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MIDDLE EAST

What's at stake in the upcoming presidential elections in the US and Iran

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The U.S. presidential election will take place in less 100 days and analysts in both Washington and Tehran are speculating about the future of U.S.-Iran relations. There are those who think that if elected, Joe Biden and his administration will seek a more “[balanced](#)” approach to Iran by re-joining the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and providing sanctions relief. And then there are those who think that if Trump is re-elected, his administration will continue implementing the pernicious “maximum pressure” [strategy](#). What's clear is that both Trump and Tehran are not seeking a military confrontation although the Trump administration, guided by Iran hawks, is more unpredictable.

Predicting the outcomes of the U.S. election, and the upcoming presidential election in Iran, is no easy task. But it's more important to ask what Iran's current political calculations are given that it has experienced Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear agreement. Having a clear account of what is Iran's current political calculation is necessary for any credible analysis of possible outcomes.

The truth is that there is a tremendous distrust and cynicism accompanied with disappointment in the U.S. policies among Iranian officials. After 12 years of intensive negotiations, Iran and the world powers succeeded in agreeing to one of the most comprehensive nuclear agreements.

Under the JCPOA, Iran accepted the highest level of maximum transparency and limits in its nuclear activities that no other country has ever accepted, according to the [IAEA's reports](#). To be sure, the JCPOA was an international agreement ratified by the United Nation's Security Council in [Resolution 2231](#). Iran fully implemented each and every part of the JCPOA with zero failure for three years with maximum [transparency](#).

But in return, Trump has rewarded Iran with the most comprehensive sanctions ever since the revolution in 1979 after he withdrew from the nuclear deal in 2018. He also enforced the [travel ban](#) executive order to prevent Iranian nationals from traveling to the U.S., even visit their relatives. Trump sanctioned Iran's Supreme Leader, [Ayatollah Khamenei](#) as well as its Foreign Minister [Javad](#)

[Zarif](#) and he bullied the European companies who were legally allowed to do business with Iran and punished them for doing so. Trump also designated a branch of Iran's national army namely, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organization, [among others](#).

Hence, the Trump administration's policies and actions have turned into a narrative among Iranian officials. The conclusions that Iranian officials have drawn has four major elements.

First, Iranian officials believe that the United States can never be trusted because it has no hesitation to violate bilateral and international agreements with Iran — or to withdraw from them if it sees fit. From Tehran's point of view, no matter how much Iran shows good will and transparency, it makes no difference to the United States to change the course of action.

Even with the highest level of commitments and compliance, Iran would be rewarded by highest level of pressures and sanctions. Iranian officials believe, now more than ever, that negotiations with the U.S. are doomed to failure and not safeguard Iranian interests.

Second, the Trump administration's withdrawal doctrine and the frequency by which it pulls out of important international accords is indeed a new phenomenon in international relations which confirmed Iranian pessimism about the U.S. commitment to international norms and rules. The U.S. not only withdrew from [the JCPOA](#), but it also pulled out of other important international agreements and treaties like 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the 2012 South Korean trade deal (KORUS), the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and the 1945 UN Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), [among others](#).

Third, Iranian officials have been convinced that Israel always plays the key role in the U.S. foreign policy with respect to the Middle East. For instance, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu bragged that he convinced Trump to pull out [of Iran nuke deal](#). Netanyahu also disclosed that he asked President Trump to label the IRGC a [terrorist organization](#). Israeli intelligence also reportedly helped the U.S. assassinate Maj. [Gen. Qassem Soleimani](#). Iranian officials find this magnitude of involvement of Israel in U.S. foreign policy worthy of blocking any attempt for possible rapprochement.

Forth, Iranian officials have been surprised by the complacency of other world powers, mainly the European Union, in the face of the American bullying. Knowing that Iran has fully complied with the deal, Europe did next to nothing in safeguarding the deal and in making sure that its economic benefits are at least partially delivered to Iran.

Europe's Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX) as a special-purpose vehicle to facilitate transactions with Iran to avoid the U.S. sanctions has [been a total failure](#). Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei reflected this sentiment, saying in his Eid speech that the "[Europeans did nothing](#)" to hold its part of the bargain in the nuclear deal and therefore they can not be trusted.

What's next?

With two important presidential elections are coming up in the U.S. and Iran, expectations are that Iran's next president will be from the Principalists (conservative) faction, just like the result of recent parliamentary elections. The conservative faction's ascendance is largely due to the fact that Western powers backed away from the JCPOA. The Principalists have always been extremely suspicious of any negotiations with the United States given its dishonest record.

That said, rapprochement may be possible, particularly with a change in administration in January 2021. The U.S. must show goodwill in three areas.

First, re-join the JCPOA and in accordance with the U.N. Resolution 2231, to dismantle all of its illegal nuclear related sanctions that it imposed after its withdrawal from the deal.

Second, remove all of sanctions that it imposed beyond the nuclear issue on Iran such as key state officials namely the Supreme Leader and its Foreign Minister, and the designation of IRGC as a terrorist organization.

Third, terminate the triangle alliance with Israel and Saudi Arabia to bring regime change in Iran and even to disintegrate Iran.

It is important that the U.S. demonstrate goodwill and its commitment to the U.N. resolution and international rules and regulations by rejoining the JCPOA and removing all sanctions Trump imposed prior to the Iranian election in summer 2021.