

## WORLD

# Tillerson's Departure Will Embolden Saudi Adventurism

The view in the region is that more than Israel or any other lobby in Washington, it is the Saudis and Emiratis who are behind the firing of Trump's secretary of state.



US President Donald Trump and former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Credit: Reuters



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Last week, when US President Donald Trump announced he was firing secretary of state Rex Tillerson, he cited the former's wish to stay on course with the "terrible" Iranian nuclear deal as the main reason.

However true that may be, it goes without saying that there are many reasons for Tillerson's departure. Some analysts believe the Iranian nuclear deal probably had little to do anything with it, and his replacement by CIA director Mike Pompeo will not harden, in the next few months, the US policy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran. But the impression is different on the Iranian side.

Practically one day after Tillerson's sacking, Abbas Araghchi, Iran's deputy foreign minister, said in comments publicised by an Iranian state news agency that the change showed that **Washington was set on** quitting the nuclear deal between Tehran and the world powers.

According to Araghchi, "the United States is determined to leave the nuclear deal, and changes at the State Department were made with that goal in mind – or at least it was one of the reasons."

As such, from the Iranian point of view, things seem very clear: the US exit will kill the pact between Iran, Germany and the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. And as Araghchi added, "If the US quits the

nuclear deal, we will also quit it, we have told the Europeans that if they can't keep the US in the deal, Iran will also leave it." Therefore, things do not look very bright for the 2015 Iran deal.

Despite Tillerson's determination to stick with the deal, Trump has incessantly slammed the door on any negotiations with Iran, dismissing the fact that the Iranian authorities had accepted to freeze the nuclear programme in return for relief from international sanctions. Since his arrival in the White House 14 months ago, the US president has made it clear that the deal needs major changes regarding ballistic missiles, inspections and the duration of limits on Iran's nuclear programme.

But as it happens, what Trump calls "the rolling back of a disastrous deal" also has consequences for the Arab world and the Middle East in general. It is a general view in Qatar, for example, that more than Israel or any other lobby in Washington, the Saudis and Emiratis are behind the firing of Tillerson.

Some believe that the reason for this is simply the tweet of Abdul Khaliq Abdullah, a political analyst who is close to the ruling family in the UAE, saying that Tillerson was "the worst secretary of state ever." Others point to the leaked emails showing the UAE-backed efforts to get Tillerson out of the Trump administration because of his support for Qatar.

Among other reasons, Tillerson was clearly against the tensions generated back in June by the Saudi Arabian-led pressures on Qatar, including cutting diplomatic ties and isolating Qatar by curtailing its use of vital air, sea and land transport routes. But more than anything else, it is unacceptable for Saudi Arabia, Bahrein and the UAE to see Qatar having working relations with Iran or Hamas, and promoting a relatively free and open media constellation in Qatar.

These issues are considered not only as political irritants but also mainly genuine security threats. Tillerson's view of Saudi politics seemed to have been more nuanced than that of Trump when it came to maintaining stability in the Arab region through the use of guns and money to silence any critics.

But perhaps the most relevant of all explanations can be found in Trump's recent interest in Saudi Arabia and the support for Saudi's engagement in Yemen

against the Iranian funded Houthi rebels. The US support of Saudi aggression in Yemen served as a political gift to Riyadh, which was vehemently critical of the nuclear agreement with Iran whereby Iran would stop its nuclear programme and the US would lift its economic sanctions.

In 2017, Saudi Arabia allocated \$51 billion, or 21% of its budget to military spending. On his trip to Riyadh, Trump offered “partnership” to the Saudis and signed a military pact with them to sell \$110 billion worth of arms, adding up to \$350 billion during the next ten years. The deal was mainly to contain Iran’s hegemony in the Persian Gulf region.

The Trump administration continues to see Iran as a hegemon in the Middle East that has brought a shift in the regional power structure and needs to be stopped.

It is, however, important to point out that the devastating Afghanistan war, Saddam Hussein’s overthrow, the US invasion of Iraq and the full support given to the Saudis in Yemen are among the reasons that have brought the Islamic Republic of Iran to the forefront, enabling it to fill the power vacuum created by the US.

Trump’s promises of making “America great again” and relieving it from the burdens of an imperial power in the Middle East have so far proven hollow as the coalition of his administration with Saudi Arabia and other Arab Persian Gulf states continue to threaten Iran. Against this backdrop, Tillerson’s departure points to an important lacuna in American foreign policy in the Middle East.

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