

# Strategic Analysis Paper

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## Dire Straits: Iran's Search for Allies – Part One

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### Key Points

- President Trump's decision to withdraw the United States from the Iran nuclear deal has reinstalled the threat of sanctions on Tehran.
- Iran's need to be recognised as a regional leader has, simultaneously, forced it to engage in the ongoing civil war in Syria.
- Those factors have encouraged Israel take a hard line against Iran, including direct and deliberate attacks against Iranian forces in Syria.
- The situation has forced Iran to seek allies in its fight against the US and Israel.

### Summary

The decision by President Donald Trump to withdraw the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly referred to as the Iran nuclear deal, has overturned not only the existing calculus in the region but also that between Washington and the other signatories to the agreement. While it is unclear at this early stage what the exact outcomes of this action will be, it is clear that, first, the risks to the regime in Tehran have increased dramatically and, second, that Israel will feel encouraged to continue its political and military attacks on Tehran and the regime's forces in Syria.

It is also clear to observers that the ongoing civil war in Syria has become much more than that. It has quickly turned the country into a proxy battlefield between Western, democratic forces and their allies and supporters on the one hand and those of authoritarian and

dictatorial regimes on the other. Lost in the fog of war, to a large extent, has been the plight of the war-weary and terrified ordinary men, women and children of Syria. That changed, however, when President Trump withdrew his threat to remove American forces from Syria, at least temporarily, after it was alleged that pro-Assad forces had attacked Syrian citizens in the rebel-held city of Douma using [chemical weapons](#), killing at least forty. Naturally, President Trump took to *Twitter*, describing the attack as an atrocity. He [tweeted](#):

Many dead, including women and children, in mindless CHEMICAL attack in Syria. Area of atrocity is in lockdown and encircled by Syrian Army, making it completely inaccessible to outside world. President Putin, Russia and Iran are responsible for backing Animal Assad. Big price ...

... [to pay](#). Open area immediately for medical help and verification. Another humanitarian disaster for no reason whatsoever. SICK!

While there is little doubt that the attack was engineered by pro-Assad forces, given that Syrian forces had used chemical weapons on civilians previously and that the Syrian Army had surrounded Douma at the time of the most recent attack and initially prevented medical workers from getting to the victims, what is interesting is that the US President lost no time in [warning](#) Russian President Vladimir Putin against siding with Assad. He went on to warn that Assad would pay a big price for the attack. He was probably on safe ground domestically in making that threat. Despite his campaign promise to withdraw US forces from Syria and his oft-stated wish to do so after taking office, he found himself being drawn back into the conflict.

In the aftermath of the chemical attack, White House Homeland Security Adviser Tom Bossert said that the US 'wouldn't take anything off the table', adding, 'The State Department put out a statement last night and the president's senior national security cabinet has been talking with him and each other all throughout the evening and this morning.' Senator Lindsey Graham went further, placing the onus on the President to act, even if it was only for the purpose of being seen to be acting decisively by North Korea (and, by extension, China), Russia and Iran and to be doing something by the domestic electorate. Mr Graham [stated](#), 'He has challenged Assad in the past not to use chemical weapons. If it becomes a tweet without meaning, then he's hurt himself in North Korea. If he doesn't follow through and live up to that tweet, he's going to look weak in the eyes of Russia and Iran.'

The President, unsurprisingly, soon authorised a missile attack on Syria which, the Pentagon [claimed](#), 'hampered Bashar al-Assad's ability to use chemical weapons again, without encountering serious resistance from the Syrian military or its Russian allies.' Russia, interestingly, castigated the US for the attack at the United Nations but its military did not strike back in any way in Syria. Just as interesting, throughout this affair, was the fact that Iran and Russia had been formally associated with Assad and Syria.

## Analysis

Interesting though it might be, it is hardly surprising that Iran is moving closer towards Russia and Turkey. It fears the sheer uncertainty of its position vis-à-vis a very unconventional US President, the fact that its arch-enemy, Israel, is now encouraged by its renewed bonds with President Trump and his similarly-thinking Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, and its ongoing domestic issues, including the possibility of renewed demonstrations against the theocracy and the Islamic Revolution. Each of those issues poses a danger for the regime in Tehran; together, they spell disaster for it and could even signal regime change, a prospect that is clearly unthinkable for the theocracy. Regime change would automatically invalidate Ruhollah Khomeini's revolution and Islamic Republic and delegitimise the theocracy. It could, even worse, potentially see calls for revenge, perhaps camouflaged under the cloak of the law, against individual members of the theocracy.

Given that understanding of the degree of immediate danger each of the first two issues poses, it behoves us to study them. (The dangers posed by demonstrators to the regime were examined in a previous [FDI paper](#).)

One of President Trump's major campaign issues was the JCPOA. He expressed his dissatisfaction with the terms of the Agreement time and again, calling it '[the worst deal ever](#)', which placed it alongside the TPP and NAFTA in his estimation. He objects to several of its terms: the fact that it does not even abbreviate, leave alone terminate, Tehran's ballistic missile programme; the so-called "sunset provisions" that could enable Iran to halt its nuclear programme for the time being and restart it after a period of ten years; that International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors have limited powers in carrying out their inspections; that, by prosecuting destabilising wars in Yemen and Syria, Tehran has not lived up to the spirit of the agreement and, perhaps worst of all, that the previous administration gave in to Tehran's demands to the extent that [pallets of cash](#), an estimated US\$400 million, were loaded on to an aircraft and delivered to Iran.

While those factors caused President Trump to declare his distaste for the JCPOA, he nevertheless signed a six-month waiver, as he is required to do by the US Congress, in January this year but [stated](#) that it would be the last time he did so unless the agreement were re-negotiated. The Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, mocked Trump at the time, saying that he had failed to "kill off" the JCPOA. That mockery, however, would soon turn to suspicion that the President had begun moves to terminate the agreement and then fear that he would actually do so. The Iranian leaders soon realised that the lax terms they had grown used to under the previous US administration were no longer forthcoming. In fact, they soon realised that this was a president who could easily change his mind and, despite his campaign promise, work towards removing the theocracy from power.

Recognising the dangers, Iran's Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, while in New York recently, threatened that if the US withdrew from the JCPOA – that is, if President Trump did not sign another waiver in May – Iran would have few compunctions about starting a uranium enrichment programme, implying that it could then lead it to developing nuclear weapons. As he put it:

That's a very dangerous message to send to the people of Iran, but also to the people of the world – that you should never come to an agreement with the United States because, at the end of the day, the operating principle of the United States is “what's mine is mine, what's yours is negotiable”. The situation is creating an impression globally that agreements don't matter.... America never should have feared Iran producing a nuclear bomb, but we will pursue vigorously our nuclear enrichment. If they want to fear anything, it's up to them.

That was a hollow threat at best, however. There is a distinct difference in opinion between the signatories of the JCPOA. While the US seeks to withdraw from the agreement, the European signatories – the United Kingdom, France and Germany – do not wish to do so – for now, at least. Germany and France do not believe this to be the best time to re-negotiate the terms of the deal, especially the “sunset” clauses. They believe that those details could be better re-negotiated in 2023 or 2024, [according](#) to one expert. Both Germany and France concur with the United States on the need to curtail Iran's ballistic missile programme but their efforts to introduce resolutions to do so in the Security Council have been vetoed by Russia and China, the other two signatories to the JCPOA.

The regime's fears were not unfounded. President Trump did indeed [announce](#) his country's withdrawal from the JCPOA and signed a presidential memorandum to that effect, making President Rouhani's previous mockery of his American counterpart's inability to kill off the agreement all the more galling. It is even more telling to the Iranian leadership that President Trump took that major step despite visits to Washington by the French and German leaders in quick succession, both of whom tried to impress upon him their reasons as to why the agreement ought not to be abandoned. Those efforts have, obviously, failed to deter the president from fulfilling another of his campaign promises. Should he now impose a harsh sanctions regime on Tehran, including denying it access to the international banking system, the likelihood of domestic anger against the regime in Tehran spilling over into renewed demonstrations against it will increase dramatically.

Tehran recognises that it was the sense of frustration that President Trump felt regarding the stalemate in the Security Council at the UN that saw him withdraw from the agreement unilaterally, thus dooming it altogether. Should Iran follow up with Zarif's and Rouhani's threats to re-start its uranium enrichment programme, there is now little doubt that Israel would step up its assault on Iran.

Israel poses an especial danger to Iran or, more accurately, to the theocracy in Tehran and its supporters. Prime Minister Netanyahu, a nationalist by any measure, has made it plain previously that he views the current regime in Tehran as an [existential threat](#) to Israel and warned that the JCPOA could spark a [nuclear race](#) in the region. Prime Minister Netanyahu was constrained during the Obama Administration, however, by a poor relationship with President Obama and his advisers, all of whom seemingly perceived an agreement with Iran to be at least as important as the United States' relationship with Israel. In fact, so great was their desire to see a nuclear agreement with Iran eventuate that the Obama Administration worked actively to [terminate](#) an FBI investigation into Iran's proxy militant group, Hezbollah's, cocaine-smuggling operation into the United States.

That situation has now changed with the current Administration in Washington. Prime Minister Netanyahu's relationship with both President Trump and Secretary of State Pompeo is robust and based on mutual trust. It appears to have given the Israeli Prime Minister the implicit sanction to carry the fight to Iran.

It was recently reported by Syrian state TV that "enemy" rockets had struck military bases at Hama that were operated by forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. According to the [New York Times](#), the attack on 29 April of this year killed sixteen people, including eleven Iranians, and destroyed around 200 anti-aircraft missiles that Israel had [transferred](#) there. A Syrian newspaper's Facebook page attributed the attack to the US and Britain and media outlets affiliated with the Syrian opposition claimed that thirty-eight government soldiers were killed in the strike on Hama, although it could not be verified independently. Three US officers claimed that the strike had been carried out by [Israeli F-15 fighter aircraft](#), however, leading to the suspicion that Israel was preparing for war with Iran. It was not the first time that Israeli forces had attacked targets associated with Iran and was not the first time that it had done so directly against Iranian targets, either.

Three other incidents add to the evidence that Israel is preparing for war against Iran. First, one [report](#) noted that a senior Israeli Defence Force (IDF) officer had confirmed to the *New York Times* that a strike against the Tiyas Military Airbase in Homs, Syria, was 'the first time we attacked live Iranian targets – both facilities and people. ... This is the first time we saw Iran do something against Israel, not by proxy. This opened a new period.' Second, a [false alarm](#) led to Syrian air defence missiles being fired, according to Syrian state TV. Six missiles were launched at a military airbase in the suburbs of Homs and three more against a military airfield on the outskirts of Damascus. A commander in the regional military alliance that backs the Syrian Government attributed the malfunction to 'a joint electronic attack' by Israel and the United States targeting the Syrian radar system. Third, hundreds of IDF reservists were [called up](#) for service on the morning of 19 April by accident, according to the IDF Spokesman's Office. It is difficult to believe that a state as organised as Israel, one that has tried and tested procedures in place, would make an elementary mistake such as that. It is more likely that Israel is showcasing to Iran its ability to carry out air raids, its ability to intrude on Iran's Russian-made missiles through its cyber expertise and its ability to mobilise its troops almost immediately.

Israel, in short, has made it very clear that it is able and prepared to take all necessary actions to deny Iran, which has threatened Israel's very existence, any foothold in Syria. The aggressive, non-compromising stance is a direct outcome of its renewed relationship with the United States under the Trump presidency. The newly-appointed Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, flew to Saudi Arabia soon after being sworn in and then on to Israel where, immediately prior to his arrival, Prime Minister Netanyahu [said](#) at a weekly Cabinet meeting:

Today, we will welcome US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, a true friend of Israel. I think that it is important that he is coming to Israel as part of his first visit outside the US as Secretary of State. I will discuss with him developments in the region, Iran's growing aggression, and, of course, the nuclear agreement with Iran, about which there will be a decision soon.

The renewed friendship between two of Iran's arch-enemies can only be a major source of concern for Tehran. Mr Pompeo's visit to Israel and Saudi Arabia, another of Iran's regional antagonists, can only lend to the suspicion in Tehran that plans are being drawn up to confront it in some way. Israel's open attacks on Iranian forces in Syria, Tehran could feel, is an indication of the lengths to which this troika is prepared to go to diminish it in the region.

Such thinking could only see Iran seek allies in its struggle against overwhelming odds. It is that which has seen it turn towards Russia and Turkey. That budding relationship will be examined in the second part of this paper.

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