

Sanctions on Iran

by Michael Curtis



If the threat of Islamist terrorism is the major issue threatening the world, the Islamic Republic of Iran comes a close second. Its geo-political prominence, economic and military resources , and extreme ideology make it rife for international mischief.

Economically, Iran is rich with 10% of the world's oil reserves and the second largest reserves of natural gas. It is OPEC's second largest oil producer. Its strategic location means it borders on a number of countries, which are in easy reach. It has the largest arsenal of ballistic missiles and the largest armed forces in the Middle East. Ideologically, as the Islamic Republic and with more than 10% of the World's Muslims, it dominates the Shia crescent running from Syria, Lebanon to the Gulf countries.

By its support of Islamic terrorism, its testing of missiles,

its continuing enrichment of uranium, its involvement in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, its extreme ideology, its constant threat to eliminate the State of Israel, it has become a major destabilizing factor in the world. Its diplomatic posture, which has gone through a number of changes, has been enticing. If Barack Obama's campaign slogan was "hope and change," that of the supposed moderate and "realist" President of Iran since 2013, Hassan Rouhani, has been "hope and prudence."

The nuclear deal, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, (JCPOA) of July 14, 2015 was supposed to ensure that Iran's nuclear program will be exclusively peaceful, and that for the stated length of time, Iran would not seek to develop or acquire nuclear weapons. Candidate Donald Trump may have been rather excessive in calling it the "worst deal ever negotiated" but clearly President Obama was too "kind" to Iran.

It remains to be seen whether JCPOA will prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons capability. Opinions differ about the extent of uranium enrichment facilities needed to turn natural uranium into the isotopes that can be used as nuclear material for weapons or power facilities.

Skepticism about Iran's intentions is in order for many reasons. One is inherent in the document itself. Section 52 of the 1st Annex states that "Iran will abide by its voluntary commitments as expressed in its own long term enrichment plan." Even Reagan's famous remark, "trust but verify" is insufficient to find the reality in Iran because of the meaningless of "voluntary commitments."

From the beginning, Iran benefited economically. Sanctions on Iranian organizations involved in the ballistic missile program were relaxed. The Obama Administration agreed to pay \$1.7 billion regarding an Iranian claim of the 1970s, concerning the purchase of American arms made by the Shah before the 1979 revolution, a payment almost certainly a

ransom deal for 3 American prisoners.

JCPA does not include specific provisions preventing Iran from conducting ballistic missile tests, a number of which have taken place since July 2015. Those tests violate the spirit, if not the exact letter of UN Security Resolution 2231 of July 20, 2015 . Para 3 of Annex B of the Resolution states that Iran agrees “not to undertake any activity related to ballistics missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons, including launches using such ballistic missile technology.”

A starting problem is that it is difficult to draw an exact line between conventional missiles and nuclear missiles, and a conventional ballistic missile can readily be altered to fit a nuclear warhead. In its defense, Iran argues the the tests are appropriate because the missiles are not designed to carry a nuclear warhead. Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif said the missile issue is not part of the nuclear deal, and the ballisic missiles used in tests were designed only to carry a normal warhead for legitimate defense.

The problem is that the Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in March 2016, has said it has missiles that can travel more than 2,000 miles, and thus pose a danger to the United States. In October 2015, Iran fired long range surface to surface missiles.

In March 2016 the IRGC fired two ballistic missiles, designed, according to its spokesman, to show Iran’s deterrent power, and Iran’s ability to confront any threat to the Islamic Republic. The head of the RGC aerospace division said the test was to show Israel that Iran could wipe it out. Among the missiles were 2 Qadr H precision guided missiles one of which carried the phrase “Israel must be wiped off the face of the earth” in Hebrew. Whether to take this seriously is arguable, but certainly it has propaganda value.

On January 29, 2017, Iran tested a cruise missile, Sumar, that can carry a nuclear weapon in addition to test firing a ballistic missile, and is capable of carrying a warhead, and has the ability to reach Israel. It flew 600 miles from a site near Semnan, east of Tehran. The Sumar is said to have a potential range of 2,000 to 3,000 km, flies at low altitudes and can evade radar and defense missiles. Cruise missiles are not mentioned in any UN resolutions that ban work on ballistic missiles capable of carrying nuclear weapons.

For President Trump and the King of Saudi Arabia, the launch in January 2017 is regarded as an event destabilizing regional activities. Trump has "put Iran on notice." Though there is no specific action related to the term, Trump on February 3, 2017 imposed sanctions on 13 individuals and 12 companies, freezing any property or funds they have under US jurisdiction.

The urgent question is whether the Trump administration will go further. Will it end the nuclear deal? Will it impose greater sanctions? Will it deal with foreign companies doing business with elements of Iran's economy dealing with missile program?

In connection with JCPO the US State Department Parameters on April 2, 2015 explained the prospective deal would state that US sanctions on Iran for terrorism, human rights abuses, and ballistic missiles will remain in place under the deal.

Iran is a country that abounds in violations of human rights, a large number of executions and use of death penalty, arbitrary detention and prosecution of journalists, human rights defenders, and women rights activists, and accepts child marriage. Islamic dress code is imposed in public places. Restrictions are numerous on opinions and freedom of expression. Web sites that carry political news are monitored, and religious and ethnic minorities, Baha'i, Kurds, Jews, Sunni Muslims, are attacked.

Is there a better candidate in the world for further US sanctions?