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Opinion **US-Iran tensions**

Iran's enemies in the Middle East are closing ranks

Possibility of the US removing Tehran's Revolutionary Guard from its foreign terrorist list is causing alarm in the region

DAVID GARDNER



Iran has demanded that the US remove the foreign terrorist organisation designation imposed in 2019 on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps © Ebrahim Noroozi/AP

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The stop-start efforts to resuscitate the landmark nuclear deal, or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Iran signed with the US and five world powers in 2015 may be in danger of meeting another dead end.

This month, Russia, an original signatory and enabler of the deal, suddenly demanded an Iranian loophole in the near comprehensive sanctions the developed world has imposed on Moscow as a result of its invasion of Ukraine. Josep Borrell, the foreign policy chief of the EU who has mediated negotiations with Iran in Vienna, “paused” the process, while emphasising that [“a final text is essentially ready and on the table”](#).

Further signs the endgame was in sight were the [release of dual western-Iranian nationals](#), such as [Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, taken hostage by the Tehran theocracy on spurious charges](#).

Moscow has retreated from its [blatant sabotage](#), so far. Sergei Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, [claimed the US had guaranteed the sanctions imposed after the invasion of Ukraine would not affect its trade with Tehran](#). There is no evidence for this. But Iran, an ally of convenience of Russia's, lobbied hard with Moscow to remove its roadblock.

Iran wants relief from crippling economic sanctions imposed after Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew the US from the deal in 2018. The US and other signatories want to prevent Iran reaching the threshold of nuclear weapons capability after it started enriching uranium to near weapons grade after 2019.

The new question mark over reviving the JCPOA is Iran's demand that the US removes the foreign terrorist organisation (FTO) designation Trump imposed in 2019 on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Tehran's praetorians and enforcers at home and foreign legion across the Middle East. The possibility that Joe Biden's administration might do this has electrified the Middle East.

This demand is outside the framework of the nuclear deal. But, as even the original JCPOA showed, it was nigh on impossible for foreign companies to invest in Iran without falling foul of the [US Treasury, which threatened to exclude from the dollar financial system](#) anyone dealing with the IRGC.

Many initially thought the Iranian demand was the work of hardliners who do not want a deal. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader, is understood to want an agreement. But it would be hard for Khamenei to be seen to retreat from the defence of an institution, the Revolutionary Guard, essential to his regime. It is also extremely difficult for Biden to be seen to reward the IRGC, which is directly or through proxies behind devastating missile and drone attacks across the Levant and the Gulf. There would be uproar in the US Congress.

Yet officials in the Middle East say the US is trying to find a way to clear this roadblock: [to delist the IRGC in return for an Iranian commitment to de-escalate its aggression](#) in the region. An initial report on the news site Axios last week may have been missed by many. But once Israel checked it out, it [leaked every detail it had and denounced it](#).

Now Naftali Bennett, the Israeli prime minister, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Egypt's president, and Mohammed bin Zayed, Abu Dhabi crown prince and de facto ruler of the United Arab Emirates, are closeted in a summit at Sharm al-Sheikh, the Egyptian Sinai resort. This was set to be an unusual and unusually long meeting, and Arab sources say there was even talk they might be joined by Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi crown prince and day-to-day ruler of the kingdom.

This has the makings of a common front against Iran. They have already seen how the Islamic Republic, subject to the most punishing embargo ever until Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has exponentially expanded its regional influence since Trump's histrionic withdrawal from the JCPOA and pursuit of a ["maximum pressure" campaign that had boomerang written all over it. It also backfired badly on the Gulf, which naively thought the US would protect them from Iranian reprisals](#).

As well as attacking directly from Iran, the IRGC and its proxies — Hizbollah in Lebanon and Syria, Houthi rebels in Yemen, a cluster of Iraqi militias and a network of fighters in Syria — [continue their regional attacks](#) even as Tehran moves closer to a nuclear deal.

On March 13, the IRGC acknowledged a 12-missile strike on Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan, against, they said, an "Israeli target" but close to the US consulate. Days later there was another salvo against Saudi Aramco installations in Jeddah, in the west of the kingdom. The fifth round of Saudi-Iranian talks in Baghdad, a fragile chrysalis of rapprochement, was suspended. The clash of ranks closing is the sound to be heard now.

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