

Donald Trump pulls US from Iran nuclear deal, Obama says 'serious mistake'

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US President Donald Trump signs a proclamation declaring his intention to withdraw from the JCPOA Iran nuclear agreement in the Diplomatic Room at the White House in Washington, US, May 8, 2018. (Source: REUTERS)

Washington: President Donald Trump announced Tuesday the US will pull out of the landmark nuclear accord with Iran, declaring he’s making the world safer but dealing a profound blow to allies and deepening the president’s isolation on the world stage. “The United States does not make empty threats,” he said in a televised address from the White House Diplomatic Room.

Trump said the 2015 agreement, which included Germany, France and Britain, was a “horrible one-sided deal that should never ever have been made.” He added that the United States “will be instituting the highest level of economic sanction.”

Former President Barack Obama called Trump’s decision to pull out of the Iran deal, which had been brokered by Obama’s administration, a “serious mistake” that will erode America’s global credibility. He said Tuesday that Trump’s decision to withdraw is “misguided,” especially because Iran has been complying.

Obama also warned: “The consistent flouting of agreements that our country is a party to risks eroding America’s credibility, and puts us at odds with the world’s major powers.”

The former US president said that without the deal, the US “could eventually be left with a losing choice between a nuclear-armed Iran or another war in the Middle East.” The deal remains a model for what diplomacy can accomplish, including when it comes to North Korea, he said.

US President Donald Trump holds up a proclamation declaring his intention to withdraw from the JCPOA Iran nuclear agreement after signing it in the Diplomatic Room at the White House. (Source: REUTERS)

Trump’s decision means Iran’s government must now decide whether to follow the US and withdraw or try to salvage what’s left of the deal. Iran has offered conflicting statements about what it may do “and the answer may depend on exactly how Trump exits the agreement.

One official briefed on the decision said Trump would move to reimpose all sanctions on Iran that had been lifted under the 2015 deal, not just the ones facing an immediate deadline.

Supporters of trying to fix the agreement had hoped Trump would choose a piecemeal approach that could leave more room for him to reverse himself and stay in if he could secure the additional restrictions on Iran that European nations have tried unsuccessfully to negotiate with Trump. Still, the administration planned to allow a grace period of at least

three months and possibly up to six months so that businesses and governments can wind down operations that would violate the reimposed US sanctions, officials said.

As administration officials briefed congressional leaders about Trump's plans Tuesday, they emphasized that just as with a major Asia trade deal and the Paris climate pact that Trump has abandoned, he remains open to renegotiating a better deal, one person briefed on the talks said.

US President Donald Trump speaks to reporters after signing the proclamation. (Source: REUTERS)

The Iran agreement, struck in 2015 by the United States, other world powers and Iran, lifted most US and international sanctions against the country. In return, Iran agreed to restrictions on its nuclear program making it impossible to produce a bomb, along with rigorous inspections.

In a burst of last-minute diplomacy, punctuated by a visit by Britain's top diplomat, the deal's European members gave in to many of Trump's demands, according to officials, diplomats and others briefed on the negotiations. Yet they still left convinced he was likely to re-impose sanctions.

Trump spoke with French President Emmanuel Macron and Chinese leader Xi Jinping about his decision Tuesday. The British foreign secretary traveled to Washington this week to make a last-minute pitch to the U.S. to remain in the deal, according to a senior British diplomat. The diplomat, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the British objective will remain to uphold and maintain the deal.

Hours before the announcement, European countries met to underline their support for the agreement. Senior officials from Britain, France and Germany met in Brussels with Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs, Abbas Araghchi.

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If the deal collapses, Iran would be free to resume prohibited enrichment activities, while businesses and banks doing business with Iran would have to scramble to extricate themselves or run afoul of the US. American officials were dusting off plans for how to sell a pullout to the public and explain its complex financial ramifications.

In Iran, many were deeply concerned about how Trump's decision could affect the already struggling economy. In Tehran, President Hassan Rouhani sought to calm nerves, smiling as he appeared at a petroleum expo. He didn't name Trump directly, but emphasized that Iran continued to seek "engagement with the world."

"It is possible that we will face some problems for two or three months, but we will pass through this," Rouhani said.

Under the most likely scenario, Trump would allow sanctions on Iran's central bank "intended to target oil exports" to kick back in, rather than waiving them once again on Saturday, the next deadline for renewal, said individuals briefed on Trump's deliberations. Then the administration would give those who are doing business with Iran a six-month period to wind down business and avoid breaching those sanctions.

In this photo released by official website of the office of the Iranian Presidency, President Hassan Rouhani addresses the nation in a televised speech in Tehran, Iran, Tuesday, May 8, 2018. (Source: Iranian Presidency Office via AP)

Depending on how Trump sells it "either as an irreversible US pullout, or one final chance to save it" the deal could be strengthened during those six months in a last-ditch effort to persuade Trump to change his mind. The first 15 months of Trump's presidency have been filled with many such "elastic chances" for the Iran deal in which he's punted the decision for another few months, and then another.

Even Trump's secretary of state and the UN agency that monitors nuclear compliance agree that Iran, so far, has lived up to its side of the deal. But the deal's critics, such as Israel, the Gulf Arab states and many Republicans, say it's a giveaway to Tehran that ultimately paves the path to a nuclear-armed Iran several years in the future.

Iran, for its part, has been coy in predicting its response to a Trump withdrawal. For weeks, Iran's foreign minister had been saying that a re-imposition of US sanctions would render the deal null and void, leaving Tehran little choice but to abandon it as well. But on Monday, Rouhani said Iran could stick with it if the European Union, whose economies do far more business with Iran than the US, offers guarantees that Iran would keep benefiting.

For the Europeans, Trump's withdrawal constitutes dispiriting proof that trying to appease him is futile.

Although the US and Europeans made progress on ballistic missiles and inspections, there were disagreements over extending the life of the deal and how to trigger additional penalties if Iran were found violating the new restrictions, US officials and European diplomats have said. The Europeans agreed to yet more concessions in the final days of negotiating ahead of Trump's decision, the officials added.

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