

Iran's escalation policy has backfired

U.S. President Donald Trump's policy of ignoring Iranian provocations while keeping up the economic pressure on Tehran has earned him considerable criticism—but appears to be working.

(December 3, 2019 / JCPA) The wave of demonstrations in Iran following the regime's decision to raise the price of gasoline by 50 percent is the most important manifestation to date of the impact the U.S. "maximum pressure" policy is having on the Islamic Republic. It reflects the shortage of resources available to the regime due to the shrinking of its oil export income, as well as the Iranian people's widespread hostility towards the regime. It also adds to the challenges Iran is facing in maintaining its grip over two of its most important would-be colonies, Iraq and Lebanon.

Even if Tehran manages to repress the popular outrage against it on all fronts, recent events in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon, combined with Israel's unrelenting attacks on Iranian military targets in Syria and allegedly also in Iraq and Lebanon, and the imposition of even more U.S. sanctions on the Islamic Republic, but the mullahs' regime under unprecedented pressure.

The harsh Iranian response to that pressure was revealed with the impressive Iranian attack on the Saudi oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais on Sept. 14, using weapons that were introduced for the first time by Iran (a special kind of attack UAV and the "Quds 1" cruise missile, that until then had been used only by the Houthis) to maintain deniability. Iran's resumption of uranium enrichment at its underground Fordow facility was another manifestation of Iranian pushback.

Both of these incidents were striking expressions of just how painful the U.S. sanctions are to the Iranian regime. Iran's offensive steps also reflect the Iranian leadership's frustration at the failure of their escalating brinkmanship policy, adopted after the "maximum pressure" sanctions were applied in May 2019, to attempt to force the United States out of the "comfort zone" of a tough sanctions regime.

Initially, Iran attempted to take steps in the nuclear and military realms. It

encouraged its proxies in the region to act against their common opponents, who are also U.S. allies, namely Israel and Saudi Arabia. The nature of the attacks indicated that Iran was not looking for a direct confrontation, but rather to convince Europe to provide it with a safety net that would enable it to overcome the sanctions. Tehran also hoped that the risk-averse U.S. president would ease the sanctions.

This is a familiar arena for Iran—its comfort zone—in which it has certain advantages. Iran wishes to avoid escalation into a full-scale war, in which the United States would enjoy a clear advantage, while at the same time giving the impression that it views war as an option. This policy is risky, as evidenced by U.S. President Donald Trump's aborting a U.S. military attack against Iranian targets 10 minutes before it was set to begin following the downing by Iran of a U.S. drone.

Following the Sept. 14 attack on the Saudi oil facilities, the United States understood the nature of the Iranian trap and was careful to avoid it. Instead, the Americans decided to lever the Iranian move and put *more* pressure on Iran by imposing even harsher economic sanctions. On Oct. 31, the United States sanctioned the Iranian construction sector and banned a list of materials that can be used by Iran for its nuclear program. The United States also urged the Europeans to convey to Tehran that it must resume negotiations on a new nuclear deal and regional security while the sanctions remain in place. Indeed, France is considering imposing its own sanctions on Iran due to its breach of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear deal, according to a Nov. 27 report by *France24*.

At the same time, widespread protests broke out in Lebanon and Iraq, countries that Iran sees as client states that it can manipulate to challenge the United States and its allies. The protests were directed against Iran and its local proxies and have rapidly developed into a threat to the Iranian grip over the governments in Lebanon and Iraq. Demonstrations in both countries were catalyzed by the sanctions on Iran, which had a direct impact on the Lebanese economy and Iran's ability to support its Hezbollah and Popular Mobilization Forces surrogates in Lebanon and Iraq, respectively.

This American policy, which seemed to many to be counterintuitive, earned Trump considerable criticism, including from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin

Netanyahu. Trump's decision not to use force against Iran also coincided with his decision to withdraw American troops from most of northeastern Syria and expose the Kurds, who had fought with the United States against Islamic State, to a Turkish offensive.

Trump attempted to protect the Kurds by threatening to impose economic sanctions on Turkey if Ankara went beyond a reasonable use of force, and the United States continued its cooperation with the Kurds on other issues (fighting ISIS and securing the oil fields). Arguably, U.S. deterrence was damaged by this move, and critics raised doubts about the reliability of the United States as a superpower and an ally.

However, Trump's policy seems to be succeeding with regard to Iran, and in fact, the two cases are quite different. After defeating ISIS, Trump no longer considered the Turkish-Kurdish conflict to be a critical national security matter, whereas Iran's behavior remains a significant national security challenge for the United States.

As Iran's policy of brinkmanship backfires, and with the growing tensions with the IAEA after the U.N. nuclear agency confirmed Israeli claims about the presence of unaccounted-for and undeclared enriched uranium in Turqezabad, it is not clear what the Iranian leadership's next decisions will be.

Its extreme radical elements, led by Gen. Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps' Quds Force, may argue that not enough was done to counteract American pressure and call to take even greater risks. The main area open to Iranian moves in this direction is the nuclear realm. With the reactivation of 1,044 centrifuges at Fordow and the first activation of a large cascade of IR-6 centrifuges, the Iranians are shortening by the week the time they need to produce enough fissile material for a nuclear device—so far with no repercussions from the IAEA or from the Europeans, Russia, and China—the parties committed to the JCPOA.

Other possibilities include another attack on oil facilities, on Israel (most probably from Syria or Iraq), or an attack on American targets in the region that may force a wide-scale American reaction of the kind Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei is trying to avoid. This is probably why Israeli political and military Israeli leaders are increasingly concerned about the possibility of an Iranian attack against

Israel. Indeed, Tehran has already attempted several attacks against Israel, albeit with zero success and resulting in several casualties and loss of significant equipment.

On the other hand, the realistic radicals in the Iranian regime, led by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, may advocate a resumption of negotiations with the United States, fearing that as time goes by Iran's opening position—which is already weak—will weaken further, with the outcome being more dangerous for the regime than the ongoing sanctions.

Whatever Khamenei decides, the most immediate challenge he has to deal with is the widespread popular protests in Iran. They seem to be wider and more intense than previous rounds of protest and may not only erode the regime's image and power projection but endanger its stability. There are also the protests in Lebanon and Iraq to consider—in both these countries, the Shi'ite communities—Iran's natural allies—joined or even led the protests. This doubles the risk and the embarrassment to the ayatollahs' regime.

IDF Brig. Gen. (res.) Yossi Kuperwasser is director of the Project on Regional Middle East Developments at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. He formerly served as director-general of the Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs and head of the research division of IDF Military Intelligence.

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