
EU AND US CLASH ON IRAN: AN EX-SPY'S VIEW

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Halting the Iran deal could plunge its nuclear programme back underground, the CIA believes. It could also create a sanctions clash with EU states, a former US spy has warned.

That is the assessment that the Central Intelligence Agency would likely have given US president Donald Trump, according to Robaert Baer, a former CIA operative in the Middle East.

But Trump followed his "strategically stupid" national security advisor, John Bolton, instead when he pulled the US out of the nuclear deal on Tuesday (8 May), Baer told EUobserver.

The deal, put in place by UN powers two years ago, lets inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) swoop down on Iranian sites if they get leads on secret weapons activity in the only real intelligence asset that the US has there, Baer said.

"If the Iranians pull out of the IAEA inspections in return, the intelligence collection on its nuclear sites will disappear, so they can move stuff around and restart their [weapons] programme again. You go back to zero because there are not a lot of sources inside the nuclear programme who are reliable," he said.

He said satellite photos would be no substitute because the Iranians were "very good at putting facilities underground".

He also said Israeli intelligence and Iranian exile groups in the US were no substitute for the IAEA inspections.

"The Israelis are largely using MEK dissident groups, but Iran is not falling apart in terms of intelligence to the point where we can overcome this. It's always bad when you don't have people on the ground," Baer noted.

The CIA expert, who used to carry out covert operations in the region in the 1990s, said Bolton also relied on flawed information from the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK), an Iranian opposition group, and from exiled supporters of the former Iranian Shah, who wanted the US to topple the Iranian regime so that they could go back home.

Following Bolton on Iran was as bad as following him on Iraq regime change when he was a White House advisor back in 2003, Baer said.

"The Iraq invasion was strategically the most stupid conflict for US and Israeli interests in the region. Putting the same guy who pushed for that invasion back in the White House is like bringing

back the engineer of the Titanic to build us another one. Same boat," Baer said.

"It's bullshit incompetence. You can't tear up an international order that works very well and then have no plan. We've got no plan [on how to control Iran's nuclear programme]," he said.

EU clash

The EU powers who backed the Iran deal have said they would continue to do business with Iran in return for IAEA oversight and curbs on uranium enrichment, setting the scene for a trade clash with the US after Trump reimposed US sanctions, Baer added.

France, Germany, and the UK would "work with all the remaining parties to the deal * including through ensuring the continuing economic benefits to the Iranian people that are linked to the agreement," the three countries' leaders said in a joint statement on Tuesday.

They urged the US "to avoid taking action which obstructs its full implementation" after Bolton warned that French and German firms who did business with Iran had two months to get out or face penalties.

"Is the US treasury going to punish Mercedes [a German carmaker] and European oil companies for continuing to do business?," Baer said.

"We're close to rupturing trade with Europe in any case," he added, referring to Trump's recent plan to impose trade tariffs on European exports to protect American manufacturers.

"This is more fuel for the fire. You throw in trade penalties and penalties for dealing with Iran and pretty soon the Europeans are going to say: 'Enough is enough'," Baer said.

"They're going to continue to do business with Iran and ignore the United States. All the Europeans are going to band together and come down on this, especially the Germans, who have a key business relationship with Iran," he said.

"To just gratuitously tear up this deal for no reason is going to infuriate [German leader] Angela Merkel," he said, referring to the prospect of an EU-US sanctions clash.

Russia benefits

Baer said the only beneficiary of the Iran fiasco was Russia, which stood to profit from higher oil prices due to the heightened risk of a new Middle East conflict.

Asked by EUobserver if Trump might be happy to serve Russian interests, given the allegations of Kremlin collusion weighed against him, Baer said: "You have to wonder. If you think of a war with Iran that disrupted oil supplies, who's going to step in and benefit is Russia".

He said the idea that Moscow might have "bought" the US leader was not so wild in times when Russian espionage was bold enough to use a chemical weapon to try to kill a former spy in Salisbury in England in March.

"After Salisbury, anything's possible. It's a different world out there. If Russia is going to be using

nerve agents in Europe, indiscriminate weapons of mass destruction, what won't they stop at? Buying a US president? You can't exclude that," he said.

Kaynak/Source: