

US steps up threats as Iran exceeds uranium enrichment cap

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The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Monday confirmed that Iran has breached the limit imposed by the 2015 nuclear agreement on the level at which it is allowed to enrich uranium.

Iran had announced its breach of the limit on Sunday, a deliberate step aimed at pressuring the remaining signatories to the nuclear accord—particularly Germany, France and the UK—to take substantive steps to counter crippling US economic sanctions that are tantamount to a state of war.

Washington has taken a series of actions that have placed the threat of a war in the Persian Gulf on a hair trigger, raising the specter of a catastrophic military confrontation in a region that is the source of a third of the world's natural gas and a fifth of its oil.

In May 2018, the Trump administration unilaterally abrogated the agreement, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), that was reached between Tehran and six major world powers—the US, China, Russia, Britain, France and Germany. It not only reimposed nuclear sanctions that had been suspended with the agreement but implemented a series of even more punishing measures.

The increase in the enrichment level—which had been capped at 3.67 percent and has risen to 4.5 percent, according to Iranian authorities—follows last month's announcement by Iran that it was deliberately exceeding the 300 kg cap imposed by the JCPOA on its enriched uranium stockpiles. The country is supposed to export any excess amounts, but even that option has been undermined by the US “maximum pressure” sanctions regime.

Tehran indicated that it will impose another 60-day deadline for the European powers to take concrete steps to ensure that Iran receives the sanctions relief that it was promised in return for its submission to drastic limits on its nuclear program.

Behrouz Kamalvandi, the spokesman for the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), told the official news agency ISNA Monday that if such relief is not forthcoming, Iran could take a third step of installing more centrifuges and enriching uranium to 20 percent.

While the increase from 3.67 to 4.5 percent is largely symbolic, the rise to 20 percent would place the Iranian nuclear program in a position to move more rapidly toward the 90 percent enrichment level needed to produce weapons-grade uranium.

Tehran has steadfastly denied, both before and after entering into the 2015 agreement, that it has ever sought nuclear weapons or utilized its nuclear program for anything other than peaceful purposes.

Iran's latest actions provoked a flurry of new threats from top US officials. President Donald Trump told reporters on the White House lawn Monday that “Iran better be careful,” while suggesting that the minimal increase in its uranium enrichment was aimed at securing a nuclear weapon.

Similarly, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo tweeted that “Iran's latest expansion of its nuclear program will lead to further isolation and sanctions.”

And Vice President Mike Pence, speaking before a sympathetic audience of right-wing evangelicals at the Christians United For Israel conference in Washington Monday, said: “Iran should not confuse American restraint with a lack of American resolve ... the United States of America and our military are prepared to protect our interests and protect our personnel and our citizens in the region.”

A prepared text released before the speech described the US administration as “willing to talk” with Tehran, but Pence dropped the line in his delivered remarks.

Last month, Trump called off air strikes that could have triggered a spiraling escalation into a full-scale war with only 10 minutes to spare before bombs and missiles were set to fly. The US bombardment had been ordered in response to Iran's downing of a \$200 million Golden Hawk spy drone that Tehran charged had violated Iranian airspace.

The threat of a military conflagration remains high, with Iran ringed by reinforced US garrisons containing tens of thousands of US troops, a naval armada that includes an amphibious assault group carrying a Marine expeditionary unit and a nuclear-capable B-52-led bombing strike force.

The response of the European powers to Iran's latest action has been to call upon Tehran to reverse its breaches of the 2015 accord, while resisting demands from Washington that they respond with the immediate reimposition of sanctions.

French President Emmanuel Macron is sending his chief diplomatic adviser back to Tehran for talks on the nuclear accord. The Élysée Palace said Monday that Emmanuel Bonne would fly to Iran on Tuesday, his second trip in a matter of weeks.

Berlin, meanwhile, placed the onus on Tehran for the increasing crisis surrounding the nuclear deal. "The ball is clearly in Iran's court," a spokesman for the German Foreign Ministry told a news conference on Monday. "We want to preserve the deal. For this, parties must stick to it."

The reality, however, is that Tehran has no reason to "stick to it" under conditions in which the US sanctions regime has robbed Iran of the promise of economic normalization that was made in return for its sweeping nuclear concessions.

While the European powers announced last month the activation of Instex (Instrument to Support Trade Exchanges), a trade mechanism meant to evade US sanctions and bypass the dollar-based financial system, there is no indication that the measure will lead to any significant increase in oil exports, which as a result of US sanctions have fallen to 300,000 barrels per day (bpd), compared to more than 2.5 million bpd in April.

For its part, Britain remains embroiled in bitter conflict with Tehran over its act of state piracy and military aggression in its July 4 seizure of an Iranian supertanker loaded with oil in what Iran insists were international waters near the strait of Gibraltar. London made the preposterous claim that it acted at the behest of the Gibraltar police in furtherance of European Union economic sanctions seeking to curtail oil shipments to Syria.

It is obvious, however, that the action was undertaken on behalf of Washington with the aim of further ratcheting up the military confrontation with Iran.

Iranian officials have insisted that the tanker was not bound for Syria, whose terminal could not even accommodate a ship of its size. It has also charged that neither the UK nor any other European power has the legal right to enforce EU sanctions against non-EU members.

The head of Iran's judiciary, Hojatolislam Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi demanded that the UK "immediately release the oil tanker, otherwise, they'll have to face the consequences."

The threat that Iran may retaliate by seizing a British-flagged vessel has reportedly led the London-based BP energy conglomerate to halt the voyage of a UK-flagged oil tanker through the Persian Gulf on Monday. According to

Bloomberg News, the tanker, the British Heritage, had been bound for Iraq's Basra oil terminal, but turned back on Saturday, stopping off the coast of Saudi Arabia.

Meanwhile, both Beijing and Moscow responded to Iran's latest breach of the terms of the JCPOA by indicting Washington for its unilateral abrogation of the treaty.

Chinese Foreign Ministry Geng Shuang told a press briefing in Beijing, "The maximum pressure exerted by the US on Iran is the root cause of the Iranian nuclear crisis." He added that "it has been proven that unilateral bullying has become a worsening 'tumor' and is creating more problems and greater crises on a global scale."

China is defying the US sanctions regime and is expected to import 200,000 barrels per day from Iran.

Similarly, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov declared Russia's continuing support for the JCPOA and described Iran's action on uranium enrichment as one of the "consequences" of the Trump administration's tearing up of the agreement.

The Russian Foreign Ministry described as an "ironic quirk" Washington's demand for a July 10 extraordinary meeting of the IAEA Board of Governors to discuss Iran's violation of an agreement that the US itself has completely repudiated. Moscow pointed out that Tehran's concessions under the JCPOA had nothing to do with its continuing compliance with nuclear non-proliferation agreements or other protocols it has signed with the international nuclear agency.

In another sign of the tensions provoked by Washington in its campaign against Iran, members of the Iranian men's volleyball team were held and interrogated for four hours after landing at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport on Saturday, as other national teams were waved through. Tehran filed a formal diplomatic protest over the incident Monday with the Swiss embassy in Iran, which represents US interests in the country. The Iranian foreign ministry said that the US should no longer host international sporting events if it cannot treat teams fairly.



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