

# United States-Iran Relations: The Trump Impact

Emirhan KAYA<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract



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In spite of the ongoing enmity between the United States (U.S.) and Iran, the signing of the 2015 nuclear deal during the Presidency of Barack Obama was a turning point that had a potential to repair the bilateral relations. On the other hand, President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from the deal in 2018 dashed hopes of many for the stabilization of bilateral relations as well as the containment of the nuclear threat. Recently, President Joe Biden's potential reengagement with Iran is being questioned, even though the use force might still be an attractive choice. In that context, the article will shed light on the U.S.-Iran relations during the Presidencies of Obama, Trump and Biden respectively. Thus, the fluctuation in recent bilateral relations will be understood from a comparative perspective. It is argued that the anti-Iran strategy of Trump pushed the bilateral relations into a stalemate and his foreign policy legacy prevailed over the efforts to reconcile with Iran by both Obama and Biden administrations.

*Keywords:* The United States of America, Iran, foreign policy, sanctions, nuclear deal.

<sup>1</sup> Res. Asst. Dr., Trakya University Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of International Relations, emirhankaya@trakya.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0001-9034-6598

# Amerika Birleşik Devletleri-İran İlişkileri: Trump Etkisi

Emirhan KAYA<sup>2</sup>

## Öz

Amerika Birleşik Devletleri (ABD) ile İran arasında süregelen düşmanlığa rağmen, 2015 yılında Barack Obama'nın başkanlığı döneminde imzalanan nükleer anlaşma, ikili ilişkileri onarma potansiyeli taşıyan bir dönüm noktası olmuştur. Öte yandan, Başkan Donald Trump'ın 2018'de anlaşmadan çekilme kararı alması, pek çok kişinin ikili ilişkilerin istikrara kavuşması ve nükleer tehdidin kontrol altına alınması konusundaki umutlarını yıkmıştır. Son zamanlarda, güç kullanma hâlâ çekici bir seçenek olsa da Başkan Joe Biden'ın İran ile yeniden angajmana girme olasılığı sorgulanmaktadır. Bu bağlamda makale, sırasıyla Obama, Trump ve Biden'ın başkanlıkları sırasındaki ABD-İran ilişkilerine ışık tutacaktır. Böylece, son dönemde ikili ilişkilerdeki dalgalanma karşılaştırmalı bir bakış açısıyla anlaşılacaktır. Trump'ın İran karşıtı stratejisinin ikili ilişkileri çıkmaza soktuğu ve dış politika mirasının, Obama ve Biden yönetimlerinin İran ile uzlaşma çabalarının önüne geçtiği ileri sürülmektedir.

*Anahtar sözcükler:* Amerika Birleşik Devletleri, İran, dış politika, yaptırımlar, nükleer anlaşma.



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<sup>2</sup> Arş. Gör. Dr., Trakya Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi, Uluslararası İlişkiler Bölümü, emirhankaya@trakya.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0001-9034-6598

## Introduction

Although Iran was a close ally and a client state of the U.S. in the post-World War II period, the U.S.-Iran status quo established after the 1979 revolution was characterized by a hostile relationship stemmed mainly from conflicting ideologies and strategic calculations. It did not change until the second term of the Barack Obama presidency and the election of Hassan Rouhani as Iranian president. The bilateral relations then witnessed a significant turn when these leaders decided to take mutual steps to engage in diplomacy for the resolution of the nuclear dispute, the core problem of U.S.-Iran relations. High-level nuclear talks resulted in the signing of the 2015 nuclear deal in spite of the objections raised by Iranian hardliners and neo-conservative lobbies in the U.S. For a while, it had been debated whether the deal would be expanded into other issues, however, the bilateral relations deteriorated during the Donald Trump era as a result of the U.S. decision to unilaterally withdraw from the deal. More recently, the U.S.-Iran tensions peaked under Trump when Qasem Soleimani, a senior Iranian general, was killed in January 2020. Currently, the U.S. aims to make Iran obey the nuclear limits on enriched uranium and centrifuges, while Iran seeks to lift the economic sanctions levied by the Trump administration. Although the Joe Biden administration took a more cooperative stance towards Iran, he has not so far been able to lead to a significant turn in the U.S.-Iran relations yet.

The article aims to identify elements of continuity and change in the U.S. foreign policy toward Iran from 2009 to present, covering the presidencies of Obama, Trump and Biden respectively. Thus, the fluctuation in recent bilateral relations will be understood from a comparative perspective. In that regard, it is mainly argued that the foreign policy legacy of Trump, whose decision to withdraw from the deal paralyzed the bilateral relations, prevailed over the efforts to reconcile with Iran by both Obama and Biden administrations. In other words, Trump's bold choice negated the U.S. attempts to normalize bilateral relations during both previous and subsequent periods. Furthermore, the article also takes into account of the stance of the American Congress that has particularly affected U.S. sanctions policy against Iran. In that context, this article has five main parts. The first two parts examine the historical background of U.S.-Iran relations including the emergence of the nuclear crisis in early 2000s. The remaining parts, in an understanding based on chronological order rather than thematic integrity, will cover the bilateral relations during the terms of the three American presidents respectively.

## Historical Background of Bilateral Relations

Although the diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Iran dates back to 1883, the U.S. influence in Iran had been limited until the end of the Second World War. While Mohammad Reza Shah, who ruled Iran between 1942 and 1979, was in need of American assistance against the Soviet Union in the aftermath of the Second World War, Iran and Israel were both in opposition to the pan-Arabism movement that emerged after the new Arab states gained independence. This rapprochement created the right conditions for the U.S. to intervene in Iran's internal affairs. Ultimately, President Dwight D. Eisenhower backed the ouster of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 due to his attempt to nationalize the

Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). Following the 1953 coup, Iran, as a U.S. ally, was provided economic and military aid during the 1950s and 1960s. Moreover, the U.S. firms were granted considerable oil concessions during that period (Ryan, 2018, p. 98-99).

By the end of the 1960s, Iran had been the largest single arms customer of the U.S., and eventually the Richard Nixon presidency witnessed Iran's transformation "from a client state to a major American partner". In 1972, Nixon gave Iran a "blank cheque" that allowed the Shah to purchase any weapon systems in any quantity (McGlinchey, 2014, p. 77-78). Meanwhile, the British announcement of withdrawal from east of Suez in January 1968 had led to the American replacement of British power and the disclosure of Iranian intention to fill the power vacuum, however, the Nixon doctrine defined the limits of American involvement in the Middle East (Brannon, 1994, p. 4). Furthermore, Henry Kissinger, the chief foreign policy advisor of President Nixon, formulated the "twin pillar" policy of strengthening Iran and Saudi Arabia at the same time in order to maintain a balance of power, yet Saudi Arabia lacked a significant military capacity while Iran was made the policeman of the Gulf (Guzansky, 2015, p. 10).

Although the regional security architecture established by the U.S. benefited from the tightening of ties with Iran, on the other hand, improvement in U.S.-Iran relations further alienated the Shah from the Iranian people. University students who had been under the repression of SAVAK, the secret police, protested the visit of Nixon in 1972. It was also underlined that American diplomats were unaware of the rise of political Islam among Iranians at the time (Ryan, 2018, p. 102). Eventually, the occupation of the U.S. embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979, by the Islamist Iranian students and the 444-day capture of 52 Americans led to a freeze in relations. It has been considered as a pivotal event that still affects the perception of Iran in the U.S. (Amies, 2018, p. 59). Subsequently, Iran was blamed for the two deadly attacks within six months in Beirut in 1983. The first incident was the bombing of the U.S. embassy in April killing 63 people including 17 Americans, and the second was the attack on U.S. and French peacekeepers in October 1983 killing 241 U.S. servicemen (O'Hern, 2012, p. 51-57). It should also be noted that the U.S. pursued an official policy of neutrality during the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988, yet the direction of American aid shifted in favor of Iraq, notably after Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 (Hunter, 2010, p. 40).

The rivalry between the U.S. and Iran continued even after the Cold War ended. While the need of the U.S. for Iran as a buffer against the Soviet Union was reduced in the post-Cold War era, both countries had identified the history of bilateral relations with traumatic events (Hunter, 2010, p. 36-37). In that context, the attempts of Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) to improve the bilateral relations failed, while U.S.-Israel relations grew under the George W. Bush administration. Furthermore, following the First Gulf War that ended the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, it remained as the only potential regional military threat to Israel. Accordingly, Iran would place more importance on U.S.-Israel relations since it became the "new arch-enemy" for Israel (Ryan, 2018, p. 112). Furthermore, the George H. W. Bush administration took account of the fact that a crippled

Iraq would empower Iran and therefore the Operation Desert Storm did not aim to overthrow the Saddam Hussein regime (Simon, 2018, p. 10).

Iran was also concerned that it was tried to be kept out of the post-Cold War regional order mainly because of its formal opposition to the Madrid peace process between Israel and Arab states. Iran's sense of isolation grew when many GCC countries started to communicate and trade directly with Israel (Ehteshami, 2002, p. 302). Khatami's aim to establish a dialogue of civilizations with the West was therefore attributed to Iran's concern about the probable re-emergence of Egypt-Saudi Arabia-Syria alliance (Ehteshami, 2007, p. 31-32). Moreover, in the mid-1990s, Iran under U.S. extraterritorial sanctions for the first time came. Under *the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act* (ILSA) of 1996, the President had the authority to impose secondary sanctions on third parties investing in the energy industries of Iran and Libya. However, the U.S. Presidents, using waiver authority in order not to adversely affect the relations with European partners, did not apply any sanctions under ILSA until it was superseded by *the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act* (CISADA) of 2010 (O'Sullivan, 2010, p. 14).

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Iran was described by President George W. Bush as part of the "axis of evil" together with Iraq and North Korea. Iran had been accordingly described as a state sponsoring terrorism and pursuing nuclear weapons. On the other hand, the secret midlevel talks held between the U.S. and Iranian officials from 2001 to May 2003 were limited to cooperation on the stabilization of Afghanistan and opposition to al-Qaeda (Pressman, 2009, p. 166). The Presidency of Mahmoud Ahmedinejad between 2005 and 2013 further hampered the opportunities for cooperation (Fawcett and Payne, 2022, p. 6). Consequently, the hostility reached such a level that U.S. obsession with Tehran did not match the material threat posed by Iran. However, they began to consider each other mutually a regional threat since they had competitive visions of regional order (Fawcett & Payne, 2022, p. 2). It should also be noted that as a result of the reflection of this perception in Gallup polls, Iran emerged as the greatest enemy of the U.S. in all five public opinion polls conducted between 2006 and 2012 (Gallup 2018).

### **The Emergence of Nuclear Crisis**

Although Iran agreed with the U.S. on nuclear cooperation under the Atoms for Peace program in 1957 and thus first established its nuclear program, the U.S. opposed Iran's quest for a plutonium reprocessing capability in the mid-1970s. Ayatollah Khomeini, who suspended Iran's nuclear program after the Islamic revolution, decided to restart it in the mid-1980s due to the devastating effects of the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988, and Iran then cooperated on the nuclear field with China and Russia in the 1990s (Albright & Stricker, 2015, p. 3-5). The early 2000s witnessed the emergence of the Iranian nuclear crisis when the existence of the Natanz centrifuge plant and Arak heavy water production plant was revealed in 2002 and these facilities were then subjected to IAEA inspections (Albright & Stricker, 2015, p. 2). Accordingly, Iran's exposed nuclear ambitions became an international security concern and resulted in punitive international sanctions in a short period of time. In 2003, the three major EU countries (France, Germany and the United Kingdom) started negotiations with Iran to keep its nuclear program within civilian use boundaries. China,

Russia, and the U.S. joined the talks in 2006 and Iran's refusal to stop its uranium enrichment activities during these negotiations led to international sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council (Udum, 2018, p. 215).

The IAEA reports on Iran's nuclear program in 2006 led the UNSC to adopt Resolution 1737 on 23 December 2006 noting that Iran had not complied with Resolution 1696 of July 2006. The measures taken by the UNSC included the ban on trade of nuclear proliferation-sensitive items and the freezing of assets of persons and entities providing support for Iran's proliferation sensitive nuclear activities (UNSC 2006). It was the first time when the Iranian nuclear file was brought to the attention of the UNSC by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reporting that there was no confidence on the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear program. It also started the P5+1 process involving the UNSC permanent members and Germany (Rajiv, 2016, p. 49).

In fact, Iran voluntarily ceased enriching uranium between 2003 and 2005; however, the Bush administration adopted a maximalist stance by refusing Iran's right to uranium enrichment under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) (Mousavian & Toossi, 2017, p. 70). Moreover, in August 2005, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamanei issued a "unilateral and unconditional" *fatwa* (religious decree) against weapons of mass destruction, notably nuclear weapons, which confirmed Iran's commitment to nuclear non-proliferation (Shahabi Sirjani, 2013, p. 59). In that context, it was also reminded that Khomeini refused to permit Iranian military officials to use chemical weapons against Iraq when Iraqi chemical attacks killed tens of thousands of Iranians during the Iran-Iraq of 1980-1988 (Mousavian, 2013, p. 148). Khamanei, in his speech at the 16<sup>th</sup> Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit to more than 120 heads of state and officials, reiterated that the use of nuclear weapons is "a great and unforgivable sin" and Iran is committed to the idea of "a Middle East free of nuclear weapons". He also stressed that Iran had the right to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes (Mousavian & Kiyaei, 2020, p. 52). On the other hand, it was argued that the authority of this *fatwa* was controversial since the religious concept and practice of *taqiyya* permitted Shia leaders to conceal their faith under threat (Mousavian, 2013, p. 150).

From the viewpoint of domestic U.S. politics, it was underlined that the Congress was active between 2005 and 2015 when concerns in the U.S. about Iran's nuclear program grew. In 2007, the House approved a bill under which the President would no longer waive the sanctions on foreign companies investing in Iran's energy sector. Although G. W. Bush opposed such legislation, he intensified diplomatic pressure on foreign governments in order to curb their investments in Iran's energy sector. Furthermore, the U.S. designated the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist group in 2007 (Tama, 2020, p. 405-406).

### **Obama and Nuclear Engagement with Iran**

The nuclear program of Iran was given a high priority on the agenda of the Obama administration given that Iran was getting closer to producing a nuclear weapon. It was even alleged that the year 2008 was a turning point since Iran developed the technical know-how

to construct and run centrifuges to enrich uranium “to levels required for the core of a nuclear bomb” (Allison, 2015). Accordingly, a possible Iran-Israel nuclear contest or a regional nuclear arms race between Iran and Saudi Arabia were considered as worrying scenarios for the U.S. because it may not have the ability to defend its regional partners against a nuclear-armed Iran (Edelman et al., 2011, p. 67). In that context, although President Obama, coming into office in January 2009, initially attempted to reset relations with Iran and engage in diplomacy, the new U.S. administration then quickly decided to implement restrictive economic sanctions through the UNSC. At that point, the Congress functioned as a “useful bad cop” for the Obama administration when it approved the CISADA built upon UNSC Resolution 1929 in June 2010 (Tama, 2020, p. 407).

The CISADA expanded the “sanctionable energy-related activities” determined by the ILSA of 1996 and added new types of sanctions to put more pressure on Iran to engage in diplomatic talks. The CISADA mainly targeted Iran’s development of its petroleum resources, production and importation of refined petroleum products (U.S. Department of State 2011). Obama implemented such sanctions due to political pressures, particularly from pro-Israel groups even though he had opt-out authority. It was also reminded that Congressional pressures for tougher sanctions pushed the Iranians into negotiations (Tama, 2020, p. 408-409). However, the initial agreement between the nuclear negotiators, Saeed Jalili and William Burns, in October 2009 had not reached any breakthrough since it was met with opposition in both countries (Mousavian & Toossi, 2017, p. 67). Furthermore, the U.S. State Department rejected the Tehran Declaration of May 2010 signed by Iran, Turkey and Brazil in which Iran agreed to deliver the 1200 kg of uranium to Turkey, where it would be used to make fuel rods before being sent back to Iran for the research reactor (Cronberg 2017, p. 249).

While the U.S. has been imposing several unilateral sanctions on Iran since 1979, the multilateral sanctions that were levied by the UNSC and the European Union (EU) dated back to 2006. In this process, “the most impactful sanctions” began to be imposed in 2010 (Zaccara & Haghirian, 2020, p. 59). In that context, the EU also took steps to isolate Iran financially in early 2010s. Thus, Iran’s capacity to conduct financial transactions was limited. As a critical step by the EU, Iranian banks were barred from the network of Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) on March 15, 2012. Furthermore, top oil customers of Iran such as Japan, South Korea, and India were put under pressure by the U.S. to reduce their imports (Rezaei, 2019, p. 24-25).

Meanwhile, popular protests against the results of June 2009 presidential elections led to Iranian accusations that the U.S. and some of its European allies intended to trigger a color revolution in Iran (Hunter, 2010, p. 34). Moreover, Obama did not hesitate to declare that military option was on the table against Iran. At that point, the U.S. decision makers were concerned that Israel might attack Iran if the U.S. had not signaled that it was obviously unwilling to use force against Iran. Besides, the U.S. allies in the Gulf were anxious about Iran’s efforts to produce nuclear bomb (Mintz & Wayne, 2016, p. 113-118). For that reason, the Obama administration intended to achieve a balance of deterrence toward Iran by bolstering the armies of the Gulf states (Guzansky, 2015, p. 13). On the other hand, it was underlined that since presidents (in the U.S.) have freedom of maneuver at the outset of a

second term, they prefer national interest to political survival. Yet congressional pressure might limit their ability to freely act. In case of Obama, his re-election in November 2012 eased the path for a non-zero enrichment deal (Fawcett & Payne, 2022, p. 15).

The shift in Obama's stance against Iran became apparent as the nuclear negotiations progressed during his second term. In that context, the secret Oman talks in which the two sides had the opportunity to directly negotiate in March 2013 broke the deadlock and prepared the ground for the formal P5+1 negotiation (Cronberg, 2017, p. 254). Besides, the negative effects of the sanctions on the Iranian economy forced a change in government and the lifting of the sanctions gained priority in the foreign policy of Iran. Hassan Rouhani, a former chief Iranian negotiator who had promised to remove the nuclear sanctions imposed on Iran during his campaign, was elected as president in June 2013 elections. He was aware of the fact that the sanctions had begun to hurt Iran's economy. As a remarkable indication of the declining Iranian economy, its oil revenues decreased 65% between 2011 and 2013 (Rajiv, 2016, p. 51). Rouhani's election was a turning point for Iran-U.S. relations mainly because his administration revitalized the nuclear negotiations. As a result, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that "marked the highest standards on nuclear transparency and non-proliferation ever negotiated" was signed in July 2015 (Mousavian & Toossi, 2017, p. 67) and annexed to UNSC resolution 2231 adopted unanimously on 20 July 2015 (UNSC 2015).

The IAEA report on December 2, 2015, concluded that although Iran conducted some activities "related to the development a nuclear explosive device" after 2003, there was no reliable signs of Iran's involvement on such kind of activities after 2009 (IAEA, 2015, p. 14). In that context, the JCPOA indicated Iran's desire for global engagement and made the international community think that the decades of animosity ended. Furthermore, it was a diplomatic success for Iran since the U.S. accepted Iran's right to enrich uranium. On the other hand, Iran agreed to limit the growth and enhance the transparency of its nuclear program, as well as to regulate its nuclear-related imports through a UN mandated procurement channel (Albright & Stricker, 2015, p. 8). Besides, among the strengths of the deal was that it had a "snapback function" that made it possible to re-impose the sanctions in case of significant violations by Iran. It was also stressed that the U.S. was prepared to re-impose unilateral sanctions against "small and mid-sized Iranian violations" (Satloff et al., 2015).

In light of the positive measures included in the JCPOA, the Obama administration contented that the deal that had "the full backing of the international community" cut off any route that Iran may take to a nuclear weapon (Harris, 2015). On the other hand, Israel that had considered the UNSC resolutions as inefficient since Iran continued to advance its nuclear program, was also against the diplomatic strategy pursued by the P5+1 and had doubts about the effectiveness of the agreement (Rajiv, 2016, p. 48-50). The objection of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Israel to the nuclear deal led to an open revolt against U.S. policies by its main allies in the Middle East for the first time since its emergence as a major power in the region (Kenner, 2013). The Republicans and some Democratic hawks that had been critical of a possible deal during the negotiations argued that the JCPOA would not achieve the original



purpose of ending Iran's nuclear program. However, they had limited options for blocking the deal since more than a two-thirds majority in both houses of the Congress was needed to overcome a probable presidential veto (Lewis, Siddiqui & Jacobs, 2015). In the end, the Congress was given the power to review the deal under the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act (INARA), known as the Corker-Cardin law in May 2015. Thus, the Congress would have 60 days to review the deal and then the President was required to report to Congress every 90 days about whether Iran was in compliance with the agreement (Lantis, 2019, p. 481-482).

Although both sides were not fully satisfied with the agreement, they believed that it was a necessary step to reduce the tensions in bilateral relations. In that context, an agreement on the exchange of prisoners was another step forward. On January 13, 2016, U.S. Navy vessels and ten sailors were liberated as a result of diplomatic efforts (Zaccara & Haghirian, 2020, p. 66). Furthermore, the removal of nuclear-related sanctions led to some positive changes in Iran's economy and foreign trade. First of all, Iran that had not been able to export oil to Europe since the oil embargo started in 2012, resumed its oil exports after the lifting of oil sanctions. French energy company Total was the first Western firm to sign a deal with Iran (Entessar & Afrasiabi, 2020, p. 92) Following the "breaking of the petroleum dam", energy giants such as Royal Dutch Shell, the Italian ENI and British Petroleum sought to enter Iran's energy market as well (Dudlák, 2018, p. 472). In addition, the largest trade contract between Iran and the U.S. since the 1979 revolution was signed when Iran purchased 80 Boeing passenger planes for about 25\$ billion (Zaccara & Haghirian, 2020, p. 68).

### **The Trump Administration and Anti-Iranism**

Although the IAEA report released on February 24, 2017, concluded that Iran met its nuclear-related obligations under the JCPOA and the Secretary of State Rex Tillerson informed the House that Iran was compliant as of April 18, President Trump refused to keep confirming Iran's compliance on the grounds that the deal was not in U.S. national interests (Rezaei, 2019, p. 33-34). Accordingly, it was stressed that Trump would instead support an agreement "that banned Iranian nuclear enrichment at any level in perpetuity and permitted no-notice inspections anywhere in Iran" (Simon, 2018, p. 13). Furthermore, the nuclear deal had been criticized for ignoring the non-nuclear challenges of Iran to American interests. Even if it was implemented faithfully, the deal was claimed to strengthen Iran's strategic position, while on the other hand, to erode U.S. influence eventually (Singh, 2017). Therefore, besides Iran's compliance with the deal, non-nuclear issues were also included in Trump's criteria to certify the deal every 90 days (Udum, 2018, p. 222).

During the decision-making process, the Trump administration initially questioned whether there was something to replace it and carried out months of internal debates among its key decision makers (Davis, 2019, p. 157) In the end, in accordance with the "America first" vision held by the Trump administration, the U.S. withdrew from the JCPOA on May 8, 2018, despite the deal did not have a withdrawal clause and such a decision constituted a material breach. Furthermore, Tillerson stated that the deal was not viable due to Iran's support for the Assad regime and its ballistic missile-development program although these were unrelated issues to the JCPOA (Simon, 2018, p. 14-15). Then the Trump administration loaded Iran "with

additional doses of sanctions and international restrictions” in cooperation with its willing partners (Azad, 2022, p. 24). In August 2018, Trump described U.S. sanctions on Iran as “the most biting sanctions ever imposed” and stated that the U.S. would not carry on business with “anyone doing business with Iran” (Reuters, 2018). From a broader perspective, it was even argued that the Republican Trump administration maintained “purposefully and deliberately hostile relations with Iran” since its objective was to ensure American military presence and to consolidate American allies in the region (Czornik, 2022, p. 3). In short, Trump made it clear that he would seek to compel Iran to make more concessions and forge a more stringent agreement.

In the framework of Trump’s anti-Iran strategy, one of his primary goals was to establish regional and international coalitions. In the regional sense, Trump sought to curb Iranian influence in the Middle East, and it was significant to form an anti-Iran coalition with the support of Gulf Arab countries, Egypt and Jordan. However, the idea of a regional security alliance called the “Arab NATO” could not be materialized due to the rift between Qatar and the Saudi-axis as well as the tensions between Egypt and Saudi Arabia over the Syrian civil war (Nuruzzaman, 2020, p. 573). Furthermore, the U.S. encouragement of Arab countries to make peace with Israel and its downplaying approach toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were considered as part of Trump’s maximum pressure strategy (Tang & Pan, 2022, p. 192). On the other hand, the U.S. could not form an anti-Iran coalition with its European partners after Trump’s decision to end U.S. compliance with the JCPOA. The EU members, considering the JCPOA as a “story of pride”, initially aimed to protect their economic relations with Iran and to avoid U.S. extraterritorial sanctions. Although the EU’s resistance tactic and the subsequent diplomatic efforts to revive the deal failed, the JCPOA was still a legal framework and a platform through which Iran could be re-engaged in nuclear diplomacy (Alcaro, 2021). In short, it turned out that Trump’s maximum pressure strategy had no significant external support.

In addition to U.S. willingness to work with regional and international coalitions, the centerpiece of Trump’s Iran strategy was economic measures and accordingly, the U.S. waged an economic warfare on Iran. In that context, foreign business firms threatened with secondary sanctions were forced to choose between business ties with Iran or denial of access to U.S. financial markets. Particularly, the reduction of oil imports by India, Japan, South Korea and Turkey left Iran in the lurch (Nuruzzaman, 2020, p. 574). Although Iran is a significant oil exporter, the Trump administration alleged that the absence of Iranian oil in the world oil market would not have a significant impact on the supply side (Entessar & Afrasiabi, 2020, p. 96). On the other hand, eight countries including China, India and Japan were allowed to import oil from Iran due to temporary sanction waivers. The Trump administration, thus giving these main buyers time to find to alternatives, rejected the demands of those asking for the extension for their waivers and decided to end these exemptions in April 2019 (BBC News, 2019).

Trump’s decision to re-impose sanctions on Iran caused major foreign contracts to be cancelled. Foreign companies deprived of U.S. financing hesitated to invest in Iran and the banks refused to fund Iranian projects for fear of the threat by U.S. secondary sanctions. The

measures even impacted the Iranian import of food and medical products (Entessar & Afrasiabi, 2020, p. 93). As a result, the value of Iran's currency had already dropped by approximately 50% within the three months after the Trump administration pulled out of the nuclear agreement (Al Jazeera, 2018). Moreover, the inflation rate in Iran rose up from 8% in 2017 to 39,9% in 2019, while annual GDP growth rates of 2,8% in 2017, -2,3% in 2018 and -2,7% in 2019 were reached (World Bank). Renewed U.S. economic sanctions also triggered social unrest in Iran. At least 25 people died during the street protests of 2018 that stemmed from the escalating economic problems and then turned increasingly into political and anti-Ayatollah. Moreover, the domestic unrest continued to worry the Iranian government in 2019 and 2020 considerably (Lansford, 2021, p. 769).

In response to the economic warfare waged by the U.S., Iran developed "Resistance Economy" based on economic self-reliance and the reduction of its dependence on oil exports. Iran also used several evasion tactics to in order to export oil, opened an oil terminal in the Gulf of Oman to avoid using the Strait of Hormuz, sought for alternative markets particularly in the neighboring countries. (Tang & Pan, 2022, p. 195). In December 2018, Iranian President Rouhani threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz and to prevent any nation from exporting oil through it if the U.S. decided to block Iranian oil exports. Although the U.S. had the ability to re-open the strait in a short time if this threat materialized, it was admitted that oil prices would spike (CNBC, 2018). Furthermore, a new payment channel called INSTEX (The Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges) was established in June 2019 to continue trade with European countries. However, it was also stressed that EU companies were still hesitant to trade with Iran, and only trading in non-U.S.-sanctioned goods such as food, medicines and medical supplies was intended to be facilitated by INSTEX. Eventually, it was reported that EU-Iran trade fell by 71,5% in 2019 (Alcaro, 2021, p. 64).

Although the reimposition of economic sanctions inflicted serious damage on Iranian economy, Trump's maximum pressure strategy did not yield expected results as Iran continued to grow its centrifuge technology and missile program. Moreover, the U.S. withdrawal from the deal and the new sanctions changed the internal balance of power in Iran and weakened the position of reformers. Ebrahim Raisi, Iranian President coming into office in August 2021, even alleged that external threats helped Iranian society become more cohesive (Tang & Pan, 2022, p. 192-193). In September 2020, the UN envoys of Britain, France and Germany declared that they were still committed to preserve the nuclear deal and implement the 2015 UNSC resolution although the U.S., no longer a party to the nuclear deal, supported the re-imposition of the measures against Iran (Nichols, 2020).

The growing tensions in bilateral relations during Trump's reign and Tehran's efforts to counter the maximum pressure campaign revealed that Iran did not back down on its demands. Following a terrorist attack on an Iranian military parade, killing at least 25 people in the southwestern Iranian city of Ahvaz on September 22, 2018, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif blamed "regional terror sponsors and their U.S. masters" (BBC News, 2018). A week after that incident, on September 29, the State Department announced that the U.S. consulate in Basra, Iraq, would be closed due to security risks from Iran and Iran-backed Shiite militia groups. The U.S. officials, in that context, underscored that the U.S. was not

related to the terrorist attack in Ahvaz (Kesling and Gordon, 2018). Later on, in June 2019, Iranian forces shot down an American unmanned surveillance aircraft operating in international space. The aircraft was on a reconnaissance mission in the Gulf of Oman since Iran carried out oil tanker attacks a week before to shut down the Strait of Hormuz (Garamone, 2019).

Furthermore, in September 2019, a drone attack carried out by Yemen's Houthi rebels aligned with Iran on the Abqaiq and Khurais refineries in Saudi Arabia escalated tensions between the U.S. and Iran since it raised the risk of an interruption in world oil supplies. It was suspected that technicians sent from Iran trained the Houthis on drone and missile technology (Hubbard et al., 2019). In the aftermath of the American killing of Qasem Soleimani in January 2020, the Iranian government announced that there would be no limitations in the nuclear enrichment capacity (Rubin et al., 2020). Iran also launched missile strikes on U.S. military bases in Iraq, yet no U.S. service members were killed after the retaliatory missile attack on January 8, 2020 (Reuters, 2020). In December 2020, the State Department condemned the rocket attacks, causing no injuries or casualties, by Iranian-supported militias against the American embassy in Baghdad. As of Trump, he directly accused Tehran and stated that Iran would be held responsible for any American death (Starr, 2020).

### **Biden and A Probable Return to Engagement**

In June 2019, as a Presidential candidate, Biden declared that the U.S. was isolated as a result of Trump's decision to abandon the JCPOA and moreover, Iran was thus pushed closer to China and Russia. He further stressed that a future decision to re-enter the JCPOA would re-establish U.S. credibility in the eyes of its European allies (Council on Foreign Relations, 2019). It was also underlined that Trump's Iran policy proved to be counterproductive since the sanctions have strengthened the status of conservative groups in Iran (Czornik, 2022, p. 5). Having this point of view, the Biden administration sought to adjust U.S. foreign policy on Iran although the strategic goals of Trump's Iran policy were maintained. In that context, the Biden administration sought for new methods to tackle the nuclear issue and accordingly increased diplomatic engagement with Iran. Eventually, the U.S. aspires to achieve "a broader and stronger new agreement" that prevents the establishment of smaller and covert facilities, restrict centrifuge development, include Iran's ballistic missile program, and preclude Iran from expanding its regional influence (Tang & Pan, 2022, p. 202).

The coming into power of a Democrat President is not a sufficient condition for an "automatic reset" in bilateral relations since the changes in Iranian as well as the Middle Eastern politics created a new strategic equation in the region. In that context, it is particularly stressed that the U.S. should especially consider the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Israel while designing its Iran policy. Therefore, Biden himself does not promise an unconditional turn in U.S. policy (Czornik, 2022, p. 6) Iran, on the other hand, demands some guarantees and the relief of sanctions. It is alleged that the Iranian demands which are not part of the original agreement derail the U.S. efforts to revive the nuclear deal (Philips and Brookes, 2022, p. 1). Furthermore, the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan has fueled Iran's fear that

the destabilizing effects of the Taliban rule could spread to Iran. The changing security environment in Afghanistan created an opportunity for cooperation between Tehran and Washington again as they did before 2002 (Berger, 2021).

Iran's use of its network of non-state actors remains a contentious issue in the U.S.-Iran relations since Iran has still been engaging in proxy wars in Syria, Yemen and Iraq. In response, the U.S. carried out an air strike on facilities occupied by Kata'ib Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed Shia militias in Syria on 25 February 2021. (Middle East Monitor, 2022). In the 2022 National Defense Strategy of the U.S., it was reiterated that Iran undermined regional stability since it supported terrorist groups and military proxies including al-Qaeda and ISIS (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022, p. 5). It was even alleged that Iran's reliance on its non-state clients has become a component of its grand strategy since the weakening of central authorities in the region paved the way for the rising influence of Iranian-backed militias. Particularly, Iran had the ability to become active in many theaters at a relatively low cost via Hezbollah. Furthermore, Tehran started to acknowledge its contact with Taliban following the disclosure of U.S. plans to withdraw from Afghanistan (Tabatabai, 2020, p. 289-292).

Iran's growing relations with China is another challenge for bilateral relations between Washington and Tehran as Trump's strategy pushed Iran eastward. The Iranian hardliners believe that China, having no ideological problem with Iran, has the potential to "replace the West as a source of technology and capital" (Kahalzadeh, 2022, p. 8). In March 2021, China and Iran signed a 25-year strategic cooperation agreement that marked the continuation of their long-standing alliance. The agreement requires that Iran will receive 400 billion dollars of investment from China. Although the Iranians are not sure whether this agreement allowing Beijing to increase its economic influence on Iran is an appropriate decision, it is recognized that the deal will offer a relief for Iran in the face of U.S. pressure (Çelik, 2020, p. 111-112). In addition, in January and September 2022, Iran, China and Russia held a joint military exercise in Indian Ocean, as part of the joint exercises started in December 2019 (Middle East Monitor, 2022). The Biden administration has been also criticized for its failure to prevent Iran's illicit oil trade with China. The critics suggest that Chinese firms buying the illicit oil should be penalized (Phillips & Brookes, 2022a, p. 7-8).

The advocates of a stricter foreign policy towards Iran suggest that the U.S. should expand the Arab-Israeli security cooperation by including more Arab states into the Abraham Accords or promoting the signing of similar agreements. Thus, the normalization of the relations between Israel and the Arab states threatened by Iran will help to maintain U.S. interests in the Middle East (Phillips & Brookes, 2022b, p. 9). On the other hand, while the Biden administration sought to reengage Iran on its nuclear program, Israel signaled that its military would be prepared to attack Iran on its own if the U.S. decided to re-enter the nuclear agreement (Miller & Sokolsky, 2021). Accordingly, in April 2021, while informal negotiations to reinstate the 2015 nuclear deal were taking place in Vienna, Iran's Natanz uranium enrichment facility was attacked by the Israelis, according to Iranian officials. Although Israel neither denied nor confirmed the allegations, it was reminded that Israel had used the tactics of cyberattacks or assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists in order to sabotage Iranian nuclear work (Bergman et al., 2021). Eventually, the three-month informal

talks came to an end after the election of anti-US hardliner Ebrahim Raisi as the President of Iran in August 2021. In June 2022, Iran imposed limitations to UN inspectors and removed surveillance cameras of the IAEA at a nuclear site. IAEA Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi declared that Iran might have sufficient enriched uranium to make a nuclear weapon, meaning that the “breakout time” was significantly reduced (Kwai, 2022).

In the domestic political arena, the Raisi regime has been accused of tightening restrictions on freedoms. A new wave of protests began in September 2022, following the suspicious death of a 22-year-old Iranian woman, Mahsa Amini, who was arrested by morality police for disobeying the strict dress code. While the death of Amini unleashed global condemnation, the U.S. imposed sanctions Iranian morality police and seven security officials who frequently used violence to suppress peaceful protestors and civil society members (Al Jazeera, 2022). As for the Tehran regime, it blamed the external enemies and non-Persian ethnic minority groups, particularly Kurdish and Baluchi minorities for the civil unrest. Although the protests do not appear to lead to a successful revolution, frequent waves of civil opposition in recent years have been eroding the regime’s base of support (Phillips & Brookes, 2022a, p. 3-4).

## Conclusion

Although the U.S. and Iran have had hostile relations since the 1979 revolution that led to the establishment of an Islamic Republic in Iran, the bilateral relations witnessed the period of a short-time peace in the aftermath of the signing of the JCPOA. However, it lasted until 2018, when Trump’s decision to withdraw from the nuclear deal brought about a stalemate again. Moreover, Trump viewed Saudi Arabia and Israel as important partners, and accordingly, started the maximum pressure campaign against Iran. Later on, the Biden administration, despite facing domestic and international challenges, intended to revive the nuclear negotiations with Iran in order to achieve a broader and more efficient agreement. On the other hand, the current adjustment in the Iran policy of the U.S. during the Biden era does not represent a significant break with Trump’s strategy. The legacy of Trump’s maximum pressure strategy poses a significant problem since it has consolidated the hardliners’ position and undermined that of moderate reformists in Iran. Furthermore, despite the fact that the deal has been still in effect, Iran has been moving closer to production of a nuclear weapon.

In order to make predictions about the future of bilateral relations, it should firstly be taken into account that Iran has been hit by U.S. sanctions and embargoes for more than four decades. Therefore, it is unlikely that Iran will automatically admit a broader agreement with new provisions aiming to undermine its regional influence since such a deal might imply that the main problem is the peaceful nature of Iran itself rather than that of its nuclear technology program. Even though the regime’s domestic control seems to have weakened in the face of popular protests in recent years, Iran has proved to be an adaptable actor. Furthermore, in order to find a common ground for negotiations with Iran, the U.S. should declare that it will not unilaterally withdraw from the nuclear deal again. In that context, while it is apparent that the positions of the U.S. and its European partners diverge on the nuclear issue, Russia and China are unlikely to miss the opportunities to deepen their ties

with Iran. In short, the U.S. should first conduct a subtle diplomacy and promote multilateralism in order to establish its credibility again. On the other hand, the U.S. needs to make it clear whether Iran, breaching its obligations under the deal, reached sufficient level of enriched uranium to produce nuclear weapon and whether it could deploy nuclear weapons on ballistic missiles. At that point, Israel and Saudi Arabia, having a key role in the regional balances, have been a source of outside pressure as opponents of the deal. Therefore, regional sensitivities and balances should be the second pillar of the Iran policy of the U.S.

### **Ethical Statement Information of the Article Titled As “United States-Iran Relations: The Trump Impact”**

	This study has been prepared in accordance with the values of “Research and Publication Ethics” and checked in a plagiarism control software. All responsibility of the article belongs to the author(s).
Acknowledgement	The work is not re-produced of thesis, or a paper etc.
Conflict of Interest Statement	There is no conflict of interest.
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