

A
CLOSER
LOOK

ANALYZING THE NEWS
THAT MAKES A
DIFFERENCE

A
Showdown
Between
the US
and Iran?

NEW SANCTIONS AND THE
POSSIBILITY OF WAR

“What I’d like to see with Iran, I’d like to see them call me.” That was a recent comment that President Trump made about what he wants to see as a result of the US stance on Iran’s nuclear program.

His inclination for personal diplomacy went so far that the White House actually gave the president’s private cell phone number to the Swiss government to pass on to the Iranians.

But the suggestion of a nice chat with the Iranians has hardly been the administration’s only move toward Tehran in recent days. The White House placed new sanctions on Iran’s metal industry, which is estimated to make up about a tenth of its exports.

There have also been seeming preparations for war. The US sent a carrier strike group, led by the aircraft carrier *USS Abraham Lincoln*, to the Persian Gulf. It also sent a number of B-52 bombers to the area and repositioned ground-based F-15 fighters. The Pentagon also announced that a Patriot surface-to-air missile battery was being moved to the area to protect US troops.

The US said that the military movements were being made in response to Iranian threats, some intercepted by intelligence agencies, against US interests and personnel in the region. Whether the two countries end up in a military conflict or not, the US is not backing down from its pressure on Iran.





NAYSAYERS

The Trump administration's moves to squeeze Iran have garnered their share of criticism, with a number of pundits claiming that the country will not buckle under due to sanctions.

For example, writing for *The Atlantic*, Ali Vaez, director of the Iran project at the In-

ternational Crisis Group, agrees that Iran is suffering due to sanctions. He notes that the country is in a recession, the rial has lost two-thirds of its value, oil exports have been cut in half, and there is a shortage of meat and medicine in the country.

However, Vaez claims that these methods won't help, because the Iranian government

simply won't cave to any pressure. Furthermore, he claims that the economic strictures will ruin the Iranian middle class, the most pro-Western part of the populace. And he notes that there haven't been strong signs that there will be any sort of uprising against the current government, if that is the hope of American policymakers.



David Ibsen

IRAN'S ANSWER

Dr. Emily Landau, head of the Arms Control and Regional Security Program at INSS, told *Ami* that she sees signs Iran is feeling the bite of the sanctions (though she noted that the Iranian economy's problems are also due to serious mismanagement).

"Iran lashing out is an indication that they are quite desperate," she said.

That hasn't just come in the form of Iranians threatening US interests. Tehran also announced last week that they would be pulling out of certain aspects of the JCPOA, the nuclear deal, which they still are signatories of with the Europeans, which could include enriching uranium beyond levels they are allowed to have. (President Trump pulled the US out of the deal last year.)

The Europeans responded by cautioning the Iranians not to violate their agreement.

David Ibsen, president of United Against Nuclear Iran, told *Ami*: "I think they were waiting to see what they could get from the Europeans. They want to keep the Europeans in the agreement. They hoped the Europeans would be able to keep trade and finance going through the special vehicle."

This was the financial arrangement the Europeans had set up to allow companies to trade with Iran.

"It wasn't actualized," he said. "No responsible European business wants to use this weird European-Iranian pipeline. Businesses are leaving Iran. US sanctions are much more effective than the prospect of doing business with some second- or third-rate Iranian company."

UANI monitors the number of companies moving in or out of Iran and discusses the decision to avoid doing business with Iran with private companies. They also monitor trade conferences for companies looking to do business in Iran, which Ibsen said have shrunk in some cases by 80 to 90 percent. "They're suffering, and they're starting to

"If the Iranians want to start launching cruise missiles at the Fifth Fleet, well, good luck."

—David Ibsen, president of United Against Nuclear Iran

lash out as a result."

He said that US sanctions are close to where they were before the implementation of the JCPOA, and the administration has been looking at how they can go even further than those sanctions did.

Dr. Landau noted that many pundits had asserted that the US would be unable to impose meaningful sanctions on Iran on its own. "We see that the US has been able to do a lot on its own."

She also noted that the Europeans haven't buckled yet. "The initial reaction of the Europeans [to the Iranian threat to pull out of the JCPOA] was the right one, and I don't know if the Iranians were expecting that."

WAR IN THE GULF?

The Iranian threats of military escalation aren't new, Dr. Landau noted. "I don't know how many times they've made the threat to close the Strait of Hormuz," she said. "This is the language that they use and the threats they have."

Mr. Ibsen noted that while there are undoubtedly "totally crazy people" in the Iranian leadership (he noted the statement by one Iranian ayatollah over the weekend

that one missile alone could destroy the US fleet), Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif have been portraying the US moves as a plot by some figures in the administration—National Security Advisor John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in particular—that is really opposed by President Trump, who doesn't want an expensive war.

"They are threatening, but they're also trying to put it on Trump to rein these 'necons' in," he said.

He noted that, in fact, the US is able to impose significant costs on the Iranians and send warships to the region without spending much.

"And if the Iranians want to start launching cruise missiles at the Fifth Fleet, well, good luck. Want to shut the Strait of Hormuz? That's a great way to coalesce a military coalition around the United States," he said.

Late on Monday, however, US officials said that they suspect Iranian explosives were responsible for large holes torn in Saudi, Norwegian and UAE ships off the coast of the UAE on Sunday.

Dr. Landau added that the media has been pushing a false narrative that the US is acting aggressively toward Iran and threatening war. She noted that Iran has continued to be an aggressive regime and bad actor even as the JCPOA has been in place. There is no evidence, she said, that the International Atomic Energy Agency has inspected any Iranian nuclear facilities, even after Israel gave them the Iranian nuclear archives showing that there was a military nuclear program. The US is simply reacting to a long history of Iranian lies and to Iran's threats of retaliation.

"The media is depicting the history exactly the opposite from how it has been. It's very important to put the latest dynamic in its proper perspective." ●