

Sorting Out U.S. and European Differences Over Iran

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Brief Analysis

Their wildly divergent responses to Iran's protests may be the first salvos in an imminent standoff over the future of the nuclear agreement and international sanctions.

If the international response thus far is any indicator, Iran's protests risk driving a wedge between the United States and Europe, potentially imperiling the West's ability to forge a common front on a wide range of regional and proliferation issues. To close this rift, Washington may need to reassure Brussels that it will not scrap the nuclear agreement—a message that must be delivered quickly given the decisions President Trump will make on a series of sanctions waivers that expire in mid-January. According to senior U.S. officials working on Iran, however, European governments and EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini would need to respond in kind by showing a much greater willingness to address the deal's shortcomings and challenge Tehran on its human rights record.

MIXED MESSAGING

Currently, the White House is putting together a string of initiatives following weeks of unrest in Iran, all aimed at placing significantly more financial and diplomatic pressure on the regime's clerical rulers and military leadership. These include more sanctions on the security services, a naming-and-shaming campaign against individuals and entities accused of wide-scale corruption and repression, and a catalog of the funds Iran has spent to support its armed proxies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. The administration is also trying to find common ground with Europe on how to significantly strengthen the nuclear accord, mainly by addressing concerns about ballistic missile development and the sunset clauses that will allow Tehran to drastically increase its nuclear activities in about a decade.

Yet senior U.S. officials say they have seen few signs in recent days that the EU or individual European governments are prepared to take a more aggressive stance. Rather, the White House is concerned that the Europeans are

prioritizing their business interests in Iran and the sanctity of the nuclear accord over any strategy that might buoy the protestors. As Vice President Mike Pence wrote in a January 3 *Washington Post* op-ed, "Unfortunately, many of our European partners, as well as the United Nations, have thus far failed to forcefully speak out on the growing crisis in Iran." For their part, European officials have voiced concern that the Trump administration may use the protests as a pretext to back out of the nuclear deal.

Such discord is hardly new—Iran policy has regularly divided the United States and Europe since the 1979 revolution overthrew the U.S.-backed shah and brought a radical Islamist regime to power. The Clinton and George W. Bush administrations often clashed with European allies over sanctions and the wisdom of engaging Tehran, while Brussels worried that Washington might launch military strikes on Iran after clandestine nuclear sites were discovered in 2002.

President Obama's election helped forge a rare consensus on Iran, with Washington and Brussels jointly emphasizing the search for a diplomatic agreement on the nuclear threat. Leaders on both sides of the Atlantic also sought to directly engage what they viewed as reform-minded factions inside the Iranian government, hoping they could moderate the regime's foreign activities and allow for more political freedoms at home. This strategy culminated in the 2015 nuclear agreement, which lifted most international sanctions on the Islamic Republic.

Yet Iran's nationwide unrest over the past two weeks has highlighted the Trump administration's sharply different approach. The president was quick to voice support for the protestors on Twitter and warn Tehran against a forceful crackdown. Conversely, various European leaders have taken a much more guarded approach, pressing both the regime and protestors to refrain from violence. U.S. officials were particularly stunned when French president Emmanuel Macron warned Washington and its Middle Eastern allies not to take a hawkish stance toward Tehran days after the protests erupted: "The official line pursued by the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, who are our allies in many ways, is almost one that would lead us to war," he told reporters on January 3. Soon thereafter, France, Germany, and Britain sidestepped Washington's tough line on Iran during a January 5 UN Security Council meeting on the protests, instead using the forum to voice their commitment to the nuclear deal.

SANCTIONS SHOWDOWN

An immediate area of potential U.S.-European contention is the question of whether to impose (or in some cases reactivate) sanctions on Tehran in light of its crackdown on protestors. Most sanctions were lifted in early 2016, but there are differing interpretations among the global powers over which Iranian entities could be targeted in any new financial pressure campaign. Many senior U.S. officials believe that all Iranian individuals and organizations should be targetable if they support human rights abuses or terrorism, even if they were removed from past sanctions lists as part of the nuclear agreement. Yet Tehran and many European governments argue that reimposing sanctions on these entities would violate the agreement.

U.S. officials have also spoken of penalizing Iranian state media outlets for their alleged role in supporting the regime's crackdown, as well as targeting entities owned by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and cash-rich foundations controlled by the Supreme Leader. Yet the EU might challenge U.S. attempts to reimpose sanctions on foundations like the "Execution of Imam Khomeini's Order" (EIKO). The Treasury Department sanctioned that organization in 2013 on charges of corruption and sanctions evasion, but the penalties were later lifted under the nuclear deal.

ROUHANI VS. REGIME

The Trump administration's view of Iranian president Hassan Rouhani is fundamentally different from that of most European governments. The EU generally sees him as a moderate who wants to use the nuclear agreement and foreign investment as tools for promoting political freedoms and engagement with the West. In contrast,

Trump's top advisors have charged the Obama administration with being hoodwinked by Rouhani's negotiators, whom they see as nothing more than the friendly face of a despotic regime. Trump aides also believe that the protests are proof that Rouhani is incapable of reforming the Iranian state, since most of the demonstrations have focused on the government's economic failures. As one White House official put it, "The government can't do what the protestors want them to do."

Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif is scheduled to visit Brussels in the coming days for talks with Mogherini and his counterparts from Britain, Germany, and France. There, he is expected to argue that more foreign investment will allow Rouhani to meet the protestors' demands.

Against that backdrop, European officials are keeping a close eye on President Trump's looming decisions about sanctions waivers. If U.S. officials want to keep the nuclear deal intact in the hope of repairing it down the road, they will need to maintain the waivers enacted by the Obama administration in 2016, at least for now. The president's top aides indicate they are still uncertain about which way he will go, though one senior White House official acknowledged that the protests "will have a bearing" on his waiver decisions.

Even if Trump extends the waivers, American diplomats expect a fight with Europe over the future of relations with Tehran. Alongside its desire to punish the regime for cracking down on protestors, the White House has signaled that it might not allow Boeing and Airbus to move forward with their planned aircraft sales to Iran. EU officials have said that this would cost European companies billions of dollars and put the nuclear deal in further jeopardy, heightening the stakes of Trump's decision considerably.

Jay Solomon is the Segal Distinguished Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of The Iran Wars: Spy Games, Bank Battles, and the Secret Deals That Reshaped the Middle East. ❖

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