

The Threat is Still Iran

by Michael Curtis



During his speech to the UN General Assembly in New York on Tuesday September 19, 2017 President Donald Trump was heard muttering to himself, “Is it for all time or simply a lark, is it a deal not worth thinking of, or is it at long last friendship?” A week before, on September 14, 2017, President Trump had renewed an exemption to imposing sanctions on Iran that were suspended under the 2015 JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) deal signed in Vienna by the P5+1 countries and Iran in July 2015. In October, Trump has to certify to Congress, according to Congressional law, that Iran is in compliance with the deal and Iran’s nuclear activities.

By the agreement Iran accepted limits on its nuclear program in exchange for relief from sanctions imposed on the country. Have there been any infractions by Iran? The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has said that Iran is complying with its commitments under the arrangements, including inspections. Indeed, it has said that at present Iran’s stockpile of low-enriched uranium is a good deal less than the

maximum allowed under JCPOA. The same is true of the stockpile of heavy water. Nevertheless, Iran's nuclear behavior, has been described by the London based International Institute for Strategic Studies as "prolematic." It pointed out that Iran was testing its most advanced centrifuge, the IR8 model, that can facilitate the enrichment process.

US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley has urged IAEA to be more aggressive in its inspections and to concentrate on Iran's military sites, which Iran will not allow and has declared off limits. Iran calls this campaign for such inspection a "dream." IAEA is reluctant to inspect the military facilities, unwilling to engage in a fishing expedition, though it has the right to request and have access to them. The US Institute for Science and International Security calls for access to military sites and the sharing of relevant information. Nevertheless, Iran has limited any access to its Parchin facility near Teheran.

A key problem of the nuclear deal has always been that Iran will be able to restart uranium enrichment very quickly, get nuclear facilities in the future, and enrich uranium on a large scale. The so-called "sunset clause" sets expiration dates on the limits of the nuclear program. Iran can extend its centrifuges beyond the present limit of 6,000 after ten years, and later will be able to increase its nuclear stockpile and heavy water reactors which can generate weapons grade plutonium. It is almost certain that Iran will continue its quest for a nuclear bomb.

Donald Trump as candidate and as President has always been and remains critical of the nuclear Iran deal, even if hesitant to abandon all of it as Ambassador Haley has suggested. Trump during the electoral campaign talked of the nuclear deal as "the worst deal ever negotiated." Like Haley he believes that technical compliance by Iran is insufficient. Iran has not only violated different parts of the deal but also the spirit of it.

Iran has a history of deception, it continues its development of ballistic missiles. What is important in addition to this very active ballistic missile development, are also Iran's cyber activities, its destabilizing actions such as its sponsored missile attacks on Saudi Arabia by Houthi rebels in Yemen to whom Iran ships weapons; its support for President Assad in Syria; its supply of arms to Hezbollah, its increasing participation in conflicts in the Middle East; and its weapons smuggling.

The Trump administration has responded in certain ways. In July 2017 the US responded to the Iranian provocative launch of a rocket into space, a rocket capable of carrying a satellite weighing 550 pounds, and using technology capable of carrying a nuclear payload. On July 28, the US put sanctions on 6 Iranian organizations involved in the project. It imposed sanctions on an industrial group, Shahid Hemmat that is central to the ballistic missile program by producing the medium range Shabab-3 based on a North Korean missile, and imposed tighter sanctions against individuals associated with the Revolutionary Guards Corps (Quds Force), known for their support of terror and hijacking activities.

The real issue involved is not merely the nuclear ambition of Iran but three factors: its desire for political expansion; its role for state sponsored terrorism; and Iran's ability to obtain nuclear facilities in the future

A significant factor in the issue is Russia's defense of Iran in the international arena. It has said Iran will not be anybody's client state but Russia is in reality allowing Iran, which has been almost isolated since 1979, to play an increasing role in political and security affairs, though they differ on some issues. One is that Russia and Iran are both supporting Assad, and favor the existence of Syria within present borders, but Russia is less interested than is Iran in keeping Assad in power.

Another is that Moscow does not approve of Iran's animosity against Israel. Vital in this regard is difference over Iran's support for Hezbollah. Yet, Russia did put an advanced S-400 air defense system near the Iranian weapons factories in Syria, factories that produce long range guidance missiles for Hezbollah. Israel has used missiles to target Iranian sponsored weapons convoys in the area.

Nor does Russia approve the continuing UN bias against Israel or the BDS movement, now recently illustrated by the UNHRC blacklist concerning Teva, Egged, Coca Cola Israel, and Israel's two largest banks, Bank Hapoalim and Leumi, and US firms Caterpillar, Trip Advisor and Priceline: compliance with this violates US law.

In this complex international game there have been secret visits by officials of the Saudi government, deadly rivals of Iran, to Israel in recent days. The most meaningful is the reported visit in September 2017 by a royal prince, believed to be Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. This is not surprising because of the common enemy Iran. Noticeably, Arab countries have allowed Israel businesses to operate in the Gulf Countries and allowed Israel's El Al to fly over Saudi airspace.

What is necessary is a more enlightened European policy. The EU supports the nuclear deal, because it holds it is not an agreement between two countries, but one by the whole international community and Iran, and is supported by the UN Security Council. But the EU is also concerned with economic issues. On July 3, 2017 the French energy company Total signed a \$5 billion deal with Iran, arguing that economic development is also a way of building peace. European hotel chains, Melia and Accor, are interested in projects in Iran.

The great British political philosopher Ringo Starr, the drummer of the Beatles, gave unsolicited advice to Prime Minister Theresa May about Brexit. "It is a great move," he

said, "get on with it." In dealing with the growing threat of Iran, the US Congress and President Trump should take his advice and get on with it.