated that he cannot take “yes” for an answer.

Third, Iran’s regional policies are central to its national security doctrine. Its nuclear weapons research was shelved in 2003, demonstrating that it was not a national security priority. Tehran was thus able to trade nuclear for economic concessions. Ballistic missiles and support for Hezbollah and the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad—those are central to how Iran has chosen to defend itself based on the lessons of the Iran-Iraq war. They cannot be easily traded for economic (as opposed to security) gains.

Fourth, although U.S. sanctions will hurt, the pain will not be spread equally. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps seems well positioned to profit both economically and politically, at least in the short term, and is unlikely to make concessions on regional issues.

Iran will probably try to wait the United States out for now. If domestic pressures mount, Iran is more likely to try new provocations than it is to quietly change regional policies or to return to the bargaining table.

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Carnegie Middle East Center

Emir Bechir Street, Lazariéh Tower
Bldg. No. 2026 1210, 5th flr.
Downtown Beirut, P.O.Box 11-1061
Riad El Solh, Lebanon

Phone
+961 1 99 15 91

Fax
+961 1 99 15 91

Contact By Email

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