

Contrasting US-Iranian Relations Between
the Obama and Trump Administrations

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Given the deterioration of US-Iranian relations in only the first few months of the Trump administration, this research paper shall examine the foreign policy evolution that led the Obama administration to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the regulation of Iranian uranium to state of brinksmanship observed between the Iran and the Trump administration in 4th federal quarter of 2019. Moreover, this paper will review the rise of tensions between the US and Iran beginning with the US attempting to sponsor Western leaning regime in 1953, the Iranian Hostage Crises, and the culminating with US implications in the Stuxnet cyberattack on an Iranian uranium refinement facility. The focus of the paper will then transition to the diplomatic milestones achieved under the Obama administration—its rhetoric regarding the pursuit of diplomatic relations with Iran and the broader details surrounding the JCPOA. The analyses of the JCPOA will then segue into the swift dismantling of the JCPOA by President Trump and the exploration of the cold-conflict narrative that has codeveloped between Iran and the Trump administration in the period since. The overall purpose of this analysis is to discuss the missed relational opportunities that may have been lost with the dismantling of the JCPOA and the exchange in diplomatic strides made with Iran under Obama in favor of the hawkish and dangerous brand of realism exhibited by President Trump and his staff. Given the evidence found in the following case study material, the change from the diplomatic bent of the Obama administration to the pugnacious approach of the Trump administration can be shown to have a direct effect on the current volatility observed between the US and Iran.

A Brief History of US-Iranian Relations

The relational difficulties between modern Iran and the US amalgamated after the United States Central Intelligence Agency would involve itself in the installation of the Shah of Iran in 1953. This coup would ultimately oust Iran's democratically elected prime minister, Muhammad Mossadeq, and create a veritable puppet government that would be more in line with Western idealism (Wilford, 2013, p. 160-174). Though the Shah would preside over the government for the better part of three decades and Iran would experience substantial economic growth, dubiousness surrounding relations with the West and the public condemnation of the Shah's dictatorial leadership style would begin shift towards critical mass in the 1960s and 1970s. The result of this groundswell of incompatibility between the collective conscience of the public and the Shah would culminate in 1979 with the Iranian revolution and the exiling of that Shah in favor of the anti-Western, Shia-leaning Ayatollah Khomeini (Ansari 1999).

In fashion resembling a classic fable, the installation of the Shah and the 1979 revolution that is would go on to inspire would only come back to haunt the United States and its bent on spreading Western idealism. In the midst of the revolution in 1979, the Shah would go into exile and seek asylum in the US. Unable to reconcile with the synthetic placement of the dictatorial regime and Western meddling in Iranian self-determination, revolutionary elements in Iran would call for the return of the Shah to face prosecution within his home country. This would ultimately result in 444-day Iranian Hostage Crisis that would see Iranian revolutionaries take US hostages as leverage negotiating the return of the Shah. Though the Carter administration would negotiate the return of these hostages at the 11th hour of his tenure in office on January 29th, 1981; tensions between the US and Iran remained high with perhaps one minor exception during the Iran-Contra scandal (Bowden, 2006).

The Iran-Contra scandal involved the clandestine sales of US weaponry to the Iranians to support their war against Iraq despite an active arms embargo. The funds from this secret agreement would prop up a separate, congressionally condemned campaign to support the Contra revolutionaries in the Nicaragua (Byrne, Kornbluh, & Blanton, 2006). This secret sale and subsequent scandal would become the blight of the Reagan administration and result not only in a far-reaching criticism over the integrity of the administration, but also in future administrations distancing themselves from Iran for sake of political positioning. In the George H. W. Bush administration, this would mean stale Iranian relations, Iranian derision over US alignments with Israel, and US contempt for increased Iranian alignment with terrorist organization (Haass, 2010). The Clinton administration would come nearest to all-out conflict over suspected Iranian involvement in deadly attacks on US personnel, but in the absence of proof relations continued to sour mainly over Iranian state-sponsored terror and “its pursuit of nuclear technology” (Riedel, 2010).

It was not until the George W. Bush Administration, however, that complications with Iran would take on a truly drastic turn towards a more defensive realist posture. As part of this posture, then-President Bush would label Iran as a member of the “axis of evil” along with North Korea and Iraq and end his presidency with an embroilment with the Iranian regime over issues of nuclear weapons development despite a \$60 million congressional endorsement to promote democracy in Iran. The reason for this turn is multifaceted, but mainly centered around the US posture on the Middle East under the Global War on Terror after 9/11, the rise of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president of Iran in the midst of Bush’s second term, and the commonly overlooked complications that stemmed from the suspected involvement of the US and Israel in the 2007 Stuxnet cyberattack that would destroy several Iranian uranium enrichment centrifuges

(Hadley, 2010; Zetter 2016). In response to Stuxnet, Behrouz Esbati, the top official in charge of Iran's cyber strategy, issued the following statement in 2015:

Nowadays, America is the symbol of the evil person and the Islamic Republic is the symbol of the divine person. There is no common ground for these two. One of these two must be victorious over the other (as quoted in Bucala & Pendleton, 2015).

Alas, this statement is indicative of the volatility that exists within the Iranian military apparatus towards the US, despite the progress that would follow in the Obama administration. In the following review of US-Iran relations under Obama, then, this hostile context will be critical in understanding the deeper meaning of the JCPOA in terms of milestones in trying to develop an amiable narrative between the two nations.

Iran Under the Obama Administration

In light of the rather tense ending to that came at the close of the Bush administration, it would seem that the transition to the Obama administration could not have come at a more fortuitous time. The liberal internationalist approach demonstrated by Obama would create the framework for future diplomatic negotiations with Iran and set a much more positive tone in comparison to the militaristic realism exhibited by Bush under the foundation of the Global War on Terror. This is perhaps most captivated in some over Obama's earliest Middle East rhetoric featuring Iran as well as in the Iranian response.

Obama-Iran: Early Rhetoric

President Obama was inaugurated on January 20, 2009 and wasted little time in issuing a statement of diplomacy unto the Muslim world in his first speech as President. In Obama's inaugural address, religious pluralism would be emphasized on the domestic front while he would simultaneously "seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect"

from Muslim leadership within the international system (as quoted in Phillips, 2009). Obama's speech would be met head-on by Iranian President Ahmadinejad just eight days after the address. In a televised statement issued on Arab television on January 28, 2009, Ahmadinejad responded to President Obama by stating, "We will listen carefully to their words... If change happens, we will welcome such an endeavor" (CNN Politics 2009). Such remarks reflect the demarcation point for the near 30-year tension that dominated the US-Iran narrative.

In rounding out these early positive exchanges, Obama would offer a continuation of these sentiments and even offer and acknowledgement of the implication of the US in the 1953 coup that would set the US and Iran on its tumultuous past along with the prized concern of the Obama administration in limiting Iran's nuclear program:

In the middle of the Cold War, the United States played a role in the overthrow of a democratically elected Iranian government. Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran has played a role in acts of hostage-taking and violence against U.S. troops and civilians. This history is well known. Rather than remain trapped in the past, I've made it clear to Iran's leaders and people that my country is prepared to move forward. The question now is not what Iran is against, but rather what future it wants to build. I recognize it will be hard to overcome decades of mistrust, but we will proceed with courage, rectitude, and resolve... It is clear to all concerned that when it comes to nuclear weapons, we have reached a decisive point. This is not simply about America's interests. It's about preventing a nuclear arms race in the Middle East that could lead this region and the world down a hugely dangerous path (Office of the Press Secretary, 2009).

While it would seem that the Obama White House would stick to this framework going forward, the middling years of Obama's twin terms would see an Iran go through a period of soft

revolution in the wake the questionable 2009 reelection of Ahmadinejad. This would welcome a sort of awakening inside of Iran amongst the younger population priming the Iranian public remove Ahmadinejad through the Iranian election of 2013.

The March to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

In preface to the replacement of Ahmadinejad in 2013, tensions would flare along familiar lines between the US and Iran. Issues surrounding the encroachment on Iranian airspace by US drones resulted in the capture of at least one drone and offensive aerial maneuvers on another (CNN Wire Staff, 2011). Additionally, the Iranian Navy began a loop of rhetoric that threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz in 2011 and 2012 in response to US Naval deployments to the area as presumably as a response the aforementioned drone activity (Starr, 2012). However, Iran's 2013 elections would bring on the sort of moderate leader needed to offset the staunchness of Ahmadinejad and usher in the prevailing sentiments needed to make any sort of progress between not only the US and Iran, but also in modifying its perception of Iran in the eyes of the international community.

After assuming office in August of 2013, newly elected Iranian President Hassan Rouhani wasted little time before expressing its desire to come to the table over the topic of nuclear diplomacy. It would be revealed in November of 2013 that these sentiments largely moved forward as a product of secret negotiations between the incoming Rouhani, his new Iranian foreign Minister Javad Zarif, President Obama, and then-Senator John Kerry. What would follow would be a series of sessions overseen by the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council comprised of the US, China, Russia, France, and the United Kingdom with the addition of Germany as a supplemental party. This led to the initial Joint Plan of Action on November 24, 2013—an interim agreement that would have Iran halt its nuclear

program while negotiations could take place. This interim agreement would receive several extensions and over a 16-month period before finally culminating in the definitive framework of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on April 2, 2015 (Perkovich, 2017).

Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Trump Takes Office, and the Bigger Picture

The JCPOA would be fully adopted on October 18, 2015; implemented on January 16, 2016; and receive limited fanfare on both the US domestic front as well as within the broader international community. Perhaps the most popular criticisms of the Iran Nuclear Deal, as it became to be known, were that it seemed to offer a great deal of concessions to Iran in exchange for limited or seemingly short-term compliance with many of the core restrictions only lasting either 10-15 years (Perkovich, 2017). Additionally, further criticisms would go on to cite that the agreement did little to address Iran's proxy power in countries like Yemen and Lebanon or its ballistic missile program (Masters, 2016).

Leading the momentum for these early criticisms would be 2016 presidential candidate Donald Trump. As part of his campaign rhetoric, Trump promised the demise of the JCPOA in favor of a return the type of US sanctions that were in place before the agreement—all behind the foreboding of superior American military might (Masters, 2016). When Trump won the election later in 2016 and take office in January of 2017, he would waste little time in launching probes to investigate the durability and efficacy of the JCPOA in his pursuit of undoing the agreement. Much to his dismay, Trump's administration could find little in the way of non-compliance on the part of the Iranians and also little in the actual agreement that would support a credible stance against it (International Crisis Group, 2018). However, this would not stop Trump from finding and glorifying external occurrences that would help him dislodge the JCPOA in accordance to his prevailing agenda.

Trump would ultimately center on the slow economic progress within Iran, leveraging the high hopes from many in the international system that lifting sanctions would somehow yield an immediate relief from the economic turmoil that had gripped the country in the wake of Ahmadinejad, i.e. substantial issues with inflation and limited global access in terms of imports and exports. Likewise, Trump used the hesitation of the global businesses to interact with Iran due to skepticism surrounding the JCPOA and its sudden willingness to explore diplomatic options within the international community. The result would find President Trump failing to recertify the JCPOA in early 2018 in favor of a snapback to former Iran sanctions just as his narrative portended in his early rhetoric (International Crisis Group, 2018; Perkovich, 2017). At this point, a stern demarcation line was driven between the long and hard-fought diplomatic end that would become the JCPOA under Obama in favor of a new, potentially dangerous experiment in offensive realism under Trump that has since led to a type of brinksmanship that has hardly been seen since the Cold War. Since pledging its defiance of the agreement, US and Iranian tensions began to revert

Analyzing the Cost of Withdrawal Under Trump and Looking Toward the Future

The final withdrawal from the JCPOA by way of the Trump administration would come in May of 2018 with the reimposition of sanctions against Iran in August of 2018. What would follow would be a US campaign of *maximum pressure* that would last until present day and amount to a continuous rise in confrontational rhetoric. On the US side, the Trump administration would demand new and more aggressive oversight standards than were listed in the JCPOA as well as a further agreement from Iran that it would stop its proxy war in Yemen and towards Saudi Arabia. On the Iranian side, US demands have been met with spite by President Rouhani who has since allowed uranium enrichment activities to travel past the

thresholds conveyed in the JCPOA and looked at the other nations entered into the deal for a means to work around the dissent from the Trump administration (Kirby, 2019; Lee, 2019).

The US Perspective

On the domestic side, Trump supporters would praise the President for his adherence to campaign promises. On the opposite end, many view Trump's cap on previous policy as a measure against not only the democratic party in the US but also against former President Obama himself. This hypothesis seems to hold weight given the sheer number of efforts being fielded to defy the policy of the previous administration, as well as under the speculation that President Trump has coopted a personal vendetta against former President Obama. In the former, many of Obama's hallmark policies are either pending executive actions against them, have had failed executive actions against them, or have been removed altogether. Examples of these undone policies have been portions of the Affordable Care Act, the Paris Climate Agreement comprised of 175 global signatories, and reversal of many of Obama's immigration policies in favor of increased strictness upon entry as well as the US-Mexico border wall (Eilperin & Cameron, 2018). In the case of purposely thwarting Obama policies, a leak reported in July of 2019 from at least one British ambassador charges President Trump with knowingly conducting "diplomatic vandalism" and pits President Trump as one with a purely egoist bent against Obama. Regardless of the criticisms of this claim, reactions to the leak indicate that there is an increasing sentiment both at home and abroad that the deterioration of relations between the US-Iran over such an acute timeline is telling of Trump's impatience in seeing the JCPOA bear fruit and in his unwillingness to improve upon the agreement in light of its gestural showing of support towards his predecessor (Kelly, 2019). In response to this, former President Obama has issued his condemnation and described Trump's shortsightedness in the following statement:

I believe that the decision to put the JCPOA at risk without any Iranian violation of the deal is a serious mistake. Without the JCPOA, the United States could eventually be left with a losing choice between a nuclear-armed Iran or another war in the Middle East... In a democracy, there will always be changes in policies and priorities from one Administration to the next the consistent flouting of agreements that our country is a party to risks eroding America's credibility, and puts us at odds with the world's major powers (quoted in Mallin, 2018).

Global Analysis and Conclusion

The stark contrast between President Obama's diplomatic aspirations in Iran versus Trump's hawkishness is having very notable consequences. Just four years ago under President Obama, the US had finally fostered progress over Iran's nuclear program and gained a possible foothold for further resolutions. In just months, President Trump defied this progress and set the US on a course of confrontation that has done little more than threaten its security and credibility. As a result, the history of the US and Iran has currently reached rather low point—a dangerous milestone that may lead to yet another US entanglement in the Middle East and possibly with another nuclear power in the world.

President Obama alluded to the aforementioned danger in his condemning remarks over Trump's dismantling of the JCPOA. As of July 2019, the international system, including the other nations involved in the agreement, have responded in similar fashion and are seeking their own means of dealing with Iran to salvage what is left of the JCPOA without the help of the US (Coppola, 2019). Meanwhile, President Trump and his administration continue to push the limits of the strained relations between Iran and the US by increasing the presence of US forces in the area as well as threatening both military actions and yet more economic sanctions.

The great misfortune of this stark downturn in relations is not only in the regression of US-Iran relations, but in the failure of President Trump and the broader US government to realize the potential of the JCPOA as the avenue for greater policy objectives over time. What President Obama and the deep analysts of the JCPOA seem to agree on is that the JCPOA was not a perfect policy nor was it meant to be. It was the opportunity to start something from the chaos that plagued US-Iranian relations since 1953. As it stands, it would seem that the current era of politics under Trump is unwilling to withstand the need for a well-calculated, long-term foreign policy position on the nations it fears the most. As the situation between the US and Iran develops, the US runs the risk of not only entering into and exasperating its already tired presence in the Middle East, but also in inviting others from the international system with a keen eye and patient ear to move in and establish a diplomatic and/or strategic footprint in the region.

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