

US embarks on policy to box in Iran but is careful not to touch nuclear pact

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Washington

The United States is embarking on a tougher policy towards Iran but is careful not to touch the international nuclear deal with Tehran, despite warnings by US President Donald Trump that the agreement is in peril.

Following a speech by Trump that called for tougher measures to box in Iran and threatened to tear up the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the nuclear accord is formally known, the US House of Representatives passed bills targeting Tehran's support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Iranian missile programme. US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson called for a decrease of Iranian influence over Iraq.

The clock is ticking for Congress to act after Trump refused to certify that Iran was in compliance with the JCPOA. Lawmakers have until mid-December to decide on fresh sanctions related to the nuclear accord, a step that could blow up the agreement. If Congress does not act, the agreement remains in place as it is.

"The House has taken two critical steps towards addressing the full range of threats Iran poses to the United States and our partners," Republican Ed Royce, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said in a statement.

In one measure, passed October 25 without opposition, the House called for sanctions to cut off Hezbollah from international financial aid and from support by "foreign states." A second act was directed against Hezbollah's alleged use of civilians as human shields. In a third decision, the House called on the European Union to declare Hezbollah a terrorist organisation.

The House later passed the Iran Ballistic Missiles and International Sanctions Enforcement Act, demanding sanctions against Iranian government agencies involved in the missile programme and against

foreign countries, individuals or organisations that support it.

"These sanctions will squeeze Iranian and foreign companies, banks and individuals that support the Iranian regime's illicit weapons programmes," Royce said. "Iran must know that the United States will not tolerate its dangerous behaviour."

Passage by the US Senate and Trump's signature are necessary for the bills to become law.

A Hezbollah member of the Lebanese parliament said the United States was meddling in Lebanon's internal affairs with the sanctions proposals. "The sanctions law... is a blatant interference in Lebanese internal affairs, a violation of its national sovereignty and an unacceptable targeting of the Lebanese people," Hezbollah parliamentarian Hassan Fadlallah said in a televised statement quoted by the Reuters news agency.

As the bills passed through the House, Tillerson used a visit to the Gulf region, India and Pakistan to demand a withdrawal of Iran-backed forces from Iraq as the threat from the Islamic State (ISIS) was receding after a string of military defeats for the jihadists.

"Iranian militias that are in Iraq, now that the fight against Daesh and ISIS is coming to a close, those militias need to go home," Tillerson said in Saudi Arabia, using an Arabic acronym for the extremist group.

For all the new pressure on Iran, the Trump administration is not challenging the JCPOA. Speaking in India, Tillerson made an explicit distinction between the nuclear agreement and other measures against Iran.

He said Washington's Iran policy rested on three separate pillars. "One is dealing with the nuclear plan of action. The second important pillar of that policy, though, is to deal with [the Iranians'] other destabilising activities – their ballistic missile programmes, their export of arms to terrorist organisations and their destabilising export of foreign fighters, involvement in the revolution in Yemen, Syria and



Two steps. Republican Ed Royce, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, presides over a markup of a bill to expand sanctions against Iran on Capitol Hill in Washington, on October 12. (AP)

other places." The third pillar was "support for moderate voices inside of Iran."

US allies welcome the caution displayed by Washington despite Trump's tough talk. "We can talk about all that," said a senior European diplomat, referring to US concerns about the Iranian missile

programme and Iran's aggressive stance in the region, "but it has to be separate" from the JCPOA. "We can't have a linkage between the JCPOA and other issues," he said.

That approach is shared by former senior US officials. Leon Panetta, a former CIA director and defence secretary, called on the Trump administration to stick to the JCPOA despite the criticism levelled against the agreement.

The United States had signed the nuclear pact and should make clear "that we continue to enforce the agreement," Panetta told a panel organised by the Hudson Institute, a conservative think-tank, in Washington. Walking away from the JCPOA would be disastrous,

Panetta warned. "The worst thing you can do is break your word," he said.

There is no plan for a move by Congress on new sanctions in connection with the Iran deal, Brian Fitzpatrick, a member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, told the same panel. Calling the JCPOA a "bad decision," he said: "The question is now: What is the best course of action?" Fitzpatrick said lawmakers needed "full and open hearings" to make that decision but no schedule for them has been announced.

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Iran's al-Quds Force out of the shadows

As US President Donald Trump presented his new Iran strategy, he authorised the US Treasury Department to "further sanction the entire Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) for its support for terrorism and to apply sanctions to its officials, agents and affiliates."

Following the president's speech, Treasury Secretary Steven T. Mnuchin, in a statement, declared: "We are designating the IRGC for providing support to the IRGC-[al-Quds Force] QF, the key Iranian entity enabling Syrian President Bashar Assad's relentless campaign of brutal violence against his own people..."

Mnuchin accused the IRGC of using "IRGC bases and civilian airports in Iran to transfer military equipment to Iraq and Syria for IRGC-QF."

One does not need to search hard for evidence of IRGC's al-Quds Force in Iraq and Syria. The Iranian media openly report on its losses there.

Commander Shaban Nasiri, who died May 27 in an explosion in Tal Afar west of Mosul, Iraq, represents one of those losses. He served as an adviser to Major-General Qassem Soleimani, chief commander

of al-Quds Force. Nasiri's story and the story of his fellow al-Quds Force commanders killed in combat in Iraq and Syria shed light into the otherwise secretive organisation operating in the shadows.

Nasiri was born in 1958 in Karaj on the outskirts of Tehran. In the search for better job opportunities, his family moved to the Nezam Abad neighbourhood of the Iranian capital. The area was urbanising fast to accommodate the rural population flocking to Tehran.

Not much is known about Nasiri's family background but, like most migrants from the countryside, they probably were more religious than the average Tehrani. Unsurprisingly, the family answered the late Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's call to help overthrow the shah's regime and establish a religious political order.

The revolution provided the likes of Nasiri the opportunity for social mobility. He joined the IRGC and expanded its Karaj branch. After the 1980 Iraqi invasion of Iran, Nasiri volunteered for the war effort. He was transferred to the Nosrat tactical intelligence base, which was manned mainly by Iranian nationals of Arab background. He was transferred to the 9th Badr Division, composed of Shia Iraqi prisoners of war who had volun-

teered to fight alongside Iranian forces.

After the war with Iraq ended in 1988, Nasiri was engaged in al-Quds Force training and spent time in Somalia as late as 2011. In his final deployment, Nasiri served in Iraq in an advisory capacity. There, he revived his old network and helped organise the Iraqi Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) until a booby trap in Tal Afar ended his life.

Nasiri's history and information on other al-Quds Force officers killed in combat in Iraq provide remarkable insights into the secretive organisation.

My study of funeral services in Iran for military personnel killed in Iraq and Syria indicates that at least 40 Iranian nationals have been killed in combat in Iraq since April 2014. At least seven were al-Quds Force officers. They were either ethnically Arab or fluent Arabic speakers.

Most had either served in the Nosrat tactical intelligence base, Base Hamzeh directing the fight against Kurdish insurgents within Iran, or Base Ramezan of IRGC, which was engaged in operations behind enemy lines in Iraqi Kurdistan. This clearly indicates al-Quds Force officers in Iraq were all high-ranking officers and the command

language is Arabic.

Among the 510 Iranian nationals killed in combat in Syria since January 2012, 41 were identified as al-Quds Force officers but the real number is probably much higher.

The branch affiliation of 302 casualties is not known. Many may have served in al-Quds Force. Initially, al-Quds Force officers may have fought in combat units of their own but, as Tehran deployed non-Iranian Shia militias in Syria, al-Quds Force officers were fighting alongside Iraqi Shia militias or served as mid-level commanders in the Shia Afghan Fatemiyoun Division.

Al-Quds Force officers seconded to the Iraqi militias were either ethnically Arab Iranian nationals or fluent Arabic speakers. This indicates those units' command language is Arabic. The Fatemiyoun Division, on the other hand, consists of Persian speakers.

Deployment of al-Quds Force in Iraq and Syria clearly helped advance the IRGC's war aims in the region. However, the rising death toll among its officers is bringing new attention to the secretive unit. Not only blood, but exposure and US Treasury sanctions are included in the price al-Quds Force is paying for its increased activities in wars.

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