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US withdrawal from Iran nuclear deal drives Ankara into a corner

The Turkish government has sharply criticized US President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from the nuclear accord that Iran reached with the so-called P-6 group of states (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) in July 2015.

Speaking to CNN International on Wednesday, May 9, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan warned that the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, which is formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA, would roil not just the Middle East, but the entire world.

"The US," said Erdogan, "might gain some certain advantages from the withdrawal," including higher oil prices, "but many of the countries in poverty will be hit harder and deeper."

Asked if the US withdrawal from the JCPOA could lead to war, the Turkish President said he hoped not, but that if that were to be the case, "the USA will be the ones to lose." Previously, Turkish presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin warned that Washington's repudiation of the JCPOA would cause instability and new conflicts.

Speaking at a joint press conference with his Lithuanian counterpart, Linas Linkevicius, in Ankara, on the same day, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu criticized the US government for its high-handed attitude. "States," said Cavusoglu, "must stand by the treaties they have signed. If they do not, all international treaties of the past could suddenly be ignored."

A Turkish Foreign Ministry statement noted that, the “International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), mandated to monitor the implementation of the deal in accordance with the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231,” has repeatedly confirmed “Iran’s compliance.”

The Turkish government has also conferred with Russia and Iran, its ostensible partners in seeking a “political solution” to the Syria conflict, over the American attempt to blow up the JCPOA.

Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly agreed to coordinate attempts to prop up the Iran nuclear deal, when they spoke by phone last Thursday.

The Turkish president also reassured his Iranian counterpart, Hassan Rouhani, that Ankara remains committed to the JCPOA and close economic ties with its southeastern neighbor. For his part, Turkish Economy Minister Nihat Zeybekci has vowed, “Turkey will continue to trade with Iran as much as possible and will not give any account to anyone for this.”

Iran is an important trading partner of Turkey. According to official Turkish figures, total trade between the two countries reached US \$10.7 billion in 2017. In the first seven months of last year, Iran exported 7.4 million tons of oil to Turkey, more than double the 3 million tons it sent to Turkey over the same period in 2016. After Russia, Iran is Turkey’s second largest supplier of natural gas, sending Turkey around 10 billion cubic meters a year.

The reimposition of punishing US economic sanctions on Iran and Washington’s plans to force other countries to follow suit or themselves face sanctions threaten to deliver a major blow to a Turkish economy already reeling from crisis.

The Turkish lira has lost almost one sixth of its value against the US dollar within the last four months, due to investor concerns about geopolitical instability and rising inflation inside Turkey. After the lira fell below 4.37 to the US dollar on May 9, Erdogan was forced to call an emergency meeting of his top economic advisors to discuss steps to bolster Turkey’s currency. However, the president has been resisting calls for higher interest rates, which he has termed the “mother of all evil,” for fear they could trigger a deep economic slump.

While Turkish government officials are claiming the country will defy Washington’s new economic sanctions on Iran, a score of the country’s banks are already facing billions of dollars in possible US fines for alleged “sanctions busting” prior to the JCOPA coming into force.

Last January, a US court found Mehmet Hakan Atilla, a former deputy general manager at Turkey's state-controlled Halkbank, guilty of conspiring to launder hundreds of millions dollars through the US financial system on behalf of Iran. The US government is recommending Atilla be sentenced to 15 years in prison.

The new US offensive against Iran, which is being eagerly support by Israel and Saudi Arabia, threatens to further intensify the geopolitical predicament of Ankara, which has tried to straddle the fence between the US and its NATO partners, on the one hand, and Russia and Iran, on the other, in the Syrian war.

Taking heart from Trump's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA, Israel launched a massive missile attack on Iranian forces in Syria, early Thursday morning, in supposed retaliation for a failed Iranian strike, using primitive missiles, on the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

Like Tehran, Ankara has been stunned and shaken by these events.

In recent years, the Erdogan government has made a show of criticizing Israel, but it has failed to issue any statement on the Israeli attack on the forces of a country it claims as a close partner. The reality is the Turkish-Russian-Iranian alliance is shot through with contradictions, as the rival ruling elites of the three countries scramble to advance their respective economic and military-strategic interests.

Turkey helped spearhead the US regime-change war in Syria, until it fell out with Washington over the latter's alliance with Kurdish militia in Syria that are aligned with the PKK of Abdullah Ocalan.

And even now, while allied with Moscow and Tehran in the so-called Astana peace process, Ankara remains hostile to the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Thus, the Turkish government welcomed last month's reckless US, French and British missile strikes on Syria on trumped-up claims Damascus had mounted a poison gas attack.

The cooperation between Ankara and Tehran in Syria is mainly based on their common reactionary policy towards the Kurdish people.

While they agree on the oppression of the Kurdish population and the working class both at home and in Syria and Iraq, the Turkish and Iranian bourgeoisie are pursuing their own domestic and regional interests, amid the ongoing imperialist carve-up of the region.

The Turkish government's criticism of the Trump administration over its withdrawal from the JCPOA is thus no more than a tactical maneuver aimed at advancing the interests of the Turkish bourgeoisie.

It is the escalating imperialist war drive and its domestic economic and social implications that forced Erdogan to call parliamentary and presidential elections on June 24, seventeen months ahead of schedule.

Not only Erdogan, but the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois opposition parties have also welcomed the election as a means of strengthening the hand of the Turkish ruling class, both internationally and at home, against the working class.

The election campaign is unfolding under a state of emergency, which was imposed shortly after the failed July 2016, US-backed coup against Erdogan. It allows the president to bypass parliament in enacting new laws and grants authorities the ability to suspend rights and freedoms.

Under the ongoing emergency, some 150,000 people have been detained and nearly the same number dismissed from their jobs. More than 120 journalists have also been detained and more than 180 media outlets closed.

Whilst in the past Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) basked in the support lavished on them by the US and the European Union, now that the imperialists have soured on his rule, Erdogan beats the drum of Turkish nationalism against his explicitly pro-NATO and pro-EU bourgeois opponents, accusing them of being collaborators with the west. In reality he is continuously seeking a rapprochement with Washington, Berlin, London and Paris.