



## PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

# The Killing of Soleimani and Iran's Nuclear Program

by Lt. Col. (res.) Dr. Raphael Ofek

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,405, January 14, 2020

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Tehran has announced it is withdrawing from the 2015 nuclear deal following the killing by the US of Quds commander Qassem Soleimani. It also stated, however, that it will continue to cooperate with the IAEA and expressed its willingness to return to the deal if the economic sanctions are lifted. This suggests that despite its repeated violations of the nuclear deal over the past year, Iran is reluctant to escalate conflict.

In July 2019, Iran began to violate the nuclear deal in a number of ways in order to pressure the EU to neutralize the effect of the sanctions that had been imposed on it by the US. Its violations included:

- enriching uranium above the maximum permitted quantity of 300 kg UF<sub>6</sub> (uranium hexa-fluoride compound) enriched at 3.67%
- raising the level of uranium enrichment to 4.5%, above the permitted rate of 3.67%
- producing and holding heavy water inventory beyond the 130 ton limit
- operating advanced centrifuges of higher enrichment capacity
- renewing, in early November 2019, uranium enrichment at the Fordow underground enrichment facility

To no one's surprise, US Democrats fiercely opposed President Trump's decision to withdraw from the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement (JCPOA). They are now criticizing him for having eliminated Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Iranian Quds Force and arch-terrorist, and blame the president for driving Tehran to retreat from the nuclear deal.

A *New York Times* article by William Broad and David Sanger, published on January 6, made this linkage explicit in its subtitle, which read: "President

Trump thought the nuclear deal was flawed because restrictions on Iran would end after 15 years. Now, responding to a U.S. strike, Iran has declared the limits over after less than five.” The article goes on to state, “It largely re-creates conditions that led Israel and the United States to consider destroying Iran’s facilities a decade ago; again bringing them closer to the potential of open conflict with Tehran that was avoided by the accord.”

This assertion is baseless. Had the US not withdrawn from the nuclear agreement and imposed sanctions on Iran, then at the end of the deal 10 years from now, Iran—which would likely still be an Islamist regime—would have broken out with full force to produce nuclear weapons. Considering the existential danger Iranian nuclear weapons would pose to Israel, the Middle East at large, and probably even the US, the odds of war breaking out with Iran would have been high if not inevitable.

How far is the Tehran regime prepared to go in the nuclear field? For the time being, it appears that despite its breaches of the nuclear deal over the past year and the shake-up of recent days, Iran is approaching this matter with caution. It fears, first of all, that unequivocal efforts at this stage to advance toward nuclear weapons could cause it to be attacked by the US and Israel. This would likely result in the destruction of parts of its nuclear infrastructure, probably including its uranium enrichment facilities at Natanz and Fordow. Trump responded to Iran’s withdrawal from the nuclear deal by tweeting, “Iran will never have nuclear weapons.” As Tehran just learned, Trump is capable of dramatic action and willing to use force.

Secondly, Iran does not want to cause the collapse of its relationship with the EU, which continues to show it considerable sympathy.

Finally, it is doubtful whether Iran’s economy, which has been hard-hit by the sanctions, will allow it to continue to invest in the nuclear weapons project right now.

Tehran’s caution is reflected in the form of its military moves against the US, Israel, and the allies of those countries in the Arab world. Rather than confronting those countries directly, it conducts its operations via proxy militias (Hezbollah in Lebanon, pro-Iranian Iraqi militias, and the Houthi rebels in Yemen). Hence, its direct response to the Soleimani killing was carefully crafted and limited so as to avoid a wider escalation.

*Lt. Col. (res.) Dr. Raphael Ofek, a BESA Center Research Associate, is an expert in the field of nuclear physics and technology who served as a senior analyst in the Israeli intelligence community.*