

Iran deal will impact higher ed

On May 8, President Donald Trump announced that the United States was pulling out of the 2015 deal with Iran and other countries to limit the Iranian nuclear program. This deal was designed to slow and delay Iran's efforts to build a nuclear weapon by lifting economic sanctions on that country in exchange for a number of actions aimed at shutting down its uranium enrichment efforts and related programs.

The decision by the Trump Administration seems to have been prompted more by demagoguery and hatred towards anything President Barack Obama did, than by reason. In fact, America's European allies tried everything in their power to prevent the U.S. from pulling out from the accord. Besides increasing volatility and uncertainty in the Middle East, this action will have a number of unintended consequences on academia.

A key component of the agreement was thorough inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) of Iran's activities that could be related to development of nuclear capabilities. Among the objectives of the agreement was a plan to convert some of the nuclear facilities that enrich uranium, such as the one in Fordow, into centers of scientific research where worldwide scientists could collaborate and, therefore, ensure that those facilities were not employed for the development of nuclear

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weapons.

For example, Iran had planned to pursue particle-physics research at the Fordow facility, as well as to use other facilities to produce medical isotopes. Russian scientists had been working with Iran on experiments to advance Iran's medical isotope production. Now, with this turn of events, those facilities could be used for enriching uranium again.

A workshop was to have been convened to explore potential research topics in collaboration with international partners, but now such collaboration seems to be off the table. The same can be said about projects with European partners – including a center on nuclear safety – that can now be declared dead. Further, Trump's decision will also affect the long-term status of the U.S. within the global nuclear community through the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action). Without the deal in place, the U.S. will lose its ability to monitor Iran's nuclear program.

All this is not surprising. When Trump took office last year, longstanding efforts to establish scientific exchanges between Iran and the United States came to a halt. For

example, workshops organized by the U.S. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) between 2010 and 2017 that involved hundreds of scientists and were aimed at bolstering collaborations in diverse field, including solar energy and water resource management, were frozen.

Because of the U.S. actions, hardliners in Iran now feel emboldened to defy U.S. and ally demands, which means that any international exchange with Iran will become more difficult, and that challenges to civil liberties in that country will become even harder to curtail. And that will affect not only Iranians, but also Americans being detained in that country under made-up charges.

At the present time, there are at least four Iranian-Americans and one Chinese-American being detained by the Iranian regime. Several of them are being held in Tehran's notorious Evin prison – nicknamed "Evin University" – for holding intellectuals and political prisoners before and after the Islamic Revolution. Based upon history, it is not unthinkable that Iran would impose even longer jail sentences, making

the release of these Americans unlikely.

One of the prisoners, Xiyue Wang, a Chinese-American graduate student at Princeton University, was arrested in 2016 while researching in Tehran and sentenced to 10 years in prison for "spying," a charge he denies. Another U.S. citizen who has been imprisoned by the Tehran regime is Morad Tahbaz. This Iranian-American businessman, a director of the Persian Heritage Wildlife Foundation (PHWF), was arrested in January with others from that organization and accused of espionage. An Iranian-Canadian member of the group died in February.

Karan Vafadari, an Iranian-American gallery owner in Tehran, was arrested with his wife in July 2016 and accused of serving alcohol and holding mixed-gender parties. He was later also accused of spying, charges that he denies.

It is not uncommon for dictatorial regimes that are at odds with the U.S. to arrest U.S. citizens to use them as bargaining chips and for propaganda purposes. After the U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal they will lose any bargaining value, so their fate becomes even more dire.

Testimony from Americans who have been released in the recent past by Iran provides a glimpse of the future for these captive American citizens. Jason Rezaian, a journalist who was imprisoned in Iran for 18 months, recently told the U.S.

media that he considers any possibility for his fellow Americans to be released null and that the U.S. State Department officials had told him that there are no longer any meaningful negotiations for their release.

From the Iranian side, its foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, said last month that his government would consider a prisoner swap similar to one agreed by Obama in 2016 if Trump showed a "change in attitude" toward Iran. Now that possibility has vanished. And any agreement aimed at reducing the possibility of Iran developing nuclear weapons and avoiding a nuclear confrontation with Israel has seemingly become a thing of the past. The inspections carried out by international teams of scientists are in serious jeopardy. The collaboration between Iranian scientists and their worldwide counterparts are being reduced to a minimum.

The international prestige of the U.S. has been severely degraded. After pleas from our European allies, German Chancellor Angela Merkel declared publicly that Europe could no longer count on the U.S. for protection.

What a way to make America great again.

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. is a writer and college professor with leadership experience in higher education. He can be contacted through his website at: <http://www.aromerojr.net>