

Trump-Biden Policy of ‘Maximum Pressure’ on Tehran Backfired

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Global Research, November 04, 2021

[The Jordan Times](#) 3 November 2021

Region: [Middle East & North Africa, USA](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

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Tehran’s announcement that it is prepared to reenter this month the Vienna talks on rescuing the 2015 agreement for limiting Iran’s nuclear programme in exchange for sanctions relief has reassured none of the other participants. These are Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China, the remaining signatories of the deal, and the US, which withdrew in May 2018. Iran stuck to the terms of the deal for a year after the US breached it. Since the Trump administration not only restored but also added sanctions, in 2019 Iran began to exceed limits on enrichment and stockpiling and eventually reined in UN inspectors who had ensured compliance on Tehran’s part.

Unfortunately, commentators have warned that a return to compliance by the US, the instigator of the crisis over the pact, and Iran could be a long way off, if reaching a new deal remains a possibility.

It is expected that Tehran will adopt a hard-line in fresh negotiations as the new government under ultraconservative Ebrahim Raisi continues to demand reassurances that the US, under incumbent President Joe Biden, or his successor, will not pull out again as it did under Donald Trump, and insist that all sanctions imposed on Iran since US withdrawal will be lifted.

Although Biden has assured Britain, France and Germany that the US will not again pull out of the deal unless Iran reneges, he cannot provide legal guarantees that a future administration will remain in the nuclear deal and not reimpose sanctions.

While Biden pledged during the 2020 election campaign to return to the nuclear deal, he has not honoured this verbal commitment. He should have done this early in his presidency along with decreeing the US return to the Paris climate accord and other agreements from which Trump withdrew. But Biden hesitated and listened to the bad advice of appointees who believed the US could bully Iran into major concessions on its involvement in the affairs of the region and weapons development. Such concessions were not granted while Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani, a moderate who was in charge when the deal was signed, was in

office and will not be conceded by Raisi. He might not have become Iran's president if Biden had quickly rejoined the nuclear deal, thereby boosting the Iranian moderate camp ahead of the June presidential election.

If Biden had kept his word and re-entered the deal within days or a week or two of taking office, Rouhani might well have been succeeded by a moderate who would have retained his determination to rescue the deal. Instead, Biden followed Trump's lead by making demands unacceptable to Tehran and piling sanctions on Iran despite the failure of Trump's policy of exerting "maximum pressure" on Iran by imposing 1,500 sanctions.

Tehran did not capitulate to Trump's pressure strategy because, since the fall of the US-allied shah in 1979, Iran has resisted and survived US-imposed and US-driven international sanctions. They have crippled Iran's economy, reduced oil exports, blocked access to international banking and punished its population by denying food, medical supplies and other essential supplies. This policy, upheld by Biden, has turned Iran's 80 million people against the US and has, according to polls, accorded Raisi a modicum of popularity which Rouhani did not enjoy at the end of this term.

In other words, the Trump-Biden policy of "maximum pressure" has backfired. As far as Tehran is concerned, Biden enjoys no more trust than Trump. Biden's team, which has been involved in six rounds of negotiations in Vienna, has lost credibility with pundits in Washington, the remaining signatories and Tehran. To make matters worse Secretary of State Antony Blinken has added former US ambassador to Israel, Daniel Shapiro, to the team with the intention of keeping Israel up to date on the talks and protecting the Israeli interest — which is to scupper the deal.

Meanwhile, Iran has moved ahead despite US policies and actions.

In retaliation for the US abandonment of the nuclear deal, Iran has exceeded limits on enrichment by exceeding 3.7 per cent purity to 4.5, 20 and 60 and has created stockpiles of such material beyond those permitted by the deal. Iran has deployed advanced centrifuges for enrichment which are far more efficient than those specified in the deal. Iran has cut back on cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency by curbing the access and activities of its inspectors. Some commentators argue that Iran is a "few weeks" or "several months" away from producing enough 90 per cent enriched uranium for manufacturing a bomb or bombs. A former Israeli head of Mossad intelligence dismissed these predictions while Tehran says it has no intention of building nuclear bombs. If the US continues to exert "maximum pressure" plus under Biden, Tehran could change its mind even though possessing nuclear weapons does not mean they can be used.

Tehran has pivoted to the East by concluding a major investment and oil deal with China and focusing on rebuilding its domestic economy with the goal of making it independent. Iran has deepened its regional involvements in the Yemen war, the Syrian civil/proxy conflict, Iraq and Lebanon. Iran has also developed ballistic missiles and drones capable of striking US military positions in the region.

On the diplomatic plane, Tehran has conducted several rounds of reconciliation talks with Riyadh, a major US ally, with the aim of ending the rivalry between Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia. If successful, rapprochement could stabilise the region.

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