A visible pattern of US foreign policy application in the past two decades has been direct wars/military interventions as in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Libya. Importantly enough, all of these started with the US designating these countries, their rulers or some elements in them as “terrorists”, posing “threat” to the US security. In Afghanistan, it was the Taliban; in Iraq, Saddam Hussain supposedly possessed Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs); in Libya, Qaddafi was a threat and in Syria, Assad’s rule was “terrorising” enough to justify a military intervention. The Trump administration, following in the footsteps of its predecessors, has now found an “Iranian terrorist” to justify a strict action—a war, ideally speaking. The designation of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards as a terrorist organisation is not just a gross non-sense; it carries a subtle meaning against the backdrop of a usual US foreign policy and its 21st century grand strategy, a crucial element of which is the so-called “war on terror” which begins with a label of “terrorism.” As such, the pertinent question is: will the US designation of Revolutionary Guards as “terrorists” be a precursor move towards a direct war?

While it may not cause a war immediately, the designation has certainly created a condition for it. While the US president, as he put the decision, tended to sound like avoiding a military confrontation and instead underscored his move as a strategy to exert “maximum pressure” on Iran by targeting the Guards, who wield considerable economic clout within Iran, the matter is a lot more complicated than meets the eye. Not only is this for the very first time that the US has labelled a formal state entity as “terrorist”, but also made its intentions clear that the US - Iran relations, particularly with regard to Iran’s increasing influence in the Middle East, would not normalise any time soon. Indeed, bi-lateral relations have turned into a tickling time-bomb.

Recognising the complication that this particular designation has created, Richard Nephew, a former director for Iran at the National Security Council, said “If you have terrorists nearby ... what do you do with them?”, adding
further that “In the US system, we have authorities that authorize military operations against them [terrorists]. The Iranians know that. Are they going to wait to be hit? Or will they hit first?”

What if a confrontation happens and some personnel on both sides are killed? Will it lead to a war of attrition and/or pitched battles since both sides have now declared each other as “terrorists?”

While a straightforward answer to this question may not be available as yet, there is little doubt that this designation has institutionalized US enmity with Iran, meaning thereby that almost all the doors towards resolution of outstanding problems, especially the Iran-nuke deal and return of the US to the deal, are now closed at least for now, which means that the objective conditions for hostility to turn into hostilities have come into existence in a much stronger form than ever before.

This designation is also likely to embolden hawks in Washington, Riyadh and Tel Aviv to design an aggressive strategy against Iran, particularly in terms of inciting Iran’s minorities against the regime, an important part of which is the Guards.

Unsurprisingly, these countries are already appraising the US decision. While Netanyahu claimed the credit for convincing the US to take this decision, an official Saudi newspaper, Al Arabiya, stated that “the US decision (follows) the kingdom’s repeated demands to the international community to address the issue of Iranian-backed terrorism.” It further stated that the decision is “practical and serious step” in curbing what the kingdom describes as Iranian meddling in the region. Washington’s decision on Monday marks the first time that the US has branded an arm of a foreign government a terrorist group.”

Within the US, hawkish think-tanks are clearly pushing a war propaganda. Atlantic Council thinks that after the ISIS, “the IRGC and extremist Shia groups under its command are now the biggest threat to the stability of the region and to US interests and those of its allies. The post-ISIS era in the region will be marked by a sharp increase in tensions between the United States and the Islamic Republic.”

A pro-Netanyahu Israeli newspaper wrote that the designation as terrorist was necessary because Iran “is slowly but steadily turning Syria and Iraq into proxy-states based on the Lebanon model” and that it is also “continuing its entrenchment” in Syria. This is a part of the war that Iran “is actively preparing for” against Israel; hence, the necessity to curb Iranian efforts and then resultant designation of the Guards, Iran’s premier military force, as terrorist to isolate it.

But the prospect of an actual war between the US and Iran is not bright given that the US as well as its allies know that such a step will not remain confined to just Iran. At the same time, if the intention is to curtail Iran’s activities in the Middle East, this step is unlikely to make any difference since the Guards have long been under US sanctions and it made no difference to lowering their activity in the region.

What this means is that instead of the Guards changing their policy, what is most likely to happen is that the US’ regional strategies in Syria and Iraq will come under severe challenge. Iran will most likely press for a making its “resistance front” even stronger.

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