IRAN AND THE US ESCALATE THEIR ‘WAR OF WORDS’

By Andrew Richards

Iran announced that it would stop complying with certain elements of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, better known as the Iran nuclear deal, in 60 days if the remaining signatories did not find a way to make the deal more economically beneficial to Iran. The announcement came a year after President Trump withdrew the United States from the deal — and subsequently reimposed sanctions that made it difficult for Iran to reap the benefits of remaining in the deal. The deal’s European signatories, France, Germany and Britain, which had tried to persuade the Trump administration to keep the United States in the deal, are now caught between their ally, the United States, and the deal they very much want to keep alive. *(Washington Post)*

Recent escalations in tensions

Iran’s threatened non-compliance with the nuclear deal comes amid heightened tensions with the US in recent weeks. On Sunday 5 March, US National Security Advisor John Bolton announced that the US would be deploying carriers and bombers to the Middle East, and while this is not something unusual for the US to do, Bolton made it clear that the move was related to the ‘Iranian threat’. He said that the move was intended to send a “clear and unmistakable message” of US resolve, and that the US was not seeking war but was prepared to respond to any attack on US interests in the region. Some analysts have suggested that Bolton’s comments echo those of US President George W. Bush before the US invaded Iraq in 2003.

In April, the US announced a decision to officially blacklist Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps, and to designate the group as a foreign terrorist organisation. This elite branch of Iran’s armed forces was established to protect the country’s Islamic republic system and to prevent foreign interference, rather than defending borders and maintaining internal order, and it answers to Iran’s Supreme Leader (Ayatollah Ali Khamenei). The declaration by the US infuriated Iran, and not long after, Iran announced that it would consider all US military personnel in the Middle East to be “terrorists”.

Iran knows that it cannot attack the US directly in any way, because they would never be able to withstand the US retaliation and a possible long-term occupation of the country. However, Iran’s relationship with Russia could embolden the country to stand up to the US more than if they were standing alone.

Iran’s relationship with Russia

Some analysts suggest that Iran’s threat to undo everything agreed upon under the nuclear deal is a result of the close ties it has with Russia. Russia worked with Iran in defending the Syrian government against rebel factions, and their joint ‘success’ allows Iran to ‘position’ Russia alongside itself as a double threat. Russia, thus far, does not seem to protest this alignment.

When the US withdrew from the nuclear deal, Russia benefitted on three levels. Firstly, Russia was in part responsible for negotiating the deal and getting it signed, and it is now able to ‘blame’ the US for the failing deal (adding it to a long list of other Middle East ‘failures’). Secondly, if Iran decides to pursue a nuclear agenda and is further sanctioned, it may be unable to sell its oil — this, in turn, could increase oil sales (at higher prices) for Russia. Thirdly, Russia’s increasingly close relationship with Iran could strengthen its voice in the UN Security Council.

On the flipside, Russia also has close ties with Saudi Arabia (Iran’s primary enemy). The Soviet Union, in 1926, was the first to establish diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia, then known as the Kingdom of Hajez and Nejd. Relations between the two went sour during the Afghan war (1979-1989) and again during the recent Syrian war (with Russia siding with Iran on behalf of the government and Saudi Arabia supporting the rebels). However, relations between the two countries have since improved again, and with Saudi Arabia’s help, Russia became a member of the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Andrea Kendall-Taylor, director of the Transatlantic Security Program at the Center for a New American Security, recently wrote that even though Russia wants close ties with Iran, it would “not want to be seen as firmly standing in Iran’s corner because doing so could alienate countries like Saudi Arabia where the Kremlin has worked to increase ties”.

Russia is therefore not likely to back Iran in an all-out military conflict against the US, especially because Russia is already involved militarily in Syria and Eastern Ukraine.

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Farhad*, a Christian leader in Iran who spoke to INcontext about the current situation, does not think that there is much chance of the rising tensions developing into direct confrontation, as there has been a ‘war of words’ going on between Iran and the US for the past 40 years. He says that current developments have been magnified by the media in order to pressure Iran to surrender to US demands and to return to the negotiating table for an adjusted nuclear deal. From the Iranian side, Farhad believes that the threat of leaving the nuclear deal and pursuing nuclear capabilities is a means of putting pressure on the EU.

He also said that neither Iran nor the US actually wants a war, and if direct conflict were to somehow happen, it would have come about accidentally. Both sides are aware of the extreme mess it would cause in the region.

Farhad believes that it is important to remember that the enemy comes to “steal, kill and destroy”, and it is necessary for Christians to remain focused on the battle that is against spiritual powers rather than flesh and blood. He says that it is the responsibility of believers to be peacemakers in the midst of the tensions (on both sides), and there is much need to intercede for Iran and the Iranian Church at this time.

*Name changed for anonymity

PRAY

➢ For a de-escalation of tensions
➢ For wisdom for leaders in both the US and Iran
➢ For Christians in Iran (and around the world) to focus on peace-making and intercession for their country

IMAGE SOURCE:
https://www.middleeastobserver.org/2017/02/04/us-iran-relations-since-1979/