

# The Fallout From the Iran Nuclear Deal

Will the United States recalibrate its policy toward Iran? By Hichem Karoui



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## Controversies

Iran has test-fired several ballistic missiles since UN Resolution 2231 was passed on July 20, 2015. However, the latest test, carried out on January 29, was the first since Trump entered the White House. As with many other decisions he has taken during this new administration, Trump's reaction caused controversy.

Some argue that Iranian ballistic missiles do not fall under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as the Iran deal. These are conventional missiles, while the JCPOA only concerns nuclear technology.

Two key features of Resolution 2231, which terminated all previous UN sanctions against Iran, need to be made clear at this point. First, Resolution 2231 did not prohibit Iran from developing conventional weapons or missiles, nor did it provide any prescription for punishment in case Iran transgressed the agreement. Second, the resolution "calls upon Iran not to undertake any activity related to ballistic missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons." Iran claims it does not have—and never had—such nuclear capacities.

Is the Trump administration "stretching" the UN resolution for its own political goals? If so, what are those goals? It is worth remembering that Trump has called the international nuclear deal with Iran, "disastrous" and "the worst deal ever negotiated by Washington."

So, is it possible to withdraw from the JCPOA, either by explicitly declaring so or through policy sanctions that would violate the agreement? Technically yes, though Trump did not suggest this was his purpose. Instead, he said he will renegotiate the agreement. Considering this is a collective agreement, co-signed by Britain, France, Germany, Russia, China and the UN, rather than a bilateral U.S.-Iran deal, this will be tricky.

It is not obvious that Trump would find support in Europe for such a venture—possibly with the exception of the UK. All the co-signatories of the deal have resumed business relations with Iran, with the latest unilateral sanctions imposed by the Trump administration being of great concern to them.

## A strange silence

Some observers claim that the only beneficiaries of Trump's hardline Iranian position are Saudi Arabia and a few Gulf allies. The same voices note that when Trump announced the executive order banning travelers from seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the United States, nothing happened in those places. The reactions against the ban in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf were very "meek." There were no protests or systematic media bashing, just a polite follow-up. Most strikingly, there was no official criticism, with some officials even sympathizing with the concerns of the U.S. president.

In short, there were more protests in Christian nations (in Europe and the United States itself) against the "Muslim ban" than in Muslim countries. But, this is no mystery. In the Gulf region, the former U.S. administration did not leave good souvenirs. Many regional powers believe they were marginalized by the United States, allowing Iran to expand at their expense. Although they accepted the JCPOA, they think of it almost in the same terms as President Trump and his camp.

## Mutual interests

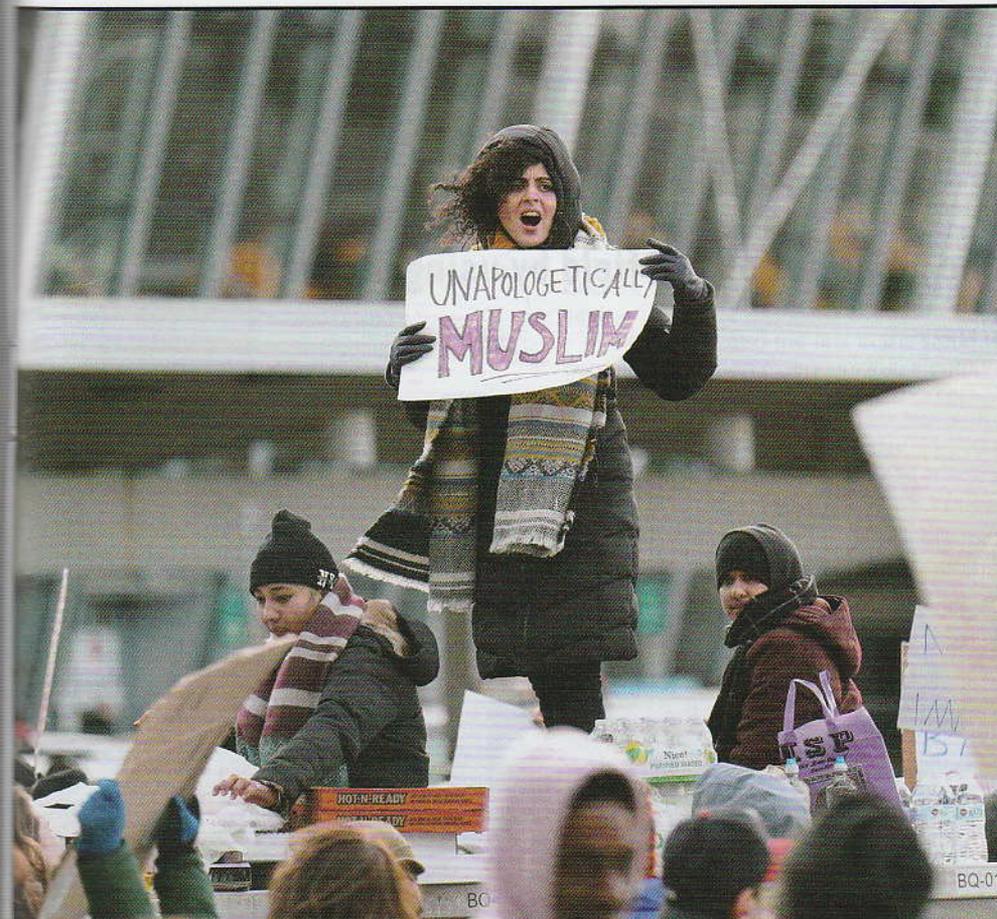
In the U.S. camp, the Saudis and their allies have tried to maintain influence. Among them, Jeb Bush and Dennis Ross co-published an op-ed in *Time* magazine on January 19 calling for the isolation of Iran. They claim the JCPOA has not halted Iran's path to a bomb, but merely delayed it, "at the

While the former U.S. administration was perceived by its Arab allies in the Gulf as prioritizing an appeasement deal with Iran, the new administration is coming back to the old neoconservative stance, antagonizing Iran.

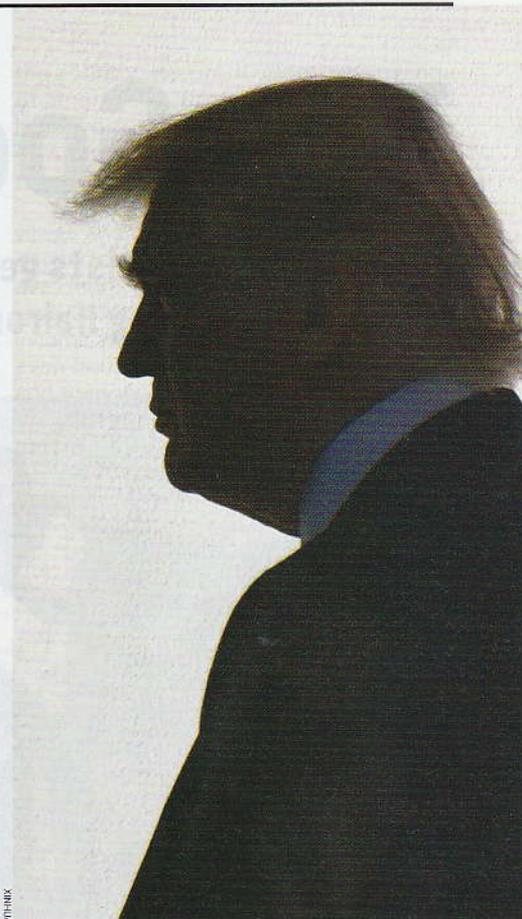
Tehran has denied that its recent missile test launch, which some claimed violates a UN resolution, was a message to test the new U.S. leader. In return, the swift reaction of President Donald Trump signaled that he may test the "P5+1" nuclear agreement. The Trump administration ordered sanctions against more than two dozen people and companies from the Gulf in retaliation.

In a toughly worded statement before his resignation, Michael Flynn, ex-national security adviser, said, "The days of turning a blind eye to Iran's hostile and belligerent actions toward the United States and the world community are over."

This provoked two answers from the Iranians. The first was diplomatic, coming from Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Ghasemi: Tehran denied accusations that its test launch was a violation of UN resolutions. The second response was defiant: Brigadier General Hossein Salami, Lieutenant Commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, said, "The number of Iranian missiles, warships and defense missile launchers is growing every day... and the sky, land and sea are under the control of this nation... This is not a land where an outsider can set foot with sinister intentions."



Protestors gather at JFK Airport in New York City to voice opposition to President Donald Trump's travel ban on people from seven Muslim-majority nations on January 30



U.S. President Donald Trump has vowed to renegotiate the nuclear deal with Iran

considerable price of abandoning Western leverage against Iran."

Jeb Bush was a Republican rival to Trump during the electoral campaign, while Ambassador Ross served in both the George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations. He played a role in assisting the Israelis and Palestinians to reach the 1995 Interim Agreement, brokered the 1997 Hebron Protocol, and facilitated the 1994 Israel-Jordan peace treaty. But he failed to bring Israel and Syria together. The Bush family and Ross still have excellent connections in the Gulf.

Therefore, by taking a tough stance against Iran, Trump does not fear isolation. All the hawks who served former Republican presidents are well disposed toward him. An inspection of the conservative and neoconservative think tanks in Washington would convince any skeptic that the rightward shift in U.S. politics underlined by the George W. Bush administration remains and is happy to lend a hand to another mess in the Middle East.

John Bolton, for example, opines that Trump should tear up his predecessor's

deal with Tehran. First, because of what he calls the strategic miscalculations embodied in the deal which endanger the United States and its allies. Second, because the entire agreement reflects appeasement, which for Bolton translates as weak diplomacy. Indeed, Bolton was one of Bush's backers in the war against Iraq. In his own words, this deal endangers the United States by "lending legitimacy to the ayatollahs, the world's central bankers for terrorism."

Another right-wing hawk, Michael Rubin, advises a series of U.S. actions against Iran, including stationing two carrier strike groups in the northern Indian Ocean and imposing sanctions against the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, in a bid to end the nuclear deal.

While you cannot charge the neocons and other conservatives with idealistic love for the Saudis, they do see them as potential "bankers" for any military enterprise. Iran is the meeting point between the Saudi camp and U.S. right-wingers.

The latter have never forgotten the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which overthrew

the U.S.-backed regime. They accuse pro-Iranian Hezbollah forces of thwarting U.S. and Saudi interests in Lebanon and other nations, creating thousands of victims. In Yemen and Syria the conflict is still ongoing.

U.S. right-wingers and their Middle Eastern allies consider that without Iran's underhand tactics and ambitious regional expansion (Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen), there would not be much to hear about Sunni terrorism. This implies that Sunni terrorism is a reaction to Shiite expansionism, though no evidence supports this. Some also consider the invasion of Iraq, instead of Iran, under Bush as a grave mistake, barely concealing their desire for Trump to carry this out.

All of this leads to a bleak sight; diplomacy is the greatest absence in this picture. A new era has emerged in the United States, yet instead of turning the page of conflict and opening a path to peace, it is calling back the "veterans" of past wars. ■

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