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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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08.02.2020

Libya is Being Torn Apart By Outsiders



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With the United States walking out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—more commonly known as the Iran accord—we all enter into a heightened zone of danger. Trump is threatening a war on Iran through his statements and tweets, and now by his actions, assassinating serving Iranian and Iraqi generals on Iraqi soil. Assassinations are illegal in international law, but then Trump's understanding of domestic and international law is limited by what he thinks he can get away with. A war in the region now threatens its entire oil and shipping infrastructure, and can also take down the entire global economy in its wake.

The international community is complicit by complying with the patently illegal U.S. economic sanctions on Iran, and now with its cowardly silence on the assassinations of

Major-General Qassem Soleimani, commander of Iran's Quds Force, and Iraqi militia commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Only UN sanctions are valid international sanctions. The United States is able to enforce its domestic sanctions illegally on the rest of the world by virtue of its control over the global financial network: the SWIFT international money transfer platform, the international banking system, global financial institutions, etc. In international law, these economic sanctions are illegal and imposing collective punishment on Iran's civilian population.

Recently, the three EU signatories, the UK, France and Germany (EU-3), have lodged a formal complaint to the dispute settlement mechanism that Iran is violating the JCPOA, paving the way for snapping back the UN sanctions that had been lifted. This is bad faith. The United States under Trump has already pulled out of the JCPOA, and the EU-3 has failed to counter the sanctions as they had committed to Iran. Iran is still unable to sell oil, its main export; the INSTEX, the financial mechanism set up by EU supposedly to bypass the U.S. sanctions, has not seen any transaction with Iran. Effectively, Iran has been put back to a pre-2015 era, or the status prevailing before the JCPOA was signed.

Iran had given notice under JCPOA itself that it would move step-by-step away from its commitments, as permitted under the agreement if one or more parties reimpose sanctions. It would return to fulfilling all its commitments if the signatory states abide by theirs. No agreement can impose only one side to comply, while the other side reneges on its commitments.

Russia and China have limited capacity to beat the U.S. sanctions. So has India, the other big buyer of Iranian oil. All countries have problems in paying Iran except through barter deals. This is impossible in the modern era without duplicating the existing global financial infrastructure independent of the United States. The U.S. exercises a stranglehold on the world's financial structure, and this gives the U.S. sanctions international teeth.

If the U.S. sanctions continue and the rest of the world does nothing to ease Iran's pain, it will restart the escalatory ladder to war—Iranians ratcheting up their nuclear program, while the United States threatens more sanctions and possibly physical attacks on Iran's nuclear and other infrastructure. Without any off-ramp from such a course, this can only lead to an eventual collision and war. Iran, having faced U.S. and international sanctions for four decades now, is unlikely to submit and give up its nuclear and missile capability. It is fully aware of what happened to Saddam Hussein and Gaddafi, after they did.

So why is Trump sounding the drumbeats of war against Iran? Is the endgame regime change through sanctions? Or is it war with Iran and its physical destruction?

Trump's thoughts and actions are often hard to predict. He is a president who lives his life on Twitter and thinks he is still on reality TV, where firing his apprentices and firing presidents of other countries have no consequences in the real world.

The larger U.S. game plan is to reduce Iran to a vassal state. The difference between Obama-Clinton, with Trump-Pompeo, is more about tactics and means than a deeper difference on end goals. Having failed to deter Iran through sanctions, Obama had finally chosen the treaty path, hoping to subvert Iran in the future through peace, trade and a color revolution. Trump would like to reset the same game that successive U.S. administrations have tried and failed; that is, asking Iran to surrender—or else!

The United States has the capability to inflict economic pain on Iran, creating dissatisfaction with the Iranian political system, particularly among the youth. Young people in Iran are not too fond of the stifling Islamic structure that straitjackets opinions and organizations. But Iran's state structure, including its elections, still retains legitimacy among the people. The more sanctions and attempts to threaten Iran there are, the more they will lead to nationalist consolidation behind Iran's leaders.

What about the military equation? If the United States resorts to force, can Iran retaliate sufficiently for the U.S. to be deterred?

The recent missile strikes by Iran on the U.S. bases in Iraq are a key indicator of how much Iran's missile prowess has grown. Earlier, we had seen its ability to bring down a behemoth spy drone flying above 60,000 feet. The missile strikes against the two U.S. bases this time have shown a quantum leap in the accuracy of Iranian missiles. If Iran's missiles have improved dramatically as the defense experts argue, so must have that of its allies: Lebanon's Hezbollah, Yemen's Houthis, and the Syrian government forces.

So how good are Iran's missiles? Iran used short-range ballistic missiles and not cruise missiles, which it is also known to possess. The short-range missiles used were Fateh-110, which has a range of about 300 kilometers, and Qaim-1 with a range of 800 km. A defense website in the United States sums up its conclusions, that "Iran can reliably 'put hundreds of kilos of high explosive on targets within 700km of Iran' with decent, if not impressive, accuracy." This view is widely shared by other arms experts. From the Scud-era missiles, which had an accuracy of 1-2 kilometers in terms of CEP (circular error

probable, the measurement of the accuracy of missiles), they have now reached an accuracy of ten to tens of meters CEP.

The other issue is that though the United States claimed it is their early warning system that warned them of the missile attacks in advance, it appears that Iranians had warned the Iraqi government of the impending strike, and they, in turn, had warned the United States two hours before the strikes. The U.S. soldiers had taken shelter in bunkers, and even then 50 of them have been shifted to hospitals in Germany and Kuwait suffering from concussion/brain injury. The payload carried by Iranians was also lower, indicating the possibility that Iran wanted to show its missile prowess, but not cause American casualties.

The United States' much-vaunted air defense seems to not have been deployed or not used at the two bases that Iran attacked. The Patriot batteries had also failed to defend a major Saudi oil facility against Houthi missiles in September 2019. Many experts have stated that Patriots are highly overrated, and will not work against the Iranian missiles.

What about Iron Dome or other defense systems that Israel has developed? While they might work against the crude and less sophisticated rockets from Gaza, such systems will be overwhelmed if a large number of missiles with higher accuracy are launched simultaneously. If Hezbollah in Lebanon and Houthis have missiles similar to Iran's, then Israel and the other U.S. allies in the region—Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates—are at risk of the destruction of their sensitive infrastructure such as chemical and nuclear plants and population centers. Iran with its allies also has the ability to inflict significant damage and casualties on the U.S. bases and ships. The latest Iran strikes show that all of the U.S. bases in the region are within Iran's strike range. It does appear that Iran's missile development provides it with a strategic deterrence against U.S. military power without nuclear weapons.

Looking at all these elements, neither side in West Asia—either the U.S.-Israel-Saudi axis or the Iran-Hezbollah-Houthi-Syria alliance—wants war and its consequence. The problem is that war often happens by accident; or through unintended consequences of actions when forces are at hair-trigger alert. This time it was limited to an unfortunate accident leading to the Ukrainian aircraft being shot down, killing Iranians and Canadian citizens of Iranian descent. Next time it could be a warship that is struck; or a war-hungry Dr. Strangelove pressing the nuclear trigger; or a wrong intelligence input leading to wrong conclusions, unfolding strike, counterstrike and general war.

Trump's illegal assassination of General Soleimani, that too on Iraqi soil, has added fuel to the fire lit by his sabotaging of the Iran accord. This time it did not lead to a larger conflagration. At the moment, only the Iranians seem to be the adults in the room wanting peace. But they will not do it at the cost of their right to technology and abandoning their missile deterrence. If the United States believes that more pressure will cause Iran to surrender, they have not understood the last four decades of Iran-U.S. history. Those who do not learn from history are forced to repeat it. But then, what do a real estate agent and a bunch of frat boys who are running the United States today know about history?

This article was produced in partnership by [Newslick](#) and [Globetrotter](#), a project of the Independent Media Institute.

CounterPunch 07.02.2020