

# The Trump Administration's Erratic Iran Policy Hasn't Changed Iran's Malign Behaviour

By Holly Dagres

## Abstract

*Not only has an erratic policy by the Trump administration toward Iran been perplexing, but this article also suggests that it has not changed the Islamic Republic's behaviour. Instead, it has caused Iran to lash out and exacerbated the tensions in the Persian Gulf region.*

United States President Donald Trump has always [advocated](#) talking to Iran. As early as 2011, the business mogul claimed to be open to talking to hardline Mr Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, then Iranian prime minister. Even so, Mr Trump never trusted former President Barack Obama's ability to negotiate with Iran. Mr Trump would later call the 2015 multilateral nuclear agreement a "bad" and "disastrous" deal.

As a 2016 Republican presidential candidate, Mr Trump campaigned on making a "better deal" than his predecessor. Mr Trump's suggested [approach](#) at the time, is not entirely different from his current Iran policy: "double up and triple up the sanctions and have them come to us". Despite this, the incoherence of the Trump administration's Iran policy makes its end goal unclear.

During his first year as president, Mr Trump toyed with the idea of withdrawing from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). After numerous cabinet reshufflings during 2017, the former US ambassador to the United Nations Mr John Bolton — one of the architects of the disastrous 2003 Iraq War and a known Iran hawk pushing for regime change — joined as national security advisor in April 2018. Less than a month later, the US abrogated the JCPOA on 8 May 2018. The blueprint for withdrawal was [based](#) off of Mr Bolton's "Iran nonpaper", which listed ways the US could safely pull out of the JCPOA and pressure Tehran.

In the weeks following, on 21 May 2018, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [announced](#) a list of 12-point demands, which included, among other things, curbing Tehran's malign behaviour in the Middle East and ending its nuclear and ballistic missile programs — all part of an effort to make Iran behave like a "normal country". Known as the maximum pressure policy, it seems to be partly [inspired](#) by Mr Peter Schweizer's book, Victory: The Reagan Administration's Secret Strategy that Hastened the Collapse of the Soviet Union, which as its title denotes, how former President Ronald Reagan's policies led to the USSR's collapse. The broad demands — which, as of October 2018, also

include [improving](#) human rights — make it unrealistic to assume that Iran would follow through, particularly since the demands appear to be a veiled effort at regime change.

After the May 2018 withdrawal, and ignoring the fact that Iran continued to abide by the JCPOA, the Trump administration unilaterally re-imposed sanctions on all elements of the Iranian government and economy, and even went as far as designating the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a foreign terrorist organisation — going against the [advice](#) of the US intelligence community that this would put American forces in the Middle East at risk. However, the biggest blow to Tehran was the Trump administration’s push to cut all Iranian oil exports to zero. After briefly granting sanctions waivers to key Iranian oil purchasing countries — China, India, Japan, Turkey, and South Korea — the US [cancelled](#) them on 2 May.

Up until then, the Trump administration’s all sticks policy of ratcheting up pressure was, in their own words, an effort to change Tehran’s malign behaviour and bring the country to the negotiating table. However, it’s worth noting that amongst some officials, there were also hopes that perhaps it would, in the [parlance](#) of Secretary Pompeo, bring about an “economic collapse” or “lead the Iranian people to rise up and change the behaviour of the regime.” That is, until President Trump changed his own tune, claiming he was open to talking to Tehran — regardless of its behaviour and actions — thereby undermining what his own officials had been saying publicly all along — even while the US continues to pile on sanctions. Thus, since June, the Trump administration has [offered](#) to sit down with Tehran with “no preconditions”.

The mixed messages have been perplexing to say the least. If that is the point — to cloud Iran’s judgement — it’s not exactly working and only exacerbating tensions in the Gulf region.

The goal of zero Iranian oil exports — which Iran calls economic warfare — prompted [threats](#) of cutting the world’s access to the strategic Strait of Hormuz, which 20 per cent of the world’s oil passes through. In the months following the final waiver cancellations in May, Iran has indirectly attempted to close the strait by sabotaging oil tankers, and even seizing two tankers — a Panamanian-flagged vessel (that it claims was oil smuggling) and a British-flagged vessel in [retaliation](#) for the British seizure of an Iranian oil tanker off the coast of Gibraltar on 4 July.

Similarly, when it comes to Iran’s proxy groups, there’s no real sign of them losing their relevance with Tehran. The Obama era multilateral sanctions during 2011–2016 are a real measure that Tehran does not change its behaviour under pressure. Iran not only [propped](#) up the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, it fought the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (Isis), and armed Houthi rebels in Yemen — all while under the most punitive sanctions regime it ever faced. As Congressional Research Service Iran Analyst Kenneth Katzman [noted](#): “Events and trends demonstrated just the opposite or, at best, suggest that sanctions and Iran’s regional influence are independent of each other.”

Today, the IRGC still maintains a presence in Syria, while Iran-backed Houthi rebels continue to push back against the Saudi-led coalition. Though some articles point to Hezbollah’s financial cutbacks, there is neither evidence of it losing its [clout](#) in Lebanon nor abandoning its presence in Syria. As The New York Times recently [explained](#): “Recent history suggests that financial pressure on Iran does not necessarily lead to military cutbacks.”

The point of the JCPOA was to maintain the peaceful nature of Iran’s nuclear program, but with the US withdrawal and re-imposition of sanctions, there has been less incentive for Tehran to stay within the boundaries of the accord. It’s worth noting that per Article 26 of the JCPOA, Iran

has the [right](#) to “cease performing its commitments under this JCPOA in whole or in part”, if sanctions are re-imposed. With that in mind and little [deliverance](#) on the part of Europe of a special purpose vehicle that would circumvent said sanctions, Tehran has felt the need to push back by increasing its uranium enrichment in recent months.

Despite using unilateral pressure, the US has not caused Iran’s economy to collapse, but crumble — though it’s worth noting that corruption and mismanagement also play a role. The national currency, the Iranian rial, has lost 70 per cent of its [worth](#) since May 2018. The International Monetary Fund [reports](#) that the Iranian economy will contract 6 per cent —merely a recession. Regardless, if Iran continues with reforms and better economic planning, it can likely [float](#) with a minimum of petroleum export revenue of 720,000 barrels per day or US\$17 billion.

On a domestic front, things look all the more different. From the get-go, hardliners were vehemently against the JCPOA and warned that the Rouhani administration should never trust the US. Their feelings were validated once the US pulled out of the nuclear agreement. Some hardliners have continued to pressure and blame Mr Hassan Rouhani, even going as far as attempting to [impeach](#) Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in November 2018 for getting them into this mess in the first place as the country’s lead nuclear negotiator. Though there are qualms between factions on how to take on the US, the unilateral pressure on Tehran in recent months has led to a rally-around-the-flag [effect](#) as Iranians are banding together to push back against what they view as a Western imperialist threat forcing its ways.

If the Trump administration’s goal has been to change Iran’s malign behaviour, it hasn’t succeeded. The so-called “maximum pressure” policy has instead caused Tehran to lash out.

With that in mind, if some form of a diplomatic meeting takes place — irrespective of the Trump administration’s erratic Iran policy — it would be an opportune moment to ease regional tensions. But if North Korea is any indicator, talking to Tehran — which the president has always advocated for — will likely not lead to anything groundbreaking. A meeting will merely be an image boost ahead of the 2020 elections — and for Trump that’s enough.

## About the Author

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