



POLICY BRIEF


The US - Iran Information Warfare: the backstage of the Nuclear Deal and the role of the European Union

VOCAL
EUROPE

*This Policy Brief was written by **Mariaeugenia Benato** | 25 June 2019

 Rue de la Science 14, 1040 Brussels

 office@vocaleurope.eu

 + 32 02 588 00 14

VOCAL EUROPE

RUE DE LA SCIENCE 14B, 1040 BRUSSELS

TEL: +32 02 588 00 14

VOCALEUROPE.EU



[TWITTER.COM/THEVOCALEUROPE](https://twitter.com/thevocaleurope)



[FACEBOOK.COM/VOCALEUROPE](https://facebook.com/vocaleurope)



[YOUTUBE.COM/VOCALEUROPE](https://youtube.com/vocaleurope)



[INSTAGRAM.COM/VOCALEUROPE](https://instagram.com/vocaleurope)

Disclaimer and Copyright

This document is prepared for, and addressed to Vocal Europe and its audience. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of Vocal Europe. Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged.

“We live in an age that is driven by information. Technological breakthroughs . . . are changing the face of war and how we prepare for war”.

- U.S. Secretary of Defence William Perry -

The concept of Information Warfare (IW) is not recent. It could be define as “a targeted effort to undermine and neutralize hostile command and control systems for the purpose of protecting and coordinating the activities of command and control systems of friendly forces”¹ and, in the aftermath of the Cold War, each single country learnt rapidly the strategic impact of information in fighting a war.

According to the political scientist and American philosopher Noam Chomsky, IW is one of the most efficient methods of conducting psychological warfare.² During his career, Chomsky studied the effect of Information Warfare and he affirmed that about 20% of the population of a county can be influenced by media in making decisions and implementing politics.³

Nowadays, information (and mainly disinformation) is one of the most common tools that states use to expand and impose their power in terms of military-psychological operations (maneuvers to communicate selected information to audiences to influence their behavior), cyberspace threats (dangers that exploit a system vulnerability to breach it and to cause possible harm), electronic warfare (use of the electromagnetic spectrum to conduct both military and civilian operations) and strategic communications (concepts, decision-making processes, or data analyses used to achieve a long term strategic goal).⁴

In this field, Russia has been one of the earliest countries in using disinformation campaigns in order to promote its own personal purposes. However, with the development of new technologies, Iran has drastically increased its communicative skills, employing both media and social media as an unconventional mean to achieve its strategic objectives.⁵

One of the most recent cases of IW is the ongoing hostile confrontation between Iran and the U.S., following the withdrawal of Washington from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) under President Donald Trump’s leadership.⁶ Besides the diplomatic crisis since 1979 and economic sanctions imposed by Washington, in fact, there is more. Both the U.S. and the Islamic Republic of Iran are currently engaged in a verbal and psychological fight that can escalate in less than no time. If that happened, the consequences would be significant in terms of international security and

¹Damjanović, D.Z. (2017) Types of information warfare and examples of malicious programs of information warfare. *Military Technical Courier*. Vol 6, N 4, pp: 1044-1059.

<https://scindeks-clanci.ceon.rs/data/pdf/0042-8469/2017/0042-84691704044D.pdf>

² Chomsky, N (1991) Media control: the spectacular achievements of propaganda. A Seven Stories Press First Edition.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Allen, T.S. & Moore, A.J. (2018) 21st Century Political Warfare. Victory without Casualties: Russia’s Information Operations. *Parameters journal*. Vol. 48, N.1, pp: 59-71.

⁵ Hicks, K. H. & Dalton, M.G. (2017) Deterring Iran after the Nuclear Deal. *Center for Strategic and International Studies*. March.

⁶<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/122460/full-text-of-the-iran-nuclear-deal.pdf>

stability, and they would involve not only Washington and Teheran, but also many U.S. allies, particularly the European Union.

The consequences of the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

In November 2013, in Geneva, China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States (P5+1) signed for the first time an interim agreement called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

During the next two years of negotiations, Teheran used a “war of narratives” in order to attract and encourage all involved actors to support its cause.⁷ Ayatollah Khamenei, in fact, made sure that a wide English-language social media campaign was developed to spread the Iran perspective by declaring that implementing the “nuclear fatwa” (a non-binding legal opinion provided by a qualified jurist in response to a question presented by a government or a private individual) is an Iranian right.⁸ Conversely, during the first phases of bargaining, the U.S. Administration under the former President Barack Obama was much less efficient in this sphere.⁹

After different meetings and a preliminary agreement in Lausanne, in July 2015, the P5+1 countries signed in Vienna the definitive version of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, ensuring that Teheran will use its nuclear program purely for peaceful purposes. In exchange, the European Union, the United Nations and the United States will widely reduce sanction on Iran and, only if Teheran violates its commitments, sanctions will be imposed again.

On May 8, 2018, however, the U.S. withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. All powers involved in the negotiation, especially the European Union, tried several times to persuade Washington from its decision, without any positive response.¹⁰ Trump Administration defined it as “a horrible one-sided deal that should have never, ever been made”¹¹ and he also claimed that “it didn’t bring calm, it didn’t bring peace, and it never will”.¹²

From that moment on, the U.S. recovered the ground lost and it began to stage a meticulous information campaign in order to promote and spread its perspective worldwide, exactly as Iran did previously.¹³ As a consequence, tensions between Washington and Teheran intensified significantly and both sides started accusing reciprocally to death with tweets.

⁷See Hicks and Dalton.

⁸Kerry, J (2014) US Welcomes Ayatollah Khamenei’s Fatwa against N. Weapons, *Fars News Agency*. March. <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13930102000247>

⁹See Hicks and Dalton.

¹⁰ Slavin, B. (2019) Europeans Promise Political and Economic Steps to Salvage the Iran Deal. *Atlantic Council*. May. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/europeans-promise-political-and-economic-steps-to-salvage-the-iran-deal>

¹¹ Landler, M. (2018) Trump Withdraws U.S. From 'One-Sided' Iran Nuclear Deal. *The New York Times*. May. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/world/middleeast/trump-iran-nuclear-deal.html>

¹²Ibid.

¹³ <https://www.presstv.com/DetailFr/2018/08/13/571057/Iran-US-Warfare>

The U.S. declared that relieving the sanctions would provide Iran with the opportunity to conduct “malign activities” in the region.¹⁴ From the Iran’s perspective, instead, the remodeled sanctions coming from Washington have been identified on Twitter as a strong form of *#EconomicTerrorism*.¹⁵

In light of that, both sides seem to have understood the real value and impact of social media such as Twitter to share their thoughts. However, the *power of words* does not only guarantee massive numbers of followers; it is also connected with the possibility to create windows of opportunities, and both sides have used the Nuclear Deal issue to sponsor their own national interest.

On one side, for instance, the Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif accused the US National security adviser John Bolton “to drag the U.S. into war with Iran”¹⁶. Accordingly, Teheran identifies Washington as an aggressor that, due to its sanctions, is sponsoring economic terrorism and genocide, as it is possible to read in one of his tweets released on May 20th, 2019:

*Goaded by #B_Team, @realdonaldtrump hopes to achieve what Alexander, Genghis & other aggressors failed to do. Iranians have stood tall for millennia while aggressors all gone. #EconomicTerrorism & genocidal taunts won't "end Iran". #NeverThreatenAnIranian. Try respect—it works!*¹⁷

On the other side, instead, the U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton affirms that what the Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has asserted is totally absurd, specifying that it “was a carefully prepared propaganda script by the Iranians”.¹⁸

Bolton’s thoughts and concerns, moreover, have never been isolated. The U.S. National Security Advisor has always been supported by the President Trump who, on May 17th, 2019, published the following tweets:

"With all of the Fake and Made Up News out there, Iran can have no idea what is actually going on!"¹⁹

“If Iran wants to fight, that will be the official end of Iran. Never threaten the United States again!”²⁰

Although it is unquestionable to say that nobody can really understand “what is actually going on”, it is noticeable that both sides are using their best tactics to fight this “war”.

¹⁴ Kerr, K.P. & Katzman, K. (2018) Iran Nuclear Agreement and U.S. Exit. *Congressional Research Service*, pp:1-38. July.

¹⁵<https://twitter.com/JZarif/status/1135591916660281344>

¹⁶https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2019/04/28/iranian_foreign_minister_mohammad_javad_zarif_saudis_israeli_s_and_john_bolton_trying_to_drag_us_into_war_with_iran.html

¹⁷<https://twitter.com/JZarif/status/1130419673756049410>

¹⁸https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2019/04/28/john_bolton_slams_iranian_propaganda_and_disinformation_tha_t_accuses_him_of_wanting_war.html

¹⁹<https://www.ctvnews.ca/world/iran-s-top-diplomat-presses-efforts-to-save-nuclear-deal-1.4426501>

²⁰<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1130207891049332737>

Psychological and disinformation activities, in fact, have always been central in the Islamic Republic of Iran's (IRI) politics and strategy²¹, as well as the U.S. has always exploited its military power to create deterrence.

However, what is seriously worrying several political actors worldwide is the possibility that, due to an overstressed disinformation campaign, a conventional war might blow up. Many rely on the European Union to avoid the escalation, arguing that it can represent the chance to reopen a positive and concrete dialogue between Washington and Teheran.

The Role of the European Union

Concerning the European capabilities to contain a plausible escalation between Teheran and Washington, people have different points of view. Many assert that the European Union is actually the only actor able to encourage the U.S. and Iran to engage in dialogue.²² In May 2019, after a meeting with the U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, the EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini affirmed that the EU's main task is to promote solid diplomatic engagement between the two countries, highlighting that "we are living in a crucial delicate moment where the most relevant and responsible attitude to take is maximum restraint and avoid any escalation on a military side".²³

Others, instead, believe that the European Union is not enough powerful to contain a U.S. - Iran clash.²⁴ According to this perspective, it seems that no international actor, not even the European Union, is strong enough to motivate the President Trump to change his position. As a consequence, the U.S.-EU diplomatic and economic ties might face the risk of further deterioration.²⁵

However, the European Union is attempting to play one of its best strategic and psychological games in order to avoid any sort of further escalation between the U.S. and Iran. According to what has been declared by the EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini, it appears that the European Union has understood the intentions of both sides in using media in order to spread news and create disinformation.

For instance, in May 2019, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani announced that Tehran will suspend compliance with its obligations under two Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action clauses for 60 day. This ultimatum has been renewed in June 2019 and Teheran added that, due to the absence of positive signals coming from the other signatories of the JCPOA, Iran would increase uranium at higher levels²⁶.

²¹ Lewis, B. (2001) Propaganda in the Pre-Modern Middle East, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* Vol. 25, pp: 1–14.

²²https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/eu-urges-us-to-show-restraint-iran-to-comply-with-nuclear-deal-119051400362_1.html

²³ Ibid.

²⁴Writer, S (2019) Europe Feels Powerless as US Faces Off Against Iran. *The Globe Post*. May.

<https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/world/europe/2019-05-09-europe-now-powerless-to-stave-off-threat-of-looming-us-iran-clash/>

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190615-iran-president-renews-ultimatum-over-compliance-with-nuclear-pact/>

Nonetheless, according to Brussels, Iran's announcements do not correspond to a violation of the nuclear deal.²⁷ Federica Mogherini, has already announced that there won't be immediate new actions against Teheran since the EU does not impose sanctions on the basis of announcements.²⁸ EU member states will continue to support what has been defined in the JCPOA in order to keep Tehran's nuclear ambitions in check but, as a senior EU official, Mogherini also affirmed, "the Iranians know perfectly well what they risk if they cross the line".²⁹

What appears, therefore, is that Brussels is seriously attempting to cover a role of mediator between the two sides, giving due weight to each declaration. However, there is also the possibility that EU's efforts could be marginal and not enough to stop the escalation exist.

Conclusion

The U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA caused significant diplomatic tensions, leading Washington and Teheran to initiate a widespread Information Warfare (also called "Soft War") to influence populations across the globe.³⁰

The Islamic Republic of Iran has usually utilized Gmail, Facebook and Twitter as conduits in order to persuade individuals towards an anti-Americans campaign, even before the Nuclear Deal.³¹ Similarly, Trump's "Sanctions are coming" tweet caught the world's attention.

As a result, the European Union is the one who is losing the most. On one side, Iran expects that the EU will fulfill its commitments in terms of protecting the Iranian economy from further US sanctions but, on the other side, Brussels cannot turn its back on the US. The EU is in the middle of an IW that, maybe, could escalate in to something bigger. Many expect³² that Brussels will take soon a stand; others suggest that any effort to encourage both sides to cooperate would be vain.³³

Nonetheless, the EU High Representative Federica Mogherini seems to have in mind what it is necessary now in order to contain disinformation: transparency. She publicly declared that the main European objective is to keep the nuclear deal in place, specifying that it is not easy and that "we have made no secret of that".³⁴

According to Mogherini, every concern about the U.S.-Iran tension needs to be managed "not by words but by deeds".³⁵ This could be the key to success.

²⁷See Writer.

²⁸<https://theglobepost.com/2019/05/09/europe-iran-trump-jcpoa/>

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Jones, S. G. & Newlee, D. (2019) The United States' Soft War with Iran. *Center for Strategic & International Studies*. June, pp: 1-12.

³¹Sabet, F. & Safshekan, R. (2013) Soft War: A new episode in the old conflict between Iran and the United States. *Center for Global Communication Studies' Iran Media Program*, pp:1-26.

https://global.asc.upenn.edu/app/uploads/2014/06/soft_war_0.pdf

³² Peel, M. (2019) Tanker attacks add pressure on Europe to turn against Iran. *Financial Times*. June.

<https://www.ft.com/content/2feb5fb6-9116-11e9-aea1-2b1d33ac3271>

³³ See Writer.

³⁴<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/06/mogherini-keeping-iran-nuclear-deal-alive-easy-190617145450867.html>

³⁵https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-geneva/55699/speech-high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-seventh-eu-non-proliferation-and_en

VOCAL EUROPE

RUE DE LA SCIENCE 14B, 1040 BRUSSELS

TEL: +32 02 588 00 14

VOCALEUROPE.EU



[TWITTER.COM/THEVOCAL EUROPE](https://twitter.com/thevoCALEUROPE)



[FACEBOOK.COM/VOCAL EUROPE](https://facebook.com/vocaleurope)



[YOUTUBE.COM/VOCAL EUROPE](https://youtube.com/vocaleurope)



[INSTAGRAM.COM/VOCAL EUROPE](https://instagram.com/vocaleurope)

Disclaimer and Copyright

This document is prepared for, and addressed to Vocal Europe and its audience. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of Vocal Europe. Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged.