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The rush to meet news deadlines and get instant commentary after a major Presidential address or White House policy statement often encourages a peculiar kind of strategic illiteracy. Reporting focuses only on the key policy speech or statement, and on getting instant reactions in the form of commentary and op-eds. No one has the time or immediate access to pay attention to the formal statements and documents that explain or justify a given policy action, and much of the reporting and commentary is rushed and incorrect.

Sometimes this leads to exaggerated views and criticism. President Trump's new strategy speech was followed by a flood of exaggerated criticism that ignored the actual strategy document, the text of the Department of Defense national security strategy that followed, and the content of the FY2019 budget submission. It treated a conservative, but balanced set of documents as extreme and almost isolationist.

The JCPOA Talking Points on the President's Speech

The White House also, however, went a great deal further. Less than half an hour after the President spoke, it issued "JCPOA Talking Points" that both summarized the key points of his speech, and then provided a great deal more detail of the President's intentions regarding future relations with Iran than his May 8th speech did.

The talking points summarized the President's decisions, and the reasons for them, as follows: ¹

President Trump is terminating United States participation in the JCPOA, as it failed to protect America's national security interests.

- The JCPOA enriched the Iranian regime and enabled its malign behavior, while at best delaying its ability to pursue nuclear weapons and allowing it to preserve nuclear research and development.
- The President has directed his Administration to immediately begin the process of re-imposing sanctions related to the JCPOA.
- The re-imposed sanctions will target critical sectors of Iran's economy, such as its energy, petrochemical, and financial sectors.
- Those doing business in Iran will be provided a period of time to allow them to wind down operations in or business involving Iran.
- Those who fail to wind down such activities with Iran by the end of the period will risk severe consequences.
- United States withdrawal from the JCPOA will pressure the Iranian regime to alter its course of malign activities and ensure that Iranian bad acts are no longer rewarded. As a result, both Iran and its regional proxies will be put on notice. As importantly, this step will help ensure global funds stop flowing towards illicit terrorist and nuclear activities.

Iran negotiated the JCPOA in bad faith, and the deal gave the Iranian regime too much in exchange for too little.

- Intelligence recently released by Israel provides compelling details about Iran's past secret efforts to develop nuclear weapons, which it lied about for years.
- The intelligence further demonstrates that the Iranian regime did not come clean about its nuclear weapons activity, and that it entered the JCPOA in bad faith.
- The JCPOA failed to deal with the threat of Iran's missile program and did not include a strong enough mechanism for inspections and verification.
- The JCPOA foolishly gave the Iranian regime a windfall of cash and access to the international financial system for trade and investment.
- Instead of using the money from the JCPOA to support the Iranian people at home, the regime has instead funded a military buildup and continues to fund its terrorist proxies, such as Hizballah and Hamas.
- Iran violated the laws and regulations of European countries to counterfeit the currency of its neighbor, Yemen, to support the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force's destabilizing activities.

Calling for a Broad Coalition but Only Addressing Iran's Actions in the Middle East less Israel

The Talking Points, however, went much further. The President's speech did little to address what would happen next to try to replace the JCPOA. The only portions dealing with the fact that Britain, France, and Germany – the "E3" and America's three European partners that were responsible for the actual Western efforts to negotiate with Iran over the JCPOA – continued to support the JCPOA did not address their lack of support for ending the JCPOA, how the U.S. intended to work with them in the future, or how the U.S. would deal with Russia and China – the other two members of the 5+1 that had originally negotiated the agreement.

The only references in the speech were:²

... Over the past few months, we have engaged extensively with our allies and partners around the world, including France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. We have also consulted with our friends from across the Middle East. We are unified in our understanding of the threat and in our conviction that Iran must never acquire a nuclear weapon.

After these consultations, it is clear to me that we cannot prevent an Iranian nuclear bomb under the decaying and rotten structure of the current agreement. The Iran deal is defective at its core. If we do nothing, we know exactly what will happen. In just a short period of time, the world's leading state sponsor of terror will be on the cusp of acquiring the world's most dangerous weapons.

...As we exit the Iran deal, we will be working with our allies to find a real, comprehensive, and lasting solution to the Iranian nuclear threat. This will include efforts to eliminate the threat of Iran's ballistic missile program, to stop its terrorist activities worldwide, and to block its menacing activity across the Middle East.

In contrast, the Talking Points announced a U.S. effort to create a coalition that would replace the JCPOA with a far broader U.S. approach to Iran and to the Middle East: "President Trump will work to assemble a broad coalition of nations to deny Iran all paths to a nuclear weapon and to counter the totality of the regime's malign activities."³

The Talking Points made no effort to define this "broad coalition." It did, however, state that it would have to work together to address far more than Iran's nuclear programs and other military activities:⁴

- Nations must work together to halt the Iranian regime's destabilizing drive for regional hegemony.
- In Syria, the Iranian regime supports the Assad regime and is complicit in Assad's atrocities against the Syrian people.
- In Yemen, the regime has escalated the conflict and used the Houthis as a proxy to attack other nations.
- In Iraq, Iran's IRGC sponsors Shia militant groups and terrorists.
- In Lebanon, the Iranian regime enables Hizballah to play a highly destabilizing role and to build an arsenal of weapons that threatens the region.
- The Administration's actions are directed against the malign behavior of the Iranian regime, not against the Iranian people, who are the regime's longest-suffering victims.

This list effectively called for a unified allied strategy to deal with Iran's growing regional influence that focused on its efforts to achieve "regional hegemony". These are radically different goals from the past focus on dealing with the time limits in the JCPOA, inspection issues, and the fact it does not apply to Iran's missile programs, and it should be noted that the last bullet may be seen in Iran as an indirect call for regime change.

Calling for Mission Impossible (?): The White House List of What Iran Must Now Do

However, the final section of the Talking Points did go much further. It went on to state that, "President Trump is making clear that, in addition to never developing a nuclear weapon, the Iranian regime must" perform eight actions.⁵

- Never have an ICBM, cease developing any nuclear-capable missiles, and stop proliferating ballistic missiles to others.
- Cease its support for terrorists, extremists, and regional proxies, such as
- Hizballah, Hamas, the Taliban, and al-Qa'ida.
- End its publicly declared quest to destroy Israel.
- Stop its threats to freedom of navigation, especially in the Persian Gulf and Red Sea.
- Cease escalating the Yemen conflict and destabilizing the region by proliferating weapons to the Houthis.
- End its cyber-attacks against the United States and our allies, including Israel.

- Stop its grievous human rights abuses, shown most recently in the regime's crackdown against widespread protests by Iranian citizens.
- Stop its unjust detention of foreigners, including United States citizens.

It is not clear whether President Trump was aware of this list, or how much support it had from the rest of the U.S. national security community. It obviously, however, goes far beyond what a speech writer might add on his own. It also reinforces the position that the President is focusing on a broad set of goals for a regional strategy and not on any new form of nuclear agreement.

Never have an ICBM, cease developing any nuclear-capable missiles, and stop proliferating ballistic missiles to others

Iran may be willing to halt ICBM development and deployment, but this requirement – like the poorly draft UN resolution on missiles – ignores the fact that Iran has developed short- and medium-range missiles as its only way of countering that its current air force often dates back to the time of the Shah and is largely obsolete. It ignores the fact that Iran cannot import modern combat aircraft, or begin to compete with the airpower Israel, the Arab Gulf states, the U.S., Britain, and France can deploy. It also ignores the reality that missiles that can deliver effective conventional warheads, with precision guidance or even larger warheads to partly compensate for the lack of precision require, require payloads and throw weights large enough to deliver nuclear warheads. This requirement would keep Iran a third-rate military power even if it never sought nuclear weapons and is almost certain to be unacceptable.

Cease its support for terrorists, extremists, and regional proxies, such as Hizballah, Hamas, the Taliban, and al-Qa'ida

This requirement overstates the limited support Iran has provided for the Taliban and al-Qa'ida, which has generally been to use given figures to provide leverage against the U.S. or its neighbors, but Iran broadly sees both movements as enemies and might agree to this, and even to any future support of Hamas – a Sunni movement. Ceasing all ties to Shiite movements like Hizballah and the Shi'ite militias in Syria in Iraq, Yemen, and the Hazara in Afghanistan would mean giving up critical strategic leverage without any quid pro quos, and sacrificing asymmetric capabilities that Iran feels are essential to offset the conventional superiority of Israeli, Arab Gulf states, and U.S., British, and French forces

End its publicly declared quest to destroy Israel

Iran's opposition to Israel is partly ideological, partly a result of the fact that Israel had close ties to the Shah, partly a tactical way of positioning Iran to be a "defender" of the Palestinians and win Arab popular support, and partly the result of nearly 40 years of mutual hostility since the fall of the Shah. Hardliners in Iran will try to use this demand to block negotiations, and it is unclear that any Iranian government could make this change without an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement.

Stop its threats to freedom of navigation, especially in the Persian Gulf and Red Sea

Once again, Iran would have to give up critical strategic leverage without any quid pro quos, and sacrifice asymmetric capabilities that it feels are essential to offset the conventional naval-air-missile superiority of Israeli, Arab Gulf states, and U.S., British, and French forces.

Cease escalating the Yemen conflict and destabilizing the region by proliferating weapons to the Houthis

Support of the Houthis gives Iran leverage over another key Shi'ite military movement, and allows it to use small, cheap arms transfers to put intense and highly costly asymmetric pressure on Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and – to a far more limited extent – the other members of their coalition. It also deprives Iran of the option of establishing a strategic position in the Red Sea. Again, it seems doubtful that Iran would accept this without a major quid pro quo and broader set of regional security agreements that removed most of today's strategic tensions and allowed Iran to develop its economy.

End its cyber-attacks against the United States and our allies, including Israel

Again, Iran is being asked to give up an asymmetric capability without a clear quid pro quo, and without any acknowledgment it has been under cyber-attack by the U.S. and Israel.

Stop its grievous human rights abuses, shown most recently in the regime's crackdown against widespread protests by Iranian citizens

There are "moderate" forces even within the current regime in Iran that support a less repressive approach, and see economic and social reforms as key steps in winning popular support. Like all too many governments in the region and developing world, however, the regime is very unlikely to take any steps that it feels threaten it. Repression – not reform – is the region's default approach to internal security.

Stop its unjust detention of foreigners, including United States citizens

Once again, repression – not reform – is the region's default approach to internal security. Iran also feels it can use the detention of U.S. citizens as a form of leverage. Iran might still agree, but it will not fail to detain or create serious problems for any foreigner who is seen as a threat to the regime.

Mission Impossible

If this list does fully reflect the President's views, it creates a far more ambitious set of goals for U.S. strategy than an effort to block Iran's nuclear programs – a goal that isn't even listed among the eight in the Talking Points. On the one hand, all would greatly enhance the U.S. strategic position in the Middle East and the security of America's regional allies.

On the other hand, they are all so broad that none of the eight goals seem likely to be negotiable with the Iranian government. Moreover, many may not win meaningful active support from our European allies. As a result, they effectively give both the U.S. and its allies something that appears to be "mission impossible."

Documentary Annex

It should also be noted that the White House and the Treasury issue a wide range of detailed data on the history of the JCPOA, how the President's decisions will be implemented, and the nature of the new sanctions on May 8th. These are collected in a documentary annex to this commentary entitled *Key Documents Relating to the President's Decision to Reimpose Sanctions on Iran - May 8, 2018*. This Annex is available on the CSIS website at [????????](#).

The documents include:

- Key Documents Relating to the President's Decision to Reimpose Sanctions on Iran - May 8, 2018
- Joint Plan of Action (JPOA) Archive and Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) Archive
- Frequently Asked Questions Regarding the Re-Imposition of Sanctions Pursuant to the May 8, 2018 National Security Presidential Memorandum Relating to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) May 8, 2018
- Statement by Secretary Steven T. Mnuchin on Iran Decision May 8, 2018
- Treasury Detailed Update on Iran Sanctions, May 8, 2018

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¹ Sadler, Kelly J. EOP/WHO, *JCPOA Talking Points*, <Kelly.J.Sadler@who.eop.gov> Tue, May 8, 2018 at 2:25 PM

² "Read the Full Transcript of Trump's Speech on the Iran Nuclear Deal," *New York Times*, May 8, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/us/politics/trump-speech-iran-deal.html>.

³ Sadler, Kelly J. EOP/WHO, *JCPOA Talking Points*, <Kelly.J.Sadler@who.eop.gov> Tue, May 8, 2018 at 2:25 PM

⁴ Sadler, Kelly J. EOP/WHO, *JCPOA Talking Points*, <Kelly.J.Sadler@who.eop.gov> Tue, May 8, 2018 at 2:25 PM

⁵ Sadler, Kelly J. EOP/WHO, *JCPOA Talking Points*, <Kelly.J.Sadler@who.eop.gov> Tue, May 8, 2018 at 2:25 PM