

As US hints at exit from Iran deal, potential new conflicts come into view

Thomas Seibert

Washington

As US President Donald Trump edges closer to ending the Iran nuclear agreement, officials and observers warned of a potential new conflict in the Middle East and of a growing split between Washington and its European allies.

"I have decided" about whether to pull the United States out of the 2015 agreement, Trump said, without giving details. The New York Times reported that the president wants to extend the time frame of the treaty and deter Iran's development of ballistic missiles. Tehran has rejected all calls for new negotiations about the accord.

The Trump administration must submit a report by October 15 to tell the US Congress whether Iran is following the rules of the agreement designed to keep Tehran from developing nuclear weapons. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the Iran deal is officially known, was hammered out after years of talks between Iran and the United States, Russia, China, France, the United Kingdom, Germany and the European Union.

In his first address to the UN General Assembly, Trump repeated his criticism of the Iran deal in strong language.

"The Iran deal was one of the worst and most one-sided transactions the United States has ever entered into," Trump said in his speech. "Frankly, that deal is an embarrassment to the United States and I don't think you've heard the last of it – believe me."

He expressed a suspicion that Iran has not given up its nuclear ambitions. "We cannot abide by an agreement if it provides cover for the eventual construction of a nuclear programme," he said.

Trump said Tehran was using Iranian resources to support Hezbollah in Lebanon, shore up the rule of Syrian leader Bashar Assad, help rebels in Yemen's civil war "and undermine peace throughout the entire Middle East."

Iranian President Hassan Rohani said in his General Assembly speech that his country would "not be the first country to violate the agreement" and later said he did not believe Trump would walk away from the treaty.

America's partners are split over Trump's hawkish stance on Iran.



Under pressure. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif talks on his cell phone as he attends the UN General Assembly at UN headquarters, September 20. (AFP)

Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, who has said the Iran agreement should be changed or scrapped altogether, called Trump's speech "courageous." Saudi Arabia, another key US ally in the Middle East, repeated its criticism of the Iran accord.

European powers warned the United States that leaving the Iran agreement would be a mistake. "Renouncing it would be a grave error, not respecting it would be irresponsible," French President Emmanuel Macron told the General Assembly just hours after Trump's speech.

EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini, after a meeting between treaty partners, said the agreement was working. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called Trump's position "extremely worrying."

Russia and the Western European powers are expected to stay

with the agreement even should the United States withdraw, blunting the effect of renewed American sanctions against Iran and isolating Washington.

Macron, after meeting with Trump in New York, said the US president had been unable to explain to him what should take the place of the JCPOA: "I didn't understand it." German Chancellor Angela Merkel told state broadcaster DW that the Iran treaty was "better than having no agreement at all."

The statements by two of Europe's most powerful leaders show

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that Trump risks isolation if he leaves the accord. "The rest of the international community would not be with us," said Michael O'Hanlon, a national security specialist at the Brookings Institution in Washington.

Despite warnings by Macron and others, there are signs that even high-ranking officials in the Trump administration who have been arguing to keep the nuclear pact together are distancing themselves from the JCPOA.

One of them is Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, one of several senior officials who have said it would be better for the United States to leave the treaty intact. Following Trump's speech, Tillerson called for changes to the accord, especially because the limits on enrichment technology imposed by the agreement run out in 2025.

"We can almost start the count-

down clock as to when they will resume their nuclear weapons capability," Tillerson told the Fox News channel, referring to the Iranians. "If we're going to stick with the Iran deal, there have to be changes made."

State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert referred to the agreement in the past tense. "This nuclear deal failed to look at the totality of all the bad actions that Iran is responsible for," Nauert told Fox.

In case of a US withdrawal from the JCPOA, all eyes would be on Tehran, which could carry on with the remaining treaty partners and continue to accept UN inspections of nuclear facilities or decide to "kick the inspectors out," O'Hanlon said.

This would put pressure on Trump to launch a military strike against Tehran – "a very difficult decision," O'Hanlon said.

Is Nikki Haley looking to move up?



Mark Habeeb

is East-West editor of The Arab Weekly and adjunct professor of Global Politics and Security at Georgetown University in Washington.

Despite her lack of prior foreign policy experience, people who know Haley say they are not surprised by how she has performed.

While the world's attention focused on US President Donald Trump's high-level meetings and his first address at the UN General Assembly, observers in Washington were also closely watching Nikki Haley, the US ambassador to the United Nations.

Haley, the 45-year-old former governor of South Carolina, had no foreign policy experience before assuming her diplomatic post in January. Since then, however, she has proven to be politically adept and forceful in defence of the Trump administration's agenda. Many people say Haley is the most likely candidate to replace US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who officially is her

boss, should Tillerson resign or be squeezed out.

Many also say that she aims to one day run for the White House.

Haley, who was born Nimrata Randhawa, is the daughter of Indian Sikh immigrants from Punjab. She is the first Indian-American to hold a cabinet-level position in the US government and only the second to be elected governor of a US state.

Among her successes at the United Nations were twice persuading the UN Security Council – including China and Russia – to tighten sanctions against North Korea in response to Pyongyang's missile tests. Her efforts were praised by both Republicans and Democrats in Washington, as well as by top US allies.

Despite her lack of prior foreign policy experience, people who know Haley say they are not

surprised by how she has performed. Ian Bremmer, president of the Eurasia Group consultancy, said: "Nikki is a politician and has worked as a politician her whole life. She's more flexible and willing to be charismatic. The lack of experience has not hurt her."

Haley has strongly supported Trump's hard-line position towards Iran – in contrast to Tillerson's more measured approach – and is believed to support US withdrawal from the nuclear deal with Tehran. She has argued that, under the deal, the world will be facing "another North Korea" within a decade.

She also is outspoken in her support for Israel. In her first address to the United Nations as US ambassador, she said: "Nowhere has the UN's failure been more consistent and more outrageous than in its bias against our close

ally Israel."

While he was in New York, Trump was accompanied by Haley nearly as often as he was by Tillerson, even though Tillerson is by far a more senior official. Moreover, prior to the president's New York meetings, it was Haley and national security adviser H.R. McMaster who briefed the media.

Haley has consistently denied that she would like to be secretary of state and she was reportedly offered and refused the position by Trump before he took office. That was before her UN experience, however, and before she had developed a taste for diplomacy. Her strong showing in New York may lead her to reconsider if Trump were to make the offer again.

"She would be a more capable spokeswoman for the Trump administration's foreign policy [than Tillerson]," said Bremmer.