

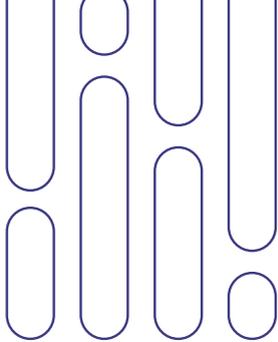
REPORT

The Impact of Hook's Ouster on the Future Course of US Pressure on Iran

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On August 6, 2020, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that Brian Hook, the US special envoy for Iran, would be stepping down from his position, with Pompeo giving no reasons for the move. Pompeo subsequently posted a tweet in which he claimed that Hook would be moving on to the private sector.

This unexpected announcement is of special importance as it occurred during a sensitive phase in the US mission which was assigned to Hook by the Trump administration. The announcement has raised several questions about the reasons behind it, its potential impact on the 'maximum pressure' strategy, the implementation of which Hook outlined and oversaw after assuming his position in 2018, and the future course of US policy on Iran in the coming period.

I. Hook and the Extent of His Responsibility on the Iranian File

Hook is a technocratic lawyer who joined the Department of State under former President George W. Bush. He played a major role in outlining the policy framework of US President Donald Trump toward Iran after former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson included him in his team in early 2017 and after the US pullout from the nuclear deal.

Pompeo announced the establishment of the Iran Action Group on August 16, 2018, with Hook appointed as its head, who became the Department of State's special representative for Iran.

This group took over the mission of implementing the 'maximum pressure' strategy with the aim of changing Iran's behavior. Among the group's [objectives](#) was to coordinate the activities of the US Department of State on Iran, coordinate between the United States and its allies in regard to sanctions and pursue countries which continue to trade with Iran.

Prior to the announcement of his resignation, Hook was closely pursuing the implementation of the 'maximum pressure' strategy on Iran. He [believed](#) that the economic pressure, diplomatic isolation and the credible threat of military force to defend American interests would force Iran to return to the negotiating table in accordance with US conditions.

There were no signs or indicators that suggested his departure might be imminent; indeed, on the contrary, President Trump was lauding Hook's 'maximum pressure' strategy, which he said placed Iran under unprecedented pressures. Even the statement addressing Hook's resignation announced by Mike Pompeo lauded Hook's efforts. Pompeo said that he had "achieved historical results countering the Iranian regime;" and Hook managed to release two US captives held by Iran: Michael White and Chu Wang. Pompeo also said that Hook "has been a trusted adviser to me and a good friend."

Hook himself had praised the 'maximum pressure' strategy, which he said deprived Iran's political system of financial resources and [prevented](#) it from passing on billions of dollars to its affiliated militias in the region. He also said the strategy had undermined the legitimacy of Iran's political system at home to an unprecedented degree. The strategy's results included waves of

protests against Iran's political system at home and abroad. These protests undermined the authority of the political system and cast doubt among the Iranian people about the religious sanctity of their leaders.

Therefore, the timing of Hook's resignation stirred up a great deal of controversy since no clear reasons have yet been given by the Department of State for the decision, except for a single vague tweet by Mike Pompeo in which he announced that Hook had moved on to the private sector. It should be noted that Hook himself said, "There is never a good time to leave" since the confrontation with Iran has become a ceaseless series of provocations, reactions, and efforts to change the behavior of Tehran. His departure cannot be analyzed without looking at the outcomes of his efforts or Trump's expectations on this issue.

II. Did Hook Fail in His Mission?

The strategy outlined by Hook to change Iran's behavior achieved important successes over the course of two years. It undermined some of the most important gains of the nuclear deal, prevented Iran from taking advantage of its economic incentives, succeeded in ensuring the cancellation of some nuclear exemptions, and expanded the scope of sanctions on an unprecedented scale. All the aforementioned have deprived Iran of important sources of foreign currency and the means to develop its commercial and banking relations with the outside world, as well as imposed restrictions on the most important figures, leaders and institutions of Iran's political system as well as Iranian firms involved in malicious activities. Hook's strategy also reduced the political system's support for militias beyond Iran's borders and reestablished regional and global partnerships to confront the Iranian danger. This also helped to accelerate the decline in the popularity of Iran's political system at home and within Shiite hotspots in some other regional countries such as Iraq and Lebanon.

Even the US argument that it remains a participant in the nuclear deal under Resolution 2231 and has the right to trigger the Iranian deal's dispute resolution mechanism is in doubt. Russia and China have objected to the US's invocation of this right, citing legal reasons, as the US unilaterally announced its withdrawal from the nuclear deal in May 2018. This pullout

means that the United States cannot take advantage of this mechanism. In addition, time is needed to implement the mechanism and as a result Trump will be unable to do so before the US elections in November 2020.

Moreover, the nuclear deal has not been completely undermined thus far. The fact the deal remains in existence is a blow to Trump's pledge to end its effects. In fact, Iran has abandoned some of the limitations put in place by the deal and reduced its obligations under the deal. The aforementioned have boosted its ability to enrich uranium, stockpile heavy water and develop centrifuges, as well as conceal some of its activities from the International Atomic Energy Agency. Some consider this situation worse than the one that existed during the full implementation of the nuclear deal.

Iran also seems to be about to break free from the embargo imposed on its acquisition of weapons and to be boosting its defense capabilities through signing military deals with Russia and China, as well as further enhancing its ballistic missiles program. Recently, China [signed](#) a \$400 billion investment deal with Iran, which is believed to involve massive arms deals, not to mention engaging in plans to sign a strategic agreement with [Russia](#).

The 'maximum pressure' strategy did not create any new mechanisms nor did it coordinate any successful policies to curb the regional influence of Iran, which now has unprecedented leverage in the Gulf, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. This has threatened the interests and allies of the United States, with Iran's naval '[Great Prophet](#)' maneuvers in the Gulf in August 2020 destroying a mockup of a US aircraft carrier. This was an unobvious message from Iran intended to emphasize its commitment to deterrence as well as to intimidate its adversaries. Iran fears that Trump could opt to wage a military operation ahead of this year's elections to improve and enhance his electoral chances.

Inside the United States, Hook's 'maximum pressure' strategy has been met with skepticism as it was deemed tactically inconsistent with the objective of changing the behavior of the Iranian political system, altering the alignments of its leaders, or reaching a breakthrough by pressing for reform or radically changing the country's political system.

Thus, all in all, while it could be said that Hook's strategy ultimately weak-

ened the Iranian political system, and deprived it of benefiting from the nuclear deal, it did not achieve a major breakthrough and did not encourage Iran's political system to sign a deal as Trump wants so that he can respond to critics of his foreign policy choices.

III. Hook and the Path of US Policy

Hook's departure from his position could lead to a change in US policy towards Iran. Hook was one of the technocrats and diplomats in charge of the Iranian file within the Trump administration. The aim of the 'maximum pressure' strategy he outlined was to reach the stage of direct talks and to sign a new agreement with Iran. This is the same path that was pursued by the Obama administration despite the difference in objectives, international circumstances and balances surrounding the crisis as well as the variables caused by the nuclear deal in 2015.

The selection of [Elliott Abrams](#) in particular supports the possibility that US alignments towards Iran may be changing. The new alignments could be much more radical, and might even lead to a policy of regime change in case Elliott Abrams' position is not temporary and transitional until another official is appointed to take over the Iranian file. Elliott Abrams is one of the radical hawks when it comes to Iran. He is also a veteran politician with a long record among the neo-conservatives. He supported the 2003 Iraq invasion. Tellingly, he also served as US envoy for Venezuela. He engaged in a campaign to depose the leftist Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro in which Abrams managed to significantly paralyze the Venezuelan economy. It is possible that he will adopt a similar approach to Iran.

Elliott Abrams believes that the possibility of reaching a diplomatic settlement with Iran has diminished and he is [supportive](#) of Israel militarily targeting Iran's nuclear facilities.

This possible move is dangerous in the current phase as suspicions about Iran's nuclear program are mounting, along with the rising chances of open confrontation between Iran and Israel. Iran has already accused Israel of attacking its vital military and nuclear facilities, including the Natanz facility, and of destroying its sophisticated centrifuges.

If the United States' fails to pass a resolution extending the arms embargo on Iran, or is unable to extend the arms embargo via the dispute resolution mechanism included in the nuclear deal, this might push Israel to militarily strike Iran's nuclear facilities. President Trump would be put in an extremely awkward situation if the US fails to extend the arms embargo on Iran. Instead of isolating Iran and reimposing international sanctions on the country, the United States would be heading down the path of self-isolation in its confrontation against Iran, which would undoubtedly impact upcoming US policies.

It is also possible that Hook's replacement will not be accompanied by a substantial change in the US strategy towards Iran. Trump does not have much time, as he is busy with his electoral campaign. He is also busy with trying to contain the growing domestic crisis after the outbreak of the coronavirus and to improve his head-to-head position with Joe Biden in the polls.

In addition to this, Trump does not want a military escalation with Iran. Trump dismissed his National Security Adviser [John Bolton](#) in September 2019, as he shared Hook's hawkish position on Iran.

Trump also does not agree with the policy of regime change in Iran; for him, the ultimate objective is to demolish Obama's deal with Iran in order sign a new one. He signalled this previously, indicating that he is in no rush when he told the Iranians he would win the next election and they would sign a new agreement.

In addition, there are deep concerns in the United States about any inclination toward military escalation with Iran. Trump could resort to this to improve his chances of re-election.

The United States House Committee on Appropriations has already approved an amendment to the 2021 defense funding amendment. This amendment aims to prevent the financing of military operations against Iran if they are undertaken without congressional approval. The Committee also approved two other amendments requiring the withdrawal of the 2001 and 2002 war authorizations granted to the US president. These war

authorizations permitted the use of military force. However, this bill must gain approval from both houses of Congress before being referred to the US president to sign.

It seems most likely that the US will adopt a more radical policy on Iran in light of the divergent positions of the two countries, along with US concerns about the catastrophic impact of Iran's behavior in both the nuclear and non-nuclear spheres.

This is in addition to the ongoing threats that Iran poses to the region, especially after the Beirut Port explosion, which revealed the possible fate of the region's countries. Regional and global security will be at great risk if Iran continues to extend its influence and deepen its presence across the countries of the region.

The radical position on Iran might be pushed even further beyond the boundaries of Hook's 'maximum pressure' policies and exceed the imposition of more sanctions and threats to use force on a limited scale. Examples of radical actions include the ambiguous attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities during the past two months. Attacks of such a nature could be accelerated under Abrams, who backs military action against Iran.

In the end, there is no doubt that the US is sending tacit messages by suddenly replacing the official in charge of the Iranian file.

The first message is targeting Russia and China, as well as the European parties who refuse to extend the arms embargo on Iran via the UN Security Council. The US wants them to know that the alternative to extending the arms embargo on Iran is military escalation. This is a form of pressure on these countries to persuade them to change their position.

The second message is targeting the Iranian political system itself, signaling that the option of war has not been ruled out in case no breakthrough is reached in negotiations for a new deal in accordance with Trump's wishes.



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