

# Towards a New Regional Strategy in the Persian Gulf

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On May 2018, the US President Trump withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal, namely the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which was agreed between the world powers and Iran in 2015. The withdrawal was despite Iran's full compliance to its obligations under the nuclear agreement ratified in the form of a U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231. Subsequently, the Trump administration implemented the "maximum pressure" policy and re-imposed a vast array of economic sanctions on Iran. It also threatened other European members of the nuclear agreement that there will punitive measures taken against them if they engage in trade and business with Iran. In numerous writings, I emphasized that the 'maximum pressure' strategy of the U.S. is counterproductive and will have inimical long-term consequences for the non-proliferation regime, U.S.-Iran relations and the broader Middle East Security.

By pursuing the maximum pressure strategy, the Trump administration sought to bring Iran to the negotiating table and forge a "better" deal, one that would encompass a list of 12 [demands](#). To be sure, the U.S. maximum pressure campaign did squeeze the Iranian economy by ways of re-imposing crippling sanctions, but it failed to bring Iran to the negotiating table to negotiate a new deal or the regional issues (see Movahed Masoud. 2019. "The Sanctions Game." *Boston Review*. <http://bostonreview.net/war-security/masoud-movahed-sanctions-game>). There is hardly anyone who would deny the failure of the maximum pressure strategy, which brought about the highest level of tensions in the region. It was speculated that the United States might actually be dragged to a military confrontation with Iran in the [region](#). For instance, four ships were targeted near the strategic Emirati port of Fujairah, what the UAE described as a "[sabotage attack](#)" and a Saudi Aramco plant in Abqaiq was attacked and initially knocked out half of Saudi Arabia's oil [production](#).

The U.S. maximum pressure campaign took on a specific cue when the Trump administration decided to assassinate Gen. Maj. Qasem Soleimani, who was Iran's most influential military commander and strategist. In response to the assassination of the Gen. Soleimani by a drone strike, Iran launched a barrage of missiles on a US military base in Iraq, injuring 109 troops, the first military strike by a nation on a US military base by any country since [World War II](#). Within few hours from the ballistic missile attacks on the U.S. military bases in Iraq, a Ukrainian flight crashed, killing all 176 passengers and crew. Iran mistakenly shot the Ukrainian civilian plane as a result of the heightened tensions and serious threats of confrontation.

The ill-advised U.S. policy of maximum pressure revolves around a central misconception that it will put enough economic pressure on Iran to force it to accept maximalist demands. On 1 July 2020, an explosion hit a centrifuge production plant at a nuclear enrichment facility in Natanz,

## IDEAS POLITICAS

which is one of Iran's main nuclear fuel enrichment sites. The site was significantly damaged while no deaths or injuries were [reported](#). *The New York Times* reported that the three former U.S. diplomats informed that Israel was responsible for the attack on the nuclear complex in the city of Natanz in July 2020. In response Iran's increased its uranium enrichment to 60%, its highest level ever. "60% enrichment is an answer to your evilness. ... We cut off both of your hands, one with IR-6 centrifuges and another one with 60%", said the Iranian president, Hassan [Rouhani](#). It has been more than three years the United States has pulled out the JCPOA, but none of the stated objectives of maximum pressure were achieved but led only to a political [impasse](#)."

The Trump administration's strategy was also criticized at home and by the US western allies. For example, the then democratic candidate Joe Biden noted that despite the difficulties standing in the way, should he be elected as President, he will return to the [JCPOA](#).

The European Union, while insisted on remaining in the JCPOA, was diffident in taming and reducing the economic hurdles caused by the U.S. extraterritorial sanctions. Iran was disappointed that the European Union could not do much to contain the U.S pressures to engage in trade and business with Iran. Iran's disappointment with the US and European Union incentivized the state to strengthen its ties with the eastern bloc powers specifically China and Russia. Iran began working with China on a sweeping long-term political, economic, and security agreement that would facilitate hundreds of billions of dollars of investments in the Iranian economy. Iran is also pursuing a long-term partnership with Russia. Politicians in Tehran see the agreements with the Eastern powers as a necessary means of combating U.S. hegemony and hostility. Iran's new policy of a "Pivot to the East" involves cultivating strong economic, political, military, and security ties with the giants of the Asian continent, namely, China and Russia. This policy has gained all the more credibility among Iranian officials after the Trumps' ill-advised move to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and pursue a "maximum pressure" [strategy](#)."

Equally importantly, the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA and the implementation of the maximum pressure policy had direct implications on global nonproliferation. In response to the violation of the deal by the United States, Iran lowered its commitments, ending the limit to enrichment of uranium as part of its 2015 nuclear deal with world [powers](#). Furthermore, Iran's then "breakout time"—should it attempt to build a nuclear bomb—was estimated to be around a year, but this is a year or even a matter of three months if enrichment levels are increased to 20% as is [now](#). In early November 2020, the Iran's parliament passed a bill threatening to boost uranium enrichment and suspend inspectors. The bill states that if the sanctions are not lifted, the Iranian government must suspect the inspectors. The support for this bill was garnered in the Iranian parliament in the wake of the assassination of a top nuclear [scientist](#).

By withdrawing from the nuclear deal and pursuing the maximum pressure policy, Donald Trump secured a legacy of being the first US president to launch a political, security and economic war on Iran. Adding to the sense of drama is that the assassination of Gen. Soleimani in Iraq by the U.S. forces was a nail in the coffin of rapprochement during the Trump administration. Trump's policy deleteriously impacted the lives of Iranian civilian population, especially during a global pandemic where many peoples' economic livelihoods are seriously challenged – let alone a country such as Iran that must deal with both. Obviously, Iranian government's ability to fight COVID-19 has been severely curbed by the Trump coercion policy since limited its ability to trade with other nations. These sanctions, which choked of Iran's oil exports, crippled its economy and practically pushed it out of the international banking system, made it impossible for the country to swiftly take the necessary medical, economic and social measures to protect its citizens from the coronavirus. The role US sanctions have played in the devastation caused by the coronavirus in Iran led to renewed discussions on the effectiveness, legality and legitimacy of sanctions not only in Iran and the US, but also across the [world](#). In fact, Trump administration hurt the livelihood of Iranian people without achieving the administration's political objectives (see Movahed, Masoud. 2020. "Industrializing an Oil-Based Economy: Evidence from Iran's Auto Industry." *Journal of International Development*. 32:1148– 1170, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.3499>).

### **Building on JCPOA Model to Resolve Regional Security Issues.**

President Biden seems committed to the idea of resolving issues through dialogue and negotiations. He has demonstrated his willingness to rejoin JCPOA which was endorsed by the UN Security Council Resolution 2231. Since March 2021, multiple rounds of negotiations have taken place in Vienna to revive JCPOA. The talks are aimed at the sanctions the US should lift; the steps Iran should take to reverse its steps away from the [deal](#). During the talks, the US has confirmed its readiness to lift major part of sanctions but not those imposed on the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) while Iran insists that those sanctions are inconsistency with JCPOA. "The JCPOA participants at their meeting today noted that 'good' or 'significant' progress was made and that an agreement is 'within reach'," tweeted Mikhail Ulyanov, Russia's top negotiator on May 19<sup>th</sup> after the fourth round of talks in Vienna. EU coordinator Enrique Mora shared a similar sentiment, saying "an agreement is shaping up" and a common understanding has been reached on measures required to lift US sanctions and scale back steps Iran has taken since 2019 to advance its nuclear [program](#).

By reviving the JCPOA, President Biden can pave the way towards resolving other pressing issues including nonproliferation in the Middle East. On the non-proliferation issue, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) first endorsed calls for the establishment of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone (NWFZ) in Resolution 3236 approved in December of 1974 following a proposal by Iran and Egypt. From 1980 to 2018, that resolution had been passed annually without a vote by UNGA and endorsement for the proposal has been incorporated in a number of UN Security Council Resolutions. In 2018, the resolution was brought to a vote, but only two countries

## IDEAS POLITICAS

namely the United States and Israel stood against it (see Kelsey Davenport, WMD-Free Middle East Proposal at a Glance, Arms Control Association, December 2018; <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/mewmdfz>). To be sure, this vision has only been spoken about, with no concrete practical actions!

In a recently published book titled “A Middle East Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction: A New Approach to Nonproliferation,” which was published by *Routledge* I have outlined a comprehensive yet achievable roadmap that can be applied in order to realize that vision. While the Middle East region is rife with conflicts and its leaders suspicious of each other, the need to eliminate weapons of mass destruction in that region and around the world is inevitable, largely because of the possible use by the terrorist groups. As I have discussed in the book, we need a roadmap based on a phased approach, including guidelines and parameters for a weapons of mass destruction-free zone. Confidence-building and verification measures gradually would create trust among the region’s stakeholders, enabling them to move along a step-by-step path that might otherwise seem unrealistic (see Mousavina, Seyed Hossein, “A Middle East Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction: A New Approach to Nonproliferation,” 2020, *Routledge*). Writing a review for the book, Ambassador Thomas Pickering noted that “book looks carefully at how the elements and principles of the JCPOA can best be incorporated in a regional accord. It reviews the troubled diplomacy for bringing a zone about with a phased approach. It looks carefully at the pitfalls and problems, including the peace issues, and makes cogent suggestions for moving [forward](#).”

Moreover, Peter Jenkins, the former U.K. Ambassador to the IAEA also wrote a review article published by the *Middle East Eye* stating that “[a] significant part of this illuminating book describes the roots of the current instability in the region, with accounts that are both historical and analytical in regard to Iran's uneasy relations with several of its Arab neighbors, Iran's and Israel's nuclear programs, the 2015 nuclear deal, the use of chemical weapons in Syria, and the emergence of a risk that terrorists will acquire [WMD](#).”

The central argument here is that the JCPOA represents a major *achievement* for the nonproliferation and the International Atomic Agency, because it is, by far, the most comprehensive non-proliferation agreement in [history](#). President Obama reiterated that JCPOA would cut off every pathway that Iran could take to develop a nuclear weapon, contains the most robust and intrusive inspections and transparency regime ever negotiated for any nuclear program in [history](#). This means that the JCPOA is a great asset for strengthening the nonproliferation globally. Reviving the JCPOA would create a great opportunity for Biden’s administration, the world and the regional powers, to regionalize the principles of the JCPOA.

The Biden administration should realize that the time may be running out for the ongoing Vienna negotiations. The United States should return to its obligations, so that Iran can also come back to full compliance and benefit from the economic dividends of the deal in a meaningful way,

## A New Security of the Persian Gulf

The second important development during Biden's presidency is direct talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Baghdad aimed to restore relations severed five years ago. This initiative comes at a time of shifting power dynamics, as US President Joe Biden decided to revive JCPOA and abandon Trump's maximum pressure policy against [Iran](#). Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister said Kingdom is "hopeful" after exploratory talks with [Iran](#). Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman also reiterated that it wants "good relations" with its arch-rival [Iran](#).

It is no longer an arcane notion that the Middle East is the prime case of a conflict-ridden region (see Movahed, Masoud. "Beyond sectarian politics: Saudi-Iranian relations in prospect." *Yale Journal of International Affairs*. 2014. <https://www.yalejournal.org/publications/beyond-sectarian-politics-saudi-iranian-relations-in-prospect>). Engulfed with multiple challenges such as terrorism, civil wars, sectarianism, refugee's crisis, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Saudi-Iranian conflict that have caused so long-standing insecurities in the region. However, peace and cooperation between Iran and its seven Arab neighbors in the Persian Gulf would play a major role to manage some major regional crisis. In an interview with *The Atlantic*, President Obama said: "the Saudis need to *share* the Middle East with their Iranian foes. The competition between the Saudis and the Iranians—which has helped to feed proxy wars and chaos in Syria and Iraq and Yemen—requires us to say to our friends as well as to the Iranians that they need to find an effective way to share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold [peace](#)."

To eliminate the threats -real or imagined, I introduced a comprehensive road map in my new book "A New Structure for Security, Peace, and Cooperation in the Persian Gulf" (Mousavian, 2020). Comprising the six-member states of the GCC, plus Iran and Iraq, in accordance with Paragraph 8 of the UNSC Resolution 598 that provides a framework for resolving all the outstanding issues between Iran and the GCC, particularly Saudi Arabia. Because organizing "a common security arrangement" within the framework of a collective security system facilitates fighting terrorism, extremism, sectarianism, organized crime, drug trafficking among other common security concerns. To resolve the disputes, we need diplomacy which requires dialogue while direct discussions will require a roadmap, which includes a set of reciprocal confidence building measures and pursues a clear vision for a mutually acceptable regional security arrangement. With President Biden sworn into office, countries in the region are far better positioned to resolve their long-lasting disputes than the preceding years during the Trump administration.

The first step toward rapprochement would be for each side to recognize the other's threat perceptions. Member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council are concerned about Iranian efforts to export the 1979 Revolution, challenging their sovereignty, advocating political Islam and to

## IDEAS POLITICAS

expand its regional influence. Iran is concerned about GCC's alignment with the US-Israeli policy of regime change in Iran, providing financial and logistic support to Iran's separatist and terrorist [oppositions](#) and exclusion of Iran from the GCC, undermining the natural and legitimate role of Iran.

Similar points were highlighted in a jointly written opinion article with Abdulaziz Sager, the chair of the Gulf Research Center of Saudi Arabia, in the [The Guardian](#). In that article, we proposed to the leaders of our respective countries that they need to break the current deadlock and move beyond the blame game and engage in direct discussions guided by the following fundamentals:

1. conducting relations based on mutual respect, according to mutual interest and on an equal footing;
2. preserving and respecting sovereignty, territorial integrity, political independence and the inviolability of international boundaries of all states in the region;
3. non-interference in internal affairs of states;
4. rejecting the threat or use of force and committing to peaceful settlement of all disputes;
5. rejecting the policy of supporting sectarian divisions, employing sectarianism for political objectives, and supporting and arming militias in the regional states;
6. respecting the Vienna convention on diplomatic relations, and in particular inviolability of diplomatic facilities;
7. strengthening Islamic solidarity and avoiding conflict, violence, extremism and sectarian tension;
8. full cooperation on counterterrorism measures;
9. treating the religious minority in the other's country as citizens of that country, not primarily as co-religionists with transnational loyalties;
10. rejecting the pursuit of hegemony by any state in the region;
11. ensuring freedom of navigation and the free flow of oil and other resources to and from the region, and the protection of critical infrastructure; and

## IDEAS POLITICAS

12. prohibiting the development or procurement of all forms of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).

Based on UN Resolution 598, the UN Secretary General organizes a Regional Dialogue Forum , all countries need to halt hostile rhetoric and propaganda, reestablish diplomatic relations, begin confidence building measures, organize joint separate task forces to envisage practical measures to realize economic, political, cultural, security and military cooperation to achieve the final goal which would be establishing an Organization for Security and Cooperation in the Persian Gulf (OSCPG) like OSCE-EU.

In short, the concrete steps I have suggested in my recent book on the GCC is based on my observations and long experience in the realm of diplomatic efforts to resolve conflicts peacefully. These steps are both workable and realistic, and proven to be effective when applied in other similar conflicts. Enforcing the rubrics for conflict resolution that I delineated above can bring the region closer to sustainable peace and prosperity for all of the countries in the Middle East.

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