

US vows support for Iranian protesters, weighs options against regime

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Washington

The United States said it fully supports the anti-government protests in Iran but analysts said that, despite the fiery rhetoric, options for Washington to do anything on the ground are limited.

US President Donald Trump heads an administration in which hardliners are pushing for strong measures against Iran and for an end of the nuclear deal with a country seen by Washington as an aggressor in the Middle East and a security threat to the United States and its allies. Looming deadlines in mid-January mean a decision by Trump about the fate of the nuclear agreement is imminent.

Following the start of the current unrest in Iran, Trump denounced the Iranian regime and praised the protesters. In a series of tweets that started December 30, Trump said the “people of Iran are finally acting against the brutal and corrupt Iranian regime.” Iranians “are hungry for food & for freedom. Along with human rights, the wealth of Iran is being looted. TIME FOR CHANGE!” He promised “great support from the United States at the appropriate time!”

The call for regime change in Tehran was unusual for a president who has said many times that the United States no longer pursues a policy of nation-building in faraway places. Iran said the unrest was due to meddling from outside forces but there is no evidence the United States was involved.

Senior officials said the administration is considering ways to help anti-government groups in Iran. Writing January 4 in the Washington Post, US Vice-President Mike Pence criticised Trump’s predecessor,

Barack Obama, for failing to support change in Iran during the 2009 Green Revolution there.

“Where his predecessor stayed silent in 2009, Trump swiftly offered the Iranian people America’s unwavering support,” Pence wrote. “He has also committed to providing assistance in the days ahead.”

Pointing to US sanctions against Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps introduced last year, Pence stressed that “the president is weighing additional options to punish the regime for its belligerent behaviour and assault on its own citizens.”

The UN Security Council scheduled a meeting after US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley pushed for action against Iran. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin imposed new sanctions against Iranian companies connected to the country’s missile programme and promised the United States would “continue to decisively counter the Iranian regime’s malign activity, including additional sanctions targeting human rights abuses.”

State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said in a statement on January 4 that the United States had “ample authorities to hold accountable those who commit violence against protesters, contribute to censorship or steal from the people of Iran. To the regime’s victims, we say: You will not be forgotten.”

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a State Department official told The Arab Weekly the Treasury Department had a range of “sanctions authorities” but declined to give details. “There is a lot of different things that are possible,” the official said.

It is unclear what the United States can accomplish in Iran. “I am not sure whether Trump or Haley can do much to shape things,” said Allen Keiswetter, a former deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs who is a scholar at



Fiery rhetoric. US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley speaks at UN headquarters in New York, on January 2. (Reuters)

the Middle East Institute in Washington.

Any action by Haley at the United Nations faced vetoes by Russia and China, Keiswetter said, adding that he suspected domestic as well as foreign policy motives behind the tough rhetoric coming from Washington. “Trump is playing to his base,” he said.

US efforts for regime change in Iran go back to the overthrow of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in a 1953 coup orchestrated by British and American intelligence services. Analysts say, however, today’s US influence on events in Iran is very limited.

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“I think Trump would like to see regime change in Tehran,” Gary Samore, executive director for research at Harvard’s Belfer Centre for Science and International Affairs at the Kennedy School of Government, said via e-mail, “but he’s not likely to do anything about it except talk and tweet.”

One area that offers Trump the chance to do something concrete and dramatic is the 2015 international nuclear deal with Iran, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Last October, the president gave Congress three months to draw up additional sanctions that would be triggered if Iran violated criteria set by Washington but lawmakers have taken no action.

US law requires the president to certify every three months whether Iran complies with the JCPOA. Trump refused to do so in October and said he might pull the United States out of the nuclear deal.

Under legal deadlines starting on January 11, Trump will have to decide about certification and about a

possible reintroduction of unilateral US sanctions against Tehran that were suspended when JCPOA went into effect. The return of sanctions could prompt the Iranians to cancel JCPOA. America’s allies in Europe and several Trump aides say the deal should be saved.

The Iranian unrest could convince Trump that JCPOA should be scrapped, media reports said. Politico quoted an unnamed senior administration official as saying that a decision to leave the sanctions suspended “sends a horrible message,” given the unrest in Iran. However, aides would supply Trump with an option to leave JCPOA intact, the official said.

Samore said the president might conclude that the reintroduction of sanctions could lead to the regime change he is after. “Trump might decide to re-impose US sanctions on the grounds that the regime is wobbly and needs one final push to knock it over,” he wrote. “The danger is that this approach might backfire and rally domestic support for the regime.”

Viewpoint



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Obama, Trump responses to unrest in Iran reveal sharp differences

The popular unrest wracking Iran has drawn comparisons with the Green Revolution in 2009, the last time that Iran’s rulers faced such widespread public opposition. Because both 2009 and 2017 happened to be the first years of new US presidencies, the respective responses to events in Iran by the Obama and Trump administrations have also come under scrutiny.

As learned from the “Arab spring,” seemingly spontaneous popular revolts do not have simple explanations and usually are the result of long-simmering grievances triggered by a spark. In 2009, Iranians took to the streets following national elections in which voting irregularities were rampant.

Underlying that immediate cause, however, was anger by the mostly younger Iranians that the mullahs’ favoured candidate, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, had defeated – perhaps by fraud – the pro-reform Mir-Hossein Mousavi, who had promised more freedoms and less revolutionary fervour.

While the uprising that began in late 2017 lacks a clear trigger – although some analysts simplistically blame it on “inflation” – it shares with that of 2009 a deep frustration with the Iranian ruling class. The fact that Iran is in the second

term of a more reform-oriented president, Hassan Rohani, further proves the deeper roots of unrest.

Neither of the newly elected US administrations – that of President Barack Obama in 2009 and of President Donald Trump today – was prepared for the events in Iran. (No US intelligence agency in December 2010 predicted the “Arab spring” either, so one of the lessons here may be the limits of intelligence gathering.) The responses of the two US presidents could not be more different, however.

Obama reacted cautiously, even timidly, and bent over backward to not be seen as publicly supporting the demonstrators. The Trump administration – mostly via the tweeted messages of the president – relished this opportunity to stick it to Tehran.

One reason for the radical difference in tone from Washington has to do with the personal characteristics of the presidents. Obama was, by nature, cautious and deliberative; Trump is, by nature, reckless and impulsive. Obama liked to operate quietly and through back channels; Trump adores the spotlight.

Obama and his advisers said that, if Washington openly backed the protesters, the effect could be to bolster the regime. After 30 years of US-Iranian hostility and demonisation, they understood that anti-

regime Iranians were not necessarily pro-American. Obama knew he had little leverage over Tehran, the United States having already imposed extensive sanctions on Iran.

Obama was by no means silent. On June 15, 2009, he said of the Iranian protesters: “For those people who put so much hope and energy and optimism into the political process, I would say to them the world is watching and inspired by their participation [in demonstrations].”

On January 1, Trump fired off a tweet saying: “The people of Iran are finally acting against the brutal and corrupt Iranian regime. All of the money that President Obama so foolishly gave them went into terrorism and into their pockets. The people have little food, big inflation and no human rights. The US is watching!”

Substantively, Trump’s message is not that much different from Obama’s (other than Trump’s dig at his predecessor). Both presidents warned that they were “watching” and clearly sympathised with the protesters. Later January 1, however, US Vice-President Mike Pence tweeted: “The United States of America will not repeat the shameful mistake of our past when others stood by and ignored the heroic resistance of the Iranian people... We must not and we will not let them down.”

Pence’s tweet suggested that US

action was imminent, although, like Obama, Trump has little leverage over Tehran, with one huge exception: On January 13, he will once again have the option of pulling the United States out of the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement. Although Iran’s domestic politics were not an element of Iranian compliance with the agreement, the unrest – and the regime’s violent response to it – could give Trump the excuse he has wanted to scrap it.

The different responses are not just questions of style and tone. There is a more significant factor: Already in 2009 Obama was trying to develop a policy of long-term reconciliation with Tehran; none of his advisers advocated for regime change in Tehran, which had been the goal of many in the George W. Bush administration. Trump, however, has made the Iranian regime America’s number one global enemy and many of his advisers have put regime change – if not regime destruction – in the cross hairs of US policy.

Iran’s political evolution will be determined by Iranians and, even if the regime were to collapse, it is unlikely that a successor government would align itself with Trump’s America. In the meantime, Trump will milk the situation for all he can, which may mean the end of the nuclear agreement.

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