

# Trump's Maximum Pressure Policy and Diplomacy

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## Abstract

In the past four decades, the US-Iran relations have been hostile, especially after Donald Trump took office as president in 2017. Since 1979, Washington's official policy toward Iran has been predicated on containment, push-back, and change of behavior. However, Iran usually perceives the US policy regarding itself in terms of regime change or metamorphosis. The United States has countered Iran through coercive diplomacy, crippling sanctions, military blockade, delegitimization, isolation, and demonization. The present paper aims to investigate the antagonism between the two countries in Donald Trump's administration. The main reasons behind Trump's maximum pressure campaign against Iran and Iran's perception of this attitude constitute the main research questions addressed in this paper. The findings show that the two countries have different understandings of their hostilities. Although the US preference in Trump's era for Iran was regime change, it would settle for a non-challenging or so-called a normal Iran. But Iran perceived the US policy as undermining its independence, identity, and existence. In fact Iran perceived Trump's gesture on negotiation or making new deal as just a propaganda show. This paradigmatic different outlooks has blocked diplomacy. The present paper, through a descriptive-analytic method, elaborates on this antinomy mainly from Iranian side.

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## **Introduction**

US-Iranian relations began in the mid-19th century. These relations continued until the Iranian revolution of the 7th of February 1979. Since then, the two countries have had limited political and military connections except in few cases (including the Iran-Contra affair in 1985 and military aid to the US troops and the Afghan Northern Alliance against the Taliban by the IRGC in 2001). They did not have any relationship until June 16, 2008, when three rounds of talks were held between the US and Iranian envoys in Baghdad for the establishment of peace in Iraq, which failed due to sharp divisions. Subsequently, during a series of visits by former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the United Nations headquarters from 2005 to 2013, he put forward proposals for direct talks with Washington, which were met with opposition from Iranian conservatives and drew no response by the US officials (Mousavian and Shahidsaless, 2014:207-229 ).

Bilateral talks between the United States and Iran peaked after Hassan Rouhani took office in August 2013 as the seventh president of Iran. The negotiations over Iran's nuclear case, which lasted for nearly two years, resulted in the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on July 14, 2015. The hammering out of the deal was the highest level of diplomatic relations between Iran and the United States since the Islamic Revolution in Iran. However, the US contribution to the deal was temporary, and the 45<sup>th</sup> US President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from it on May 5, 2018 (Ritter, 2018). The gap between the two countries has been widening ever since, and Maryland University's survey in 2019 showed over four in five Iranians

expressed negative opinions about the United States—the highest level recorded in 13 years. The majority of Iranians believe the United States is deliberately blocking humanitarian goods being exported to Iran and it is unlikely that a new president might return to the JCPOA after 2020 (Maryland University, 2019). In the last 18 years, according to the findings of Gallup, Americans have viewed Iran as the greatest adversary of the United States (Benjamin and Simon, 2019). The mutual hatred is so deep that even amid the tense situation resulting from the global COVID-19 pandemic, the United States did not ease its paralyzing economic sanctions against Iran.

Tensions escalated to brinkmanship when, on 20 June 2019, Iran shot down a U.S. RQ-4A Global Hawk surveillance drone when it entered the Iranian airspace. On January 3, 2020, the United States assassinated the Iranian Major General Major Qasem Soleimani in an airstrike in Iraq. He was the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps' Quds Force. The assassination intensified the decades-old tensions between the two countries. On January 7, 2020, Iran carried out a heavy missile attack, launching around 20 missiles to strike multiple US targets in Ayn al Asad Airbase (Iraq) where about 1,500 soldiers are stationed. There have been serious concerns that this escalation might culminate in a destructive regional war (BBC News, 2020).

The main questions addressed in the present research are, “what main drivers have propelled the Trump administration to withdraw from the JCPOA and adopt a hostile policy toward Tehran, and in what ways does Tehran and Iranian leader perceive the US Trump’s policy toward itself?”

The main recent works on the Iran-US relations in Trump’s era tackled this issue mostly from the US outlook or real-politics. While subjective reasons play a lot in the dynamics of the Tehran-Washington hostilities. Entesar and Afrasiabi(2019) in “Trump and Iran from Containment to Confrontation” seek to examine the fluid dynamic of US-Iran relations in the Trump era by explaining antagonism between Washington and Tehran that may lead to a

disastrous war in the region. They gave a sound insight of the outcome Trump's hostility toward Iran. Albarasneh and Khatib (2019) argue that both Obama and Trump administrations have developed a containment strategy for handling the disputed issues with Iran, but did not succeed fully. They did not elaborate the problem from Iranian side. Tabatabai(2020) also tackled Iran-US hostilities and concluded that the United States could try to attain a series of comprehensive agreements by tailored processes and mechanisms to address vastly different challenges. The author of current paper believes that Tabatabai is wrong and made a simplified picture of the hostility. Duncombe(2020) shows how emotional factors blocks dialogue between states such as Iran-US, but came short to analyses deeply the Iranian understanding of the problem. This research tries to contribute to the US-Iran hostile relations from an Iranian outlook and concluded the US politicians and even some oversea researchers have not understood Iranian perception of the US arrogant policies deeply.

## **I. Theoretical Framework**

Perception is a mental process by which individuals understand and interpret data in their surroundings and thereby give meaning to them. Perception may conform with or be very different from reality. Oftentimes, people have different perceptions of the same object. It can be said that people's behavior depends on their perception, not reality. The same holds about the mutual understanding between Iran and the United States. Scholars of International Relations have always attached an important role to the perceiving process of the threat on issues such as war, deterrence, alliances, and conflict resolution. Perhaps for the first time, Thucydides raised the issue of threat assessment, not a real threat, as a factor in the occurrence of wars. (Stein, 2013: 364-366) In some cases, understanding the threat is more important than the expressed threat. In fact, perception is the process of receiving the subject through emotions, intellect, and its interpretation by people's belief sets. Perception is the basis of

understanding, learning, and knowledge and a fundamental motivation for action. In the process of perceiving something, the emotional state, information processing capability, and the characteristics of perceivers are important. A set of individual perceptions can lead to the definition of a collective perceptual situation which leads policy-makers to an assessment of a threat situation. Based on cognitive psychology, Robert Jarvis argues that the main factors involved in perception - and perception of a threat - are images, beliefs, and intentions:

“In determining how he will behave, an actor must try to predict how others will act and how their actions will affect his values. The actor must, therefore, develop an image of others and their intentions. This image may, however, turn out to be an inaccurate one; the actor may for several reasons misperceive both others’ actions and their intentions.”(Jarvis, 1968: 454)

Perception is the process by which an actor produces an understanding according to his belief set and the images he made about other actors and what they are expected to do (intention) in a particular situation. (Jarvis, 1968: 455) The intention in this sense is the reactions or actions that one actor expects from another actor in a given situation and may be contrary to the reaction or action that the actor actually intends or hopes to perform. Jarvis conforms to cognitive psychologists that psychological factors can reinforce erroneous estimates and thus limit the rationality of decision-makers. (Neack, 2018: 38) He states that an actor who tries to strengthen his defensive capabilities knows his intentions well and assumes that other actors understand his intentions rightly as well, but other actors may misperceive the intention of other states, especially the adversary ones. Jarvis devotes his entire book, ‘Perception and Misperception in International Politics’, to perception dynamics and to how states receive others and their actions, and when and why these perceptions can go wrong. Jarvis's main focus in this book is on the interaction between theory and data. In his view, man has a great desire for cognitive consistency and sees what he

expects to see and adapts new information to the images he already established. (Jervis, 2017:117-128) Explaining the effect of expectations on perception, he believes that expectations create a context in which leaders pay attention to some issues and ignore others altogether. New information is always processed from within the prism was formed by previous assumptions (images) about an actor, and is classified and understood accordingly. This creates an incomplete image of others, which in itself leads to misunderstanding or misperception. (Ibid:37) In analyzing information received from a hostile country, leaders tend to get what they expect based on previous beliefs. (Morin and Paquin, 2018:77-78) They tend to accept information and data that is consistent with their previous beliefs. When data contradicts previous beliefs, leaders often retain previous beliefs and reject the data. These psychological dynamics have overshadowed the realities in US-Iran adversary interactions. Therefore, it is not important what is the US leaders' intention in addressing Iran, but it is more important what Iranian leaders perceives the US messages.

## **II. Trump's Policy**

Donald Trump appears to be a unique phenomenon in American politics. Without any political background or governmental assignment, he ran for the 2016 presidential election and despite his opposition to the ruling political system in the United States, he won the ballot and became the president of a superpower state. He is self-opinionated and is rarely concerned about getting advice from the US bureaucratic and intelligence entities. In this respect, the 45<sup>th</sup> US president is an exceptional person in the White House (Ricard, 2018).

Trump's inner circle is a radical one rarely seen in the last two decades of US history, bringing together the most hawkish figures of the GOP. As compared to the Obama administration officials, they have huge ideological leanings. In this group, the majority are pro-Israel individuals with an evangelical mindset, believing

that God granted the so-called land of Israel to the Jews. Another characteristic of Trump's cabinet people is that they are hostile to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Most of the people who have worked on Trump's foreign policy have experiences with territories in Iran's strategic neighborhood, including Iraq and Afghanistan. They are of the opinion that Iran's policies and practices make up the main causes of the failure and fatalities of the United States in the two countries. They show great animosity toward Iran (Zamani and Niyakuei, 2019: 103-109).

At the top of them was the former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, who was in office for a very brief period of time, and had to resign due to a scandalous involvement with the Russian ambassador to the United States. Vice President Mike Pence, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who was later replaced by the CIA Director Mike Pompeo, Secretary of Defense Gen. Jim Mattis who was succeeded by Mark Esper, National security advisor Herbert Raymond who was later replaced with John Bolton and Robert C. O'Brien, Steven Mnuchin as Treasury Secretary, Nikki Haley and Kelly Craft as the US representative to the United Nations, as well as advisors such as Walid Phares, Jeff Sessions, Keith Kellogg, Joe Schmitz, Carter Page, and finally George Papadopolous, are the most imperative people in the formulation of US foreign policy and national strategy concerning Iran (Draitser, 2016).

By examining the Trump policies and actions, it can be concluded that he is pursuing the consolidation of the US global leadership at the expense of others. It means he rescinds or reduces certain foreign policy commitments, but at the same time agrees to the maintenance of some of the other commitments and offers to accept new obligations. He first evaluates the costs of commitments and then tries to forge a foreign policy that serves the US national interests better. In the Trump administration, global political cooperation is selective and based on American national interests. Trump believes the U.S. has to be willing to cut down its cooperation with anyone and any country where needed.

Trump's inattentiveness to the so-called American values is rooted in his pragmatist personality; something that is commonly referred to as 'immoral pragmatism' (Shapiro, 2017). "My job is not to represent the world, my job is to represent the United States," Trump had said in a speech to the Congress. (USA Today, 2017).

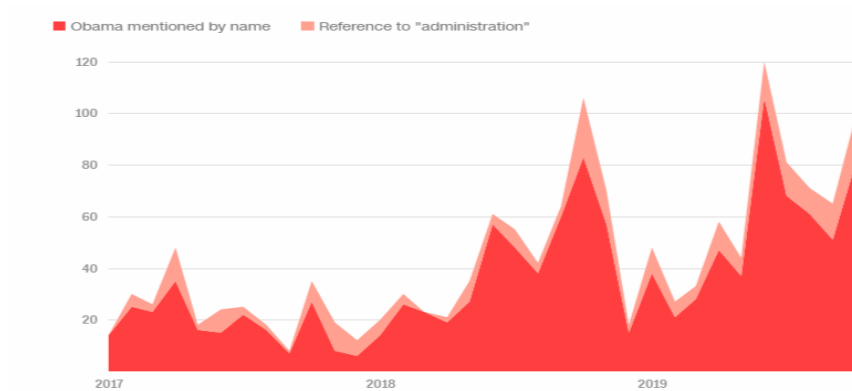
In line with the same insight, Donald Trump believes that the JCPOA is not in conformity with the US interests. Trump called the deal "a very bad deal" and "embarrassing" for his country, saying, "the Democrats and President Obama gave Iran 150 Billion Dollars and got nothing, but they can't give 5 Billion Dollars for National Security and a Wall?" Trump's main grievance was that the U.S. had spent a huge amount of money on a "single deal" and did not get much. In this regard, he tweeted: "The Democrats and President Obama gave Iran 150 Billion Dollars and got nothing, but they can't give 5 Billion Dollars for National Security and a Wall?" This is while, the real figure was around \$50 billion in "usable liquid assets," according to the 2015 testimony by Adam Szubin, the Acting Undersecretary of Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence (Spencer, 2019). In the same vein, Vice President Mike Pence, the running mate of Donald Trump in the 2016 elections campaign, emphasized that Trump would "rip up" the deal upon arriving at the White House (ABC News, 2016). Corresponding to the same doctrine, Trump pulled out of the JCPOA, endorsed by the Security Council resolution 2231, on May 18, 2018.

The decision by Donald Trump to withdraw from JCPOA and adopt a "maximum pressure policy" have been explained under six reasons:

The first one was personal jealousy and obsession with Barack Obama. He had attacked this agreement throughout the presidential campaign trail and should have kept his word after becoming president. He didn't want to give his supporters the impression of a weak person. So, he withdrew from the deal. For psychological reasons, Trump has been seeking to obliterate major Obama legacies including the Iran nuclear deal. "Through



October, Trump had mentioned Obama by name 537 times during 2019 as a whole -- an average of 1.8 times per day,” CNN estimated (Figure 1). Michael Anton, a former top security official, told CNN that “Obama's own decisions are a factor for Trump but denied it was driven by reflexive animus.” He argued the president “thinks in terms of correcting the mistakes of not just Obama but George W. Bush and even earlier presidents”. (Waren, CNN, 2019)



**Figure 1. Mentioning Obama by Trump in 2017-2019(Source: CNN, 2020)**

The second reason is believing in the fruitfulness of the “maximum pressure policy.” The rationale behind the maximum pressure policy has been that the United States, as the world’s superior financial power, will be able to destroy the Iranian economy by freezing Iran’s oil exports, depriving it of foreign business investment and cutting it off from the global financial system. As a result, Iranian oil exports went down from 2.8 million barrels per day in the spring of 2018 to less than 500,000 barrels per day in September 2019, i.e. shrinking by more than 80% (Reuters, 2019). The IMF had predicted the Iranian economy would be downsized more than 9.5% by the end of 2019, and this forecast turned out to be true (Reuters, 2019). That figure will undoubtedly aggravate the unemployment rate and other economic indicators. Amid the coronavirus outbreak, Trump not

only refused to suspend Iran sanctions but also added new sanctions against the Islamic Republic (Press TV, 2020). Stephen M. Walt explains the goals of the maximum pressure campaign by saying: “Hawks see two possible routes to regime change. The first approach relies on ramping up economic pressure on Tehran in the hope that popular discontent will grow and that the clerical regime will simply collapse. The second option is to provoke Iran into restarting its nuclear program, which would give Washington the excuse to launch a preventive war” (Walt, 2018).

Donald Trump assumed that Iran resembles Mexico, in dealing with whom he could impose a new deal named USMCA as a replacement for NAFTA. Trump, with his business background, came to this understanding that he can make gains in changing other actors' behaviors with an economic weapon by imposing costs and offering financial incentives to target people. Therefore, he assumed he will be able to achieve the same result with Iran. This policy was supposed to bring Iran back to negotiations over its nuclear program and even overthrow the Iranian regime through economic pressure. However, he failed to understand that the Iranian regime is an ideology-driven state with historical pride whose economic interests do not count as its top priority. Iran has rejected any further negotiations with the United States as long as it is subjected to severe economic sanctions. Iran has also caused Donald Trump troubles, by launching attacks on the US forces directly or through proxy forces in Iraq after the assassination of Major Qasem Soleimani , and therefore may influence the US presidential elections in November 2020. For sure, the signals coming from Tehran confirm that forcing Iran to a new nuclear agreement with the United States will not happen. All Iranian authorities reiterated several times that Iran will not talk to the United States while under sanctions and while the United States is not upholding the JCPOA (The Atlantic, 2018).

So why didn't the maximum pressure policy pay off? The main explanation is that Donald Trump set his goals unrealistically. Mike Pompeo asked for major concessions that are

implausible without a regime change in Iran. Trump's next rookie mistake was to assume that the U.S. unilateral actions are impactful enough to achieve massive success, and there is no need for international cooperation, unlike previous presidents who relied on it. But he was wrong, and China and other countries that faced financial blackmailing from the Trump administration have been helping Iran quietly to bypass the sanctions. More importantly, Trump's unilateral sanctions have lacked international legitimacy (The Washington Post, 2020).

The third reason has to do with Trump's interpretation of contextual perceived deficiencies in the JCPOA. In other words, from Trump's point of view, a big deficiency within the text of the agreement pertains to what is described as the sunset clauses of JCPOA and other timetables, which levy restrictions on Iran in specific, limited periods of time. The Trump administration maintains that if Iran is supposed to be a non-nuclear country, this clause must change and limitations on Iran must become permanent. If its overall enrichment capability is dismantled, it would better serve the US interests.

Under the JCPOA, different restrictions on Iran will expire and Iran would be permitted to resume its activities regularly. These are the dates when the restrictions will be terminated:

Date	Expiration of Bans
October 2020	UN restrictions on conventional weapons transfer to Iran
October 2023	The UN ban on assistance to Iran's ballistic missile program. The EU terminates all remaining nuclear sanctions.
October 2025	UNSC Resolution 2231 and all remaining EU and UN measures are terminated. Restrictions are lifted on numbers of centrifuges, centrifuge production, and purchase of dual-use materials.
2026	The cap of 5,060 IR-1 centrifuges at Iran's Natanz facility will be lifted. Restrictions on centrifuge R&D will end as will the ban on replacing IR-1 centrifuges with more advanced models.

October 2030	Restrictions on uranium enrichment levels, location of enrichment, quantities of enriched uranium, Iran's construction of heavy-water reactors will come to an end.
2031	All restrictions on heavy water reactors, the number, and type of centrifuges, as well as the number of enrichment facilities and the amount and level of enriched uranium Iran may stockpile.
2036-41	International access to Iran's supply chain of centrifuge manufacturing and nuclear storage facilities.

More importantly, the JCPOA granted Iran's demands to cease investigation of the possible military dimensions (PMD) of its nuclear activities and, according to Iran's narrative of JCPOA, barred IAEA inspectors from unlimitedly inspecting any site in Iran, whether military or civilian. The U.S. officials maintain that the IAEA has never been allowed to conduct 'anytime anywhere inspections,' and it is a big loophole of the deal (Politi Fact, 2015) (Jewish Virtual Library, 2017).

All the same, the Trump administration maintains that, according to the JCPOA, Iran's uranium enrichment facilities will continue to work, Tehran continues to research and develop the new generation centrifuges, and by the end of the 15 to 25-year-period, it can put these new technologies into practice to enhance its nuclear industry. The neo-cons in Washington believe the nuclear agreement recognizes Iran as a nation on the nuclear breakout threshold: "In fact, the deal allowed Iran to continue enriching uranium and, over time, reach the brink of a nuclear breakout," Trump stated (The New York Times, 2018). For this reason, they believe that since a substantial portion of Iran's obligations will lapse in a short period of time and restrictions on Iran's nuclear activities will be lifted, the United States will be in an unfavorable position in the next few years by crushing the sanctions regime.

On the hyper-textual aspect, there were two interconnected issues to be taken note of: first, the JCPOA did not cover Iran's

missile program, and secondly, it could not restrict Iran's regional activities. Contrary to initial expectations, JCPOA not only did not ease the rivalries in the region, but also intensified tensions between Iran and its regional competitors. "As we exit the Iran deal, we will be working with our allies to find a real, comprehensive, and lasting solution to the Iranian nuclear threat. This will include efforts to eliminate the threat of Iran's ballistic missile program; to stop its terrorist activities worldwide, and to block its menacing activity across the Middle East," Trump said. He also argued, "And we will not allow a regime that chants 'Death to America' to gain access to the most deadly weapons on Earth" (White House Briefings, 2018).

It seems that the US withdrawal from the JCPOA was underpinned by the impact of the Middle East strategy of President Trump and the alliance of the trio of the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. As staunch adversaries of Iran, Riyadh and Tel Aviv believed that Iran has gained more economic benefits to increase its influence and power in the region after the signing of the deal. This was a hypothetical threat especially perceived by Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. These states are concerned that Iran's success in hammering out an outstanding deal with the world's great powers will strengthen its role and influence in the region. "America's interests are endangered, and Iran is seen by America's allies, including Israel and Saudi Arabia, as the main beneficiary of Arab uprisings... In Trump they found a willing ally in not just containing Iran but to try and roll back Iran's influence" explains Anoush Ehteshami, professor of international relations at Durham University (ABC News, 2020).

As a source of insecurity, Israel has considered the Islamic Republic of Iran as the main threatening and a source of instability. Israel has assumed Iran as the 'other-enemy,' viewing the JCPOA to be against its existence and deterring its own nuclear capability. Israel is seeking to extend its supremacy in the region to ensure its survival. Therefore, the further isolation of

Iran is in line with Israel's security goals (Haaretz, 2018). On the other hand, Israeli lobbyists have infiltrated the US politics so deeply that the security of Israel has become a redline for the American politicians and they mostly exert it as an asset in boosting themselves.

The last, but not the least reason, is the logic of cost-effective calculations. It means the United States did not benefit from JCPOA economically. The total US trade balance with Iran was \$71.7 million in 2019 (The US Census Bureau, 2020). It means literally nothing in the US foreign trade. The United States, like most states in the world, seeks to achieve its interests and is committed to its international commitments as long as they are beneficial. If a leader in the United States finds out that the benefits of adherence to an agreement are more than its costs, he/she may be persuaded to put it down. That's why the Trump administration decided to withdraw when it found that it would not do much to stay in JCPOA. In general, states do not evaluate the benefits and costs of remaining in an agreement notwithstanding other relations, but consider them collectively and in a holistic way. In other words, considering that there is only one agreement between two states, if its costs outweigh its benefit, or if it doesn't produce considerable benefits, they may be persuaded to abrogate the agreement. In other words, under circumstances where trade and economic relations between the parties are deep and diverse, they will enforce agreements that appear to be less beneficial to them, in order to prevent the violation of agreements that are of interest. The breach of JCPOA was not costly to the United States, because no American company or national have had trade and investment in Iran, the American embassy in Iran is dysfunctional, nor is there any other connection that makes the United States concerned.

All these dynamics may mean that Trump is pursuing the regime change project in Iran. If we contemplate the 12 preconditions which Mike Pompeo elaborated Iran should accede to, it can be easily concluded that Trump has been seeking that

project. But there are many shreds of evidence underlining that although he may prefer regime change, he is in practice looking at fundamental behavior change. He became president with anti-war promises and condemnation of the US military interventions in the Middle East (Iraq, Libya, Syria, etc.). Since regime change requires massive money and produces fatalities, he doesn't like to defame himself at home. He repeatedly pointed out that the US spent \$7 trillion in the Middle East wars, killing and wounding thousands of people without any achievement. Trump's mantra was "America First." He said, "We will stop racing to topple foreign regimes that we know nothing about, that we shouldn't be involved with." In October 2015, he told *The Guardian*, "We're nation-building. We can't do it. We have to build our own nation. We're nation-building, trying to tell people who have [had] dictators or worse for centuries how to run their own countries. Assad is bad. Maybe these people could be worse" (*The Guardian*, 2016). Speaking at a news conference with the visiting Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, Trump said he had "no preconditions" for a meeting with the Iranians, adding, "I would certainly meet with Iran if they wanted to meet" (*Aljazeera*, 2018).

Therefore, it is hard to conclude that he is seeking regime change in Iran, even though people around him prefer such an option. After firing John Bolton as National Security Advisor, Trump tweeted: "[He] gets fired because frankly, if I listened to him, we would be in World War Six by now" (*Axios*, 2020). Or, after Iran's missile attack at the Ain al-Assad airbase, Trump tried to downplay the attack and expressed that Iran appears "to be standing down" after and that "the American people should be extremely grateful and happy no Americans were harmed." (*NPR*, Jan. 8, 2020) All these stances mean that war against Iran is not his top priority.

### **III. Iran's Perception of Trump Policies**

The content of interviews and statements of President Trump and

other officials of his administration, especially the 12 conditions listed by Mike Pompeo during a speech at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, DC, on May 21, 2018, indicate that the Trump administration's demands for Iran boil down to four main themes:

1. Iran behaves like a normal state domestically and internationally and stops its "malign activities";
2. Iran dismantles its nuclear enrichment and sophisticated missiles program;
3. Iran stops sponsoring militia groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, Ansar Allah (the Houthi movement), Al-Hashd al-Shaabi and others;
4. Iran stops threatening Israel and the US allies such as Saudi Arabia.

If we compare these demands with what ex-President Bill Clinton had put forth as his Iran containment policy (1995), we will find out that there is no much difference. Just the wording has changed a little, and the umbrella of the US allies has been extended to states such as Saudi Arabia and does not merely include Israel. The list of militia groups has expanded as well and includes Yemeni Ansar Allah and Iraqi Al-Hashd al-Shaabi.

From the perspective of Iranian Ayatollahs, the US policy against Iran has not changed since Jimmy Carter's time in office in 1979. In 1984, the U.S. State Department identified Iran as a 'state sponsor of terrorism,' and Mike Pompeo termed it "the world's foremost state sponsor of terrorism." The policy of Donald Trump aligns with that of his predecessors and is an extension of the longstanding US animus against Iran. In Iranian leaders' perception, the deep roots of Iran-US antagonism after the 1979 Revolution and in the first Trump administration can be reduced to three denials: denial of Iran's identity, denial of Iran's independence, and denial of the Muslim people's self-determination. Ayatollah Khamenei has set out the current Iranian strategy in response to Trump's 'maximum pressure' as "neither war nor negotiations" ([english.khamenei.ir/](http://english.khamenei.ir/) May 14, 2019). He



has always cast doubt on the effectiveness of any negotiations with the United States with unequal political conditions. Given the overwhelming veto power of the ‘Supreme Leader’ and the military-political influence of the Revolutionary Guards in Iran’s political structure, it looks no voice inside Iran supports negotiations with the Trump administration, especially after the assassination of Major Major Qasem Soleimani.

The reformists and political wings such as the so-called Green Movement in Iran have signaled that not everybody in Iran views the United States in terms of a good versus evil duality. But the Iranian moderates who have already shown positive signals to the West, especially under Hassan Rouhani era, have been politically discredited after Trump’s adoption of the ‘maximum pressure policy.’ “Power at the moment is invested in the Supreme Leader and with the Revolutionary Guard and these are really the two axes that operate,” said Ali Ansari, a professor of Iranian history at the University of St Andrews (ABC News, 2020). After the assassination of Major Qasem Soleimani , IIRCG has been representing itself as a forerunner of Iranian nationalism, defending the aspirations of an ancient and proud people (The Conversation, 2020). Now, there is consensus among different political factions inside Iran that the United States is false-hearted, its demands are equivalent to the full capitulation of Iran, it lies by saying that humanitarian transactions are exempt from the sanctions, it doesn’t believe in face-saving negotiations and there is no guarantee that likely agreements by the future US administrations will be adhered to. “We know what we are doing. When the US says, ‘let us negotiate’, it does not mean, ‘let us find a fair solution’. No, it means ‘let us sit at the negotiating table and then you accept whatever we say.’ This is what they mean by negotiations... A negotiation in which we have to accept this and that terms is meaningless” Khamenei said ([english.khamenei.ir/](http://english.khamenei.ir/) Sep. 17, 2019).

In Iranian leaders’ perspective, behaving like a normal state means transforming the identity of Iran as an Islamic system that

has challenged the US hegemony in the region. Being a normal state means that Iran ceases being a 'rogue state,' a term that Bill Clinton had coined, and stops opposing the American interests in the Middle East. Elsewhere, Henry Kissinger had once said, "[Iran must] decide whether it is a country or a cause" (Benjamin and Simon, 2019). The rulers in Iran maintain that one of the most important reasons behind the hostility between Iran and the United States is the formation of a theocratic system, or a so-called 'religious democracy' in Iran, the most prominent characteristic of which is opposition to the US order, arrogance, and domination in the Middle East. In some of his writings, the American scholar Daniel Pipes notes that political Islam is inherently opposed to the West. He writes, "Americans know an opponent when they see him," and, "like Communism during the Cold War, Islam is a threat to the West" (Quoted in Gerges, 1999: 24). Iranian leaders have held this belief, so the phenomenon of the Islamic Revolution of Iran is no longer only a conventional domestic issue; it is the wave that this revolution has created, laying the foundation for Islamic movements across the Middle East and North Africa. That is why Iran's Supreme Leader views anti-US ideology as the main reason for Washington's hostility to Iran: "The position of the Islamic Revolution is the offensive; the offensive against the oppressive and oppressive system [the US] that is rife in today's world politics. It Invades the US domination system" (Resalat Daily, 2009). In his opinion, it makes no difference who is in the White House. The complicated architecture of the longstanding sanctions against Iran since 1979 provides that regardless of who is in the White House - whether Republican or Democrat, an increasing trend of pressure against Iran has been institutionalized as an indispensable component of the US foreign policy. Therefore, the rotation of politicians in the White House only changes the tone of the rhetoric, not the general anti-Iran policy of the United States. "There is the same wolfish quality, the same international dictatorship, the same malevolence, and the same desire for having no limits – it has no limits and

borders. The US is the same US. Of course, it has weakened today,” Khamenei said ([english.khamenei.ir/](http://english.khamenei.ir/) Sep. 17, 2019). Therefore, anti-Americanism has become part of the political identity of Iran in the post-revolution era. “Enmity with the United States is the main pillar of the ideology of Islamic Iran” Sadegh Zibakalam, a professor of political science at the University of Tehran tweeted (@sadeghZibakalam, 2018).

Importantly, Iranian leaders believe the idea which has guided the US foreign policy for the past two hundred years is domination and empire-building. There are no public speeches or statements in which Ayatollah Khamenei does not call the United States ‘world arrogance’ or ‘enemy,’ which has been seeking to dominate Iran, the Middle East, and even the world. In a content analysis of Ayatollah Khamenei’s 51 speeches and messages in March 2019 to March 2020, it is found that he used 131 thousand words in which he applied 451 times the word “enemy” hinting to the US and 424 times the word “US” and its derivatives. Moreover, he applied adjectives such as “malice”, “evil” and “satan” for the US performance against Iran (Radio Farda, 2020). This idea has been elaborated by W. E. Williams, author of ‘The Empire as a Way of Life,’ and is an essential feature of the US culture, reflecting not only the aspirations of GPO strategists, but the aspirations of the majority of the US politicians. He writes, “Empire had been inherent in American history from the outset” (Quoted in Finzsch, Wellenreuther, 2002:129 and 137). Iranian rulers concur with Noam Chomsky who believes the socio-economic elites who exert control upon the United States have pursued an ‘Imperial Grand Strategy’ since the end of World War II to maintain global hegemony through military, political, and economic means. Chomsky is of the opinion that the end goal of this strategy is to deter any challenge to the “power, position, and prestige of the United States.” This dominance-seeking attitude of the United States has been so deeply institutionalized that it has become the basis for its behavior at all domestic, national, and international levels. Contrary to Marxism’s determinism,

Chomsky maintains that America's dominance-seeking attitude has been chosen deliberately (Chomsky, 2007:11-51).

Iranian leaders believe the United States Empire seeks to assert its political, cultural, and economic dominance over the entire world in the post-Cold War era, especially the Middle East. So, a country that wishes to resist this domination would face a backlash by the United States. Iranian leaders believe they stand up against this empire and hold onto their independence by fighting tooth and claw and thereby pay heavy costs.

In Ayatollah Khamenei's opinion, the United States has struggled to keep up its technological, military, and monetary superiority to maintain its global dominance. He says it tries to give a humanitarian, altruistic impression to facilitate its dominance. He uses the metaphor of 'iron hand with velvet glove': "The so-called 'gentlemen' around the negotiating table are the same terrorists of the Baghdad airport [hinting at the assassination of Qassem Soleimani]. They are the same. The iron hand emerged from the velvet glove and revealed itself" (english.khamenei.ir/ Jan. 17, 2020). He believes, "it is in the nature of global imperialism to show enmity towards a system such as the Islamic Republic. Their interests are 180 degrees different from each other. Global imperialism is about treachery, waging wars, creating and organizing terrorist groups, suppressing freedom-seeking groups, and exerting pressure over the oppressed—such as the oppressed people of Palestine and countries like Palestine. This is in the nature of global imperialism" (english.khamenei.ir/ June 3, 2016). To undermine the legitimacy of the competing powers, the United States labels all actors such as Iran who behave outside the framework of the US norm and interests as rogue states, implementing punitive measures against them whenever possible. In line with this idea, Chomsky says, "successful defiance can inspire others to pursue the same course. The 'virus' can 'spread contagion', as Kissinger put it when laboring to overthrow Salvador Allende in Chile. The need to destroy such viruses and inoculate victims against contagion—

commonly by imposing harsh dictatorships—is a leading principle of world affairs” (Chomsky, 2019).

As perceived by the Iranian leaders, the influence of the Islamic Revolution on Islamic movements in the Middle East and the emergence of the Revolution as a model for confronting US policies represent another major reason for hostility toward Iran by the United States. “We do not distinguish between Gaza, Palestine, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Bahrain, and Yemen. Oppression against nations should be condemned everywhere. We approve of national movements that shout Islamic slogans and seek freedom,” Khamenei said ([english.khamenei.ir/](http://english.khamenei.ir/) March 21, 2011).

In Iran, it is believed that Islamic movements across the Middle East including the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Lebanon, Bahrain, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and so on mainly stem from their domestic circumstances, not Iran. Underdevelopment, dictatorship, neo-colonialism, and occupation are the main variables explaining the revival of Islamism in the region. Iran has only become the scapegoat of despots, colonizers, and occupiers (Hedges, 2019). But the ideology of the Islamic Revolution fulfills an auxiliary and facilitating role, because it contradicts the interests of Israel and conservative governments such as Saudi Arabia. It was after the Iranian revolution that the legitimacy and political stability of conservative Arab states such as Saudi Arabia was further undermined. Powerful anti-Israeli movements have emerged in the region as well as inside Palestine after 1979, and Israel has faced an existential threat. It means that Muslim nations across the Middle East, especially in the occupied territories have been seeking self-determination. The Iranian regime considers it its religious duty to assist these movements. But the United States, through supporting Israel and despots in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, and other countries, has denied the basic rights of these people to self-determination. Tehran is of the view that there is now a coalition against Iran under the US leadership connecting three groups: First, the Saudi royal family and other Arab despots; second, the Israeli state, especially under Prime Minister

Benjamin Netanyahu, and third, the US politicians, national security bureaucrats and lobbyists from AIPAC and FDD whose job and financial interests conform to animosity against Iran and stoking Iranophobia. It is in the interest of these three groups that the Tehran-Washington relationships never improve. Iran's perception is that the Trump administration represents this coalition (Zamani and Niyakuei, 2019: 105-109).

Iranian leader maintains that independence is another important reason for the US' hostility toward Iran. As a country where the former Shah regime had been policing the United States' interests for many years, Iran now can take pride in its independence, which is unacceptable to the United States. In this regard, the Supreme Leader of Iran says, "the US has owned Iran for a long time, the revolution has taken it out; it does not want to stop [destroying it] until it again dominates Iran" (Khamenei.ir, Feb. 17, 2016). In supporting this claim, Noam Chomsky says, "I presume that the main reason is that Iran is just too independent and disobedient. Great powers do not tolerate that in what they take to be their domains" (Tehran Times, 2009). He goes on, "The (US) hatred of Iran is such a deep-seated part of modern American culture. To eradicate it is going to be very hard" (Financial Tribune, 2018). Iranian leaders maintain that the United Kingdom sanctions on Iran in 1953 over Iranian oil and the latest US maximum pressure sanctions share a common goal – to punish Iran for its independence. "Both of them (the sanctions 70 years ago and the new ones) are attempts to punish Iran for its independence," said Stephen Kinzer, the author of 'All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror.' Therefore, the authorities of Iran refer to demands such as the dismantlement of its uranium enrichment facilities, anytime and anywhere inspections, abandonment of its missiles programs, and changing its Middle East policy as evidence that the US cannot tolerate an independent Iran. In other words, the US wants a weakened and tamed Iran, not independent and powerful. Tehran believes the negotiating table with the United States is not a trade-

off venue, it is a crucible for capitulation. “The other side [US] considers Iran’s accepting and sitting at the negotiating table as bringing the Islamic Republic to its knees. It wants to say that they have finally managed to bring Iran to its knees with severe sanctions until it agreed to sit at the negotiating table with them” Khamenei said (english.khamenei.ir/ Nov. 3, 2019). Iran’s Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif interprets Trump’s signals to negotiation as Iran’s submission: “the U.S. wants regime change, Israel seeks war. Secretary Pompeo puts 12 conditions for negotiations with Iran which means surrender, and I think he is dreaming” (The Iran Primer, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

After the presidency of Hassan Rouhani in 2013, it was expected that tensions between Iran and the United States would be toned down. However, despite the positive expectations, it appears that there is a deep mistrust among leaders, elites, and even groups of people in the US-Iran relations. In the present paper, from the US perspective, six reasons including Donald Trump’s obsession with Barack Obama’s legacy, wrong belief in the fruitfulness of maximum pressure campaign, the so-called deficiencies in JCPOA, perceived threats of Iran’s regional policy, the so-called threats of Iran’s missiles programs, and cost-effective calculations tempted the US president to withdraw from an international multilateral agreement which was endorsed by the UNSC Resolution 2231. To be sure, the pressure groups and think tanks such as AIPAC, FDD, and states such as Israeli regime and Saudi Arabia, as well as ultra-conservatives both in Iran and the United States, have constantly influenced rapprochement in the relations between the two countries negatively. The conflict is sometimes so acute that it has nearly resulted in military confrontations between the two sides, particularly after the assassination of Major Qasem Soleimani .

The prolongation of the conflict is partly due to the longevity of the hostility, nature of the Islamic system in Iran,

misperceptions, as well as the developments that have molded the history of the two countries. As it was argued, the Trump administration might prefer a new nuclear deal, but Iranian authorities perceived it as regime change. So long as Iran perceives the US gesture on negotiation as a precursor to capitulation, degradation, and regime change, and the impasse in Iran-US relations will continue. So a negative and adversary image has been developed of the US by Iranian leaders which look unshakable by changing US presidents. On the other hand, Trump administration often has asked Iran to the negotiation table, but it ignores the splendid Iranian pride, the principles of respect, equality, and fair win-win solutions. This attitude makes Iran consolidate its negative image of the US government and be reluctant to negotiate. As long as Iran perceives the Washington gestures for negotiations as humiliating, arrogant and aimed at capitulation by Tehran, and Washington conforms to the agenda of Israel and Saudi Arabia in framing its Iran policy, it is unlikely that any fundamental improvement will happen in the two state's relations in the near future.



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