

# The Risks of Inaction in the Face of Iranian Misbehavior

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## If Iran's disregard for Chapter VII measures and other international injunctions is ignored, it cannot be long before Tehran treats the nuclear deal the same way.

**T**he Obama administration has emphasized that the nuclear deal with Iran was narrowly focused and was not intended to address concerns such as Iran's support for terrorism or its regional activities. Yet while the U.S. and its allies got a narrow deal, Iran effectively received a far more comprehensive one.

Iran's actions have made clear that it can be expected, at most, to abide by the letter of the text. As Sen. Bob Corker has noted, since the agreement was signed in July, Iran has sentenced *Washington Post* reporter Jason Rezaian -- who has been in jail for more than a year -- and imprisoned another Iranian-American. It has defied United Nations sanctions by exporting arms to Yemen and Syria; by dispatching Gen. Qasem Soleimani, chief of Iran's elite military Qods Force, and other sanctioned officials to Russia, Iraq, and elsewhere; and by conducting two ballistic missile launches. Iranian hackers have reportedly engaged in cyber attacks on the State Department. Tehran also refused to fully cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency investigation into its nuclear weapons research.

How have the U.S. and its negotiating partners responded to Iran's actions? Rote condemnation.

This has not been for lack of tools to respond. In defending the nuclear deal, Obama administration officials were at pains to rattle off the multiple multilateral and unilateral options remaining to them to respond to just these sorts of situations. Despite these assurances, designed to sell the agreement to a skeptical Congress, the administration has not acted.

U.S. reticence is probably based on the fear that taking a tough stand against Iran's provocations would derail the nuclear deal, which has yet to be implemented. Iran's supreme leader has insisted that the Islamic Republic will walk away from the agreement if new sanctions are imposed, whether related to nuclear activities, terrorism, or human

rights.

The U.S. and its allies may fear that any punitive action or delay in sanctions relief could damage the prospects of President Hassan Rouhani's allies in Iran's parliamentary elections, benefiting hard-liners. If so, this suggests that the timeline for implementation of the nuclear deal will be driven primarily by politics and that U.S. acquiescence to the agreement, contrary to recent assertions by Secretary of State John Kerry, is based at least in part on the hope that it will tilt Iran's domestic politics in a more congenial direction.

But inaction in the face of Iranian misbehavior implies that Tehran stands to receive broader-than-intended relief in exchange for limited and temporary nuclear constraints. This is a steep price -- and one unlikely to achieve its objectives. Iran would be foolish to walk away from an agreement that offers it substantial financial rewards and leaves it well-positioned to develop nuclear weapons in 10 to 15 years. Undermining the credibility of our own threat to punish such an action can only encourage the Iranians to test the deal's limits.

Nor is Western magnanimity likely to influence Iran's elections -- which are far from democratic -- in February; if anything, it was economic pressure that propelled Mr. Rouhani to victory in 2013. Even if his allies prevail, it is not clear that Mr. Rouhani diverges significantly from hard-liners in his commitment to a nuclear weapons' capability or regional policies that undermine U.S. interests.

Maintaining deterrence as well as the integrity of UN sanctions will require meaningful responses to Iranian provocations with the full range of tools at Washington's disposal. This need not preclude discussions with Iran as events or strategy may warrant; rather, it means wielding carrots and sticks together, and not neglecting U.S. commitments under the nuclear deal as long as it remains in effect.

As much as President Barack Obama's critics would like to see a firmer response to Iran's actions, backers of the nuclear deal should be even more eager. If Iran's disregard for international injunctions -- many passed under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the gravest action the Security Council can take -- is ignored, it cannot be long before Tehran treats the nuclear deal the same way.

*Michael Singh is managing director of The Washington Institute. This article originally appeared on the Wall Street Journal blog "Think Tank." (<http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2015/12/21/the-risks-of-inaction-in-the-face-of-iranian-misbehavior>)* ❖

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