

Iran: Hung out to dry

By GWYNNE DYER

Iran has 'begun its march ... towards nuclear weaponry,' said Israel's energy minister Yuval Steinitz, and that is technically correct. Only one year and 60 days after President Donald Trump tore up the treaty that guaranteed Iran won't make nuclear weapons and 'peel on the pieces', Iran has taken a tiny step towards reviving its nuclear programme.

Just a baby step: on Monday Tehran announced that it would start enriching uranium fuel to more than 3.67%, the limit set by the treaty that it signed in 2015. Until last week it was fully obeying all the terms of the treaty, as France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Russia and China, the other signatories to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), all confirmed.

The fuel Iran is making now will be used in its reactor at Bushehr, which requires fuel enriched to just below 5%, so this is not a very big breach of the treaty. Indeed, Iran says it is not a breach at all, quoting the part of the JCPOA that says a party can 'cease performing its commitments' in whole or in part in the event of 'significant non-performance' by any of the other parties.

You could say certainly argue that the United States 'ceased performing its commitments' in whole or in part' by abandoning the JCPOA, imposing extremely harsh trade sanctions on Iran, and trying to force everybody else to stop trading with it too, but there would be no point. This is about power, not legality or fairness, and the U.S. has the power.

The U.S. has used its power to force most of the other countries that signed the treaty to stop trading with Iran too, even though they knew that Iran was meeting all its obligations. Unfortunately, it's not 'Germany' or 'France' that trades with Iran; it's German and French companies, which will not be allowed to buy or sell in the United States if they trade with Iran.

The European governments have no legal power to force their companies to trade with Iran, and they have not offered to compensate companies that do so and as a result lose American contracts. They all acknowledge that Iran is in the right and Donald Trump is in the wrong, but they lack the courage to act accordingly.

So Iran has been hung out to dry. Its foreign trade has collapsed, including the oil sales that kept the economy afloat. Inflation has quadrupled, its currency has lost 60% of its value, household incomes have fallen sharply, and the economy is predicted to shrink by 6% this year. It's what Trump calls 'maximum pressure', and ordinary Iranians are hurting.

Iran's response, after more than a year of this, was to become just a little bit non-compliant with the JCPOA. Its clearly stated policy, however, is to ratchet up the scale of the breach a bit more every sixty days, applying pressure back in a quite different mode.

You can only subdivide the move back to a full civil nuclear program into so many steps, however, and even at 60 days per step Iran will probably be there by this time next year.

That doesn't mean it will be making nuclear weapons next year. It had a full civil nuclear program for several decades before the JCPOA was signed, and it didn't get nuclear weapons then. But without the treaty the 'break-out time' to Iran's first nuclear weapon, if Tehran decided to go for broke, would drop from one year to only a couple of months.

This is what the JCPOA was really about. Iran always swore that it would not make nuclear weapons 'Ayatollah Khomeini even called them 'un-Islamic' but a lot of other governments hated or at least mistrusted the Iranian regime. Before the 2015 deal, there was constant talk in the U.S. and Israel about the need to make a 'preemptive attack' on Iran's nuclear facilities.

The JCPOA kicked the can down the road for 15 years. Iran dismantled various nuclear facilities and agreed to intrusive inspections so that if it ever did decide to cheat, everybody else would have a year or more to respond. Nobody loved the deal, but everybody agreed that it was the best available, and made the future a lot safer.

So why did Donald Trump trash it? His obsession with destroying Barack Obama's political legacy undoubtedly provided the initial impetus, but he also probably believed that putting 'maximum pressure' on Iran would make it crumble. Another triumph for the great statesman.

The hawks in the White House (John Bolton, Mike Pompeo et al.) probably do know that Iran is too proud to crumble, but they don't care because they actually want a war.

Trump is trapped between them and his promise not to lead the United States into another Middle East war ? which is why we have crazy episodes like the air strikes on Iran he allegedly cancelled on June 20 ten minutes before they hit.

No wonder Sir Kim Darroch, British ambassador to the U.S., said in a confidential dispatch leaked to the press on Sunday that Trump's White House is 'uniquely dysfunctional' and 'divided'.