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Iran, US: Confrontation Continues

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On March 10, leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Khamenei met the newly elected Assembly of Experts. He said the United States harbors plans to change the state structure of Iran, but an attempt to stage a coup d'état is doomed to fail.

The Iranian spiritual leader noted that Iranians must not forget what the West has done to their country. They must always remember who Iran has to deal with. The West does not represent the entire world community; it's just part of it. The Ayatollah warned that those who wish Iran ill will soon have to stay in line willing to normalize the relations.

The Assembly of Experts of Iran is a deliberative body of eighty-eight mujtahids (Islamic theologians) that is charged with electing and removing the supreme leader of Iran and supervising his activities. The members are elected from lists of candidates by direct public vote for eight-year terms. President Hassan Rouhani is a member of the Assembly, as well as other top officials. If Ayatollah Khamenei (76) is not able to continue in the office, the Assembly will elect another person to perform his duties. The spiritual leader called on the Assembly members to serve the interests of the state and preserve allegiance to the values of Islamic revolution.

According to him, today the normalization of the relationship with the United States does not serve the Iranian interests. The US is still viewed as a threat.

The Iranian nuclear dossier was closed in July 2015, but it did not lead to normalization of the relationship. The US continues to exert economic pressure on the Islamic Republic. The United States lifted the sanctions against Iran only partially with numerous reservations unlike America's European allies who lifted them all on January 17. Obama's temporary softening his position on Iran was nothing more than just another tactical move.

President Obama extended the status of national emergency vis-a-vis Tehran despite the recent lifting of nuclear-related sanctions stipulated in Iran's agreement with the P5+1 group of countries, President Barack Obama told the Speaker of the US House of Representatives in a letter on March 9.

«Certain actions and policies of the Government of Iran are contrary to the interests of the United States in the region and continue to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States. For these reasons, I have determined that it is necessary to continue the national emergency declared with respect to Iran and to maintain in force comprehensive sanctions», the President informed the Congress.

US firms will still be largely left out of the market. Washington tries to expand the sanctions regime internationally.

This time the United States wants to impose additional sanctions related to Iran's recent launches of ballistic missiles. The US Congress wants the administration to immediately bring the issue before the UN Security Council. It's not clear what the Security Council has to consider. Could the Iranian missiles be nuclear-tipped? Probably yes, but Iran has no nuclear warheads to be fitted on the missiles. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) created the Iran Task Force within the Department of Safeguards, reporting directly to the deputy director-general for safeguards. The task force is responsible for all technical activities that now are carried out under the Joint Plan of Action and to be carried out under the new agreement between Iran and the P5+1 upon its entering into force. The Joint Plan of Action is being implemented according to the United Nations Security Council resolution 2231 and the decisions taken in December 2015. The Council simply has nothing to discuss.

Still, the US continues to stick to its present course. The US wants the discussion on Iran to go beyond the missiles program to include the destabilization role of Iran in the region, especially the security of Israel. During the recent visit of US Vice President to Israel, it was stated that Tehran's Middle East policy was no less dangerous than the activities of international terrorist organizations. Israel's motivation for rising tensions is clear. Tel Aviv is involved in a bargain deal with the United States over increased military aid in view of the nuclear deal concluded with Iran. It's hard to understand why the Obama administration puts Israeli security interests above the interests of the United States and why the mission to counter Iran is given higher priority than the fight against terrorism.

Surprisingly, that's what US military top leaders do. Gen. Lloyd Austin III, the head of the US Central Command and Gen. Joseph Votel – the head of the US Special Operations Command who has been nominated to replace Austin – told lawmakers that Islamic State fighters represent the greatest short-term threat to US security in the Middle East.

But over the long-term, both men are more concerned with Iranian support for terrorist groups and interference in neighboring governments' operations.

In reality, Tehran's regional policy is focused on providing aid to the Syrian government in its fight against the terrorist organizations that have seized parts of the Syrian national territory. In 2015, 37 thousand foreign mercenaries were fighting the Syrian army. The absolute majority of them infiltrated Syria from Turkey. Ankara's main enemy are not terrorist groups, but the Syrian Kurds – the only ground force capable of fighting the Islamic State on the ground. It's an open secret that in 2013 President Obama allowed the CIA to arm rebels. The arms shipments were paid for by another US vassal state – Saudi Arabia, which provided recommendations on who the weapons should go to. As a result, the weapons went right into wrong hands.

By accusing Iran of supporting international terrorism, the US does not shy away from outright provocations.

For instance, Iran was ordered by a US judge to pay more than \$10.5 billion in damages to families of people killed in the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and to a group of insurers.

US District Judge George Daniels in New York issued a default judgment Wednesday against Iran for \$7.5 billion to the estates and families of people who died at the World Trade Center and Pentagon. It includes \$2 million to each estate for the victims' pain and suffering plus \$6.88 million in punitive damages. Daniels also awarded \$3 billion to insurers including Chubb Ltd. that paid property damage, business interruption and other claims. Earlier in the case, Daniels found that Iran had failed to defend claims that it aided the Sept. 11 hijackers and was therefore liable for damages tied to the attacks. Daniels's March 9 ruling adopts damages findings by a US magistrate judge in December. While it is difficult to collect damages from an unwilling foreign nation, the plaintiffs may try to collect part of the judgments using a law that permits parties to tap terrorists' assets frozen by the government.

It's clear, the US wants to rob Iran. For instance, a new US export restriction against China's ZTE Corp. for alleged Iran sanctions violations is likely to disrupt the telecom manufacturer's sprawling global supply chain and could create substantial parts shortages, according to sanctions experts. Under the measure announced by the Commerce Department on March 7, US manufacturers will be banned from selling components to ZTE, which is a major global supplier of telecom-networking equipment. In addition, foreign manufacturers will be prohibited from selling products containing a significant amount of US-made parts to the Chinese company. The Commerce Department said ZTE planned to use a series of shell companies *«to illicitly re-export controlled items to Iran in violation of US export control laws»*. It said ZTE acted *«contrary to the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States»*.

Under the circumstances, there is no alternative to the decision made by the Iranian top leadership to improve relations with the whole world, except the United States. Sticking to such a policy seems to be a natural thing to do. It's also easily understandable why Tehran is reluctant to seek ways to normalize the relations with the United States.

There is no thaw in the bilateral relationship. Instead, the countries are in for a new round of confrontation.