

## Trump has undone the years of progress in US-Iran relations achieved under Obama



*Nearly four years ago, the US, along with five other countries agreed to lift sanctions on Iran in exchange for the curtailment of the country's nuclear programs. While this agreement helped thaw US-Iranian relations during the Obama administration, President Trump's withdrawal from the deal has seen a massive decline in engagement between the two countries and a return to old animosities, writes **Ambassador Seyed Hossein Mousavian** and **Younes***

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Three years ago, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed that Iran had met its nuclear related commitments under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action agreed between with China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Germany in July 2015. The announcement triggered the lifting of sanctions based on **UN Security Council Resolution 2231**.

The Iran nuclear deal is the most comprehensive agreement in the history of nonproliferation, a clear **triumph for diplomacy** and represents the most important security agreement since the signing of the Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles (INF) Treaty between Washington and Moscow during the twilight years of the Cold War. No doubt, US president Obama played a key role on this achievement.

### Why Obama was important to US-Iran relations

In the context of Iran-US relations after the 1979 revolution, the Obama administration was an exception in both its approach and subsequent successes regarding Iran, and thus deserves to be examined carefully. During this period, in addition to other world powers, Iran's **direct bilateral communication and negotiations** with the United States were at an all-time high. Secretary of State John Kerry and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif's frequent meetings and cordial relationship was something unprecedented between the longtime rival nations.

As far back as November 2007, then Senator Obama **called for negotiations with Iran** as part of his presidential campaign, a sign of that he was willing to engage with the Islamic Republic directly, without any preconditions. His administration made attempts in its first term but faced two serious hurdling blocks: a very hardline adversary in President Ahmadinejad as well as domestic division in the White House.

The American government was neither united nor coordinated in its Iran policy at first; serious differences existed between the White House and the State Department. **Dennis Ross** of the National Security Council, a prominent Israel advocate, was skeptical of a multilateral engagement policy with Iran and often clashed with seasoned diplomat **William J. Burns**, a moderate who had served in the State Department under both Republican and Democratic administrations. Ross stepped down from his post in the Obama administration in November of 2011; Deputy Secretary of State Burns was subsequently tasked with leading the American team in secret talks with Iran.

During the Ahmadinejad presidency and President Obama's first term (2008-2012), world powers became united in their approach towards Iran. It was a unique moment where China and Russia supported US-EU initiatives to pressure Iran, imposing **six UNSC resolutions** against the Islamic Republic. American sanctions during this period were said to be truly the most damaging and harmful because of the cohesiveness and coordination of the US and its allies. No American allies dared to openly defy President Obama, much less form a coalition designed to subvert his policies. The US achieved global consensus on its Iran policy. Maximum international pressure was exerted. Nevertheless, the first direct US-Iran negotiations at the level of deputy foreign minister **began in 2012**, in the last year of Ahmadinejad's presidency.

## The road to the JCPOA

In 2013, President Rouhani took the helm of the Iranian government with his moderate foreign policy approach and a promise to end sanctions. His foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, a US-educated diplomat, was nominated to lead his country into nuclear negotiations with world powers. For the first time in over three decades of US-Iran relations since the 1979 revolution, there existed a positive, coherent team on both sides willing to engage in reciprocity measures founded on mutual respect. Secretary of State John Kerry led the American team in the international negotiations while Robert Malley headed the Middle East desk of the National Security Council; William Burns and Wendy Sherman played critical roles for the US as well. The presence of united and moderate teams in both Iran and the United States yielded the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, a diplomatic triumph **applauded** by the international community.

The Obama period can be characterized by historic firsts in US- Iran policy. First, following the deal, President Obama remained dedicated to implementing American commitments outlined in the agreement, although primary US sanctions remained his main obstacle. Long-standing financial disputes between the two countries were partially resolved during this period, including a **\$1.7 billion payment** made to Iran.

Second, the American president declined pressures by Israel, **Saudi Arabia**, the UAE, and Egypt to attack Iran and in an **interview** with *The Atlantic*, Obama outlined power-sharing incentives for Iran and Saudi Arabia rather than unilateral dominance of the Middle East, thus avoiding war.

Third, successful negotiations between US-Iran security officials culminated in a **prisoner swap**: five Americans were released in Iran in exchange for seven Iranians freed by the United States. Improved relations and direct ministerial contact also resulted in the **swift release** of US sailors after having entered Iranian territorial waters in January of 2016.

*President Donald J. Trump signs an Executive Order in Bedminster, New Jersey, entitled "Reimposing Certain Sanctions with Respect to Iran." (Official White House Photo by Shealah Craighead)*

Finally, rhetoric softened and concessions were made; in his address to the UN general assembly in 2013, President Obama **committed** to not pursuing regime change in Iran but rather seeking relations founded upon "mutual interests and mutual respect." The US president also recognized Ayatollah Khamenei's fatwa banning weapons of mass destruction, and respected Iran's right to peaceful nuclear enrichment (becoming the first US president to ever do so).

President Obama also acknowledged that Iranians were victims of chemical weapons during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War and admitted to the US role in overthrowing Iran's first democratically elected government in 1953.

This unprecedented success was only possible due to political will on both sides to uphold their commitments and a genuine desire for cooperation. President Obama defied both domestic and foreign war hawks. He stood up to the constant threats and intimidation from Tel Aviv and Riyadh and exerted maximum effort in implementing the nuclear deal. His measures were a step forward towards establishing trust. Iran, in turn, fulfilled all of its commitments as **confirmed by the IAEA** and began to engage with world powers on a variety of issues.

These policies were followed by concrete diplomatic breakthroughs, a direct result of the "engagement policy". The United States and Iran were able to resolve their differences in a fundamentally new way.

## **A new Iran policy under President Trump**

The stark contrast in policies and results between the Obama and Trump presidencies could not be more pronounced, even from the outset. President Trump began his presidential election campaign with belligerent rhetoric, **threatening to rip up the multilateral agreement** "to shreds", calling it the "worst deal in history."

After his electoral victory, his administration isolated itself by subsequently **withdrawing** from the JCPOA; a clear violation of UNSC resolution 2231, which the US had sponsored. Trump failed to convince the other signatories to abandon the nuclear deal and rejected **international consensus** that endorsed the JCPOA, leading to US isolation.

Following encouragement by Israel and Saudi Arabia, the United States, under President Trump, **resorted** to illegal, unilateral pressures: barring Iranian civilian's access to humanitarian goods including food, life-saving medicine, and civil aviation equipment. Sanctions were also re-imposed on **Iranian carpets, pistachios, handicrafts** and other goods. The symbolic \$25 billion Boeing deal with Iran was also **cancelled** in May 2018, and this past November, National Security Advisor John Bolton announced, **"Iran will be squeezed 'until the pips squeak.'** "

In his September 2018 address to the UN General Assembly (UNGA), Trump chose to heap praise upon North Korea's leader Kim Jong-Un (who he had previously referred to as "rocket man") while making the most provocative statements ever made by a US president **regarding Iran** at the UNGA. All high-level and formal negotiations with Iran were terminated including negotiations between security institutions.

Looking more widely, the United States has strengthened its alliance with Saudi Arabia and has been complicit in the Saudi bombardment of Yemen while **selling** the Kingdom \$110 billion in American arms. The US also initiated the creation of an **"Arab NATO"** which has exacerbated ethnic rivalries and Sunni-Shia tensions in order to eliminate Iranian influence from the region. An increasingly hostile Riyadh, Tel Aviv, Abu Dhabi triangle was formed to confront Iran. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman was **quoted** saying, "We will work so that it becomes a battle for them in Iran" while Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu posted a video **threatening** Iran at a nuclear facility.

Military action is not off the table either: this month, National Security Advisor John Bolton **asked** the Pentagon for military plans to strike Iran and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly **announced** that US President Donald Trump “is acting against Iran at the economic level and we here in Israel are acting against Iran at the military level.”

With the arrival of the Trump administration, US-Iran policy was transformed from one of “interaction” to “hostile confrontation” overnight. Conversely, world powers are currently exploring ways to save the JCPOA without the United States, counteract American sanctions, and have rejected the hawkish rhetoric coming from the Trump administration. The EU has threatened to distance itself from the US and for the first time in history establish its own “European Payment System” undermining the US dollar. The current **EU project**, the Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV), is designed to encourage trade with Iran and effectively bypass American sanctions. Countries, under the banner of the Group of 77 at the United Nations, have [also] voiced support for” the deal. The remaining JCPOA signatories are endeavoring to maintain their commitment to the agreement and support for Iran.

If world powers manage to preserve the JCPOA without the United States, this would have an enormous impact on the promotion of multilateralism in the face of US unilateralism in regional and international issues. ‘After observing twenty months of Trump’s foreign policy in the Middle East, we have to conclude that it has needlessly escalated conflicts, inflicted collective punishment on tens of millions of people for no good reason, damaged US interests and our national reputation, and made our government complicit in numerous war crimes and crimes against humanity. One can call the administration’s policies successful only in the sense that they are “successfully” inflicting unnecessary suffering and death on people in many different parts of the region’, **wrote** Daniel Larison a contributing editor at *The American Conservative* in October 2018.

Trump has relied on Riyadh and Tel Aviv to undermine Iran in the region and create an axis of power tasked with destroying the nuclear deal. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s **12 preconditions** for negotiations with Iran further demonstrate a fundamental difference in approach as compared to the Obama administration. These preconditions are tantamount to complete submission by Iran to the United States and international humiliation. Efforts to bring Iran to its knees have isolated the Trump administration and unified world powers in their resistance towards US policies regarding Iran.

## **Tehran disengages in the face of Trump**

The Obama-Trump presidencies diverge completely in terms of Iran. President Obama favored multilateralism while President Trump acts unilaterally. President Obama avoided sensitivities and focused diplomatic efforts on common ground. President Trump has chosen insult and slander. The US, under President Obama, maintained a respect for international law and negotiations whereas President Trump has rejected international institutions and the rule of law (the ICJ, the UN, the P4+1, and the IAEA). The Obama administration was in favor of better Saudi-Iran relations and regional cooperation. Trump is fueling Tehran-Riyadh tensions and has encouraged sectarianism, arms races, and regional division. President Obama acknowledged past US mistakes in regard to Iran. President Trump seems hell-bent on regime change and support for Iran’s enemies, no matter the cost: Several prominent members of the Trump administration have **met with and voiced support** for the Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MeK) terrorist organization, a group infamous for its support of Saddam Hussein and its history of suicide bombings and assassinations carried out in Iran.

In short, the US knows how to create wars and impose sanctions but is incapable of genuine diplomacy to resolve animosities with Iran. This policy of threats, bullying and intimidation has failed in the past and will not work in the future. Cooperation and dialogue provide results. Iran has been calling for “**mutual respect**” for decades. “Axis of evil” rhetoric simply fails every-time, especially concerning Iran. Nevertheless, President Obama was far from soft on Iran. His sanctions and policies in the first term of his presidency were the most hostile and unwelcome, yet they failed to achieve results. It was his tact and his willingness to put aside differences that led to concrete progress.

Although Tehran was not willing to engage with the Obama administration beyond the nuclear issue, tensions decreased dramatically during his presidency. However, following Trump’s Iran policy, Tehran has **rejected** every offer by the Trump administration to approach the negotiating table. Why? Appearances matter. A country with a proud history of civilization and resistance will not succumb to the language of threat, bullying and humiliation. “Good faith begets good faith.” President Obama understood this, and these are the magic words President Trump needs to understand in order to manage US-Iran relations after four decades of hostility.

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