

Will Iran be a Full Nuclear Power by the End of 2020? No Return to the 2015 Agreement

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French President Emmanuel Macron failed to promote successfully his Iranian initiative with the US administration despite the initial blessing of his US counterpart. This failure led Iran to make a third gradual withdrawal from its JCPOA nuclear deal commitment, raising two main issues. Iran has become a regional power to be reckoned with, so we can now scrap from reactions to its policies the words “submit,” or “bow to the international community”. Moreover, since Europe is apparently no longer in a position to fulfil its commitments, Iran will now be headed towards a total pull-out following further gradual withdrawal steps. Just before the US elections due in November 2020, Iran is expected to become a nuclear country with the full capability of producing uranium enriched to more than 20% uranium-235, weapons-usable and therefore in a position to manufacture dozens of nuclear bombs (for which uranium must be enriched to about 90%). However, this does not necessarily mean that this is Iran’s ultimate objective.

Industry data shows that half of the effort goes into enriching from 0.7% to 4%. If Iran reaches the level of 20%, the journey towards 90% is almost done. A few thousand centrifuges are needed to reach 20% enrichment while a few hundred are enough to cross from 20% to the 90% needed for a nuclear bomb. When Iran announces it is reaching a level which is considered critical by the west, there is the possibility that Israel might act militarily against Iran’s capability as it did in Iraq in 1981, in Syria in 2009, and in assassinating nuclear scientists. If this happens, the Middle East will be exposed to a mega earthquake whose outcome is unpredictable. But if Israel and the US are not in a position to react against Iran’s total withdrawal from the JCPOA (nuclear deal), Iran will no longer accept a return to the 2015 deal. Its position will become much stronger and any deal would be difficult to reach.

Sources within the decision-making circle have said

“Iran will become a state with full nuclear capability. It is also aiming for self-sufficiency and is planning to move away from counting solely on its oil exports for its annual budget. It is starting to generate and manufacture in many sectors and it will certainly increase its missile development and production. Missile technology has proved to be the most efficient and cheapest deterrent weapon for Iran and its allies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and the Yemen”.

Iran has been following a “strategy of patience” since US President Donald Trump unlawfully revoked the nuclear deal. Tehran allowed Europe, for an entire year, to think about a way to tempt Iran to stay within the nuclear deal on the basis of 4 (France, Russia, China, UK) + 1 (Germany), excluding the US. After that long waiting period, Iran has taken the initiative into

its own hands and is gradually pulling out of the deal. It seems Trump did not learn from President Obama who signed the deal, convinced that US sanctions would be ineffective.

But Iran is not missing an opportunity [worth trying](#) to make its case. At the G7 in France, Iran Foreign Minister Jawad Zarif cut short his visit to Beijing to meet European leaders and ministers at the request of President Macron. It was hinted that there were chances for Iran to sell its oil and that Macron had managed to break through the US-Iran tension.

Iran President Hassan Rouhani thought there was a real opportunity to smooth over tensions and that Trump, according to the source in Tehran, was ready to ease the sanctions in exchange for a meeting and the beginning of discussion. This is why Rouhani overtly stated his readiness to meet any person if that helped. But Zarif was surprised to learn that Macron didn't fulfil his promises- because Trump had changed his mind. The initiative was stillborn and all are back at square one.

Macron understood that the problem doesn't lie with the US President but in his [consigliere](#) Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his neo-con team Pompeo-Bolton. The [meeting](#) between the French Minister of Armed Forces Florence Parly and the Pentagon Chief Mark Esper was an attempt to convince the US Secretary of Defence to distance himself from the Pompeo-Bolton team before the situation gets out of control and Iran became unstoppable.

"Trump rejected the French idea to offer Iran a line of credit of 15 billions of Euros (not Dollars). This credit is part of Iran's acquired right since it has agreed with Europe to sell 700,000 barrels of oil daily as part of a signed deal. Following the US sanctions on any country or company buying Iranian oil, Europe refrained from honouring the agreement. Vice Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi calculated the amount at stake of 15 billion euros with European representatives. The agreement was that Iran would sell oil to Europe for this amount in the future, and that Iran could buy any product, not limited to food and medicine which were originally excluded from the US sanctions. Iran, according to the deal with European partners, would have had the right to take the money in cash and transfer it to any other country, including Iran", said the source.

All this has been thrown to the winds. The result is simple: Iran will continue its nuclear programme but will allow the International Atomic Energy Agency to monitor development. It is relying on the nuclear deal [articles](#) 26 and 36 to partially withdraw, a deal that was not signed based on trust, but on respect for law. This is the reason why Iran announced its third withdrawal step, increasing its stockpile of enriched uranium and replacing its IR-1 and IR-2m with [IR-6](#) centrifuges (supposed to happen in 2026, as stated in paragraph 39).

Europe has used all its resources to persuade Iran from taking withdrawal steps, but to no avail. Iran has moved from a "patience strategy" to an "aggressive strategy" and will no longer accept a soft approach. It has undergone sanctions since 1979 and though it has learned to live with them, its patience is exhausted.

The US has nothing to offer to Iran but further sanctions and additional pressure on Europe, so the old continent follows its withdrawal path. The US administration planned to form various coalitions, including an Arab NATO, but failed so far to pull off any such alliance. US officials believed the Iranian regime would fall in months and that the population would turn against their leaders. Nothing of the sort happened. On the contrary: Trump and his neo-

cons brought Iranian pragmatists and hardliners together for the same cause. The US destroyed the possibility of any moderate argument with people like Rouhani and Zarif, and showed that it was too untrustworthy for any reliable deal or agreement.

Iran is feeling stronger: it has downed a US drone, sabotaged several tankers and confiscated a British-flagged tanker despite the presence of the Royal Navy nearby. It has shown its readiness for war without pushing for it. Iran knows its allies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Palestine will be united as one in the case of war. The Iranian officials did not use revolutionary or sectarian slogans to face down US sanctions but instead managed to create national solidarity behind its firm policy of confrontation with the US. Washington, largely responsible for the status quo in the Gulf, failed to weaken Iran's resolve and has so far been unsuccessful in undermining the Iranian economy. It is putting about the idea that its "suffocation policy" has been successful, but Iran is not giving the submission signals the US administration wants and needs, to justify the tension it has created in the Middle East and the Gulf.

Iran is handling its policy towards the US and Europe in the same way Iranians weave carpets. It takes several years to finish an artisanal carpet and many more years to sell it. The nuclear deal needed several years of preparation but even more time for establishing acceptance and the bona fides of the signatories. Trump's simple-minded decision destroyed all that work. The US and Europe have lost the initiative. Europe is not politically in any position to stand against the US sanctions, nor does it have sufficient tools or standing to offer Iran and thus force it to the negotiating table.

Iran is becoming stronger and much more difficult to tame than in the past. It is imposing itself as a regional power and a challenge to the west. It has advanced nuclear technology and capabilities, a self-sufficient armament programme and it is strengthening its allies in the Middle East.

It is difficult to foresee any negotiation between Iran and the West before November 2020, the date of the US elections. Iran is no longer willing to accept in 2019 what it signed in 2015; Trump is responsible for the new scenario. Destroying the nuclear deal now redounds to the benefit of Iran. There will be a time when the US administration, due to the realisation of its ignorance in Iranian affairs, will feel regret, and will ask to return to the negotiating table- perhaps after Trump? But conditions will definitely no longer be the same and it may very well come too late to see Iran accepting what it signed for in 2015.

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