



“Trump’s ‘New Iran Strategy’: An Assessment”

*Dr. Asif Shuja **

US President Donald Trump has announced what his administration calls a ‘New Iran Strategy’ which seeks to undo the Iran nuclear deal agreed upon by his predecessor Barack Obama. This new strategy has been announced at a time when the Middle East is witnessing much turbulence, all of which are not directly related to Iran. Prominent amongst them is the power struggle within Saudi Arabia, where the new Crown Prince bin Salman has been trying to consolidate and centralise power in his own hands. While Trump’s new Iran policy is pitted directly against Iran and its objective is avowedly to correct Iran’s behaviour, the timing of this strategy suggests that this policy is linked to the regional context. This paper attempts to decipher this regional context while giving an analysis of Trump’s new Iran strategy and presents an assessment of this policy.

The New Iran Strategy as Articulated by Trump

On October 13, 2017, US President Donald Trump announcedⁱ his policy on Iran which spelled out his view of Iran, his policy objectives and the action plan to achieve those objectives. His administration has termed this policy as the ‘New Iran Strategy.’ⁱⁱⁱ There are primarily three components to Trump’s New Iran Strategy. The first is “to counter the regime’s destabilising activity and support for terrorist proxies in the region”ⁱⁱⁱ, and to “place additional sanctions on the regime to block their financing of terror.”^{iv} The second component is to “address the regime’s proliferation of missiles and weapons that threaten its neighbours, global trade, and freedom of navigation.”^v And, the third component is to “deny the regime all paths to a nuclear weapon.”^{vi}

Trump also enlisted a set of action plans to achieve these three objectives. His plan to achieve his first objective is to put an overall sanction on Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which is seen instrumental in enhancing Iran’s regional footprints. Trump announced that “The

execution of our strategy begins with the long-overdue step of imposing tough sanctions on Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps,"^{vii} adding that "I am authorizing the Treasury Department to further sanction the entire Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps for its support for terrorism and to apply sanctions to its officials, agents, and affiliates."^{viii}

It may be noted here that even before October 13, 2017, when the US President announced the New Iran Strategy, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was under US sanctions through a number of Executive Orders (E.O.).^{ix} These included, E.O. 13382, relating to WMD proliferation; E.O. 13553, relating to Iranian human rights abuses; and E.O. 13606, relating to Iranian and Syrian human rights abuses via information technology. Apart from these sanctions, those 'persons who engaged in certain activity involving the IRGC were already subject to secondary sanctions.'^x

However, action of OFAC on October 13, 2017 pursuant to Trump's authorisation under his New Iran Strategy, designating the IRGC under E.O. 13224, relating to counterterrorism, and action of OFAC on October 31, 2017 under the Global Terrorism Sanctions Regulations, 31 C.F.R. part 594 (GTSR), 'to block the property and interests in property of foreign persons that have been identified by OFAC as officials, agents, or affiliates of the IRGC carry additional consequences that limit certain activities with respect to the IRGC and foreign persons identified by OFAC as officials, agents, or affiliates of the IRGC.'^{xi} Another distinguishing factor between previous sanctions on IRGC and the new one is that 'certain exemptions available under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) relating to personal communications, humanitarian donations, information or informational materials, and travel do not apply to transactions with persons designated under E.O. 13224 or otherwise blocked pursuant to the GTSR, which include the IRGC and foreign persons that have been identified by OFAC as officials, agents, or affiliates of the IRGC.'^{xii}

Trump's plan for his second objective is to convince his allies to curb Iran's missile programme. Elaborating this, he said, "I urge our allies to join us in taking strong actions to curb Iran's continued dangerous and destabilizing behavior, including thorough sanctions outside the Iran Deal that target the regime's ballistic missile program, in support for terrorism, and all of its destructive activities, of which there are many."^{xiii}

Indeed, the Iran nuclear programme and the resulted document, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), do not 'prohibit' Iran from developing ballistic missiles. According to the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015)^{xiv}, endorsing the JCPOA and adopted on July 20, 2015, 'Iran is called upon not to undertake any activity related to ballistic missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons, including launches using such ballistic missile technology, until the date eight years after the JCPOA Adoption Day or until the date on which the IAEA submits a report confirming the Broader Conclusion, whichever is earlier.' Use of the phrase 'called upon' instead of 'prohibit' subjects this clause to controversy between the opposing parties. Iran feels comfortable that by continuing its missile programme it is not in contravention to this clause. On the other hand, this clause is interpreted by the US to mean that Iran's continued ballistic missile development programme is against the 'spirit' of this clause and consequently of the JCPOA. The realisation of the fact that Iran can 'legally' continue to develop its ballistic missile programme despite adhering to the JCPOA, Donald Trump may have attempted to find ways to curb Iran's missile development programme by looking

outside the Iran nuclear deal and the JCPOA. Similar reasoning may be given for Trump's call to curb Iran's 'destabilizing behaviour,' its 'support for terrorism, or its 'destructive' activities, which are all outside the purview of the current Iran nuclear deal and the JCPOA.

In order to ensure that Iran never builds a nuclear weapon in future, Trump's proposition is to make the nuclear deal more stringent, and if that does not happen, an eventual withdrawal of the US from the agreement. In this regard, Trump announced that he was not giving certification "that the suspension of sanctions under the deal is 'appropriate and proportionate' to measure – and other measures taken by Iran to terminate its illicit nuclear program."^{xv}

Khamenei's Response to Trump's New Iran Strategy

Reaction to Trump's new Iran strategy came from none other than Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Through his speech^{xvi} delivered on October 18, 2017, Khamenei suggested that he did "not want to waste time answering the nonsensical and foolish statements that were made by the charlatan and vulgar President of the United States."^{xvii} Nevertheless, Khamenei attempted to dismiss all allegations made by Trump against Iran as articulated in his New Iran Strategy.

Khamenei implicitly dismissed Trump's objections to Iran's increasing footprints in the region by warning European governments from echoing the US line on this matter. Khamenei asked: "What is that to you? Why should it not be present?"^{xviii} On Trump's proposition to put the IRGC under sanction, Khamenei said that the US had created Daesh or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), a potent terrorist organisation, which was neutralised by IRGC. In Khamenei's opinion, this was the reason why the US was scared of the IRGC. Khamenei said, "the creator of Daesh ... is the US. This has been openly acknowledged by the same person in his presidential campaign"^{xix} adding that "now do you expect them not to be furious at the force which has prevented Daesh?"^{xx} Specifically mentioning the role of IRGC in the fight against the ISIS, Khamenei said that the US had "created Daesh for a specific goal"^{xxi} and now its President "delivers speeches, yelling at the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps because of its achievements in defeating Daesh. Well, this is completely natural."^{xxii}

On Trump's plan to curb Iran's missile programme, Khamenei said "that the enemy is opposed to the power of the Islamic Republic. The enemy is opposed to every element of power in the Islamic Republic. Despite the enemy's efforts, we should try to increase the elements of power inside the Islamic Republic."^{xxiii} In Khamenei's opinion economic, scientific and defense are the three elements of power and missile was an important component of defensive power. Rejecting Trump's demand for limiting Iran's missile programme, Khamenei said that "this defensive power should increase on a daily basis. Of course, despite the foolish desires of the enemy, it will increase on a daily basis."^{xxiv}

As far as Trump's objection to the current format of JCPOA was concerned, Khamenei said that he would not agree for any changes in that. In Khamenei's opinion, it was an old tactic of the US to "instil"^{xxv} fear of dire consequences if a certain agreement was not reached. Citing the example of the 'Bar-Jaam' or the JCPOA, Khamenei said, "they used to instil the notion that if we reach an agreement, enmities will be eliminated, but if we do not reach an agreement, they will continue to show enmity. Well, we did reach an agreement, but not only have enmities not been eliminated, but they have also

increased in number! It was the enemy's idea that if we did not reach an agreement or if we delayed it, such and such things would happen."^{xxvi} Therefore, Khamenei continued, "Today, they should not put forward another demand. They should not say that if we do not reach an agreement with them on such and such a matter – for example, on the presence of the country in a certain region – then such and such things might happen."^{xxvii} On this matter, Khamenei's message to his countrymen was that "We should think of and find our interests on our own. We ourselves should find out what is in our interest. We should not hear it from the enemy."^{xxviii}

On Trump's threat to either expand the ambit of the nuclear deal or walk out of it, Khamenei said, "Of course, we too have said that as long as the other side does not tear it, we will not tear it either. However, if he tears it up, we will shred it."^{xxix}

Stand of the European Union

As far as the European Union is concerned, it has very clearly stated that since Iran has been showing its commitment to the JCPOA, the deal is working and therefore they were against either changing or ending this deal. On November 7, 2017, the High Representative of the European Union, Federica Mogherini said that she had reiterated to her American friends "the clear European position on the fact that the nuclear deal with Iran is delivering and working."^{xxx} She also added, "We trust the IAEA and its eight reports on the fact that Iran is fully compliant with its nuclear commitments and we have, as Europeans, a clear top priority, a strategic interest that is linked to our security to keep the full implementation of the deal in place, from all sides."^{xxxi}

Federica Mogherini informed that she had heard from her "colleagues in Congress their views and the state of play of their work, after the presentation by the President [of the United States, Donald Trump] of the new American policy on Iran."^{xxxii} However, Mogherini added that "the European Union is completely united in supporting the deal and its full implementation; both at the level of foreign ministers and heads of state and government, we used very clear expressions and words. And again, we wish to see the United States continuing its implementation of the deal in the future and we are ready to work with them in this regard."^{xxxiii}

In fact, all parties to the nuclear agreement except the US are of the opinion that the nuclear deal is working and it is not a good idea to scrap the deal. Apart from the EU, the parties to the nuclear agreement included Britain, France, and Germany as the three European nations, which have all disagreed with Trump's proposition to scrap the deal. Similarly, Russia and China, the other two parties to the deal have also supported the agreement and opine that it should be continued.

Factors Influencing Trump's Strategy

Based on the available information, three sets of factors could be identified that may have influenced formulation of Trump's New Iran Strategy. The first set of factors may be termed as personal, relating to Trump's campaign promises. The second could be regional including the internal power struggle within Saudi Arabia; and, the third could be related to the near-defeat of ISIS.

Indeed, Trump had stated time and again during his election campaign that he did not like the Iran nuclear deal. In his opinion, as a culmination of his predecessor Barack Obama's efforts, the deal was the worst ever. He had also promised his supporters that he would scrap the deal after becoming the president. Regardless of this, after assuming office in January 2017, Trump certified twice to Iran's commitment to the JCOPA, allowing continuation of waiver of the nuclear-related US sanctions against Iran. Nevertheless, it took Trump more than nine months to decide not to certify Iran's commitment and referring the agreement to the Congress for review and threatening to scrap the deal in case the Congress does not act on his demands. This indicates that there was opposition to his decision within the US administration.

As far as the timing of his announcement of the New Iranian Strategy is concerned, it has come at a time when the ISIS defeat in Syria and Iraq is nearly complete. When the Iranian nuclear deal was being worked on, the world had witnessed a ghost in the name of ISIS, defeating which was of paramount importance for the US and its allies. In this fight, Iran's role was found to be crucial. In addition, the Syrian crisis had played a role in making Iran relevant for solving regional issues. Now that ISIS is defeated, in part due to the help of Iran, and has resulted in further augmenting Iran's regional influence, it is natural for the US to attempt putting a lid to Iran's growing influence in the region. Iran's influence has increased in the region at the cost of its arch regional rival Saudi Arabia, with which Trump has revived relations.

The timing of the announcement of this strategy could also be related to the timing of the power struggle within Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia has been witnessing an intense power struggle at home since the anointment of bin Salman as the new Crown Prince after the removal of the former Crown Prince Nayef. Prince Salman appears to be following a strategy of diverting attention away from domestic issues by Saudi Arabia increasing the rhetoric against Iran and presenting itself as a regional counterweight to Iran. In this effort, Prince Salman has earned the goodwill and support of two primary enemies of Iran viz., the US and Israel, both of whom have been clearly articulating their desire to make all efforts to curb Iran's regional role and prevent it from building nuclear weapon. As opposed to the tenure of Barack Obama when US-Israel relations had suffered due to the Iran nuclear deal, in Trump's presidency this relationship is improving.

Assessment of Trump's New Iran Strategy

Iran's reaction to the Saudi rhetoric against it has been largely that of restraint. This is probably because Iran finds any escalation of the tension with Saudi Arabia as counterproductive to its gains in the region. Indeed, events in recent years, beginning from the ousting of Saddam Hussain to the Arab Spring to the defeat of ISIS, have all benefited Iran in increasing its influence in the region. Currently, Iran has strong footprints in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. In Iraq, which is now ruled by Shias, Iran has much sway. Iran's policy of staunch support to Bashar al Assad has so far worked in giving it a strong foothold in Syria, which is likely to continue even if the crisis is over. In Yemen, Iran's support to the Houthi rebels has provided it an important role, which is at the cost of Saudi Arabia which has been fighting a costly battle there without any victory in sight. Similarly, in Lebanon, Iran holds much sway due to its support to Hezbollah.

President Trump's decision on December 6, 2017 to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel has added fuel to fire. In the current Iran-US impasse on the JCPOA the US Congress will have an important role to play. If it disagrees with President Trump it will set up another confrontation between Congress and the President. Scrapping the deal will mean that Iran may also go down the same route. The divide between Europe and the US will grow and the Islamic world may also, because of the decision on Jerusalem, reassess their relations with the US under President Trump.

* *Dr. Asif Shuja, Research Fellow, ICWA, Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.*

Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

Endnotes

ⁱ The White House, "Remarks by President Trump on Iran Strategy," October 13, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/10/13/remarks-president-trump-iran-strategy>, accessed on November 1, 2017.

ⁱⁱ Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, "President Donald J. Trump's New Strategy on Iran," October 13, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/10/13/president-donald-j-trumps-new-strategy-iran>, accessed on November 1, 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ The White House, "Remarks by President Trump on Iran Strategy," October 13, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/10/13/remarks-president-trump-iran-strategy>, accessed on November 1, 2017.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Resource Center, OFAC FAQs: Iran Sanctions," October 10, 2017, https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/faqs/Sanctions/Pages/faq_iran.aspx#534, accessed on November 29, 2017.

^x Ibid.

^{xi} Ibid.

^{xii} Ibid.

^{xiii} The White House, "Remarks by President Trump on Iran Strategy," October 13, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/10/13/remarks-president-trump-iran-strategy>, accessed on November 1, 2017.

^{xiv} United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2231 (2015), S/RES/2231 (2015), Adopted on July 20, 2015, [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2231\(2015\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2231(2015)), accessed on November 29, 2017, p. 99.

^{xv} The White House, "Remarks by President Trump on Iran Strategy," October 13, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/10/13/remarks-president-trump-iran-strategy>, accessed on November 1, 2017.

^{xvi} Official Website of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, "Speech delivered on October 18, 2017 by Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution," October 18, 2017, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/5222/US-Europe-gave-Saddam-WMD-have-no-right-meddle-in-our-missile>, accessed on November 2, 2017.

^{xvii} Ibid.

^{xviii} Ibid.

^{xix} Ibid.

^{xx} Ibid.

^{xxi} Ibid.

^{xxii} Ibid.

^{xxiii} Ibid.

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^{xxix} Ibid.

^{xxx} European Union External Action Service, “Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the press briefing during her visit to Washington D.C., United States,” November 7, 2017, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/35221/remarks-high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-press-briefing-during-her-visit_en, accessed on November 8, 2017.

^{xxxi} Ibid.

^{xxxii} Ibid.

^{xxxiii} Ibid.