

PolicyWatch 2950

How Will Iran Prepare for Potential U.S. Withdrawal from the JCPOA?

[Omer Carmi](#)

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Tehran seems to believe that President Trump will kill the deal next month, so it may start prepping its dormant nuclear facilities, sowing division between U.S. allies, or courting other global powers.

Many observers believe that President Trump's recent appointment of Iran hawks for two top positions—John Bolton as national security advisor and Michael Pompeo as secretary of state—is a further sign that he will withdraw from the nuclear deal next month, when the next deadlines for extending sanctions waivers arrive. Although Tehran's response to the appointments has been fairly muted so far, this is no surprise given that the country effectively shuts down for two weeks around the Nowruz celebration in late March. After the holiday, Iran will likely start preparing more actively for a potential U.S. decision to reapply old sanctions and essentially nullify the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

BOLTON AND IRAN

John Bolton is a well-known commodity among Iran's leadership. Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif tangled with him for years going back to the 2003 nuclear negotiations with Europe, when Bolton was undersecretary of state for arms control and international security. Later, they both served as ambassadors to the UN, where they spent two years arguing with each other on the Security Council podium.

Over the past decade, media outlets in the Islamic Republic have portrayed Bolton as an anti-Iran neoconservative who supports the opposition group Mujahedin-e Khalq, and whose policies toward the country are obsolete and counterproductive. For instance, when Bolton issued his August 2017 "memo" to the White House—a *National Review* article in which he outlined a strategy to withdraw from the JCPOA—Zarif declared that such a policy would be a "huge failure for Washington," resulting in further international isolation for the United States. He emphasized that Bolton's policies were proven wrong in the previous decade, claiming that they spurred Iran to increase its number of uranium enrichment centrifuges "from 200 to 20,000 in ten years." Zarif concluded that this is why no one in Washington "is listening to these proposals anymore."

As for Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, his basic narrative has always been that America seeks to topple the Islamic regime, and that the nuclear file is only a cover for reaching that goal. Bolton's return to the scene will probably reinforce that line of thinking.

Iran's Supervisory Committee on Implementing the JCPOA—composed of officials such as Zarif, President Hassan Rouhani, Supreme National Security Council secretary Ali Shamkhani, and Atomic Energy Organization director Ali Akbar Salehi—will presumably meet again soon, and one can assume that they will devote at least some attention to Bolton's writings in order to understand his potential impact on U.S. policy. In addition to his 2017 roadmap for annulling the nuclear deal, they are no doubt aware of his January *Wall Street Journal* op-ed advocating the regime's ouster—and of Pompeo's similar rhetoric over the years.

WHAT MIGHT TEHRAN DO IN THE LEAD-UP TO MAY?

In light of this background, Iran will likely begin preparing the ground now for the possibility of Trump taking action against the JCPOA after his May deadline. Its options for doing so are numerous.

Readying the nuclear program for a restart. Iranian leaders have consistently threatened that U.S. reimposition of sanctions or withdrawal from the deal would result in rapid development of the nuclear program. In August, for example, Rouhani warned that the program would be ramped up to "a situation much more advanced" than before the JCPOA "in a matter of hours and days." Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi recently repeated this threat, claiming that Iran has been preparing for every possible scenario and will respond promptly to a Trump withdrawal according to its national interests. In practical terms, this means Iran may soon take necessary steps to ready its nuclear facilities for a quick restart after the May deadline—while carefully avoiding any measures that would violate the JCPOA.

Deterring U.S. and Israeli pressure. Soon after Bolton's appointment, a former Iranian diplomat with apparent ties to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force asserted that the "enemies of the region only

understand force," emphasizing Tehran's influence abroad and its "defensive power." Indeed, Iran has a long history of exercising this "logic of power" via frequent missile launches (accompanied by slogans vowing to annihilate Israel), harassment of U.S. naval forces in the Persian Gulf and Bab al-Mandab Strait (the latter using Houthi proxies), and [threats of retaliation](#) against U.S. forces and bases in the region (as seen when Congress passed new non-nuclear sanctions last year).

Driving a wedge between Washington and Europe. In August, nuclear official Salehi promised that "if the Americans cast the deal aside, it is highly likely that Europe won't follow suit, [and] America will remain alone." By this logic, Iran will probably continue its talks with the EU3 (Britain, France, and Germany) and cast itself as the aggrieved party, hoping to bring the Europeans to its side and prevent a unified Western front if sanctions are reimposed in May. It may take a similar approach with major trade partners and oil importers (e.g., India, South Korea, Japan) in an attempt to dissuade them from complying with U.S. pressure tactics.

Coordinating with Russia and China. Shortly after leading Iran's negotiations with Europe in 2003-2005, Rouhani expressed regret for not investing enough resources to secure Russian and Chinese diplomatic support, admitting that Tehran "would have had an easier time" with their assistance. Alaeddin Boroujerdi, the chairman of Iran's Majlis Committee on National Security and Foreign Policy, echoed this line of thinking last month when he claimed that expanding relations with Beijing and Moscow would help "neutralize and reduce the impact of U.S. pressure."

Preparing the public and economy for renewed sanctions. During his recent Nowruz speech, the Supreme Leader declared the theme of the new year to be "Support for Iranian Products," repeating his constant demand to pursue a "resistance economy" and increase the country's self-sufficiency. Despite this familiar "call to arms," however, Iran's economy is still greatly flawed and dependent on foreign investments. The rial has lost around a quarter of its value over the past six months, with the gap between official and unofficial rates widening every day. Thus, Tehran will likely complement its longstanding efforts to increase the economy's resilience by building a strong "rally around the flag" narrative over the next couple months, hoping to unite the public and prevent (or at least postpone) another outburst of mass unrest. Last month, for example, Shamkhani declared that the millions of dollars America has invested in "anti-Iran strategies" are for naught because the Islamic Republic has only improved its "strength and spiritual influence."

RETALIATION OR RESTRAINT?

Tehran will have to decide between two basic courses of action in the coming weeks: retaliating harshly against the Trump administration's hostile signals in order to deter Washington from intensifying the pressure, or restraining itself and playing the grievance card in order to maintain European support and prevent the emergence of a Western coalition against Iran. History shows that on similar occasions, the regime chose the former path and regretted it—indeed, escalation now might provoke the Trump administration to respond in kind rather than back down.

Khamenei and Rouhani seem to have learned their lesson, however, reacting patiently to perceived "U.S. violations of the deal" in order to avoid falling into an "American trap," which in their view would give Washington an excuse to revoke the JCPOA. They are now searching for the perfect middle path: a way to deter President Trump from intensifying the pressure while maintaining enough international support to foil a unified coalition against Iran.

Omer Carmi is director for intelligence at the Israeli cybersecurity firm Sixgill. A 2017 military fellow at The Washington Institute, he previously led analytical and research efforts in the Israel Defense Forces pertaining to developments in the Middle East and national security arenas.