



The End Of The JCPOA Era

May 9, 2018 **Ilan I. Berman** *The Hill*

Related Categories: Economic Sanctions; Islamic Extremism; Terrorism; Warfare; Iran

It's official: the Iran nuclear deal is dead.

On May 8th, in a nationally televised address, President Trump announced that his administration was withdrawing from the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). By doing so, the White House has effectively killed the signature foreign policy achievement of the Obama era.

To be sure, the decision was hardly unexpected. The President has long been a vocal opponent of the Obama-era agreement, which he has repeatedly called the "worst deal ever." This view was reinforced in recent weeks by the addition of fresh voices to the White House – like those of National Security Advisor John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo – who similarly see the JCPOA as both fatally flawed and dangerous for U.S. national security.

So, what does the President's decision mean, in terms of American policy?

The most immediate impact is economic. In tandem with his JCPOA announcement, President Trump signed a national security directive authorizing the re-imposition of all sanctions on Iran that had been waived by the Obama administration as part of the 2015 agreement. According to the U.S. Treasury Department, these will include, after a brief grace period, sweeping sanctions on Iran's Central Bank, its shipping and energy sectors, and on foreign companies and entities doing business with broad swathes of the Iranian economy.

By doing so, the White House clearly hopes to recreate the U.S.-led international sanctions regime that existed prior to the passage of the JCPOA, and thereby to reimpose Iran's global isolation. However, this renewed sanctions effort might end up doing even more, because Iran's clerical regime is already exceedingly rickety, buffeted by persistent grassroots protests (which have continued for nearly half a year despite massive regime repression) and by a full-blown collapse of the Iranian national currency, the *Rial*. Reinvigorated economic pressure could therefore contribute to a further destabilization of the Iranian regime, with potentially far-reaching political consequences within the Islamic Republic.

Beyond reimposing sanctions, Trump's decision also paves the way for a qualitatively new American approach toward Iran. In tandem with the President's announcement of his administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA, the White House issued an official memorandum outlining its strategic objectives vis-a-vis the Islamic Republic.

"It is the policy of the United States that Iran be denied a nuclear weapon and intercontinental ballistic missiles; that Iran's network and campaign of regional aggression be neutralized; to disrupt, degrade, or deny the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and its surrogates access to the resources that sustain their destabilizing activities; and to counter Iran's aggressive development of missiles and other asymmetric and conventional weapons capabilities," the memo lays out.

If this sounds familiar, it should. Last October, the President formally unveiled a "comprehensive" new strategy toward Iran laying out the very same set of priorities. But in the months since, little has been done on these fronts, leading many to speculate that, for all intents and purposes, the Trump administration's approach toward Iran was essentially the same as that of his predecessor.

President Trump's May 8th announcement makes clear that it isn't. It also underscores that, as far as the White House is concerned, scrapping the JCPOA is a necessary prerequisite to building a truly comprehensive strategy against Iran – one capable of dealing with both Iran's expanding strategic capabilities and its growing regional ambitions.

Abandoning the Iran nuclear deal represents the first step in this direction. The wisdom of the President's decision to do so will be judged by what comes next.

Ilan Berman is Senior Vice President at the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, DC.