Trump threatens to terminate Iran deal, raising stakes in showdown

Thomas Seibert
Washington

U.S. President Donald Trump raised the stakes in his confrontation with Iran, threatening to impose new economic sanctions against Tehran to counter the activities of a “rogue regime” bent on destabilising the Middle East and spreading terrorism.

While keeping the United States under the umbrella of the 2015 international agreement to curb Iran’s nuclear weapons programme for now, Trump is embarking on a strategy aimed at forcing Tehran to change its behaviour at the risk of seeing the collapse of the landmark pact and increasing the odds of US military confrontation with Iran.

“History has shown that the longer we ignore a threat, the more dangerous that threat becomes,” Trump said in a televised address October 13. “Our policy is based on a clear-eyed assessment of the Iranian dictatorship, its sponsorship of terrorism and its continuing aggression in the Middle East and all around the world.”

The US president accused Iran of oppressing its own people, meddling in Syria, supporting terrorism, and trying to develop a nuclear bomb despite the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the formal name of the nuclear deal that was supposed to put a stop to those activities. Listing a series of Iranian misdeeds beginning with the storming of the US Embassy in Tehran after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Trump drew the image of a regime that is not to be trusted.

He accused unilateral US sanctions against Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and urged US allies in Europe to do the same. Trump called on the US Congress to draw up additional sanctions that would be triggered if Iran violated criteria set by the United States regarding Iran’s ballistic missile programme and possible future nuclear activities.

“We will not continue down a path whose predictable conclusion is more violence, more terror and the very real threat of Iran’s nuclear breakout,” Trump said.

Despite his strong words, Trump cannot be sure to receive the necessary backing from Congress for a tougher approach. Senator Ben Cardin, the leading Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, called the new line “reckless and dangerous.” It was unclear whether Trump’s Republicans, who have only a slim majority in the Senate, would have the votes to implement the president’s plan.

Trump made it clear that he was prepared to take the United States out of the JCPOA if his demands were not met. “In the event we are not able to reach a solution working with Congress and our allies, then the agreement will be terminated,” Trump said.

“It is under continuous review and our participation can be cancelled by me, as president, at any time.”

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Despite the criticism, Trump, in a Twitter posting message late October 13, said he received favourable responses to his speech. He suggested that the Europeans’ reluctance might have economic reasons. “Many people talking, with much agreement, on my Iran speech today,” Trump wrote.

“Participants in the deal are making lots of money on trade with Iran!”

Thomas Seibert is a Washington correspondent for The Arab Weekly.

Fatah-Hamas announce reconciliation but questions remain

Ahmed Megahid
Cairo

Rival Palestinian factions Hamas and Fatah have signed a preliminary reconciliation deal, bringing hope for an end to a decades-long rift and potential restart of the stalled Palestinian-Israeli peace process.

Both sides agreed to implement a unity pact signed in 2011 but never implemented, calling for the formation of a government of national accord and Hamas handing over administrative control of Gaza to the Palestinian Authority (PA) by December 1.

“Also agreed that the president of the PA [Hamas] will take control of Gaza’s crossing with Israel on November 1,” said the head of the Fatah delegation, Azzam al-Ahmad, during a news conference October 12 in Cairo.

The PA will also take control of the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt, which is the Palestinian coastal enclave’s only gateway to the outside world.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas welcomed the reconciliation, describing it as “the final agreement to end the division,” as sides made plans for him to visit Gaza for the first time since 2007.

Egypt played a pivotal role in getting the rival Palestinian factions into negotiations, hoping that intra-Palestinian reconciliation could restart the Palestinian-Israeli peace process. However, Israel has said it would not accept an agreement that did not include Hamas recognising Israel and agreeing to give up its weapons.

“The fact is that Israel wants Hamas to be militarily defanged,” said Saad al-Zunt, the head of Egyptian think tank the Political and Strategic Studies Centre. “This is why it was closely watching the reconciliation talks.”

Speaking during the negotiations, Fatah leader Ghassan al-Hazooun told The Arab Weekly that the Palestinian Authority would be clear on who would be allowed to carry arms in Gaza.

“We also want to be clear on who should make decisions when it comes to war and peace,” Hazooun said.

There was no direct reference to Hamas’s arms during the October 12 news conference but Ahmad confirmed that Hamas and Fatah representatives will return “along with representatives of other Palestinian factions” on November 23 for further discussions in Cairo and to give the agreement their blessing.

Ahmad said the issue of payment for tens of thousands of Gazan civil servants would be discussed when Hamas and Fatah delegations meet again.

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Ahmed Megahid is an Egyptian correspondent in Cairo.

Tough stance. US President Donald Trump speaks about the Iran deal from the Diplomatic Reception room of the White House in Washington, on October 13.