



Iran Emboldened

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Tehran's new threat to ignore a key plank of the U.S.-led global nuclear agreement offers a timely reminder that, no matter what happens with Iran's upcoming presidential election, the regime is, and will remain, just as dangerous as it's ever been. It also hammers another nail in the coffin of the idea – so cherished by the last administration – that the 2015 deal, with its hundreds of billions in sanctions relief for Iran, would moderate the regime and spur a broader rapprochement between the Islamic Republic and the West.

The United States and its allies have long bemoaned Iran's terror sponsorship, efforts to upend regional Sunni governments, growing military capabilities, threats against the West and human rights abuses at home. Now, all of those problems are deepening at the same time that Tehran is mounting new challenges to the nuclear agreement, both openly and surreptitiously.

In its latest open challenge to the agreement, Tehran is threatening to ignore a provision that limits its stockpile of heavy water – a key element of nuclear reactors that produce plutonium – to 130 tons. Iran has violated that limit twice already before returning to compliance but, in a letter to the International Atomic Energy Agency, it now says it shouldn't have to comply while it seeks international buyers for its excess heavy water.

Iran's efforts to rewrite the nuclear agreement, which global negotiators inked with Tehran in July of 2015 and which took effect in January of 2016, comes amid broader concerns over Iranian compliance. As the Institute for Science and International Security, a respected nonproliferation think tank, has noted, the IAEA "is still unable to determine the absence of undeclared nuclear materials and activities in Iran."

Even as it challenges the nuclear deal, Iran is flexing its military muscle ever more boldly, raising the stakes for Washington and its allies in the region.

In recent days, Iran's naval chief said the country's navy will "expand the scope" of its exercises in international waters and soon launch its third and most advanced home-grown watercraft, the destroyer Sahand. The announcements come a month after Iran conducted naval drills in a 2 million square-kilometer area that spanned the Strait of Hormuz and nearby waterways.

Also in recent days, Iran unveiled its first advanced battle tank, the Karrar, which it plans to mass-produce. Meanwhile, the regime continues to test more sophisticated ballistic missiles on which – whether by cheating on the nuclear deal or waiting for its expiration – it could eventually mount nuclear warheads.

In Yemen, meanwhile, the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels who toppled the previous government and now seek to take power are using a new Iranian-designed weapon, a remote-controlled small boat filled with explosives, which could threaten commercial and military shipping in the Bab el-Mandeb strait and other strategic waterways.

In Lebanon, a top Iranian general said, Iran has developed rocket factories that are completely controlled by Hezbollah, its terrorist client that's headquartered in southern Lebanon, near the Israeli border. In fact, Iranian weapon shipments to Hezbollah have grown so extensive that Israel launched air strikes against Hezbollah weapons convoys three times in recent days in an effort to neutralize the threat.

As for human rights, Tehran is cracking down anew on anyone who might threaten its tight political and social control. In recent days, it has, among other excesses, detained a reporter with a reformist newspaper, arrested a dissident reporter, arrested two Iranian Catholics and sentenced a couple to death for supposedly founding a new "cult."

With its next presidential election coming up in May, Iran-watchers are raising their usual concerns that U.S. hostility toward Iran could bolster the fortunes of the regime's hard-line faction, boost the chances that "moderate" incumbent president Hasan Rouhani will lose and, in turn, heighten U.S.-Iran tensions even more.

But that view, which represents Washington's longstanding conventional wisdom, ignores a sobering reality: Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei runs the show, the Guardian Council approves only nonthreatening candidates to seek office and neither Rouhani nor any other president has ever proved to be a true reformer. Iran's regime remains as stridently anti-American as ever, and we should dispense with our baseless hopes for warmer ties, and plan accordingly.

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