

Uncertainty reigns as US decision on Iran nuclear agreement looms

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Washington

A week before a key decision by US President Donald Trump that could kill the international agreement on Iran's nuclear programme and trigger a new confrontation in the Middle East, the administration appears divided on the issue.

"With any major Trump decision, prediction is difficult," said David Mednicoff, director of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. On one hand, "Trump likes to go with his gut" and could turn his back on the Iran deal, Mednicoff said via e-mail.

On the other hand, there was bipartisan support in Washington for the agreement, which "appears to be working" and "has helped American businesses" after the end of sanctions.

Trump has said he regards the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the 2015 Iran deal is officially known, as a poorly crafted treaty that gives Tehran all the benefits while leaving the United States with scant leverage to curb Iran's aggressive behaviour in the Middle East. In his address to the United Nations last month, Trump said he was not prepared to "abide by an agreement if it provides cover for the eventual construction of a nuclear programme."

Trump was considering making a speech regarding Iran on October 12 that could include the announcement of an overarching strategy to deal with what the White House considers Tehran's "bad behaviour."

"Not just the nuclear deal as bad behaviour but the ballistic missile testing, destabilising of the region, number one state sponsor of terrorism, cyber-attacks, illicit nuclear programme," White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said.

The US State Department is obliged to tell Congress by October 15 whether Iran is complying with the JCPOA, which was designed to halt Tehran's nuclear weapons programme in exchange for a phase-out of Western economic sanctions. US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson

said his department would present "a couple of options" to the president but gave no details. The Washington Post reported that Trump would declare Iran to be in violation of the nuclear deal but would stop short of calling for new sanctions against Tehran.

The administration stated in two previous reports to Congress this year that Iran was following the accords. But Trump has suggested that those decisions were made against his own judgment. He told the Wall Street Journal in July he expected the October report to say that Iran had violated the agreement. "If it was up to me, I would have had them noncompliant 180 days ago," he said.

While Trump and US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley have voiced strong reservations over the JCPOA, other senior officials propose to keep the treaty alive. Defence Secretary James Mattis and US Marine Corps General Joe Dunford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told a Senate hearing they were in favour of sticking with the accord.

"I believe, at this point in time, absent indications to the contrary, it is something that the president should consider staying with," Mattis said about the agreement. The defence secretary said he believed that sticking with the Iran deal was in the US national security interest.

Dunford told the panel that Iran "is not in material breach" of the JCPOA and that the treaty had succeeded in slowing Tehran's nuclear ambitions. "I do believe the agreement, to date, has delayed the development of a nuclear capability by Iran," he said.

Dunford echoed arguments by America's European allies who concede that the agreement has flaws but are concerned that dissolution of the treaty could lead to a new crisis in the Middle East. French President Emmanuel Macron has offered to mediate between Washington and Tehran to address US concerns about Iran's regional activities.

Mednicoff said separating the nuclear issue from other problems would be a good way to proceed because addressing Iran's behaviour in the Middle East was never part of the JCPOA anyway.

"A better collaborative frame-



Tough issue. US Secretary of Defence James Mattis testifies before a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington, on October 3.

(Reuters)

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David Mednicoff, director of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst

work between Europe and the US on regional challenges in the Middle East, such as Syria and Yemen, could likely deter or redirect some Iranian regional muscle-flexing," he said.

Declaring Iran to be in non-compliance would not automatically end the international accord signed by Iran, the United States, China, the European Union, France, Germany, Russia and the United Kingdom.

Following the administration report, Congress would have two months to decide whether to reimpose sanctions against Tehran. Only a vote for new sanctions in the US Congress would take Washington out of the treaty. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif told Politico, a Washington publication, that Iran would not tear up the agreement right away if Trump stated that Tehran was violating the deal but would wait for the decision by Congress.

Quoting senators from Trump's

Republican Party, Politico reported that a majority in the chamber for new Iran sanctions is far from assured. As the Republicans have a narrow 52-48 majority (counting two independents who caucus with the Democrats), in the Senate and the opposition Democrats are in favour of keeping the Iran agreement, a few Republican voices in favour of the treaty in defiance of Trump would sink any hopes of the president for new sanctions.

If Congress does impose new sanctions, Washington could face a situation in which America is the odd one out while Iran restarts its nuclear activities and European countries keep trading with Tehran, Mednicoff warned.

"Trump moving to take the US out of JCPOA, as I assume his defence secretary knows, would only destabilise global nuclear politics further and enrich European trading partners, without ensuring any negative effects on Iran's government," he wrote.

Syrian Kurds, the referendum next door and US policy



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Although Syrian Kurds insist they are interested only in autonomy, not independence, their nationalist aspirations have been buoyed by the Iraqi Kurds' independence referendum. This could place the US relationship with the Syrian Kurds – Washington's best ally in the fight against the Islamic State (ISIS) – in a difficult position. The official US stance remains the territorial integrity of Syria.

Over the past few years, Syrian Kurds established an autonomous zone in north-eastern Syria they call Rojava – "West" in the Kurdish language – as it is the western part of the traditional Kurdistan homeland. They defend Rojava with their militia, set up a functioning civil administration and fly their own flag.

Local council elections September 22 in Rojava were overshadowed by the independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan a few days later. The elections signal that Syrian Kurds are essentially operating on their own and do not want to be dominated by the Syrian government, ISIS or any rebel faction.

Although the Syrian Kurds, led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), have said they favour autonomy in a federated Syrian state, events on the ground could compel

them to push for more. In Qamishli, a Kurdish-populated city in the north-east corner of Syria, there were public celebrations of support for the Iraqi Kurdish referendum on independence.

Undoubtedly, many Syrian Kurds believe that if the Kurds next door can vote for independence, why can't they? Many Syrian Kurds fought and died in the battle against ISIS and say they have earned their right to independence.

This sentiment creates a quandary for both the PYD and the United States, though its manifestations have yet to be realised.

The PYD and its military wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), know Turkey is strongly opposed to both Syrian Kurdish independence and Syrian Kurdish autonomy. Turkey claims the PYD maintains links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey, which Ankara considers to be a terrorist organisation, and fears that autonomy for the Syrian Kurds could encourage Turkey's Kurds to press for the same.

Turkey conducted military incursions into northern Syria against Syrian Kurds over the past few years and a full-blown military invasion by Ankara remains a possibility. The main thing holding Turkey back is that the US military not only is providing logistical support for the Syrian Democratic

Forces – a mostly Kurdish military unit that includes some Arab tribal forces – against ISIS but is also serving as a kind of protective shield for them to preclude a Turkish offensive.

US military commanders have praised the fighting prowess of the Syrian Kurds against ISIS and are directing them to take on ISIS forces in the Deir ez-Zor region in eastern Syria, a mostly ethnic Arab area.

The key question is what happens after ISIS is destroyed in Syria, which could be only months away. Does the US military remain in Rojava? And would a US presence encourage or discourage the Syrian Kurds to press for independence?

US calculations are multifaceted. For one, Washington does not want to change its official position that Syria should remain united. Moderate Syrian rebel groups as well as Arab countries oppose the break-up of Syria. After opposing the Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum, the United States cannot easily take a different stand vis-à-vis the Syrian Kurds.

Additionally, while Washington has continued to support Syrian Kurds despite strong Turkish opposition, the United States sees Turkey as an important ally in the region. When push comes to shove, the United States has historically

sided with Ankara in such disputes and there is no reason to think post-ISIS that it will not do the same.

The Assad regime, which has become more resilient in recent months after battlefield successes, has offered the Kurds carrots and sticks. Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem said, in late September, that, while Damascus is opposed to Syrian Kurdish independence, it would be willing to negotiate an "autonomy" arrangement.

Lebanese Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah warned that Iraqi Kurdish independence would lead to "internal wars" in the region and open the door to "partition." Although he was directing his message to the Iraqi Kurds, he was signalling the Syrian Kurds, perhaps implying that Hezbollah, an ally of Syrian President Bashar Assad, could send its fighters against them if they also press for independence.

If the Syrian Kurds stick to autonomy, they may weather the post-ISIS phase in Syria. In their favour is that any enemy knows that they could defend their autonomous region. If they press for independence, however, all bets are off, including continued US support. This means that the Syrian Kurdish leadership will need to temper the aspirations of their own people, a difficult task, indeed.

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