

Trump's Iran ultimatum has startled the European Union

The White House is blackmailing the Europeans to stop them from allowing themselves to be blackmailed by Iran.

By Matthias Küntzel

On the 12th January, Donald Trump, in his long awaited statement about the Iran nuclear deal, called upon the “European key countries to join with the United States in fixing significant flaws in the deal, countering Iranian aggression, and supporting the Iranian people.” Otherwise, by mid-May 2018, he would bring the nuclear sanctions back into force, in other words abandon the Iran deal.

In only two points did Trump accommodate the Europeans. Firstly he postponed the exit from the Iran deal which he had announced in October 2017 by a further four months. However, only in order to “secure our European allies’ agreement to fix the terrible flaws of the Iran nuclear deal.” Secondly he no longer demands an alteration of the existing deal, but a new “supplementary agreement” which, different from the nuclear deal, shall be without a time limit. This supplementary agreement would impose “new multilateral sanctions if Iran develops or tests long-range missiles, thwarts inspections, or makes progress toward a nuclear weapon.”

Trump attacked the major EU states quite undiplomatically: “Our allies should cut off funding to the Revolutionary Guards Corps” and “its militant proxies”. They should “designate Hezbollah – in its entirety - as a terrorist organization”. They should support the United States in their resistance to the proliferation of Iranian missiles, as well as against cyber-attacks and the threat to international shipping. They should put the Iranian regime under pressure to end the violation of its population’s basic human rights. They should forego business, which strengthens the Iranian dictatorship.

In his final sentence Trump sharpens his language: “Those who, for whatever reason, choose not to work with us will be siding with the Iranian regime’s

nuclear ambitions, and against the people of Iran and the peaceful nations of the world.”¹

This was strong stuff. Trump’s ultimatum has shocked the Europeans. A report of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* states that the governments in Berlin, London and Paris reacted “speechlessly” and “helplessly”. In the days following Trump’s statement “the wires between Berlin, London, Paris and Brussels were glowing.”²

For whatever one must reproach the American President otherwise, with this statement he has hit the bull’s eye. Germany and the European Union have indeed sided “with the Iranian regime and against the people of Iran” in their reaction to the great “national revolt” (Amir Taheri) of the Iranian population that started at the end of 2017. A comparison of the responses to this Iranian protest movement is instructive.

Support for the Iranian protest movement or betrayal?

On the 29th December 2017, one day after the outbreak of this revolt, the US state department declared:

“Iran’s leaders have turned a wealthy country with a rich history and culture into an economically depleted rogue state, whose chief exports are violence, bloodshed, and chaos. As President Trump has said, the longest-suffering victims of Iran's leaders are Iran's own people. The United States strongly condemns the arrest of peaceful protesters. We urge all nations to publicly support the Iranian people and their demands for basic rights and an end to corruption.”³

¹ Statement by the President on the Iran Nuclear Deal, January 12, 2018.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-iran-nuclear-deal/>

² Andreas Ross, Europa kalt erwischt von Trumps Iran-Ultimatum. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, January 15, 2018.

³ <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/12/276811.htm> .

Four days later, in the late evening of 2nd January, Federica Mogherini, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy made her first statement:

“In the last days, we have been in touch with the Iranian authorities. In the spirit of frankness and respect that is at the basis of our relationship, we expect all concerned to refrain from violence and the right of expression to be guaranteed, also in the light of the statements made by the Iranian Government.”⁴

Neither the Iranian people are mentioned in this statement nor their demands. Instead, the terror exercised by the regime is put on the same level as the “violence” by some demonstrators, as if in Iran two equally equipped armies were facing each other.

A few hours later, on January 3rd, there followed a governmental press conference in Berlin, in which the German Government called upon Teheran to respect freedom of assembly and of expression. At the same time the speaker of the Foreign Office stressed “that some of the circulating [Iranian] videos were several years old” as if, even on the 6th day of the revolt, one could not know what *really* was happening in Iran.

At this conference, the federal government could have threatened that Germany’s state support for Iran deals would be stopped if demonstrations were violently suppressed. Instead, the Government’s spokesman stated proudly that, since the middle of 2016, Hermes guarantees (insurance of German exporters) for risky businesses with Iran had been approved to a total of 795 million Euros. It was intended to “continue the path chosen” and the government was convinced that “the trade would also bring about desirable changes in the region.”⁵

Soon after, the German Foreign Office confirmed that it had agreed to let the Iranian Ayatollah Mahmoud Shahrudi be treated medically in the German city of Hanover and, in conjunction with Lower Saxon authorities, had arranged his

⁴ Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the situation in Iran, January 2, 2018, 22:40.

⁵ Regierungspressekonferenz [governmental press conference], January 3, 2018.

protection for several weeks.⁶ Shahrudi, a hardline cleric, is supposed to have imposed death sentences on more than 2,000 people, including minors, for criticising the regime. He is one of its known brutal criminals. Although charges were brought against him by a member of the German government, the Federal Government and the Provincial authorities made sure that he could leave Germany on the 11th January in hush secrecy.

But that was not enough. On that same 11th January, the German Foreign Secretary summoned not only his British and French colleagues and Federica Mogherini, the EU Representative, to a special sitting, but also Mohammed Zarif, the Iranian Foreign Minister, in order to promote the Nuclear Deal together.

Of course, the ministers of the EU's most important states could have met for this purpose without a member of the Iranian leadership, or they could have invited Shirin Ebadi as an Iranian guest, the Nobel peace prize winner who supported the protests of the Iranian people. But this did not happen.

Thus, the Iranian protest movement and its suppression played virtually no role at the EU consultations on the 11th January and the following press conference of the three EU foreign ministers. This was an unmistakable signal of non-solidarity with the Iranian protest movement sent by the three most important EU states.

But now? Will the EU continue its collaboration with the Iranian rulers despite the Trump ultimatum? In order to achieve that, the Iranian regime has invited the foreign ministers of France and Germany to Teheran for talks.⁷

Or will the EU take the side of the USA and thus against the Tehran regime? In order to ensure this, the American Foreign Minister, Rex Tillerson visited London, Paris and Warsaw last week.⁸

⁶ Regierungspressekonferenz [governmental press conference], January 8, 2018.

⁷ Iran will sich im Konflikt um das Atomabkommen stärker der EU zuwenden. Neue Zürcher Zeitung, January 17, 2018.

⁸ Reuters.com. Iran to dominate many Tillerson conversations in Europe next week, January 20, 2018.

Postpone the Iranian bomb or prevent it?

Trump cleverly uses the major fears of the Europeans, namely that the USA might leave the nuclear deal and thus kill it. He declares that the Europeans have only one chance to prevent this: By putting Iran under pressure during the next four months and getting engaged in repairing the gaps in this deal.

With this, the EU is caught between two stools. Tehran says: if you put us under pressure with additional demands then we'll drop out of the deal. Washington says: if you don't put the regime under pressure with additional demands, we'll drop out.

Until now it was Iran that was threatening to give notice to the nuclear agreement, in order to force a European appeasement. Now, however, Trump is blackmailing the Europeans in order to stop them from allowing themselves to be blackmailed by Iran.

His statement concentrates on the EU because, short of military action, a change in Iran's conduct can probably only be achieved by harsh European sanctions. Because of the high volume of trade, European sanctions would hit the country even if Russia and China did not engage in such a policy. Sanctions by the United States alone would be ineffective, as the bilateral trade amounts to close to zero.

Which "terrible flaws of the Iran nuclear deal" does the United States want to fix?

Firstly, there is Iran's missile programme. Nuclear weapons do not only consist of warheads but require also missiles to carry them. The nuclear deal does not include this second part of the bomb. Disregarding decisions by the UN Security Council, Iran is continuing its efforts to develop mid and long range missiles in close cooperation with North Korea. Recently Tehran announced to have built three subterranean missile production sites and to have stored hundreds of missiles, ready to fire, in subterranean tunnels.⁹ New sanctions are suggested to stop this missile development.

⁹ Parisa Hafezi, Iran says it has built third underground ballistic missile factory. reuters.com, May 25, 2017.

Secondly, breaking the Iranian resistance to the control of military installations by inspectors of the International Atomic Energy Agency, as provided by the Agency's Additional Protocol.

Thirdly, correcting the "sunset clause". The first restrictions of the deal will end in six years and all other nuclear limitations of the nuclear deal will be eliminated within thirteen years. Then Tehran will be able to produce plutonium reactors and weapon grade uranium in unlimited quantities. Then the time needed to build a nuclear bomb will shrink to almost zero, as Barak Obama, the former American president, acknowledged.¹⁰

That a disarmament agreement expires by mutual agreement after just a few years is highly unusual. The fact that Iran's free travel pass for the bomb is not tied to any conditions, is even more remarkable. It will be valid even if Tehran continues to inflict wars on the Middle East.

It is true: Iran largely fulfils the regulations of this deal. This, however, has to do with its special nature. Teheran can modernise its nuclear infrastructure within the framework of this agreement and can get rid of the control of installations which it declares to be military. As long as Iran fulfils all the rules of this agreement, its early nuclear capability will be assured.

The "sunset clause" proves that this deal was a wager on the future. It was believed that Iran would become reconciled with the international community within the next few years. Today, nobody denies that this was an illusion, that this wager has been lost and that reality has developed in the opposite direction.

Europe between Teheran and Trump

Meanwhile nearly two weeks have passed without the EU or one of the European governments having taken a position on the Trump ultimatum. On

¹⁰Michael R. Gordon/David E. Sanger: With Details of Iran Deal Still in Flux, White House Opens Sales Effort. New York Times, April 7, 2015.

the 15th January, the (German) Federal Government announced that “high level EU meetings” will take place to coordinate the future procedure.

That the EU country’s coordination causes difficulties is obvious, given that even the positions of London, Paris and Berlin do not match. Whilst Emmanuel Macron and Theresa May are trying to hold the West including the transatlantic linkage somehow together, a negative attitude towards the United States has become established in Germany, based on a mixture of a legitimate Trump critique, unfounded anti-Americanism and German great power fantasies.

Symptomatic for the new style was the speech by German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel on the 5th December 2017 in Berlin. Gabriel took the position that, on the subject of Iran, Germany might “suddenly or perhaps lastingly be at odds with the United States.” Since the partnership with the US is no longer sufficient “to protect our strategic interests”, Germany “has to do and to dare much more ... than before.”¹¹ The White House’s Iran policy, threatened Gabriel, would drive “us Europeans into a common position with Russia and China against the USA.”¹²

That kind of language has not been heard from London or Paris. There, some of the suggestions by the USA obtained approval. Thus the French President Emmanuel Macron stated that the nuclear deal could “surely do with a few additional props – such as agreements in respect of the missiles or the duration of its validity”¹³ Boris Johnson, the British Foreign Secretary, also publicly agreed that some aspects of the nuclear deal, “notably the sunset clause” were going to need to be renegotiated.¹⁴ Thus, it seems to be no coincidence that Rex Tillerson, the American Secretary of State during his trip to Europe hold talks in Paris and London. “We lay special value to close coordination with the British and French” he declared, “in order to close the gaps in the agreement and in the next steps on how we curtail Iranian malign

¹¹ Sigmar Gabriel, Europa in einer unbequemen Welt [Europe in a less comfortable world], speech at the Berlin Foreign Policy Forum, December 5, 2017.

¹² Steve Holland, Trump lays out new Iran strategy Friday, complicating European ties. Reuter, World News, October 12, 2017.

¹³ Reymer Klüver und Paul-Anton Krüger, Ewiger Störenfried. Süddeutsche Zeitung, September 22, 2017.

¹⁴ Patrick Wintour, Boris Johnson to travel to US in bid to save Iran nuclear deal. The Guardian, November 2, 2017.

influence in the region.” His Europe trip conspicuously avoided Germany, which hitherto insisted neither to make changes, nor to add a supplement to the nuclear deal.

Nevertheless, according to Tillerson, on January 28, Washington and the EU3 – Paris, London, Berlin – installed a working group to begin discussions about supplementary agreements to address Iran’s missile activities and regional roles as well as the deal’s sunset provisions.¹⁵

Even on the eve of Trump's ultimatum, Germany had unreservedly supported the deal which – according to the foreign ministry - not only “increased security in the Middle East” but represents for the EU states “a central part of the national security”.¹⁶ Yet, the more importance is attached to this deal, the more diligently Berlin will have to try to satisfy the Trump ultimatum. After all, the American departure from the deal means its end.

Thus, a certain constellation of 2007/8 is repeating itself. During those years, Berlin participated in sanctions essentially in order to prevent a military strike by the United States against Iran¹⁷. If Berlin participated in sanctions today, then mainly in order to prevent the USA from terminating the nuclear deal. However, this, too, would be a nail-biting event. The unpredictable Donald Trump might not be satisfied with a purely symbolic pressure on Tehran.

With Trump’s ultimatum, the big quarrel about Iran which has strained the German-American relationship for over 25 years, has certainly reached another peak. As during the last 25 years, this quarrel will take place in the backrooms of diplomacy - hidden from the public eye.

However, the answer to the question whether Iran will have nuclear arms will not only shape the future of the Middle East, but the future of the world. The outcome of the global power struggle between the Shiite and Sunni Islamists and the liberal democracies depends decisively upon whether the world community will allow the Iranian regime to produce nuclear bombs or not. Yet

¹⁵ Ahmad Majidyar, US-EU working group on nuclear deal worries Tehran. The Middle East Institute, Jan 26, 2018.

¹⁶ Auswärtiges Amt, EU/E3 trifft Iran: Atomabkommen im Interesse der Weltgemeinschaft [Foreign Office, EU/E3 meet Iran: Nuclear agreement in the interest of the world community]. January 11, 2018.

¹⁷ See my book on „Germany and Iran: From the Aryan Axis to the Nuclear Threshold“, New York (Telos Press) 2014, p. 241.

we can bet that there will be no debate about the German reply to Trump's ultimatum in the German federal parliament.

This article was first published in German on January 23, 2018 by Vienna based www.mena-watch.com . Eric Sanders, who lives in London, liked the text and therefore translated it into English. I'm very grateful to my friend Eric for that.

Eric Sanders was born in 1919 (!!) in Vienna. At the age of 18, he managed to escape to England. At 20, he joined the British Army, initially in a non-combatant unit (being an ,enemy'-alien) and subsequently into the Special Operations Executive (SOE), Churchill's "secret army", as an operative trained to be dropped into occupied territories. After the liberation, he served as a British Army occupying soldier in the Legal Division in Vienna. Back in London, he worked as a teacher and has worked as a writer, translator and scriptwriter since retiring. In 2010, Eric Sanders has published his autobiography: "Secret Operations: From Music to Morse and Beyond". At 97, he published his first and second novel : «Mazel 1 : Murder in Munich» and «Mazes 2, Conspiracy in Vienna», London (New Generation Publishing) 2017. See: <http://www.ericandersat90.co.uk/?p=5>