

Iran Nuclear Deal and the Attack on Abqaiq Oil Facility

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In response to Washington unilaterally cancelling the Iran nuclear deal and imposing sanctions on Iran, Tehran has announced on Tuesday that it will begin injecting uranium gas into 1,044 centrifuges at Fordow nuclear facility. Though like the previous retaliatory measures taken by the Hassan Rouhani government, this step too is reversible.

Donald Trump has repeatedly said during the last three years that the Iran nuclear deal signed by the Obama administration in 2015 was an “unfair deal” that gave concessions to Iran without giving anything in return to the US. Unfortunately, there is a grain of truth in Trump’s statements because the Obama administration signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran in July 2015 under pressure, as Washington had bungled in its Middle East policy and it wanted Iran’s cooperation in Syria and Iraq to get a face-saving.

In order to understand how the Obama administration bungled in Syria and Iraq, we should bear the background of Washington’s Middle East policy during the recent years in mind. The eight-year proxy war in Syria that gave birth to scores of militant groups, including the Islamic State, was directly responsible for the spate of Islamic State-inspired terror attacks in Europe from 2015 to 2017.

Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in August 2011 to June 2014, when the Islamic State overran Mosul and Anbar in Iraq, an informal pact existed between the Western powers, their regional allies and jihadists of the Middle East against the Iran-led alliance comprising Syria and Hezbollah based in Lebanon. In accordance with the pact, militants were funded, trained and armed in the training camps located in the border regions of Turkey and Jordan to wage a proxy war against the Syrian government.

This arrangement of an informal pact between the Western powers and the jihadists of the Middle East against the Iran-led alliance worked well up to August 2014, when the Obama Administration made a volte-face on its previous regime change policy in Syria and began conducting airstrikes against one group of jihadists battling the Syrian government, the Islamic State, after the latter overstepped its mandate in Syria and overran Mosul and Anbar in Iraq from where the US had withdrawn its troops only a couple of years ago in December 2011.

After this reversal of policy in Syria by the Western powers and the subsequent Russian military intervention on the side of the Syrian government in September 2015, the momentum of jihadists’ expansion in Syria and Iraq stalled, and they felt that their Western patrons had committed a treachery against the jihadists’ cause, hence they were infuriated

and rose up in arms to exact revenge for this betrayal.

If we look at the chain of events, the timing of the spate of terror attacks against the West was critical: the Islamic State overran Mosul in June 2014, the Obama Administration began conducting air strikes against the Islamic State's targets in Iraq and Syria in August 2014, and after a lull of almost a decade since the Madrid and London bombings in 2004 and 2005, respectively, the first such incident of terrorism occurred on the Western soil at the offices of Charlie Hebdo in January 2015, and then the Islamic State carried out the audacious November 2015 Paris attacks, the March 2016 Brussels bombings, the June 2016 truck-ramming incident in Nice, and then three horrific terror attacks took place in the United Kingdom in 2017, and after that the Islamic State carried out the Barcelona attack in August 2017, and then another truck-ramming atrocity occurred in Lower Manhattan in October 2017 that was also claimed by the Islamic State.

Keeping this background of the quagmire created by the Obama administration in Syria and Iraq in mind, it becomes amply clear that the Obama administration desperately needed Iran's cooperation in Syria and Iraq to salvage its failed policy of training and arming jihadists to topple the government in Syria that backfired and gave birth to the Islamic State that carried out some of the most audacious terror attacks in Europe from 2015 to 2017.

Thus, Washington signed JCPOA in July 2015 that gave some concessions to Iran, and in return, former hardliner Prime Minister of Iraq Nouri al-Maliki was forced out of power in September 2014 with Iran's tacit approval and moderate former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi was appointed in his stead who gave permission to the US Air Force and ground troops to assist the Iraqi Armed Forces and allied militias to beat back the Islamic State from Mosul and Anbar.

However, Iran nuclear deal was neither an international treaty under the American laws nor even an executive agreement. It was simply categorized as a "political commitment." Due to the influence of Zionist lobbies, the opposition to JCPOA in American political discourse was so vehement that forget about having it passed through the US Congress, the task the Obama administration faced was to muster enough votes of dissident Democrats to defeat a resolution of disapproval so that it couldn't override a presidential veto.

The Trump administration, however, is not hampered by the legacy of the Obama administration, and since the objective of defeating the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq has already been achieved, therefore Washington felt safe to annul the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018 and the crippling "third party" sanctions have once again been put in place on Iran at Benjamin Netanyahu's behest.

The sense of betrayal in Iran, however, is so fierce that recent subversive events in the Persian Gulf, including the September 14 attack on Abqaiq petroleum facility in Saudi Arabia, can also be explained if we bear in mind how Washington treacherously used the Iran nuclear deal to get a face-saving in Syria and Iraq without giving anything in return to Tehran.

Although Houthi rebels based in Yemen claimed the responsibility for the complex attack involving drones and cruise missiles on the oil facility in the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia, and they have UAV-X drones having a range of 1,500 kilometers, Washington dismissed the possibility. Instead it accused Tehran of mounting the attack from Iran's

territory which is unlikely. The most likely suspects were Iran-backed militias in Iraq, as 18 drones and 7 cruise missiles were launched from the north.

The attack was an Armageddon for the global oil industry because Abqaiq petroleum facility in eastern Saudi Arabia processes five million barrels of oil per day. The entire industrialized world is running on the Gulf's oil, and a subversive incident like the attack on Abqaiq petroleum facility would send jitters across the global markets, because the littoral states of Persian Gulf hold more than half of world's proven oil reserves, 800 billion barrels out of world's total 1,500 billion barrels of crude oil reserves.

Besides planting limpet mines on the UAE's oil tankers and shooting down an American Global Hawk surveillance drone, September 14 attack on Abqaiq oil facility was the third major attack against the US and its regional allies. Even though Washington has deployed several thousand American troops and additional Patriot missiles batteries in Saudi Arabia after the attack, unless the root cause of the conflict is resolved: waiving arbitrary sanctions on Iran, the likelihood of further such attacks targeting the global energy supply cannot be overruled, as unilateral sanctions begin to bite into Iran's economy.

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Featured image: A fire broke out at the Saudi Aramco facility in the eastern city of Abqaiq on Saturday after a drone attack by Houthi rebels from Yemen. | Reuters

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