



Will Neoconservatives Convince Trump to Favor Regime Change in Iran?

With the reimposition of economic sanctions Monday on Iran, it appears that the Trump administration is torn as to the purpose of the sanctions. On one hand, President Trump appears desirous of simply forcing the Iranians to terminate their nuclear program (and keep it shut down) and have them cease what the United States calls its “malign activities” in the Middle East. Trump insists that his sanctions are not motivated by an effort to achieve “regime change” in Iran.



On the other hand, neoconservatives within that same Trump administration, led by Trump’s trusted lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, and National Security Adviser John Bolton, have loudly and publicly called for the overthrow of Iran’s totalitarian theocracy.

The sanctions, now reimposed by the United States, were lifted by the Obama administration after the 2015 Iran nuclear deal.

Whatever the ultimate goal of the reimposed sanctions, the negative effects are quite real on the Iranian economy. Mike Pompeo, Trump’s secretary of state, claims that the sanctions have cost the Iranians the sale of more than a million barrels of crude oil, per day, so far.

“Our objective is to starve the Iranian regime of the revenue it uses to fund violent and destabilizing activities throughout the Middle East and, indeed, around the world,” Pompeo told journalists. “The Iranian regime has a choice: It can either do a 180-degree turn from its outlawed course of action and act like a normal country, or it can see its economy crumble.”

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Last week, Trump said, “We have the toughest sanctions ever imposed.” He added, however, that he wanted to be somewhat more cautious on a complete boycott of Iranian oil, “because I don’t want to drive the oil prices in the world.” While he claimed he could drive Iranian oil exploration “down to zero immediately,” he said that would “cause a shock to the market.”

President Hassan Rouhani (the official chief executive of the Iranian government, although the Iranian theocratic hierarchy is believed to be the real power in the country) was defiant. He boasted that the national oil company has sold oil to private companies, who can then turn around and sell to anonymous buyers outside of Iran, thus circumventing the sanctions. “We must resist and win,” Rouhani said.

Another method of this resistance is demonstrating Iranian military might. State television in Iran has broadcast videos of anti-aircraft batteries, with military maneuvers. In the film footage, surface-to-air missiles shot down a drone. Whether this is intended to scare away any American military attack or it is just for domestic consumption is not clear.

But the economic problems inside Iran are quite clear. Hyperinflation is causing massive disruptions to



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the economy. The rial, Iran's national currency, now trades at 150,000 to one U.S. dollar, whereas just a year ago, it was trading at about 40,500 to each dollar. (Students of history might note that the German mark went from four to the dollar in 1914 to about four trillion to the dollar by 1923, destroying confidence in the Weimar government and paving the way for Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist movement.)

Finally, Iran is arguing that the United States is the true outlaw regime, not Iran. Gholamali Khoshroo, Iran's ambassador to the United Nations, said the United States was "brazenly" disregarding a UN Security Council resolution that endorsed the nuclear deal in its unilateral decision to reimpose sanctions.

Trump is unlikely to back down simply because of a UN resolution, however. He campaigned in 2016 on tearing up the Iran nuclear deal, negotiated by the Obama administration along with several other nations. The agreement was sold by Obama as reducing the amount of nuclear fuel Iran could keep, and it extended the "breakout time" considered necessary for the Iranians to create a nuclear bomb. It also opened up some of Iran's nuclear facilities to constant monitoring, while subjecting others to inspections only after a waiting period.

In agreeing to the deal, Congress required the president to certify that the Iranians were living up to its provisions. Trump announced about a year ago that he was going to invoke "decertification" of the agreement, throwing its continued life into the lap of Congress.

Of course, under the U.S. Constitution, that is exactly where Obama should have sent it in the first place — or more specifically, to the Senate. The Constitution requires that an agreement negotiated by the president must obtain the approval of at least two-thirds of the Senate before the agreement is a law in the United States. Obama did not do that.

That is because Senator Bob Corker (R-Tenn.) authored a bill that stood this constitutional provision on its head. His legislation flipped the necessity of a president obtaining a two-thirds vote from the Senate, creating instead a situation wherein he, in effect, must have the support of only one-third of each house of Congress.

Constitutionally, Congress has no authority to transfer this power to the president.

Whether the Iran deal is, as a practical matter, a good deal or a bad one is certainly important. On the other hand, while the decision to decertify the deal may force the Iranians to practice restraint in Middle East adventurism, the deal should not be contingent upon Iranian activities there. Certainly, the Saudis and the Israelis do not like the Iranian regime. We can of course sympathize with that position, and we can certainly understand the miseries of the Iranian people themselves living under such a hellish government. But citing such considerations in a nuclear weapons deal is yet another example of the "policeman of the world" attitude that has largely prevailed among American presidents for decades — an attitude Trump rightly condemned during his campaign.

Hopefully, Trump's dealings with Iran, or with any other nation, will be based upon what is good for the United States, and he will not be guided into "regime change" politics by either Giuliani and Bolton. After all, if the United States has the moral right to tell other countries what government they are going to have, what is wrong if, say, Vladimir Putin were to want to do the same thing in America?

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