

America's Iran Policy Pendulum from Obama and Trump to Biden (2009-2022): Between Diplomatic Engagement and Maximum Pressure

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Abstract

Objectives: This study examines US policy towards Iran from 2009 to 2022, focusing on the challenges and tools utilized by successive US administrations.

Methods: The study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach, drawing on official US documents, presidential statements, relevant articles, reports, and research.

Results: US-Iranian relations faced significant obstacles due to Iran's regional behavior and interference in other countries' affairs, leading to political instability. Different administrations employed varying strategies, with Obama pursuing a mix of diplomacy and economic sanctions, while the Trump administration opted for a strict approach, including withdrawing from the nuclear agreement and re-imposing economic sanctions. The Biden administration has continued the pressure by reinstating sanctions and expressing a desire to negotiate a new comprehensive agreement.

Conclusion: Despite inconsistencies, the overarching goal of US policy remains influencing Iran to alter its regional policies. However, these efforts have not produced a notable change in Iranian behavior, impeding the improvement of US-Iranian relations.

Keywords: United States, Iran, security, sanctions, Gulf region, maximum pressure, containment.

اتجاهات السياسة الأمريكية تجاه إيران من أوباما وترامب إلى بايدن (2009-2022): بين الانخراط الدبلوماسي والضغط القصوى

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ملخص

الأهداف: تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تقديم تحليل معمق للسياسة الأمريكية تجاه إيران خلال الفترة 2009-2022. كما تهدف الدراسة إلى تبيان مجموعة التحديات والعقبات التي تحاصر العلاقات الأمريكية الإيرانية، وطبيعة اختلاف الأدوات التي وظفتها الإدارات الأمريكية المتعاقبة للتعامل مع إيران.

المنهجية: تقدم الدراسة عبر استخدام المنهج الوصفي التحليلي تحليلاً عميقاً للأهداف الأمريكية المتعلقة بإيران، والتكتيكات المستخدمة لتحقيق الأهداف المحددة. استندت الدراسة إلى مصادر ومراجع متنوعة اشتملت على الوثائق الإستراتيجية الأمريكية الرسمية وتصريحات الرؤساء والمسؤولين في الولايات المتحدة، كما تم الاعتماد على مقالات وتقارير وأبحاث ذات صلة. لقد تم توظيف هذه الأدبيات في وصف وتفسير وتحليل تطور السياسة الأمريكية تجاه إيران.

النتائج: لقد شهدت العلاقات الأمريكية الإيرانية عقبات هائلة جعلت كلا البلدين في حالة عداوة طويلة الأمد. هذه العقبات تجسدت بسلوك إيران الإقليمي؛ حيث تسعى إيران إلى تقوية نفوذها عبر التدخل في الشؤون الداخلية للدول، ما أدى إلى تعزيز حالة عدم الاستقرار السياسي. لمواجهة ذلك التحدي تنوعت الأساليب والأدوات التي استخدمتها الإدارات الأمريكية؛ حيث تراوحت سياسة أوباما بين الدبلوماسية والعقوبات الاقتصادية، بينما اتبعت إدارة ترامب نهجاً صارماً تمثل في تكثيف الضغط الذي تجسّد بالإنسحاب من الإتفاق النووي وإعادة فرض العقوبات الاقتصادية بهدف نهائي هو الضغط على إيران وكبح نفوذها المتزايد في المنطقة. من اللافت للنظر أن إدارة الرئيس بايدن واصلت سياسة الضغط نفسها؛ حيث أعاد بايدن فرض العقوبات على إيران وأعلن عن الرغبة الأمريكية في إعادة التفاوض بشأن إتفاق جديد قوي وشامل.

الخلاصة: خلصت الدراسة إلى أن هناك معوقات حالت دون التقارب الأمريكي مع إيران. قد تبدو السياسة الأمريكية غير متسقة، إلا أنها كان لديها درجة من الاستمرارية تجاه إيران. بمعنى آخر، على الرغم من تباين الأدوات التي استخدمت لمواجهة إيران، إلا أن الهدف المشترك المتفق عليه للإدارات الأمريكية هو التأثير على إيران بغية إجبارها على تغيير سياساتها الإقليمية. على الرغم من ذلك، لم تغير السياسة الأمريكية السلوك الإيراني على نحو ملحوظ، وهذا ما منع بالتالي التعزيز الواسع للعلاقات الأمريكية الإيرانية.

الكلمات الدالة: الولايات المتحدة، إيران، الأمن، العقوبات، منطقة الخليج، الضغط الأقصى، الاحتواء.



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1. Introduction:

The main objective of this paper is to provide a thorough descriptive-analytical approach to analyzing the US-Iran policy aimed at containing Iran during the period 2009-2021. It examines various factors that critically affected and determined the overall US policy of containment toward Iran. This study argues that despite the appearance of inconsistency in American policy, there was a degree of continuity towards Iran. Despite differences in the tools used, the primary policy trajectory of the US aimed at changing Iran's behavior. However, the degree of change sought differed from one President to another. Obama had more modest goals than Trump and Biden. He viewed the nuclear deal, or changing Iran's behavior concerning its nuclear ambitions, as a gateway for future change inside Iran, which would lead to different behavior in the region. On the other hand, Trump sought a one-time overall change in behavior. President Biden shares the same goals of containing Iran by maintaining his predecessors' approach of maximizing pressure on Iran through sanctions as a negative incentive to push Iran to renegotiate the nuclear agreement. Importantly, the administrations of Obama, Trump, and Biden share a similar end goal, which is to counter Iranian regional ambitions. The paper studies the Obama administration's approach toward Iran and then analyzes the changes and/or continuities under the Trump and current Biden administrations. The diffuse array of challenges that besiege US-Iran relations is deep-rooted and has caused tremendous obstacles that inflamed longstanding antagonism between the US and Iran. The successive US administrations, including Obama, Trump, and Biden, have constructed policies that converge toward countering Iran's ambitions and aiming to change its regional behavior. One can say that the three administrations have adopted a carrot-and-stick approach. Though one can argue that the stick is longer with Trump and the carrot is bigger with Obama. Similarly, Biden's approach is not much different from both of them as he maintains maximum pressure through reimposing sanctions and simultaneously offers a window of opportunity to engage diplomatically with Iran. Noticeably, a combination of a diplomatic track along with political and economic pressures has been employed to settle differences with Iran over the nuclear program. This confirms the author's argument that the overall American policy towards Iran was largely consistent in its goals.

Obama's approach focused on the prospect that the nuclear deal would lead to more cooperation with Iran, eventually resulting in a change in Iran's behavior. Meanwhile, Trump aimed for a comprehensive deal by exerting maximum pressure on Iran. However, Biden embraces Trump's Iran policy of maximum pressure by maintaining sanctions. Remarkably, various factors, including domestic political obstacles in Iran and the US, as well as the positions of regional allies—notably Saudi Arabia and Israel—all constitute major impediments to improving US-Iran relations or achieving genuine détente with Iran. Overall, it can be argued that Obama, Trump, and Biden's foreign policy goals do not represent a break with the longstanding US strategy towards Iran.

Obviously, the US policy, mainly reliant on sanctions and oscillating between degrees of coercion and negotiations, has been ineffective. Though it created hardship for Iran and its regime, it did not necessarily push the regime to change its behavior. Moreover, sanctions have reinforced the regime's narrative that denounces foreign interventions. Iran faced a daunting array of challenges as many transactions and business activities were blocked due to the lack of a legally viable payment mechanism. Also, trade with Europe dropped significantly, and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei admitted the hardships caused by the sanctions. However, to a certain extent, the regime has been able to adapt to the sanctions and tried to be self-sufficient in an attempt to overcome the restrictions on its financial system. On the other hand, countries antagonistic to the US, such as China and Russia, felt encouraged to engage with Iran (Takeyh & Malone, 2011). Apparently, rolling back Iranian presence to its territorial borders is very challenging, although this goal is pushed by US allies, namely Israel and Saudi Arabia, who perceive Iran as an existential threat (Simon, 2018, pp. 7-20).

This paper seeks to elucidate why sanctions were not as effective as expected. However, it also demonstrates how the inconsistency in the tools employed by American policy, largely drafted in a piecemeal manner, based on reactions to events, catering to public opinion, and pressure from interest groups, reinforced Iran's behavior. These measures did not provide a sufficient deterrent to Iran's approach, nor did they offer Iran a viable alternative to give up its behavior.

2. US-Iran Policy under Obama administration: An Opening Amid Increasing Sanctions

During his first term (2009-2013), Obama's approach towards Iran combined both incentives and disincentives in an attempt to convince Iran to limit its nuclear ambitions. Obama leaned largely towards incentives from the beginning of his first term, emphasizing diplomacy and rapprochement with Iran (Pollack & Takeyh, 2011, pp. 7-21). This policy reflected Obama's campaign promises, stating that his foreign policy techniques and instruments would differ from those of his predecessors and would focus on engagement with Iran (Rothkopf, 2015; Parsi & Rydqvist, 2011, p.5). Remarkably, before his election, Obama emphasized the importance of embarking on direct diplomatic negotiations with the Iranian leadership. He pledged to "engage in aggressive personal diplomacy" with Tehran if it stopped interfering in Iraq and offered cooperation on terrorism and nuclear issues (Gordon & Zeleny, 2007). However, in 2009, several factors pushed Obama to adopt a coercive approach against Iran. Iran's crackdown on popular uprisings and its refusal to accept compromises to limit its nuclear program coincided with the discovery of a new nuclear facility (Traynor & Borger, 2009). Obama was able to garner support for international sanctions against Iran. The administration imposed sanctions against Iran during the 2010-2013 periods. The Administration also frequently declared that a military option was "on the table" (Katzman, 2019). However, in his 2013 UN General Assembly speech, Obama welcomed Rouhani's statement that Iran would not pursue nuclear weapons and directed John Kerry to join the European Union in stepping up diplomacy to negotiate a deal with Tehran (The White House, 2013a). Consequently, the Obama administration signed the interim nuclear deal with Iran on November 24, 2013, and then the nuclear agreement in 2015. The deal seeks to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapon capability while enabling Iran to normalize its relations with the Western world by lifting imposed sanctions. Despite objections from American allies in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia and Israel, "The deal has been touted as a potential beginning of a thaw in US-Iran relations" (Mahapatra, 2016, pp. 36-46).

From the outset, Obama attempted to pursue a policy that encompassed a change in discourse towards Iran, with the objective of exhausting diplomatic efforts before contemplating military options. As such, Obama showed his readiness to talk to the Iranian elite without preconditions, stating in a major speech in Cairo that "There will be many issues to discuss between our two countries, and we are willing to move forward without preconditions on the basis of mutual respect" (The White House, 2009a). Moreover, Obama declared in the State of the Union address in 2013, "We will show the courage to try and resolve our differences with other nations peacefully not because we are naïve about the dangers we face, but because engagement can more durably lift suspicion and fear" (The White House, 2013b). The March 2009 Nowruz (Persian New Year) message by Obama expressed an ambitious attempt to engage Iran diplomatically and was proof of the new policy based on mutual respect rather than a "hawkish" attitude. Obama confirmed this approach when he stated that his administration is committed to diplomacy that depends on engagement and mutual respect (The White House, 2009b). However, Obama's new approach did not mean that he reversed the conventional course towards Iran. Rather, he continued to share, with his predecessor, some assumptions on Iran. Obama emphasized his approach to prevent Iran decisively from acquiring the bomb, stating that "All options are on the table". Rapprochement was not an easy target for American policy officials. Nonetheless, Obama pledged to take further steps to negotiate directly with Iran. He started overtures to Iran that may have appeared as symbolic tactics but proved fruitful as they broke the ice and were perceived as primary procedures to initiate a larger diplomatic track (Sharp, 2009). Obama confirmed this goal, stating, "We should take an approach with Iran that employs all of the resources at the United States' disposal, and that includes diplomacy. We will be looking for openings that can be created where we can start sitting across the table, face to face; of diplomatic overtures that will allow us to move our policy in a new direction" (Reuters, 2009).

During his first term in office, Obama sought reasonable options to resolve the longstanding estrangement between Washington and Tehran. Apparently, Obama's policy of rapprochement with Iran was not a magical cure for all concerns and security issues that had engulfed US-Iran relations for several decades. Therefore, rapprochement may be best understood as a situation between conflict and normal relations (Maloney & Takeyh, 2008). Hence, he came up with a dual-track strategy that appeared successful in creating new foundations for dialogue with an ideological regime that eschewed direct talks with the US over the past decades. Indeed, forestalling Iran's nuclear project requires, as argued by Maloney,

either negotiating durable constraints to limit Iran's capability of acquiring a nuclear weapon or preparing for a third American-led war in the Middle East (Maloney, 2013). Obama attempted to forestall Iranian ambitions in the region by breaking the diplomatic deadlock. The newfound approach aimed at changing the hard-line "hawkish" approach that Bush pursued in his policy towards Iran by initiating primary contacts with Tehran policymakers. Hence, Obama created a "dual-track strategy" that integrates both diplomacy and sanctions with particular emphasis on the diplomatic route with Tehran (Castiglioni, 2013). As such, Obama attempted to push back against what some call "idle talk of war" through an approach encompassing a synthesis of elements: pressure and talk (Nasr, 2012). Obama could be described as a "progressive pragmatist" since he was progressive where possible and a pragmatist when necessary (Indyk et al., 2012). Remarkably, many domestic, regional, and international factors determined Obama's pragmatic approach in dealing with Iran. On the regional level, there were pressures coming from US strategic regional allies, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, to adopt a tough position towards Iran. Internally, the Obama administration had to cope with pressure coming from Congress, because of the 2010 Congressional elections dominated by the Republicans. Therefore, any attempt at genuine détente with Iran was bound to face vocal opposition. Therefore, Obama's foreign policy achievements in his first term were limited. Although he gave many good speeches and showed diplomatic overtures, pragmatism dominated politics as he backed down whenever he faced domestic pushback (Walt, 2013). Obama changed the language style but did not make substantial shifts. However, changing the tone from "axis of evil" rhetoric to diplomatic overtures enhanced the prospects for a diplomatic breakthrough (Sharp, 2009). Obama thought that a softer, more engaging approach would serve as a better tool to deter Iran; nonetheless, his policy of rolling back Iran was not successful. Iran had built up non-state actors in the region that made rolling back Iran extremely difficult. This raised security concerns among the Gulf regimes along with the US.

Iranian internal political developments affected Obama's prospects for reaching a nuclear agreement, as the presidential elections changed the political landscape in Iran. Therefore, the election of the relatively moderate Hassan Rouhani in June 2013 gave Obama motivation to revise the US overall policy during his second term (2013-2017), which emphasized rapprochement with Iran. Interestingly, Rouhani's attitudes focused on changing Iran's image in the West by prioritizing improving the country's relations with the West and enhancing the Iranian economy through lifting the trade sanctions regularly imposed on Iran (Nuruzzaman, 2015). As one noted, "Since Rouhani took over the office of the presidency from fundamentalist Ahmadinejad, we see a discontinuity of the Iranian anti-Western foreign policy in a broader sense" (Shokri, 2016, p. 4). Additionally, during the first months of 2013, the two parties were unable to reach any primary understanding leading to an agreement. Interestingly, this gridlock was broken in June 2013 as a result of the change in Iranian leadership. The election of Hassan Rouhani gave impetus to the talks with Iran (Walt, 2013). Hence, Obama, in his September 24, 2013 UN speech, confirmed that he had sent letters to the supreme leader and Rouhani through which he conveyed that the US prefers to resolve the nuclear dispute peacefully and is not seeking regime change in Iran (The White House, 2013a). The two presidents spoke by phone on September 27, 2013—the first direct presidential-level communication since 1979. After the JCPOA was finalized in July 2015, officials from both countries held bilateral meetings at the margins of all nuclear talks, but continuing disputes prevented a broad enhancement of US-Iran relations (Katzman, 2019). Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons was central to US-Iranian antagonism. Additionally, a nuclear Iran would trigger a nuclear arms race in the region, which would be profoundly destabilizing. The multilateral negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 (United States, Russia, China, Britain, France, and Germany) resulted in the 2015 nuclear agreement, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). This agreement provided Iran with an opportunity to remove sanctions in exchange for a substantial reduction in its stockpile of enriched uranium and its number of centrifuges.

In addition, the deal included Iran's acceptance of periodic inspections of its nuclear fuel cycle by the International Atomic Energy Agency. Indeed, by early 2013, Iran was steadily building its leverage, and Obama realized that if Washington didn't compromise and reach a certain agreement, then it would have to either accept Iran as a *de facto* nuclear power or opt for war with Iran (Parsi, 2018). Apparently, the sanctions produced limited outcomes, leading Obama to extensively invest in diplomacy, resulting in the signing of the 2015 agreement, which broke the stalemate in negotiations between the two parties (Parsi, 2017). Realistically, it seems that traditional American tactics in dealing with Iran proved

inefficient, as isolation did not prevent Iran from pursuing its nuclear activities. Similarly, the sanctions did not change Iran's behavior. As noted, "There is no evidence to suggest that the policy of sanctions and dialogue has had a tangible impact on the perceptions of Iran's leading decision makers—Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, among others." The author adds that both incentives and disincentives have been inadequate to affect Iranian policymakers' thinking (Pollack & Takeyh, 2011, p. 9). As a result, isolation and military threats buttressed Iranian hardliners and did not lead to any rapprochement (Sharp, 2009).

Actually, Iran succeeded in establishing networks in the region to serve its own national agenda. It supports constantly Shi'ite militias in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon. It has also supported Hamas in Palestine for many years. Moreover, the Arab spring contributed to the rise of Iran as a prominent power in the region, especially its intervention in the Syrian crisis since its outbreak in 2011, let alone its explicit arming of the Houthis in Yemen. Consequently, some proponents to the nuclear deal think that the nuclear deal is a proper entry point to change Iran's behavior. From this perspective, Washington thought that through the nuclear deal it could convince Iran to integrate with the world economy and to opens up to the West, which ultimately will lead to weakening of the legitimacy of mullahs and mobilizing people to make a peaceful transition to democracy. On contrary, they believed that Isolation of Iran would play in the favor of hardliners (McFaul et al, 2006, pp. 121–138). The complexity of the events in the region since the invasion of Iraq have showed that the US need a comprehensive strategy to respond to Iran increasing role as "Iran's regional influence will remain as compelling as ever" (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2018). Iran has contributed to sectarian radicalization through utilizing Shia local proxies who reinforced its regional influence. This could be a real threat to the already fractured regional balance of power and to the stability of the US allies and friends in the gulf region. Engaging with Iran seen as important not just to resolve the nuclear issue, but also to help stabilize Iraq and Afghanistan and address regional and global energy security. War rhetoric was not perceive as useful since pursuing a military action could have embroiled the United States in a war with a country of 80 million people that has its own military capabilities, and is located in the heart of the Gulf region. Moreover, the American military adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan and its complicated security and economic consequences have made Obama's administration avoid considering a military options vis-à-vis Iran. Hence, the most realistically promising approach to deal with Iran was the Obama thinking that the United States could find common ground with Iran as it is in the national interest of the United States to be on good relations with a regional dominant and influential power (Duggan, 2015).

3. US-Iran Policy under Trump administration: Tough Policy and Withdrawal from the Nuclear Deal

Obama's approach was to clinch a deal with Iran on nuclear enrichment, though it was not comprehensive, hoping to contain Iran's belligerent behavior in the region. Additionally, there were hopes that the opening up of Iran would empower moderates and gradually lead to a change in Iran's approach. However, Iran did not change its behavior, which fed into Trump's narrative. Indeed, threats to the Iranian regime can risk triggering a regional war that might develop into a scenario worse than the Iraq invasion in 2003. Moreover, his withdrawal from the nuclear deal with Iran could have negative ramifications on Gulf regional security. This step might accelerate Iranian nuclear activities and magnify the risk of confrontation and costly war with Iran (Glaser, 2018). In this context, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani warned Donald Trump about pursuing antagonistic policies against Tehran, stating that "America should know that peace with Iran is the mother of all peace, and war with Iran is the mother of all wars" (Reuters, 2018).

Trump announced on May 8, 2018, that the United States would withdraw from the JCPOA and reinstate sanctions that were revoked. The sanctions were imposed again on November 5, 2018. Trump declared, "The Iran deal must either be renegotiated or terminated." He added, "Therefore, I am announcing today that the United States will withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal" (The White House, 2018). Similarly, on May 21, 2018, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced a return to a U.S. strategy of pressuring Iran through reimposing sanctions. He stated, "We'll continue to work with allies to counter the regime's destabilizing activities in the region, block their financing of terror, and address Iran's proliferation of missiles and other advanced weapons systems that threaten peace and stability. We will also ensure Iran has no path to a nuclear weapon – not now, not ever." He added that the deal has "fatal flaws" and does not "address Iran's continuing

development of ballistic and cruise missiles” (Pompeo, 2018).

Clearly, the Trump Administration has shifted policy because it believes that the JCPOA has deficiencies and weaknesses, as it tackled nuclear issues only and ignored other disputed issues. As Trump stated, “The deal does nothing to constrain Iran’s destabilizing activities, including its support for terrorism” (The White House, 2018). Therefore, the Trump Administration, through shifting policy, sought to pressure Iran’s economy, compel it to renegotiate the JCPOA, curb Iran’s influence, and weaken its ballistic missile program, let alone creating economic hardship with the goal of mobilizing internal unrest that might lead to regime change in Iran (Katzman, 2019). For these reasons, Trump condemned the Iran nuclear deal, declaring that it was one of the “worst” deals in U.S. history and that it “was so poorly negotiated” (The White House, 2018). Trump was convinced that the United States should take additional steps to curb Iran’s hegemony and regional influence. However, some argue that mutual hostility and suspicion between the US and Iran would cause more escalation and frictions between the two parties, making it hard to avoid or even contain Iran (Maloney, 2013). Trump’s hawkish policy was mainly driven by John Bolton and Mike Pompeo, both known as anti-Iran hardliners. As the Congressional Research Service report noted, “The JCPOA reduced the potential threat from Iran’s nuclear program but did not contain strict or binding limits on Iran’s ballistic missile program, its regional influence, its conventional military programs, or its human rights abuses” (Katzman, 2019). The Trump administration looked at Iran in a more comprehensive context and did not see that solely curbing nuclear ambition while tolerating its belligerent behavior could promote stability in the region.

Additionally, Iran's regional policies cannot be deterred through the nuclear agreement. Therefore, the Trump administration withdrew from the nuclear agreement, reimposed sanctions, and directed other countries and companies to abide by these measures against Iran (Romano, 2018). Notably, a variety of American policy officials have urged the administration to rely on non-military options to prevent Iran from acquiring a bomb. The former US Defense Secretary Robert Gates outlined his objection to using military force to halt Iran's nuclear program, stating that bombing Iran "will only buy us time and send the program deeper and more covert" (Blair, 2009). Simultaneously, Gates believed that it is erroneous to expect the regime to temper its behavior in the region as a result of the nuclear deal. He bluntly stated, “I think that will not happen” (Rosen, 2016). In a related vein, former Secretary of Defense James Mattis warned against U.S. military escalation toward Iran, favoring diplomacy over force in relation to the rising tensions with Iran. Mattis's remarks came as national security hawks like John Bolton pushed heavily for a confrontation with Tehran's regime (Richardson, 2019). Additionally, Ben Rhodes, who served as Deputy National Security Adviser under the Obama administration, blamed President Trump for escalating tensions with Iran. Rhodes, one of the chief architects of Obama's Iran nuclear deal, said, “Everything's gotten worse... Trump has made the nuclear threat worse, and he's made the risk of war worse, and this was eminently predictable” (Dorman, 2019).

In summary, while Obama was working on a point-by-point approach, Trump was aiming for a grand bargain. While Obama's approach is that the nuclear deal will lead to more cooperation with Iran, which will eventually lead to a change in Iran's behavior, Trump's approach aims at full behavioral change. Critics of Trump argue that developing diplomatic and military cooperation between both countries is essential to maintain Middle East security. However, the cooperation between Iran and the US in facing ISIL did not materialize into real cooperation due to several factors, namely what is perceived as belligerent behavior of the Islamic republic. Additionally, any cooperation will face objections from Arab Gulf countries and Israel (Shokri, 2016, pp. 1, 4). The Biden administration continues the efforts of containing Iran through diplomatic pressure and sanctions. Biden seeks to reach a follow-up agreement to modify the original deal with Iran to become stronger and more comprehensive.

4. The US-Iran Policy under President Joe Biden: Embracing Pragmatism

President Biden has a worldview that prefers engagement, dialogue, and multilateral action. In general, the President focuses on pressing issues for the United States such as recovering from Covid-19, the sour relations with China and Russia, climate change, resetting the relationship with Saudi Arabia, ending the war in Yemen, and equally importantly, pushing

Iran to rejoin the nuclear agreement. Biden follows the general principles of his worldview that prefer using diplomacy, multilateral cooperation with allies, and negotiations with adversaries as tools to promote US interests rather than the use of hard military power. However, despite Biden's desire to act differently from Trump's policy, he followed his path on Iran. US-Iran diplomacy is still defined by decades of mutual wariness and mistrust, resulting in uncertainty. Biden wants Iran to scale back its recent uranium enrichment, which Iran advanced in response to Trump's withdrawal from the 2015 agreement. Meanwhile, Iran wants to get rid of US sanctions so that it can sell more oil, gain access to billions of dollars of its assets held in foreign banks, and revive an ailing economy that has deteriorated further due to the coronavirus pandemic (Wright, 2021).

Tensions with Iran have not de-escalated, as sanctions have remained effective under the Biden administration. Nonetheless, Biden believes that there is a window of opportunity to revive diplomacy with Tehran by restoring the landmark nuclear deal of 2015. This has been emphasized by Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, who stated, "We continue to believe that diplomacy is the best way to deal with the challenges, the threat posed by Iran's nuclear program." He further stressed, "There's still a window through which Iran can come back to the talks and we can come back to mutual compliance with the agreement, and that would be the best result" (US Department of State, 2021a). However, if this diplomatic track fails, then the path forward with respect to the course of Iranian-American relations will become much more complicated. Reciprocal escalatory steps could take place, leading to further disturbance in the Middle East. Therefore, practical and decisive measures are necessary to narrow the gaps to avoid such results. Robert Malley, the US Special Envoy for Iran, warns, "If diplomacy fails, we have other tools and we will use other tools to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon" (US Department of State, 2021b).

With the election of Raisi, Iran's hardliners have consolidated their control of authority. The new Iranian president is an advocate of what is called the "resistance economy," emphasizing that Iran does not need trade with the West and can trade with Pakistan, Turkey, China, and Russia. Nevertheless, Raisi faces the major challenge of sanctions that have weakened Iran's economy. In particular, this challenge has been compounded by corruption, mismanagement, and most recently, the coronavirus pandemic, and therefore he might be interested in restoring the deal to remove the sanctions that have ravaged his country's economy (Ross, 2020). However, the structure of power in Iran is complex, and even if the new president wants to rejoin the deal, he will not be the final decision-maker. That decision will need the consent of Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei. Moreover, the major problem now is that Iran has ratcheted up its production of nuclear fuel and built more advanced centrifuges over the past three years after Trump withdrew from the agreement (Sanger et al., 2021).

Arguably, Biden's Iran policy is one of continuity rather than change, as the president who has criticized Trump's policy over Iran maintains the "maximum pressure" policy inherited from the Trump administration. Moreover, Biden has supported the deal's efficiency before his presidential run and warned against Trump's attempts to get a "better deal." Biden was a strong critic of the Trump administration's Iran policy and described the Trump withdrawal from the deal in May 2018 as a "profound mistake" that will isolate the US while allowing Iran to gain "international sympathy while doing nothing to reduce its harmful activities". Furthermore, Biden stressed, "Talk of a better deal is an illusion," pointing out that Trump was manufacturing a crisis with Iran (BBC, 2018b). Similarly, President Biden states that the U.S. is "continuing to suffer" from former President Trump's decision to pull out of the Iran nuclear deal (Mordock, 2021). Paradoxically, the Biden administration has declared a policy similar to that pursued by Trump by expressing a desire to "extend and strengthen" the deal, while maintaining sanctions on Iran. Obviously, the same team that criticized Trump and his former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo for pulling out of the deal and imposing sanctions is now embracing the same policy. Jake Sullivan, the U.S. National Security Advisor in the Biden administration, called Trump's decision to pull out of the Iran nuclear deal "predatory unilateralism" (The Atlantic, 2019). Evidently, going back to the deal is problematic because of technical issues, namely it is difficult for Iran to scale down the knowledge it has acquired since it started enriching again following Trump's withdrawal. It now has far more enriched uranium than it did in 2018 and is believed to be close to crossing an important threshold. However, Biden, who emphasized the importance of renewing the former President

Obama's 2015 nuclear deal, will now need to take action to reverse Trump's failed policies with Iran.

Both Trump and Biden share the desire to reduce American military involvement in the Middle East. However, because of Iran, making good on this aim looks increasingly unlikely (Hass, 2021). Despite probable differences in their approaches or conflict-management tactics, Trump and Biden share a similar goal, which is the negotiation of a stronger deal to supersede the original deal of 2015. However, they face the same setbacks to achieve this goal, as the Iranian leadership has proven resistant to incentives and disincentives to change its policies, and there is insufficient domestic consensus in the US to sustain a diplomatic accord with Tehran. Clearly, Iran's nuclear weapons aspirations and its regional interventions would dangerously affect regional stability and work at odds with US policy and interests in the region. Robert Malley, the US special envoy for Iran, confirmed that the US coordinates closely with its allies to address Iran's nuclear program and its regional activities (US Department of State, 2021). It should be obvious from the outset that Iran's nuclear activities are part of its broader strategy to magnify asymmetric power in order to become the predominant power in the region. Yet, Iran's anti-Americanism slogan is an essential component of the regime's ideology and identity. Thus, President Biden's successful policy on Iran must start with realistic goals by concentrating on reaching a short-term strategy that might be subject to refinements at a later stage.

Clearly, it is unrealistic to expect handling Iranian regional policies in a single deal, as this might achieve very little results. Therefore, asking Iran to halt its nuclear and missile programs, renounce support for its network of proxies and other regional activities, or relinquish its hostility toward the US, all these demands constitute a surrender recipe and contradict Iran's national security strategy and revolutionary ideology. Simultaneously, it is erroneous to presume that there are incentives that would motivate and persuade the current leadership in Tehran to respond to such demands. Thus, there is no sign that Iran will cooperate constructively with Washington to reduce its support for its proxies or contribute effectively to lowering its destructive meddling in regional affairs. Consequently, diplomatic efforts should pick up momentum, as it is the reasonable pathway to narrow the gaps, resolve key differences between both sides, and ensure neither side escalates the situation. The US should avoid any behavior that can provoke tensions with Iran and decrease the chance of de-escalation. Importantly, in order to scale back Iran's regional activities, Biden's administration has to link "carrots" with Iran's compliance and sanctions relief with ceasing support for militias that threaten the security of US allies in the region. Biden's administration has carried out a retaliatory strike against an Iran-backed militia in Syria in response to its attack against American targets across the border in Erbil, Iraq, but in return, it removed Yemen's Houthis from the official list of designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations. Hence, some believe that Biden's administration's actual policy toward Iran's non-nuclear activities is "mostly carrots and very few sticks," resulting in unintentionally emboldening Iran on a regional level rather than containing it (Pollock, 2021).

Furthermore, countering Iran's policies in the region requires an effective approach to strengthening and equipping US allies to enable them to deter any potential threat. This does not mean abandoning diplomacy and compromise options but emphasizing, at the same time, parallel steps of maintaining economic pressure to worsen Iran's alternatives with the goal of bringing it back to negotiations. Biden says, "We're putting diplomacy first and seeing where that takes us. But if diplomacy fails, we're ready to turn to other options" (BBC News, 2021). Thus, by marrying sanctions to diplomatic efforts, Biden may influence Iran to engage in new negotiations for compliance. In addition, President Biden will need to form a sufficient coalition of domestic and international partners whose support is deemed necessary for his policy to succeed. While this task may seem daunting, there is more convergence than divergence between Republicans and Democrats and between the US and its allies on curbing Iran, since all broadly agree not only on the need for a stronger nuclear deal but also for a robust response to Iran's regional policies. Such an approach will necessarily be multilateral, comprehensive, and sustainable, and holds the greatest chance to make Iranian alternatives more costly (Singh, 2021a, Singh, 2021b).

The US policy towards Iran will never be easy, and President Biden will have to reconcile a number of conflicts if his Iran policy is to have any chance of success. European countries want the US to return to the JCPOA, while most congressional Republicans are likely to oppose any return to the nuclear deal that does not address its deficiencies, ballistic missiles, or Iran's troublemaking in the Middle East. Equally important, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates

want reassurance about the US attitudes toward Iran, as those countries are dubious about the JCPOA, fear the US will relinquish its leverage prematurely, and worry that any negotiations or rapprochement with Iran could lead to turning a blind eye to Iran's security threats to its neighbors. Therefore, Biden should consult with Congress, European allies, the Israelis, Saudis, and Emiratis about American strategy towards Iran (Ross, 2020). The Biden administration's efforts to get Iran back to the nuclear deal were very slow, with indirect talks starting in Vienna. However, the nuclear deal remains a contentious issue between Washington and its allies—mainly the Gulf States and Israel. This will require Biden to balance interests, resulting perhaps in undesired trade-offs (Norman, 2021). Far more worrying, if Biden's administration's diplomatic efforts to revive the nuclear deal fail, then Israel might respond by using military force to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid warns, "Iran is becoming a nuclear threshold country," and that Iran is working hard to advance its nuclear and missile programs, threatening that Israel might respond with force to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon (USA Today, 2021). Therefore, Biden's administration should take measures before Iran reaches the point where Israel responds and draws the United States into a conflict. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan reaffirmed the Biden administration's commitment to preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon but without telling what, if any, strategy the Biden administration has put in place. The new Iranian leadership under Ebrahim Raisi has shown no interest in returning to the deal in Vienna talks, and the Biden administration does not appear to have any realistic alternatives. In other words, it is not clear whether Biden has a clear diplomatic option or a pressure-based strategy. The Biden team must quickly decide what they intend to do to prevent Iran from ramping up its nuclear program, given that Iran has violated the deal and is no longer abiding by its terms, resulting in increasing and accelerating uranium enrichment levels. Apparently, the diplomatic campaign should include coordination with European allies, along with enhancing regional deterrence to protect regional security (Rogin, 2021). Thus, coordinating with European allies is of particular interest for the Biden administration. Jake Sullivan, Biden's National Security Advisor, asserted, "All singing from the same song sheet on this issue" (Megerian, 2021).

Expectations that Iran should change course while Biden maintains Trump's "maximum pressure" policy are unreasonable (Rad & Mortazavi, 2021; Zakaria, 2021). However, it seems that expectations to negotiate a better agreement with Iran are unrealistic, as Iran appears to be in no hurry to re-enter the nuclear agreement. Khamenei's statements indicate that he wants economic relief in exchange for returning to the agreement, in hopes that this will ease Iranians' concerns over a variety of issues, including the impact of US sanctions, the pandemic, and Iran's longstanding corruption and mismanagement. Hence, Iran's supreme leader urged the United States to lift all sanctions if it wants Iran to live up to commitments under its nuclear deal. "If (the US) wants Iran to return to its commitments, it must lift all sanctions in practice" (ABC News, 2021). On the contrary, President Biden said the US would not lift sanctions to get Iran back to the negotiating table, suggesting the measure would only happen if Tehran stops enriching uranium (CNN, 2021). In essence, the major problem is that President Biden seeks to expand the terms of the JCPOA through negotiating a complementary pact that restricts further Iran's nuclear program. He expressed the desire to "engage in negotiations and follow-on agreements to tighten and lengthen Iran's nuclear constraints, as well as address the missile program" (The New York Times, 2020).

However, Tehran is determined to foreclose this goal, given that Iran's hard-liners consistently and firmly oppose the JCPOA because they believe it was too generous to the United States and too disadvantageous to the Iranians. Yet, the supreme leader has always seen the JCPOA as a transaction through which the United States ends sanctions and, in return, Iran accepts nuclear constraints. Khamenei emphasizes that Iran would re-enter the JCPOA on its original terms if the United States pledges to do the same. Based on Iranian statements, the diplomatic track might foreclose if the Biden administration insists on negotiating a restrictive follow-on agreement. Iran has withstood the sanctions for three years without caving in to the demands of the Trump administration. Probably, Tehran may hold out longer, as Khamenei and many of the hard-liners prefer a "resistance economy" because they perceive Iran's economic gains as less important than its security, ideology, and nationalist aspirations. As a result, President Biden needs to negotiate a quick return to the original terms of the JCPOA and temporarily set aside any ambitions of reaching a follow-on agreement (Pollack, 2021).

Efforts should be exerted to convince the Iranians to cease nuclear enrichment because this issue is a stumbling stone in front of achieving detente with Iran. Robert Malley warns that "Time is not on our side; the JCPOA cannot survive forever" (US Department of State, 2021). Realistically, reimposing sanctions, although it crippled Iran's economy, was not sufficient to get Tehran to agree to renegotiate the JCPOA with Trump, and there is no reason to believe it would work efficiently with Biden. Thus, to exert more pressure on Iran, Biden would have to manufacture more leverage against Tehran. According to some views, Washington needs to turn up the pressure on Tehran even by using threats. "To revive the nuclear deal, the threat of military escalation needs to be on the table" (Ross, 2021). Other scholars suggest replacing formal diplomacy with a less formal approach. It might be called tacit diplomacy or arms restrictions without an official agreement, through which the US and other stakeholders inform Iran of the limits of their tolerance regarding its nuclear capabilities and that if Iran crossed the red lines, then it would pay a substantial price. Contemplating arranging cyber or conventional military attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities and against its economic and military targets may jeopardize regional security. Besides, this threat would not be without risks, as there is no guarantee that such attacks would succeed, given that Iran could retaliate against targets throughout the region (Haass, 2021).

It seems that threatening the regime is not a workable alternative, and perhaps the more feasible and realistic approach is halting Iran's activities aimed at fostering its regional influence. This goal seems to be precious for Iran's hard-liners more than a flourishing economy. Therefore, Biden will need to cease the expansion of Iranian dominance across the region and roll back Tehran's creeping influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and the Gulf. Rhetorically, it would require President Biden to reiterate America's commitment to the Carter Doctrine, which pledges the United States to defend its Gulf allies. In particular, Trump's refusal to respond to Iranian attacks on oil tankers carrying Saudi and Emirati oil in the summer of 2019 or the Iranian drone attack on Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq oil processing facility in September 2019 raised concerns for America's allies in the region regarding the American commitment to safeguard regional security. Hence, assuring, supporting, and equipping allies in the Gulf region will contribute enormously to withstanding Iran's activities and might constrain its involvement in regional conflicts (Pollack, 2021).

The Obama administration played a remarkable role in negotiating the deal, under which Iran's nuclear program was restricted and subjected to international surveillance in exchange for sanctions relief. The Trump administration unilaterally exited the accord that he described as "horrible" and launched a "maximum pressure" campaign of economic sanctions, threats, and coercive diplomacy to get Iran back around the table to negotiate a better deal, claiming that the nuclear deal would not constrain Iran's regional policies. President Joe Biden pledged to seek re-entry into the JCPOA based on "compliance for compliance," but indirect talks in Vienna have not yet produced an agreement. Probably it is difficult to break a diplomatic stalemate that has persisted for decades, and diplomatic successes cannot be achieved overnight, as it requires constant efforts. Therefore, the bottom line is to recognize that no one should expect bright relations with Iran in Biden's era. Rather, the American policy direction could involve a selective process between bad options and less-bad ones. Despite sanctions that have devastated Iran's economy, Iran continued to augment its nuclear capabilities and expand its proxy militias throughout the Middle East.

In summary, Iran's ballistic missiles, drones, and proxy forces pose a significant threat to regional security. Therefore, the Biden administration must develop a clear and consistent strategy to address Iran's behavior and ensure its nuclear program remains exclusively for peaceful purposes. Washington should provide Iran with assurances of its commitment to any new deal while simultaneously working to curb Iran's regional influence to safeguard regional security, making it a top priority in US foreign policy.

The Chinese-brokered agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 2023 marks a significant step towards restoring diplomatic relations. China successfully brought Saudi Arabia and Iran together after decades of enmity and a formal cutting of ties in 2016 (The New York Times, March 11, 2023). However, it remains uncertain how far this rapprochement will progress and how it will impact the international relations of the Gulf and regional dynamics. The agreement does not imply that Saudi Arabia and Iran have resolved all their deep differences. The essence of the agreement lies in Iran's commitment to cease further attacks on Saudi Arabia, particularly considering their involvement in the

devastating proxy war in Yemen and support for opposing sides across the region.

While China's mediation in the Saudi-Iranian rift suggests Iran's attempt to involve China in Gulf affairs, the United States still maintains a leading role in the region. With extensive trade, military, and intelligence relations with the Arab Gulf states, the US remains skeptical of Iran's commitment to its agreements. Ultimately, the deal neither diminishes US influence in the region nor elevates China to a key and effective player in Gulf regional affairs. In current conditions, China seeks stability in the Gulf to ensure the safe passage of oil and goods but is not seeking to replace the American security role in the region.

5. Conclusion:

Iran is indeed facing significant economic pressure and deep distress due to American sanctions. However, returning to negotiations and reaching a new deal with Iran has proven challenging on a larger scale. Successive US administrations have consistently employed a "carrot and stick" approach in dealing with Iran. While there may be inconsistencies in the tools, approaches, and interim goals, the overall policy has been one of continuity rather than change.

Obama aimed to transform US-Iran relations positively, employing talks and diplomacy that led to the nuclear agreement. In contrast, Trump sought a better deal through maximum pressure, culminating in the US withdrawal from the JCPOA and the reimposition of American sanctions to economically pressure the Iranian regime. This policy of pressuring and even threatening Iran (keeping all options on the table) has persisted under the current Biden administration. However, despite talks in Vienna, Iran remains highly suspicious and refuses to renegotiate the original nuclear deal or discuss a follow-on agreement. There is no sign of any detectable change in their position, leading to skepticism about the effectiveness of renewed talks over the nuclear program for Iran.

There are speculations that Biden's policy may entail increased pressure on the Iranian regime, despite concerns that this policy could allow Iran to resume and accelerate its nuclear enrichment, leading to further uncertainty. Therefore, the support of the international community is crucial to making sanctions effective, given Iran's resilience to such measures over the past forty years. Economic pressure alone has not prompted a change in Iran's behavior in the region, as the regime has proven adept at enduring such pressure.

Iran has continued to expand its sphere of influence, notably in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, especially in light of the American stance, such as Congress voting to stop support for Yemen's war. It is unlikely that Iran will pull back from Syria and Yemen, and it is believed to have a comparative advantage in the Middle East, which could be leveraged in future talks with the United States. Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA empowered hardliners in Iran, affecting the domestic balance of power in favor of the regime, as evidenced by the election of President Raisi. The sanctions inherited from the Trump era remain effective under the Biden administration, with hopes that they may prompt Iran to re-engage in negotiations, similar to the pressure exerted during the Obama era that led to talks on Iran's nuclear program.

However, it is unlikely that pressure alone will compel Iran to abandon its regional ambitions. In fact, pressure alone may work in favor of the hardliners. The US has genuine and valid concerns regarding the destabilizing potential of Iran's missile capabilities, particularly the proliferation of these missiles to regional allies such as Hezbollah and the Houthis. The proliferation issue poses a greater danger than Iran's mere possession of missile capabilities. However, it is crucial to recognize that Iran's primary objective is to possess and develop significant medium and short-range missile capabilities, which it considers strategic assets. The Iranian regime believes that military self-reliance is crucial for its survival and views it as a means of deterrence and bolstering Iran's regional preeminence. Despite American economic sanctions and political pressures, Iran's strategic thinking remains solid and resilient.

Consequently, there is a fundamental divergence between Iran and the US, as successive American administrations have embraced the policy of ensuring that Israel maintains a military edge in the Middle East. Iran's development of long-range missiles undermines this Israeli military edge. Given these considerations, American policymakers require a far more comprehensive policy approach in dealing with Iran across all contentious areas. President Biden and his team must understand two critical issues when formulating a strategy: firstly, despite economic hardships, Iran perceives itself as

winning; and secondly, Iran's primary goal is to preserve its regime and political makeup. The narrative promoted by Iranian leadership emphasizes enduring hardships to achieve higher goals, which is deeply ingrained in the education system, political discourse, and religious teachings. If Iran were to compromise on its foreign policy objectives solely for economic relief, it would risk losing legitimacy.

The demands of the Biden administration essentially amount to a call for Iran's surrender, rather than serving as a starting point for negotiations. Therefore, the new American demands for negotiating a complementary agreement to supplement the original nuclear deal and restrain Iran's regional activities would only further complicate the situation, making direct contacts or talks with the Iranians even more challenging. Iran needs to demonstrate to its people that it has achieved a victory in foreign policy or, at the very least, has not been defeated, in order to have the confidence to pursue comprehensive negotiations. The approach taken by the Obama administration, which involved a point-by-point strategy, appears more realistic given the current geopolitical landscape. However, its main drawback is that while progress is made on one front, Iran may seek to compensate by increasing activities on other fronts. For example, when Iran agreed to curb its nuclear program, it intensified the actions of its proxies. Consequently, Trump viewed the deal unfavorably. Considering the way forward for US-Iran policy under the Biden administration, it is essential to emphasize that a realistic approach involves reengaging with Iran through diplomatic negotiations.

President Biden can choose to pursue the Obama approach of addressing one issue at a time, attempting to resolve it before moving on to further negotiations. Alternatively, he might opt for a comprehensive approach, aiming to address all issues in one grand bargain. If these options prove difficult, Biden and his policy officials could continue the pressure approach by reintroducing economic sanctions while consistently working to deter Iran and limit its push for regional dominance. It is crucial for Iran to recognize that it needs to make a strategic shift in its behavior before hoping to achieve a sustainable deal with the US.

Despite some discernible changes in views and tactics, the pattern in US-Iran policy has largely remained one of continuity. The overarching American goals and policies toward Iran have remained largely unchanged. However, thus far, the various policies adopted have not succeeded in achieving the US's overarching goals. Bush's confrontational strategy, which dismissed overtures from Khatami, ultimately led to the ascendancy of hardliners. Obama's approach of engagement point by point left issues such as ballistic missiles and support for proxies unresolved, prompting Trump to reverse it and impose maximum sanctions. President Biden has continued Trump's policy of exerting pressure on Iran by maintaining economic sanctions, squeezing its oil exports, and seeking to renegotiate a more restrictive follow-up agreement.

Despite the challenges and discrepancies between Washington and Tehran, restoring the nuclear deal remains the best option for both sides and other parties to avoid an escalatory cycle or prolonged standoff with Iran. Essentially, the priority goal must be the de-escalation of the crisis to avert potential deleterious effects on regional stability, followed by "incremental progress" towards addressing other flashpoints, including Iran's regional policies and its involvement in regional conflicts.

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