

The Impact of Iran's Nuclear Program on Iranian-American Relations (2010-2021)

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Abstract

Objectives: This paper explores the relationship between Iran and the U.S., focusing on Iran's nuclear program. It examines how successive U.S. administrations have addressed the issue and analyzes the responses of newly elected Presidents of the U.S. and Iran, as well as the Prime Minister of Israel, to the ongoing Iran Nuclear Deal negotiations using an analytical approach.

Methods: The study employs an analytical methodology derived from the fields of political and social sciences, moving beyond traditional approaches in international relations.

Results: The paper argues that Iran's development and acquisition of nuclear weapons, as a regional power, pose a direct threat to regional stability and may trigger a nuclear arms race. The interests of the U.S. and its allies in the region would also be endangered.

Conclusions: The paper concludes that both Washington and Tehran should reach a mutually beneficial agreement to maintain regional power balance and prevent the potential for an arms race, especially with the seventh round of negotiations approaching. As Iran pursues destabilizing regional ambitions in the Middle East, posing a strategic threat to U.S. interests and allies, the U.S. should reassess its Middle East policy to ensure that Iran does not exploit sanctions relief and its remaining nuclear energy capacity to expand its revolutionary agenda throughout the region.

Keywords: Foreign policy, balance of power, nuclear deal, sanctions, Iran-U.S. relations.

البرنامج النووي الإيراني وأثره على العلاقات الإيرانية-الأمريكية (2010-2021)

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ملخص

الأهداف: تناقش هذه الورقة العلاقة بين إيران والولايات المتحدة الأمريكية مع التركيز على البرنامج النووي الإيراني، وكيف تعاملت الإدارات الأمريكية المتعاقبة مع هذا الملف، بالإضافة إلى سياسات وتوجهات الرئيس الأمريكي الجديد جو بايدن، والرئيس الإيراني الجديد إبراهيم رئيسي، ورئيس الوزراء الإسرائيلي الجديد بينيت نفتالي تجاه الاتفاق، معتمدة بذلك على النهج التحليلي.

المنهجية: تناقش هذه الورقة أحد الموضوعات الساخنة في العلاقات الدولية: حيث يؤثر الاتفاق النووي الإيراني على العلاقات بين الدول على المستويين الإقليمي والدولي، سوف ندرس ونحلل الظاهرة السياسية بكل أبعادها النظرية والواقعية. لم يعد مجال العلاقات الدولية مقصوراً على استقراء علاقات الدول والأحداث الدولية، أو شرح الظواهر الدولية الناشئة وتبرير السلوك الدولي اللاحق، بل تجاوز ذلك بالتعمق في الحدث باعتماد منهجية تحليلية مشتقة من المجالات السياسية والعلوم الاجتماعية.

النتائج: توصلت الورقة إلى تطوير إيران وامتلاكها أسلحة نووية باعتبارها قوة إقليمية تمتلك برنامجها النووي، سيشكلان تهديداً مباشراً للاستقرار الإقليمي وقد يؤدي إلى سباق تسلح نووي محتمل في المنطقة. كما ستعرض مصالح الولايات المتحدة وحلفائها في المنطقة للتهديد. الخلاصة: خلصت الورقة إلى وجوب تواصل واشنطن وطهران إلى اتفاق يناسب الطرفين للحفاظ على توازن القوى في المنطقة وتجنب أي سباق تسلح محتمل مع اقتراب الجولة السابعة من المفاوضات، وفي ظل سعي إيران المستمر لتحقيق طموحها بالهيمنة الإقليمية مزعومة بذلك استقرار الشرق الأوسط، والذي يمثل تهديداً استراتيجياً لمصالح الولايات المتحدة وحلفائها، يجب على الولايات المتحدة إعادة تقييم سياساتها تجاه الشرق الأوسط لتضمن عدم استغلال إيران لقدرتها النووية وتخفيف العقوبات لتوسيع ويسط نفوذها في المنطقة. الكلمات الدالة: السياسة الخارجية، توازن القوى، الاتفاق النووي، عقوبات، العلاقات الإيرانية الأمريكية.



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Introduction

The conflict between Iran and the United States of America lies in the geography and history of the Middle East. Iranians believe Iran is a dominant power in the Gulf region and South Asia, a belief rooted in the fact that Iran is the homeland of some of the oldest civilizations in the world, which over the centuries has developed a strong national identity despite the presence of ethnic minorities and several sects. This belief is further reinforced by the presence of a large middle class educated population, and the possession of the fourth largest proven oil reserves in the world – a share of 10% - after Saudi Arabia, Canada, and Venezuela and the second largest natural gas reserves – a share of 15% - after Russia, and by being one of the founders of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries “OPEC” and the Natural Gas Forum. It is OPEC's second largest exporter and the world's 7th largest oil producer.

The main motive behind Iran's regional policy is a strong feeling of victimization believing that without the existence of foreign powers such as the United States of America and Russia in the region; it would have been the dominant regional power. The Iranian regime also believes that Iran's regional hegemony does not mean occupying lands of neighboring countries or imposing conditions on them, but rather urging countries of the region to work together without foreign interference, to enhance cooperation, avoid conflicts and address their economic and political differences in a peaceful manner. Iranian regional policy under both the Pahlavi regime and the Islamic Republic has been consistent and called on foreign powers to leave the Middle East and the Gulf.

On the other hand, the United States has vital economic and strategic interests in the Gulf, the Middle East, and South Asia, and feels the need to maintain a massive presence in these regions to protect these interests. Being the world's largest economy and given the growing interdependence of global economies, it is in the national interest of the United States to promote energy security by ensuring that oil and gas supplies from the Gulf to the rest of the world are uninterrupted. Washington's other key interests in the region include countering extremist groups, preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and ensuring Israel's security.

1.1 Problem and Question of the Study

Iranians believe that Iran is the dominant power in the region, and do not accept the idea of any presence of foreign powers imposing its hegemony, specifically the U.S. However, the U.S. has vital economic and strategic interests in the Gulf, the Middle East, and South Asia, which requires Washington to maintain a massive presence in the region to protect these interests.

As Iran continues to be a source of threat for the U.S. and its allies, through its continued support of resistance movements in Lebanon, Palestine, Yemen, Iraq and to opposition in other Arab Gulf states that share its ideology in an effort to extend its sphere of influence and assert its role in the region, and as its determination to develop and possess nuclear weapons poses another major threat to the interests of the U.S. and its allies, the problem of the study lies in knowing the repercussions of the Iranian nuclear program on Iranian-American relations, and the question is how that would affect the relations between the two countries?

1.2 Objective of the Study

This paper aims to discuss and understand the relation between Iran and the U.S., with particular emphasis on Iran's nuclear program, and how successive U.S. administrations have dealt with it, and how the newly elected Presidents of the U.S. and Iran, and the Prime Minister of Israel are handling and responding to the ongoing Iran Nuclear Deal negotiations.

1.3 Hypothesis of the Study

This paper argues that Iran's nuclear program and the challenges facing the Iranian regime following the U.S. withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Deal and reinstatement of sanctions notwithstanding the ongoing negotiations to revive the Deal, along with Iran's pursuit of the development and acquisition of nuclear weapons constitute a direct threat to the interests of the U.S. and its allies in the region.

1.4 The Importance of the Study

Being a regional power possessing its own nuclear program, Iran's potential to develop and acquire nuclear weapons notwithstanding the ongoing negotiations constitutes a direct threat to regional stability and may lead to a nuclear arms race

in the region thus endangering the U.S. regional interests.

1.5 Methodology

This paper discusses one of the hot topics in international relations as the Iran Nuclear Deal affects relations between countries at both regional and international levels. We will study and analyze the political phenomenon in all its theoretical and realistic dimensions. The field of international relations is no longer limited to extrapolating relations of states and international events, or to explaining emerging international phenomena and justifying subsequent international behavior, but rather transcends that by going deep inside the event, adopting analytical methodology derived from the fields of political and social sciences.

Theoretical Framework

This paper proceeds from the vision of realism in international relations assuming that relations between states are based on interests that in turn require possessing power that almost invariably leads to a security dilemma manifested in the states' desire to increase their military power and influence, thus triggering other states to follow suit eventually leading to an arms race to provide deterrence mechanisms. Realizing that it is the superpowers' foreign policies that play important, influential, and effective roles; not those of dependent or fragile countries, and since the foreign policy of any state stems from its strategic goals and the quest to achieve its internal and external interests, and since the study of foreign policy paves the way to understand national strategies of countries towards the international system, the conceptual framework that will be used in this study is the theory of balance of power.

The theory of the balance of power is based on the premise that maintaining almost equal military capabilities by potential adversary countries reduces the chances of armed conflicts, which explains why many countries are keen to maintain military balance among them. Efforts of some countries to increase their military power is therefore a matter of concern and forces other countries to enter into regional and international agreements and treaties or create alliances that would oblige the various states parties to maintain their military power within agreed limits. The balance of power sets clear frameworks for the distribution of power among states, and actions by constituents of the international political system, thus guaranteeing achieving political stability and peace and warding off wars.

The agreement that Iran reached with the P5+1 - the U.S., UK, France, China, Russia, and Germany - known as the Iranian nuclear deal was primarily aimed at regulating the lifting of sanctions imposed on Iran and allowed it to export and import conventional arms starting 2020, in exchange for curtailing Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs and accepting United Nations inspection visits to Iranian nuclear sites. This deal reflects the theory of balance of power within the international system that guarantees states' continued existence and political stability by preventing other countries from acquiring military power and possessing weapons that would enable them to dominate weaker states.

Historical Background

Political relations between Iran and the United States of America date back to the late nineteenth century when the Shah of Iran, Nasserddin Shah Qajar, officially dispatched the first Iranian ambassador to Washington in 1856, and then in 1883 the first official diplomat of the United States to Iran was appointed. However, these relations did not gain significance until the Second World War when official diplomatic relations between the two countries were announced in 1944, followed by the start of oil exports from the Arabian Gulf and the beginning of the Cold War era.

American interference in Iranian politics led to the overthrow of Mohammad Mosaddeq's government in a coup organized by the CIA and MI6 in 1953. This overthrow along with the "deeply anti-American character" of the 1979 revolution led to the new Iranian regime's obsession that the United States would attempt it again, prompting it to resort to repressive measures to tighten its grip over the country.

On the other hand, the Iran hostage crisis where United States diplomats and citizens were held hostage in November 1979 by Iranian college students, and the failure of the Carter's administration to negotiate the release of the hostages and the failed rescue attempt contributed to the defeat of U.S. President Jimmy Carter in the U.S. presidential elections at the hands of Ronald Reagan. The hostage crisis bolstered Iranian's support for Khomeini and drove Iran to support several Islamic organizations in Lebanon or Palestine.

The U.S. support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war, which led in the end to the U.S. intervention in 1988 resulting in striking several Iranian oil facilities and the downing of an Iranian civilian plane killing nearly 300 people, was one of the reasons that pushed Khomeini to make his decision to end the war with Iraq, as U.S. support for Iraq had posed a direct threat to Iran.

On the other hand, the Shah's absence provided an opportunity to reveal an unexpected ally of the United States in the Gulf region, namely the Baathist regime in Iraq that enjoyed various forms direct and indirect U.S. support during its war against Iran.

Iran-Contra Affair

The facilitation of U.S. President Ronald Reagan's administration of an arms deal with Iran constituted a scandal known as the "Iran-Contra Affair". In violation of an arms embargo, Reagan's administration arranged in 1985 to sell armaments to Iran to improve relations with Iran and obtain their influence in releasing hostages held in Lebanon. In 1986, Reagan issued a televised statement that the arms sales did not occur, but one week later he confirmed that weapons had been transferred to Iran, although he denied they were part of an exchange for hostages. We can see that Iran played a major role in expelling Jimmy Carter from the White House and caused a clear distortion of Reagan's legacy, which some considered as revenge for what happened with Mosaddeq in 1953.

Iran-Iraq and First Gulf War

In 1983, during the Iran-Iraq War, the United States brought to Tehran's attention the potential threat to the Iranian regime resulting from the Communist Party infiltration of the government. Based on that, the Khomeini government carried out a massive campaign of arrests and mass executions that eliminated the loyalists and the pro-soviets in Iran. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 raised the American fears of Iran as it became a symbol of Islamic fundamentalism, prompting the US to brand it the new enemy at the time.

Following the Iranian revolution, the United States planned to achieve a regional balance of power between Ba'athist Iraq and Revolutionary Iran by pitting them against each other, but by the early 1990's this became unnecessary as both countries were exhausted militarily and financially by the nearly *decade-long Iran-Iraq*. In 1993, the United States developed a post-Gulf War policy of dual containment aimed at containing Iraq and Iran, but this policy became increasingly unpopular internationally by 2000.

Iran-U.S. Relations and D'Amato Law

Although Muhammad Khatami's electoral victory in 1997 with 70% of the votes in free elections was received with skepticism by the American administration, it gave hope for improving the Iranian-American relations. The Iranian community in the United States lobbied several American political figures and elites to get them to defend Iranian politics. Their attempts yielded positive results as voices began to rise within American society calling for a review of the overall U.S. policy toward Iran, specifically after President Khatami's call for "dialogue of civilizations" between U.S. and Iran in which he invoked Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* to explain the similarities between American and Iranian quests for freedom. In addition, Madeleine Albright's statement describing the coup against Mosaddeq government as a "setback for democratic government" in Iran was indirect admission of the U.S. role in the coup. Khamenei, however, condemned the statement as "deceitful", remarking it "did not even include an apology."

This coincided with a strong European objection to the sanctions imposed by the U.S. D'Amato Law on European companies. The law signed by former U.S. President Bill Clinton, was introduced by Senator Alfonse D'Amato as the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act of 1996 (ILSA). Acknowledging the difficulty of monitoring all trade with Iran, the law imposed mandatory and discretionary sanctions on non-American companies investing more than \$20 million annually in the Iranian and Libyan oil and natural gas sectors. Although the law was drafted under the pretext of drying up the resources that support "terrorism", the main target was the energy sector in both countries.

The ILSA was renewed for five more years in 2001 and amended with some modifications in 2006. As sanctions imposed on Libya were removed but remained on the Islamic Republic of Iran, the act was renamed "Iran Sanctions Act (ISA)." It was extended several times, and in 2016 ISA was extended for a further ten years. The tension between the United

States and Iran continued partly due to pressure exerted by the Zionist lobby on President Clinton and Congress to stop any attempt to improve relations with Iran. The pressure was evidenced by President Clinton's keenness to announce an executive decision imposing sanctions on Iran in a meeting with a Jewish organization.

The Jewish lobby's influence, however, did not remain a dominant factor in making decisions related to the Iran-U.S. relations as other special interest groups in the U.S. pushed for easing sanctions against Iran. This resulted in lifting the ban on importing a few Iranian goods, followed by Iran's decision to import American medicines, and the exemption of several French and Russian companies from D'Amato Law penalties.

Iran-U.S. Relations and "Axis of Evil"

George Bush's administration marked a turning point in the policy towards bilateral relations between the United States and Iran. The administration's vision of the U.S. hegemonic role in the world and the new administration's strategic goals were both decisive factors. After September 11, 2001, the Iranian concerns became evident following President Bush's division of the world into two camps, the coalition against terrorism camp comprising the United States and its allies, and the terrorism camp comprising those against the United States and its policies. Iran had condemned the attacks on the United States and asserted its rejection of all forms of terrorism. Iran's President Mohammad Khatami said: "Iran fully understands the feelings of the Americans about the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on September 11." He also said: "Nations should not be punished in place of terrorists". Shortly thereafter Iran realized the United States was serious about its threats after being listed on the list of countries accused of sponsoring international terrorism.

Shortly after that, the United States sought Iran's help at the beginning of its war on Afghanistan and sought to activate dialogue on the security level where Britain played the role of mediator by sending its foreign minister at the time to Tehran. Even though Khamenei condemned the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan stating, "We condemn terrorism in all its forms, oppose the U.S. campaign on Afghanistan, and refuse to enter into any coalition led by the United States," military forces of both the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran cooperated with each other to overthrow the Taliban regime, which also had conflicts with the government of Iran. In fact, Iran's Quds Force helped U.S. forces and Afghan rebels in the 2001 uprising in Herat.

However, the friendly relationship between the United States and Iran quickly faded considering the American-Iranian differences related to the continuation of the comprehensive American economic embargo, and their differences regarding the regional presence of American forces in the Gulf, Afghanistan, and several Central Asian countries. This worsening of relations was further exacerbated by Iran's continued hostility toward Israel and support for the Lebanese resistance movement against Israeli occupation, which, of course, was countered by the American bias towards Israel. U.S. President Bush further hurt the relations in his speech of 2002 in which he described Iran, North Korea, and Iraq an "Axis of Evil" warning that the proliferation of long-range missiles developed by these countries constituted terrorism and threatened the U.S. The speech caused outrage in Iran and was condemned by reformists and conservatives alike.

The U.S. Secretary of State then stated that labeling these countries an "axis of evil" does not mean the United States intends to invade them and made it clear to Congress that the U.S. administration is ready to start dialogues and work with allies to figure out ways they should follow in dealing with these regimes. He did, however, differentiate between the policy towards Iran and North Korea, where Washington wants to continue dialogues with them, and the policy towards Iraq that supports the continuation of sanctions.

The United States has also pressured Iran to suppress acts of resistance against the Israeli occupation and handed over a list of names of figures known for their resistance to the Israeli occupation in Lebanon and Palestine. These attempts were met with Iran's refusal and the U. S. continued to list Hezbollah, which has very close ties with Iran, on the U.S. terrorism list.

U.S. Position Towards Iran Nuclear Program 2001-2015

The United States found in the September 11, 2001, attacks a good opportunity to impose its control and hegemony in a unipolar international system. It used it to justify its campaign against terrorism, which mainly targeted Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq, even though Iran took a clear position toward September 11 attacks when President Muhammad Khatami

condemned terrorism and expressed sympathy with the American people. The Supreme Leader Khamenei took a similar position. The United States adopted a stricter policy toward Iran now being a member of the "axis of evil", accused of threatening world peace and possessing weapons of mass destruction.

In 2003, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell stated "Here, we suddenly discover that Iran is much further along, with a far more robust nuclear weapons development program, than anyone said it had, and now the IAEA has found that out". The United States was not alone in fear of the Iranian nuclear program, but several European countries shared the same concerns as a potential Iranian nuclear armament posed a threat to the interests of the United States and its allies in the region.

Condoleezza Rice, National security adviser at the time said, "We've said all along that there are real problems with Iran and its so-called peaceful nuclear programs", and "It's been couched as a peaceful program, but we've been one of the lone voices that said the Iranians are a problem".

The United States therefore had to negotiate with Iran through the International Atomic Energy Agency and the European Troika represented by Britain, France, and Germany. It threatened to impose economic and political sanctions on Iran if it did not give up on its nuclear program, which in turn led to Iran's agreement to suspend its program to enrich uranium in 2004 and to sign an annex to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) It later backed down claiming the treaty was unbalanced.

After being elected President of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad sent a personal letter to President Bush proposing "new ways" to end Iran's nuclear dispute. The letter was dismissed by both U.S. Secretary of State and National Security Adviser as a negotiating ploy and publicity stunt that did not address American concerns about Iran's nuclear program. Thereafter Ahmadinejad reactivated the nuclear program and moved ahead with the building of the "Arak" heavy water reactor. In 2006 the UN Security Council imposed a ban on providing Iran with equipment for uranium enrichment and the production of long-range ballistic missiles.

In 2002, the U.S. Secretary of Defense at the time, Donald Rumsfeld, presented to the U.S. Congress a Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), which is a process to determine what the role of nuclear weapons in the U.S. security strategy should be. It included components requiring the Pentagon to draft contingency plans for the use of nuclear weapons against Russia, Iraq, Iran, North Korea, China, Libya, and Syria. It also included a proposal for a new U.S. nuclear triad based on offensive strike systems, defenses, and a revitalized defense structure. The NPR calls for the development of new types of nuclear weapons and retaining 2000 deployed strategic nuclear weapons.

Immediately after becoming President in 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad retracted the decision to suspend Iran's nuclear activities, and his positions towards the Iranian nuclear program was very strict and increased American fears especially after a speech in which he said, "The Israeli occupation regime must be eliminated from the map, we cannot make any concessions on the Palestinian cause." In 2006, Ahmadinejad announced that Iran had successfully refined uranium to a stage suitable for the nuclear fuel cycle. He was quoted as saying that Iran's conditions had changed completely as it had become a nuclear state and could talk to other states from that stand.

In response, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1696 making previous IAEA calls for Iran to suspend its enrichment activities legally binding. Iran's rejection to suspend enrichment prompted the UN Security Council to unanimously adopt Resolution 1737, imposing sanctions that prohibit the transfer of sensitive nuclear- and missile-related technology to Iran and require all countries to freeze assets of several Iranian organizations and individuals involved in Iran's nuclear and missile programs. In 2008 The UN Security Council passed Resolution 1803, further broadening the sanctions on Iran.

Even though Iran's nuclear policy under Ahmadinejad's administration received criticism especially from the U.S. and Israel who maintained that Iran is striving to obtain nuclear arms and is developing long-range firing capabilities, Ahmadinejad vowed in 2008 that Iran will not be held back from developing its peaceful nuclear program and issued orders keeping UN inspectors from freely visiting the nation's nuclear facilities and viewing their designs, in defiance of an IAEA resolution.

This pushed the United States to move at both the regional and international levels and put the Gulf States under pressure to adopt a more hostile stance toward Iran. At the international level, in 2009, the U. S., France, and Russia proposed an UN-drafted deal with Iran to find a compromise between Iran's stated need for a nuclear reactor and the concerns that Iran harbors a secret intent of developing nuclear weapons. Ahmadinejad changed his tone towards the deal after some delay and said in a live broadcast on a local TV: "We welcome fuel exchange, nuclear co-operation, building of power plants and reactors and we are ready to co-operate."

Iran Nuclear Deal

President Barack Obama's policy differed from his predecessor, as he affirmed in his inaugural address that he will follow a new approach in dealing with the International Community. He sent a message to Muslims and said: "To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect," and included Iran when he said: "we will work tirelessly to lessen the nuclear threat." Ahmadinejad released a congratulatory message to the newly elected American President and said: "Iran welcomes basic and fair changes in U.S. policies and conducts. I hope you will prefer real public interests and justice to the never-ending demands of a selfish minority and seize the opportunity to serve people so that you will be remembered with high esteem." In other speeches Obama acknowledged Iran's legitimate security interests in the region and its need to access peaceful nuclear technology, biotechnology, and chemical technology. However, Iran asked for a real change in U.S. policy toward Iran, a true change on the ground.

American fears increased after the International Atomic Energy Agency announced in 2009 that Iran disclosed the existence of the "Fordow" underground uranium enrichment facility in Qom city. This brought the Iranian nuclear file to a whole new level of negotiations. The U.S. demanded Iran to prove the peaceful nature of its nuclear program. Iran stated that the purpose of the facility was the production of UF₆ enriched up to 5% U-235. It also argued that its disclosure was consistent with its legal obligations under its Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA, which Iran claims requires the declaration of new facilities 180 days before they receive nuclear material. On the other hand, IAEA stated that Iran was bound by its agreement in 2003 to declare the facility as soon as Iran decided to construct it. Obama said after the disclosure: "Iran's decision to build yet another nuclear facility without notifying the IAEA represents a direct challenge to the basic compact at the center of the non-proliferation regime." However, Iran's determination to continue with the nuclear program prompted the United States to apply a new batch of sanctions on Iran, accusing it of carrying out a military nuclear program. The sanctions included Iranian military individuals and organizations and several banks. Bank accounts of these parties in the U.S. were frozen and Americans were prohibited from dealing with them severely affecting the Iranian economy.

The United States considered the victory of Hassan Rouhani in the Iranian presidential elections in 2013 a positive development that may pave the way for resolving the Iranian nuclear crisis. Also, considering Rouhani's desire to communicate positively with the International Community, many European countries expressed desire to resume negotiations with Iran immediately after a period of interruption. As a result, Obama announced in a letter sent to Rouhani the readiness of the United States to deal flexibly regarding the sanctions imposed on Iran, in exchange for disclosing its nuclear program and for cooperation with the international community.

These developments led to negotiations in Geneva in 2013 ending with an interim agreement on the Iranian nuclear program for six months between Iran and the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, namely, China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, United States, in addition to Germany which came to be known as the "P5+1." Continuing negotiations led to a final and comprehensive agreement in Vienna on 14 July 2015 between Iran and the "P5+1" with the European Union as an observer. The agreement, formally called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), came to be widely known as the "Iran Nuclear Deal". The agreement placed significant restrictions on Iran's nuclear program preventing it from producing nuclear weapons in exchange for sanctions relief. The nuclear deal entered into force in January 2016 and included the abolition of all international sanctions on Iran, the abolition of the economic embargo, and the release of withheld Iranian revenues estimated at tens of billions of dollars. In exchange, Iran agreed to reducing the number of centrifuges to one third and committed to a peaceful nuclear program under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

U.S. President Barack Obama's second presidential term constituted an exception in Iranian-American relations after decades of estrangement, with a diplomatic approach that was embodied in direct communication at the level of foreign ministers during the multilateral negotiations between Tehran and the "P5+1" that led to the 2015 nuclear deal.

U.S. Withdrawal from Iran Nuclear Deal

The agreement did not last long as U.S. President Donald Trump quickly turned back the clock in October 2017 by announcing that the U.S. would not make the certification provided for under U.S. domestic law but stopped short of terminating the deal. Later, on 8 May 2018, he signed a Presidential Memorandum ordering the reinstatement of harsher sanctions, in effect withdrawing the U.S. officially from JCPOA. In response, Iran threatened to close off the Strait of Hormuz if the U.S. decided to re-impose oil sanctions on Iran following the withdrawal from JCPOA.

IAEA has continued to assess that Iran remained compliant with JCPOA and that it had no credible indications of activities in Iran relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device after 2009. Hassan Rouhani said that getting out from the Iran nuclear deal would "carry a high cost" for the United States, and that no president was allowed to "single-handedly revoke" the deal signed by the UN. But on the ground, the consequences were very hard on Iran, the currency dropped significantly right after Trump announced the U.S. withdrawal, and international banks that chose to continue trading with Iran during the sanctions paid large fines.

Trump, who surrounded himself with advisers and staff hostile to the Iranian regime, followed a policy that completely contradicts the approach of former President Obama whose presidency witnessed an unprecedented openness in relations between the two countries after decades of estrangement. Trump did not enjoy the support of the international community as Britain, France, Germany, Russia, China, and the European Union maintained their support for the deal in a joint statement.

While none of the other signatories of the JCPOA expressed support for Trump's decision to withdraw from the deal and rather to the contrary France, Germany, and the United Kingdom expressed regret towards Trump's decision and tried to persuade him to stay the course, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the time said that he "fully supported" Trump's bold withdrawal from a disastrous deal. Saudi Arabia, Iran's regional rival, also expressed its support for Trump's decision.

Soon after, the U.S. and Iran entered a war of words and direct threats, embodied in the assassination of the Iranian General Qasem Soleimani in an airstrike in Iraq. This sharply escalated the decades-old tensions between the two countries as Soleimani was the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force Commander and considered the second most powerful person in Iran after Khamenei.

Iran did not take a spectator position towards the U.S. withdrawal and the re-imposing of sanctions, rather, it filed a case in the International Court of Justice against the United States in July 2018 seeking to have the sanctions against Tehran lifted. After several hearings, the International Court of Justice issued its decision in the case and ordered the U.S. to ease sanctions it re-imposed on Iran after abandoning the nuclear deal. The court also ordered that those other imposed sanctions should not affect humanitarian aid or the safety of civil aviation. The Foreign Ministry of Iran said that the decision "vindicates the Islamic Republic of Iran and confirms the illegitimacy and oppressiveness" of U.S. sanctions. The U.S. Secretary of State on the other hand accused Iran of abusing the International Court of Justice for political ends and said that the court had rejected all of its baseless requests.

Iran responded to the U.S. withdrawal from JCPOA by presenting Europe with seven conditions set by Khamenei for Iran to meet its commitments under the nuclear deal. The conditions demanded that European powers take steps to preserve business relations with Iranian banks and purchase Iranian oil despite U.S. pressure, and that there be no new discussions about Iran's ballistic missile program and regional activities. A year after the United States withdrew from the deal and imposed many unilateral sanctions, Iran decided to adopt measures relying on its right as a sovereign state and stopped sales of excess enriched uranium and heavy water to other countries.

While Trump's four years in office represented one of the worst phases of the four-decade standoff between Washington and Tehran, the then presidential candidate Joseph Biden stated, during his presidential campaigns, that he was ready to

return the United States to the 2015 nuclear deal if Iran returns to full compliance with the deal and agrees to future negotiations for longer and stricter restrictions on its nuclear activities. In September 2020, he stated that President Trump "abandoned a policy that was working to preserve America's security and replaced it with a policy that exacerbated the threat." The statements of candidate Biden at the time indicated a different orientation of American policy and carried the possibility of reducing tensions between the United States and Iran, which in turn would contribute to the stability of the Middle East.

New Era in Iran-U.S. Relations

Since the announcement of Biden's victory in the U.S. presidential elections at the end of 2020, opinions varied between making quick adjustments to Trump's policy and decisions regarding sanctions and making gradual changes especially that conditions under which the nuclear deal was concluded have changed given that Iran has violated some of its articles, thus requiring new negotiations. A third opinion was that there is no difference in goals between Biden and Trump, and that the new President seeks to achieve the same goals but in different ways using soft power. Iranian President Rouhani said that Biden's administration has a chance to "compensate for previous mistakes." The Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, expressed through Twitter his hopes that the new administration would "accept multilateralism, cooperation and respect for law" and said, in parting, that Iran's record has been one of "dignity, interest and responsible diplomacy".

Iran remains among the U.S. top policy priorities in the Middle East given the seriousness of the current situation with Iran's nuclear program and potential military confrontation between the two countries that threatens security and stability in the region, not to mention Iran's continuous support to militias in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. This priority is evidenced by the number of Biden's senior foreign policy advisers who are specialized in and have direct experience with Iranian affairs. Four of them played key roles in 2003 and led the secret bilateral channel with Iran that led to the interim agreement between Iran and the P5+1 and ultimately to the Iran nuclear deal in 2015. They include Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) William Burns, and the U.S. National Security Council's coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa Brett McGurk.

The challenge that Biden faces, however, lies in the decisions taken by the Trump administration in its last days which make Biden's task in changing U.S. policy towards Iran more difficult. In early 2021 the Trump administration sanctioned twelve Iranian and four foreign-based companies, and an Iran-based shipping company involved in supplying graphite to Iran which is a key element in steel production. The new sanctions coincided with accusations made by former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo that al Qaeda had established a new home base in Iran and that it was time for America and all free nations to crush the Iran-al-Qaeda axis.

The Biden administration must benefit from the mistakes of Trump's policies and seek to build a strong position in coordination with its allies in Europe regarding the policies pursued towards Iran, to prevent any conflict or dispute that may arise between the U.S. and Europe, and to coordinate with its partners in the Middle East and the Gulf. **Jim Inhofe**, a U.S. senator said: "It also means opening discussions with our European allies and regional partners to coordinate priorities for a new deal." He also said: "Biden should also reconsider his nomination to senior national security positions of former Obama administration officials who were directly involved in negotiating the original Iran deal, as well as those who promoted it. Unless these nominees can demonstrate that they have learned from their previous mistakes, their confirmation process in the Senate will be difficult—and rightly so."

Iran-Israel Relations

When it comes to the Iran-Israel relations, the newly elected Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett has launched an Iran policy review to be concluded before his first meeting with President Biden, which is likely to take place in late July 2021. Bennett is in the process of shifting Israeli foreign policy on several fronts with a particular focus on the Iran file including the nuclear issue and the Israeli policy toward Iran's regional behavior. Bennett wants to avoid a public clash with the Biden administration, and he believes the daylight between Netanyahu and Biden on Iran projected Israeli strategic weakness in the region and didn't serve any reasonable purpose. He also said to a bipartisan delegation from the House Foreign Affairs

Committee that a U.S. return to the 2015 nuclear deal would be a mistake and stressed Israel won't allow Iran to obtain a nuclear weapon, "In any case Israel will know how to defend itself by itself." Bennett warned world powers to wake up before returning to the nuclear agreement.

On the other hand, opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu blasted the newly elected Prime Minister, Naftali Bennet, during a speech in a Likud faction meeting at the Knesset over his secret meeting with Jordan's King Abdullah in July 2021, saying that "when Bennett gives water, Abdullah gives oil to Iran."

Netanyahu also said accusing king Abdullah: "Abdullah, I regret, agreed to transport oil from Iraq, which is controlled by Iran, through Jordan – to Egypt – and thus provide Iran enormous economic power to develop its economy and mainly its nuclear program, its plan of conquest and its terrorist activities." He added that Bennett's "weak" government does not "stand up to Iran's nuclear program" and derided it for telling "the United States that it won't conduct 'surprise' operations."

King Abdullah II of Jordan was the first Arab leader to visit the White House during Joe Biden's presidency. The visit, which came a couple of days after Netanyahu's accusations, was a resounding response to Netanyahu and a sign of strengthening ties after a rocky relationship with the Trump administration. Biden praised King Abdullah II as "loyal and decent friend," and said that "We will always be there for Jordan." These were direct messages to Israel and a sign that the United States wants to elevate Jordan once again to its traditional role as a regional peacemaker.

"Israel can live with a New Iran Nuclear Deal, and we can see a shift in Israel policy," the Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gant recently said. He assured that Israel would be willing to accept a return to a U.S.-negotiated nuclear deal with Iran and would want to see a "viable U.S.-led plan B" that includes broad economic pressure on Iran in case the talks fail, he gestured at Israel's own "plan C," which would involve military action.

New Iran

Iran expressed its openness to negotiations but set different conditions for returning to the nuclear deal and asked for compensation from the United States for its withdrawal from the deal and the imposed sanctions. It is worth mentioning that Tehran has gradually moved away from the restrictions of the nuclear deal since summer 2019, in response to the sanctions imposed by the Trump administration. According to a report by the International Atomic Energy Agency, Tehran has continued to build up its stockpile of low-enriched uranium and accelerate its nuclear research.

The victory of the conservative candidate and the head of the judiciary in Iran, Ebrahim Raisi, in the Iranian presidential elections that took place on June 18, 2021, constituted a turning point in the history of Iranian rule. This will strengthen the grip of the conservative movement on all aspects of governance in Iran and on both state and religious institutions, and therefore there will be no room for different views on major issues facing Iran, such as the Iranian nuclear file.

The urgent task that awaits Raisi is to reach a quick agreement with the United States to return to the Iranian nuclear deal, from which former U.S. President Donald Trump withdrew, with the aim of lifting U.S. sanctions imposed on Iran, which caused a sharp economic decline that was further exacerbated by the Corona pandemic.

Raisi, who is one of nine Iranian officials subjected in November 2019 to sanctions by the United States Department of State due to alleged human rights abuses, said: "We support the negotiations that guarantee our national interests. America should immediately return to the deal and fulfill its obligations under the deal," Negotiations have been taking place in Vienna since April 2021 to determine how Iran and the United States can return to compliance with the nuclear agreement.

In Raisi's first press conference, he stated that the priority in his country's foreign policy will be controlling tensions with Saudi Arabia, its regional archrival, and trying to create a balance in Iran's relations with its neighbors and world powers at the same time. Raisi will seek to get the Vienna talks moving forward, but, as he stated: "We will not allow negotiations to be for negotiations' sake. Negotiations should not be dragged out, but each sitting should bear results. A result-oriented negotiation is important to us, and it should have an outcome for the Iranian nation." He also urged the U.S. to immediately return to the deal and lift all sanctions that have affected the Iranian economy and insisted that Iran's ballistic missile program is not negotiable.

There have been varying expectations following Raisi's victory in the presidential elections and who succeed President Hassan Rouhani on August 3, 2021. There are those who believe there will be no change in Iran's foreign policy regionally

and internationally, while others believe Raisi's victory will produce a "New Iran" fearing the expansion of Iranian influence under his rule.

Raisi's victory will lead to strengthening Iran's alliances with Russia and China who share common interests in confronting U.S. hegemony. His victory will also increase Iranian support for the resistance militias in the region which will constitute a pressure card on the United States and its allies and will accelerate the return to the nuclear deal and lifting of sanctions. In fact, the conservative revolutionary Raisi, being the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, himself represents a pressure card on the U.S. to make even greater concessions.

Conclusion

Iran with a history full of accomplishments and bravery, eagerly tries to gain back and restore the glory of Persia. This became an obsession making Iran exert every effort to preserve its supremacy as a regional power and to assert its dominance.

The hostility and distrust between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran have been a continuing issue for over three decades. Despite what American media spreads, Tehran and Washington were once close allies, but the "US-supported" Shah became a domineering ruler who enraged the Iranians and triggered the Islamic Revolution and the beginning of anti-American sentiment in the Persian state.

Since 1979 till this day, diplomatic relations between Iran and the U.S have been disrupted, but both countries made immense efforts that resulted in reaching an agreement addressing Iran's nuclear program in 2015.

With the recent change of leadership in both the United States of America and Iran, both countries should seize the opportunity to engage in a dialogue to address the fundamental threats caused by the nuclear agreement, the sanctions against Iran, and the continuing decline in oil prices that has affected economic development both domestically and internationally. Given Iran's increased uranium enrichment capacity over the past years, they need to develop flexible policies from not allowing Iran to enrich to accepting limited enrichment. This is even consistent with the Israeli government statements indicating that Israel could accept new Iran nuclear deal, and in case resurrecting the deal fails, Israeli military strikes will be the option.

With Iran pursuing destabilizing regional ambitions in the Middle East that represent a strategic threat to the interests of the U.S. and its allies, the U.S. should reevaluate its Middle East policy to ensure that Iran does not use sanctions relief and its remaining nuclear energy capacity to expand its revolutionary agenda all through the region. The U.S should also revise its Middle East policy allowing Iran to play a larger regional role without conceding any U.S. interests or weakening its alliances. The United States should implement a holistic doctrine using all elements of national power, particularly based on offshore balancing, while also pursuing military assistance and training programs to demonstrate its commitment to the security of Israel and Gulf allies and prevent Iran from weakening America's position in the region.

After six rounds of indirect talks in Vienna to discuss steps that each side would adopt to return to compliance with the nuclear deal, and although they did not reach an agreement, both the U.S. and Iran said that significant progress was made on determining actions they must take to restore the deal. It is expected that the U.S. will return to talks in Vienna with a new realistic approach to reach a conclusion in the shortest time, but first a re-evaluation of the sixth round of nuclear talks should be completed by Raisi's government. It is expected that Raisi will adopt a tougher line when the talks resume. The main issue will remain what nuclear limits will Tehran accept and what sanctions will Washington remove?

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