

# US-IRAN RELATIONS AFTER TRUMP: THE PATH TO PEACE IS OPEN

*The idea of ending endless wars has become a catchphrase widely used by Republicans and Democrats alike. Yet, despite this supposedly bi-partisan cause in American contemporary politics, American leaders have continued to immerse the US in wars overseas. It is within this context that international efforts and the former Obama administration's wish to broker a peaceful deal with Iran must be understood. Instead of building upon the Obama administration's successes, President Trump focused on how to derail the accomplishments of his predecessor. Now, while addressing the US's role on the global stage, President Biden must recognize that it is the US's responsibility to mend what was damaged by his predecessor.*

Assal Rad\*



\* Assal Rad is a Senior Research Fellow at the National Iranian American Council. She received her PhD in history at the University of California, Irvine. Follow her on Twitter @assalrad.

The attacks on 11 September 2001 not only shaped the focus of US foreign policy over the last two decades, but also defined how a generation of Americans understood the gravity of these policies by bringing the cost and tragedy of conflict home. For many young Americans, it was the first time they became aware of the extent of US interventionism and how it impacts the way other nations and peoples view the United States. But events over the last year in the United States have brought the attitude of US foreign policy—which has long been driven by the idea that problems can be solved exclusively through militarism and force—much closer to home. Images of police violently confronting Black Lives Matter protestors and an insurrection at the Capitol were often likened to images of war zones abroad, the very wars started by the United States.

In contemporary American politics, the idea of ending endless wars has become a ubiquitous catchphrase employed by both Republicans and Democrats.<sup>1</sup> Yet, despite this supposedly unifying, bi-partisan cause, American leaders have continued to entrench the US in wars abroad. In 2003, millions of Americans joined the mass global protests against the invasion of Iraq to no avail. But 18 years later, the disastrous war and continued conflict in Iraq have validated the objections raised by those protests. The war in Afghanistan has become the longest war in US history, with young soldiers being sent to a war that began before they were born.

It is within this context that we must understand the international efforts and the desire of the former Obama administration to broker a peaceful deal with Iran that addressed concerns over their nuclear program and avoided another costly and destabilizing war in the Middle East. The Iran nuclear deal—formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA—established not only a model for nuclear non-proliferation, but also a standard for global diplomacy by fostering cooperation between some of the toughest adversaries.

### ***From Détente to Renewed Conflict with Iran***

After decades of combative rhetoric on both sides, the United States and Iran sat at a negotiating table, engaged in dialogue, and shook hands to symbolically endorse a mutually advantageous agreement. The deal was not only a breakthrough in addressing the critical issue of nuclear proliferation and global security, it was a model for international diplomacy and signified a long-awaited thaw in US-Iran relations that had been fraught with bitter hostility for decades. For the

<sup>1</sup> James Carden, “A New Poll Shows the Public Is Overwhelmingly Opposed to Endless US Military Interventions,” *The Nation*, 9 January 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/new-poll-shows-public-overwhelmingly-opposed-to-endless-us-military-interventions/>

US, it represented a strong break with past administrations and policies that viewed Iran as the caricature of an enemy. For Iranians the nuclear accord was a welcome respite from being continuously vilified, particularly as the promise of sanctions relief created an opening for Iranian society and renewed hopes for a future with better economic opportunities. That hope and jubilation was evident in the images of Iranians flooding the streets in celebration at the conclusion of the deal, which were replayed in the US for all to see.

---

**“In contemporary American politics, the idea of ending endless wars has become a ubiquitous catchphrase employed by both Republicans and Democrats.”**

---

But the stunning victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election created a new reality for many Americans and global citizens as they tried to grasp the consequences of this new administration, which was led by a man who had expressed a distinct vision of American—sometimes equated with white—supremacy. The ascendency of Trump dashed hopes for peaceful relations with Iran, damaged America’s traditional diplomatic ties, and challenged the very world order the US played a leading role to create. Though former President Trump was critical of the Iraq war and promoted the idea of ending America’s fruitless wars, the actions of his administration brought the US to the brink of war with Iran at least twice,<sup>2</sup> most notably after the extrajudicial assassination of Iran’s top general, Qasem Soleimani.

While Trump has been credited for not starting any new wars, it is noteworthy that he did not end any of America’s wars and the actions of his administration could have easily sparked a war with Iran. In fact, it is arguably because of Iranian restraint—despite assassinations, cyber sabotage that Trump himself gave the CIA a greenlight to conduct against Iran, and a brutal sanctions policy that impeded humanitarian goods during a global pandemic—that we have avoided another armed conflict in the Middle East. Iran, for its part, continued to implement strategic patience, presumably biding its time until fresh US elections in 2020 and for President Trump to be replaced.

---

<sup>2</sup> Peter Baker, Ronen Bergman, David D. Kirkpatrick, Julian E. Barnes, and Alissa J. Rubin, “Seven Days in January: How Trump Pushed U.S. and Iran to the Brink of War,” *New York Times*, 11 January 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/11/us/politics/iran-trump.html>

Instead of continuing on the path of diplomacy and using the successes of the Obama administration as a starting point to expand from, President Trump focused on how to undo the accomplishments of his predecessor both in terms of domestic and foreign policy. Trump invoked Obama's nuclear deal with Iran on many occasions, even before running for office, arguing the deal was a disaster without providing any evidence to substantiate his claims. Given how close the US came to war with Iran during President Trump's tenure, it is a point of irony that he accused Obama of using war with Iran as a pretext for reelection on so many occasions via Twitter.

Almost as if fulfilling a vendetta against Obama, Trump allowed longtime and outspoken Iran hawks, such as John Bolton and Mike Pompeo, to lead his foreign policy efforts. Bolton, one of the well-known architects of the destructive Iraq War, has openly called for regime change in Iran and spoken at events for the Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MEK), a formerly US-designated terrorist group that is almost universally hated inside of Iran for their support of Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), which devastated Iran and had up to a million casualties. Pompeo spent his tenure as Secretary of State focused on undermining international diplomacy with Iran in a manner that bordered on obsession.

Soon after President Trump replaced Secretary of State Rex Tillerson—who was fired by Trump in part because of his support for the Iran nuclear deal—with Mike Pompeo, Trump announced the US was withdrawing from the deal. Thereafter, Pompeo made his objective clear with a list of 12 demands, which, if Iran had kowtowed to, essentially amounted to Iranian capitulation of its sovereignty. Despite being the nation's highest diplomat, Pompeo overlooked diplomatic solutions and instead used his position to offer an ultimatum: Iran could either submit to Pompeo's demands or suffer through the “strongest sanctions in history.”<sup>3</sup>

However, after abrogating the Iran deal in 2018, engaging in such belligerent rhetoric, inundating Iran with crippling sanctions, and defying international protocols, it is the US that became isolated on the global stage.<sup>4</sup> The most striking example of US isolation and, frankly, humiliation came in September 2020 when Pompeo attempted to snapback all UN sanctions on Iran based on his logic that the US was still a participant in the nuclear deal after quitting the JCPOA and failing to uphold its obligations as such. Pompeo's gambit was a flop, as the UN rejected the claim that sanctions had been restored. That the Trump administration was dismissed in such a public manner at the United Nations is a testament to its isolation in the eyes of the world.

<sup>3</sup> Louis Nelson, “Pompeo threatens Iran with ‘strongest sanctions in history,’” *Politico*, 21 May 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/05/21/mike-pompeo-iran-sanctions-600922>

<sup>4</sup> Robbie Gramer, Jack Detsch, and Colum Lynch, “U.S. Isolated at U.N. as Push to Ramp Up Pressure on Iran Fails,” *Foreign Policy*, 21 September 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/21/us-isolated-un-iran-snapback-sanctions-trump-pompeo/>

But more critical than the rebuke of the international community is the result of the 2020 US elections. Not only did Joe Biden decisively defeat Trump, but Democrats also achieved a trifecta of control by maintaining their majority in the House of Representatives and taking the majority in the Senate.<sup>5</sup>

---

*“[A]fter abrogating the Iran deal in 2018, engaging in such belligerent rhetoric, inundating Iran with crippling sanctions, and defying international protocols, it is the US that became isolated on the global stage.”*

---

### ***A New Administration Brings Renewed Opportunities***

The new Biden administration will have to address the deep divides of the American populace, as well as the role of the United States in international affairs. On his first day in office, Biden swiftly moved to reverse Trump’s policies, such as returning to the Paris Climate Accord and rescinding the Muslim ban. So, there is every reason to believe that a Biden administration will return to the path of diplomacy in the case of Iran. The Iran deal was the crowning foreign policy achievement of the administration under which he served as vice president. Additionally, Biden has stated on numerous occasions that the decision to quit the deal was a “profound mistake,”<sup>6</sup> and rightfully predicted in 2017 that withdrawing from the deal would isolate the US rather than Iran.<sup>7</sup> After the assassination of Soleimani, Biden reiterated the disastrous nature of Trump’s Iran policy and emphasized that it was Trump, not the Iranians, who had upended diplomacy.<sup>8</sup>

None of this is to say that the road of return will not have its challenges. Just weeks after the election an Iranian scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, was assassinated in Iran. While it is generally assumed that Israel carried out the execution<sup>9</sup>—fitting a

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Lemire, Zeke Miller, and Will Weissert, “Biden Defeats Trump for White House, says ‘Time to Heal,’” *AP News*, 7 November 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-wins-white-house-ap-fd58df73aa677acb74fce2a69adb71f9>

<sup>6</sup> Joe Biden (@JoeBiden). “Today’s announcement that the United States will withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal is a profound mistake.” Twitter, 8 May 2018, 1:53 pm. <https://twitter.com/JoeBiden/status/993957007337148417?s=20>

<sup>7</sup> Joe Biden (@JoeBiden). “Unilaterally putting the Iran deal at risk does not isolate Iran. It isolates us.” Twitter, 13 October 2017, 10:49 am. <https://twitter.com/JoeBiden/status/918896418559053825?s=20>

<sup>8</sup> Bill Barrow, “Watch: Biden Says Iran Escalation Shows Trump ‘Incapable of World Leadership,’” *PBS News Hour*, 7 January 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/watch-live-joe-biden-to-deliver-foreign-policy-speech>

<sup>9</sup> Kylie Atwood, “US Official Says Israel was Behind Assassination of Iranian Scientist,” *CNN*, 2 December 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/02/politics/iran-scientist-israel-assassination-us/index.html>

pattern of such executions on Iranian soil in past years—the Trump administration did not denounce the illegal killing of a scientist, which past administrations have condemned. Additionally, in its waning days the Trump administration continued its “flood” of sanctions<sup>10</sup> in order to sabotage Biden’s ability to return to the deal. Notwithstanding the many legitimate grievances on the Iranian side, with Biden the future of US-Iran relations may still look like the hopeful days of the JCPOA negotiations.

---

*“But, as the lone superpower of the world—a status that can be recognized given the inability of the international community to actually hold the US accountable for its transgressions—the US will certainly play a significant role in shaping this century.”*

---

Just as we did after 9/11, the US today stands at yet another turning point, further complicated with the added issue of an internal test of its democracy. Trump’s shameful attempt to undermine the very foundations of American democracy<sup>11</sup> is analogous to his administration’s efforts to sabotage global diplomacy. His continued attacks and disinformation campaign against American voters and surrounding the 2020 election culminated in a deadly attack in the nation’s capital.<sup>12</sup> The violent scenes from the Capitol on January 6th shocked Americans and the world, as world leaders voiced their condemnations of this assault on the institution of democracy itself. These pictures, combined with images of thousands of troops descending upon Washington, D.C. before President Biden’s inauguration, added to the feeling among many that our foreign policy of militarism and force had finally come home.

As the US faced an unprecedented challenge to its institutions, it revealed the fragility of democracy and lifted the veneer of invulnerability. Though we witnessed a transition of power on 20 January 2021, the events at the Capitol two weeks before Biden’s inauguration makes it difficult to describe the transition of power as peaceful. The Biden administration will have to face a daunting set of challenges, from combating a pandemic that has already killed over 400,000 Americans and continues to ravage the world, to addressing the deeply-rooted divisions of the

---

<sup>10</sup> Barak Ravid, “Trump Administration Plans ‘flood’ of Sanctions on Iran by Jan. 20,” *Axios*, 8 November 2020, <https://wwwaxios.com/trump-administration-iran-sanctions-january-3951f776-09c9-4e55-b0f5-4a9c80e9e974.html>

<sup>11</sup> Geoffrey A. Fowler, “Twitter and Facebook Warning Labels Aren’t Enough to Save Democracy,” *Washington Post*, 9 November 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/11/09/facebook-twitter-election-misinformation-labels/>

<sup>12</sup> Eric Levenson and Amir Vera, “What We Know About the 5 Deaths in the pro-Trump Mob that Stormed the Capitol,” *CNN*, 6 January 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/07/us/capitol-mob-deaths/index.html>

American populace and restoring US credibility in the international community. But, as the lone superpower of the world—a status that can be recognized given the inability of the international community to actually hold the US accountable for its transgressions—the US will certainly play a significant role in shaping this century.

US-Iran relations in the coming years will be defined by the success or failure of the JCPOA, the framework of which still exists and Iran has already signaled a desire to restore the deal to President Biden.<sup>13</sup> Under the Rouhani administration, which staked its legacy on the hopeful success of diplomacy with its notable adversary, Iran has maintained its policy of strategic patience. Every decision and action to reduce its compliance with the JCPOA was a calculated measure that can easily be reversed. And while some analysts in the world of D.C. politics may argue that a straightforward return to the deal is not possible, the reality is that Trump quit the deal with the stroke of a pen and Biden can return to it in the same manner.

Though Biden has promised to return to the deal, he must recognize that the onus is on the US to repair what was broken by his predecessor. The choice for Biden now is to make the first move and restore the path of peace and diplomacy, or stay on Trump's course of conflict and war. How he chooses to move forward with Iran may serve as a model for US leadership more broadly and the future of global collaboration.

The United States can either choose to use its power to lead the world to a new stage of global cooperation and human relations that acknowledge and face existential threats like climate change and nuclear proliferation, or it can continue to flaunt that power and incite more conflict. Without an immediate change of policy vis-à-vis Iran, the prospect of another disastrous war looms large. But one thing is clear: the coming of a Biden administration brings renewed hope for diplomatic solutions and peace.

---

<sup>13</sup> “Iran’s President Calls on Biden to Return to Iran Nuclear Deal,” *Los Angeles Times*, 8 November 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-11-08/irans-president-calls-on-biden-to-return-to-nuclear-deal>