

Shadows of Conflict: Shifts in America's Iran Policy

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Abstract: With the US Presidential election less than a month away, US-Iran tensions still have the potential to escalate into all-out conflict. Following decades of animosity between the two countries, in recent years Trump has undertaken a campaign of “maximum pressure,” to force Iran to limit its destabilizing activities in the Middle Eastern region. This has sparked a new crisis in the Persian gulf. This assessment seeks to highlight the complex dynamics of the US-Iranian relationship and investigate shifts in US policy towards Iran under the Trump administration. In this report SIGNAL examines the recent escalation between the US and Iran, and together with several academics and experts assesses whether this will imminently result in a large-scale conflict. Global media sources and US reports have for months been predicting and anticipating a conflict, but experts in the field are saying that neither Iran nor America would want to risk an escalation before the election. The US always needs to be seen as a credible military threat. It needs to be able to project power in the region, and uphold the belief that it remains uncontested in providing stability. This may account for the recent movement of aircraft carriers and US fleets moving into the Strait of Hormuz, allegedly in preparation for a military flare up with Iran. Whether or not the US is preparing for a strike on Iran, a question poised to all of the academics and experts interviewed for this report, the US military is posturing to demonstrate its power and unwavering dedication to stability throughout the Middle East.

Introduction

The US drone strike against Iranian Major General Qasem Soleimani, the subsequent Iranian counter-strike on bases hosting American personnel in Iraq, and US military force deployments to the Middle East has prompted widespread speculation about the United States setting up for another major military campaign. The Trump Administration has stated its “core objective” as “the systemic change in the Islamic Republic’s hostile and destabilizing actions, including blocking all paths to a nuclear weapon and exporting terrorism.”¹ In the face of retaliatory threats from Tehran, President Trump has maintained throughout 2020 that any attack by Iran would be met with a response “1,000 times greater in magnitude,” signaling to the American public and the international community that an attack is possible. Tensions continue to run high, and many pundits are asking, not if, but when large-scale conflict will erupt.

An article published in Asia Times on September 22 was titled: “Pompeo threatens to light the fuse in Persian Gulf,” with the subheading “the US has sent a carrier strike group to the Middle East region amid rising speculation about a clash with Iran.” Similar headlines have popped up across global media platforms, and people have begun speculating and making predictions. One analyst went as far as to ask: “Will war

¹“The 2019-2020 Iran Crisis and U.S. Military Deployments.” *Congressional Research Service*, U.S. Congress, 9 Jan. 2020, crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11403.

with Iran be Trump's election eve shocker?"² In an article on September 16, Trita Parsi, an expert on Iran who heads the Washington-based think-tank Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, wrote that a "first direct clash [with Iran] may take place as early as this coming Monday," which would have been September 21. This date came and passed, however, with no reportable activity. The situation remains tense, and experts and governments worldwide have started wondering what such kinetic conflict might mean for stability in the region.

The Middle East is already a tumultuous region, and further instability is likely to significantly harm Beijing's interests, which include; ensuring the steady supply of more than half of its oil from Middle Eastern countries, securing its investments and infrastructure projects, and ensuring the success of Xi Jinping's Belt and Road initiative.

The purpose of this report is to investigate shifts in US policy towards Iran that have occurred under the Trump administration, and to assess the prospects of a military confrontation occurring before the election. This report is based on a thorough literature review of primary and secondary source materials, including official government speeches, statements and reports, academic literature, expert analysis, and news reports. To lend further credibility to the assessment, SIGNAL conducted interviews with local thought leaders whose expertise spans the geopolitics of the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean, US-Iran relations, US-foreign policy, Israeli foreign policy, Iranian foreign policy, and US-Israel-Iran relations.

Context - US policy towards Iran

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, relations between Teheran and Washington have been characterized by hostility. America perceives Iran to be the most significant destabilizing force in the Middle East. Teheran's continual support for Shia militant factions in the region and pursuit of nuclear weapons technology pose a direct threat to American interests and its regional allies. Since 2002, American policy has been marked by an attempt to constrain Iran's advancing nuclear program, to prevent Iranian purchase of new conventional weaponry, and to prevent the development of ballistic missiles. Notably, since the revolution, the US has traditionally pursued a policy akin to the containment of the Cold War era.

² Dreyfuss, Bob. "Will War with Iran Be Trump's Election Eve Shocker?" *Asia Times*, 12 Aug. 2020, asiatimes.com/2020/08/will-war-with-iran-be-trumps-election-eve-shocker/.

Expert Insight: US-Iran Hostilities Run Deep

There are several levels to the hostilities between Iran and the United States. Following the Iranian Revolution, Iran adopted a strong anti-American position. It is unsurprising when considering the close cooperation between the US and the former Shah, who the US had helped to install as the ruler of Iran back in the 1940s. For most of his reign, the Shah was considered to be an American proxy.

It is very important to understand that the Islamic Republic viewed the US as the champion of the western culture and imperialism. Western culture and Imperialism are the exact opposites of what Islam represents, it is everything that Islam is against. Therefore, Iran regarded the US as the greatest ideological and strategic opponent. Yet this is only one element.

Following the Iranian Revolution, you had an event in Iran which left a very deep scar on the psyche of the Americans: the Iranian Hostage Crisis. There were the American hostages who were captured in Iran, and embassy members who were kept prisoners in Iran for 444 days. In complete violation of all international law. This not only left a very deep scar on the American psyche, but led to lingering resentment against Iran.

Another level of this animosity is that Iran saw itself as a revisionist force in the Middle East. A force that did not accept the international strategic political status quo... in the Middle East because of Western domination over the economic culture in the nation. Therefore Iran would like to make changes, not necessarily conquer the Middle East, but to instigate revolutions. To bring about the Islamic revolution of the Middle East. Which of course is very much against American interests, because the US was a close ally of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states that are conservative monarchies who cooperated closely with the US.

This is in and of itself a threat against the Americans.

Iran also harbors a deep ideological animosity against Israel and the West. Iran called for the elimination of Israel from the beginning, directly following the 1979 Revolution. And you can speak of various structural problems that exist from the early days of the revolution.

Something else to consider is the political developments that exacerbated the tension to other countries. For instance, during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, the US clearly sided with Iraq. We know today that the US provided Iraq with intelligence information and even tried to block Iranian efforts around the city. This left a very deep scar on the Iranian psyche.

This set the stage for “THE greatest American mistake.” This mistake was, without a doubt, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the removal of Saddam Hussein. This changed the Middle East. By removing Saddam Hussein, the US removed another great strategic enemy of Iran.

Simultaneously, Iraq shifted from a radical Arab country dominated by a Sunni Bathist regime, to a country ruled by the Shiite majority. And since 2003, Iraq has been a weak state. This essentially enabled Iran to become a major player in Iranian-Iraqi politics.

The shift in Iraq had profound implications for the entire middle east, and changed the balance of power in favor of Iran.

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Barack Obama: shifting between appeasement and confrontation

When Barack Obama took office on January 20, 2009, he emphasized the importance of diplomacy and rapprochement. Determined to break the 30 years downward spiral in relations between Washington and Teheran, Obama pledged to “engage in aggressive personal diplomacy” with the Islamic Republic if it ceased its destabilizing behavior in Iraq and offered cooperation on terrorism and nuclear issues.

Despite these aspirations, later in 2009, amid Iran's crackdown on the popular uprisings, the US, along with the United Kingdom and France, discovered that Iran had been secretly constructing a uranium-enrichment facility - the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant. Following the discovery, the administration imposed harsh sanctions against Iran. At an AIPAC policy conference held on March 4, 2012, Obama announced:

“Because of our efforts, Iran is under greater pressure than ever before...Few thought that sanctions could have an immediate bite on the Iranian regime. They have, slowing the Iranian nuclear program and virtually grinding the Iranian economy to a halt in 2011. Many questioned whether we could hold our coalition together as we moved against Iran's Central Bank and oil exports. But our friends in Europe and Asia and elsewhere are joining us. And in 2012, the Iranian government faces the prospect of even more crippling sanctions.”³

Addressing the United Nations General Assembly in 2013, Barack Obama welcomed President Rouhani's statement that Iran would not pursue a nuclear bomb and instructed John Kerry to join the European Union in an effort to step up diplomatic efforts and negotiations towards a deal.⁴ Consequently, the Obama administration signed the interim nuclear agreement with Iran on November 24, 2013, laying the foundation for the later signing of the 2015 nuclear agreement. In July 2015, the Iran Deal, also known by its official title, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), was reached in Vienna by Iran and the P5+1, (China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, United States, Germany), and the European Union.

The JCPOA itself is a 159-page agreement with five annexes. The nuclear deal was endorsed by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231, and adopted on July 20, 2015. Iran's compliance with the nuclear-related provisions of the JCPOA would be verified by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) according to certain requirements set forth in the agreement. American regional allies including Israel and Saudi Arabia, two countries who view Iran as an existential threat, vehemently opposed the deal.

From their perspective, the “sunset clause” in the agreement will allow Iran to produce “as many nuclear weapons as they like as soon as the deal expires” in 2025. Meanwhile, the lifting of sanctions will serve to bolster the Iranian economy. In January 2016, the agreement was implemented after IAEA certified that Iran had taken the key steps to restrict its nuclear program and put measures in place to increase monitoring. Following this report, the sanctions were lifted. Temporarily, the lifting of most nuclear-related sanctions under the JCPOA sparked a restoration of Iran's oil production and revenue that drove GDP growth, but economic growth declined in 2017 as oil production plateaued. To this day, the Iranian economy suffers from low levels of investment and declines in productivity since before the JCPOA, and from high levels

³United States, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary. *Briefing Room*, 31 July 2012. obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/07/31/fact-sheet-sanctions-related-iran.

⁴United States, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary. *Briefing Room*, 24 Sept. 2013. obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly.

of unemployment, especially among women and educated youths. All the main economic aggregates – private and public consumption, investment, imports, and exports declined.⁵

Expert Insight: Obama Makes a “Lousy” Deal

Obama’s approach to Iran’s nuclear power was based on negotiations, agreements, and trust.

As Iran is a member of the nonproliferation treaty, they are therefore entitled to develop nuclear infrastructure for peaceful purposes. And the nonproliferation treaty legitimizes this. In 2015, Obama made the assumption that if there is an agreement, then Iran will implement it.

The nonproliferation agreement left a blind spot and primarily failed to deal with issues other than nuclear proliferation, such as missiles. This is an important issue because Iran has been experimenting with long-range missiles, and the only rationale for them to do this is to equip them with nuclear weapons.

So experimentation with long-range missiles was left out of the agreement, but so was behavior in the Middle East such as military interventions, terrorism, undermining of moderate Arab governments, especially in countries with substantial Shiite communities.

Iran’s behavior in the region remained largely unchecked: the intervention in Lebanon with Hezbollah, the intervention in Gaza with Hamas/Islamic Jihad. Sanctions were removed in return for the nonproliferation agreement, and Iran received hundreds of billions of dollars in frozen assets.

Looking forward 10 years, the Obama Administration thought that Iranian society would be more open, perhaps more democratic. Therefore, the whole issue of nuclear weapons would become irrelevant.

Now we are over five years from the agreement. None of those assumptions have turned out to be true. As part of the agreement. First of all, the agreement itself has been very controversial in the United States, in Israel, and in other places. It was controversial, but it was sanctioned by the United States. Obama assumed that this money would go to improve the economic conditions and bring in Western companies, and with it Iranian society would be more open to Western influence.

But it never happened.

Professor Eytan Gilboa

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Trump takes charge

On May 8, 2018, President Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from the JCPOA and reinstate US nuclear sanctions on the Iranian regime.⁶ The president declared, “the Iran deal must either be renegotiated or terminated.” Shortly after, the White House published a report, explaining that “Iran’s malign behavior in the region is a direct and significant threat to the United States’ economic and strategic interests and to the American people, and risks triggering a wider conflict.”⁷ Just two weeks later, Secretary

⁵Rivlin, Paul. “Iran’s Battered Economy.” Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 16 Sept. 2020, dayan.org/content/irans-battered-economy.

⁶The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance. The Arms Control Association, Oct. 2020, www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/JCPOA-at-a-glance.

⁷United States, The White House, Foreign Policy. *A Look at the U.S. Strategy for Iran*, 13 Feb. 2019. www.whitehouse.gov/articles/look-u-s-strategy-iran/.

of State, Mike Pompeo, announced that America would “continue to work with allies to counter the regime’s destabilizing activities in the region, block their financing of terror, and address Iran’s proliferation of missiles and other advanced weapons systems that threaten peace and stability. We [America] will also ensure Iran has no path to a nuclear weapon – not now, not ever.”⁸

Pompeo added that the 2015 deal contains “fatal flaws” and does not “address Teheran’s continuing development of ballistic and cruise missiles” - echoing Israeli, Saudi, and other Gulf Allies sentiment towards the Iran nuclear issue. Following the withdrawal, the administration implemented a multi-front campaign of diplomatic, economic, and military pressure on Tehran.

The Trump Administration shifted policy because it believes that the JCPOA has deficiencies and weaknesses in that it tackled nuclear issues only, ignoring other critical issues that profoundly affect regional stability. Trump has gone as far as to call the JCPOA “the worst deal ever.”⁹ He intends to rectify the situation by enforcing a campaign of “maximum pressure.”

On November 5th 2018, the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) reimposed sanctions on more than 700 Iranian individuals, entities, aircraft, and vessels. The Treasury explained in a press release that its “imposition of unprecedented financial pressure on Iran should make clear to the Iranian regime that they will face mounting financial isolation and economic stagnation until they fundamentally change their destabilizing behavior. Iran’s leaders must cease support for terrorism, stop proliferating ballistic missiles, end destructive regional activities, and abandon their nuclear ambitions immediately if they seek a path to sanctions relief.”

A new crisis in the Gulf

In early May 2019 then-US National Security Advisor John Bolton announced that the US was deploying the USS Abraham Lincoln carrier strike group and four B-52 bombers to the Middle East. The USS Abraham Lincoln was deployed to the Arabian Sea near Iran. The US government claimed these actions were to deter an alleged Iranian plot to attack US forces in the region. The purpose of these deployments were to “improve America’s ability to respond to aggression, if necessary.” As it happens, it was not long until such aggression emerged. As “maximum pressure” squeezed the Iranian economy, the Revolutionary Guards navy executed a disruptive operation in the waterways of the Persian Gulf.

On May 12, 2019, four commercial ships, including two oil tankers, were damaged near the Strait of Hormuz. One of the ships was Norwegian, while two were Saudi Arabian. The fourth ship belonged to the UAE. Both Norway and the UAE described the attacks as “sabotage.” The US argued that the attacks were either perpetrated by Iran or by Iranian proxies operating in the region. Later, in June, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Navy allegedly mined a Japanese tanker as well as a Norwegian tanker in the Gulf

⁸ Pompeo, M. (2018). Statement by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at the Heritage Foundation, After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy. Washington: The Heritage Foundation.

⁹ Robbins, James S. “The Iran Nuclear Deal Was the Worst Deal Ever. No Wonder Donald Trump Nixed It.” *USA Today*, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 8 May 2018, www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2018/05/08/iran-nuclear-deal-worst-donald-trump-column/589828002/.

of Oman, near the Strait of Hormuz.¹⁰ Both vessels suffered explosions, which forced the crews to abandon the ships and leave them floating in waters between the Gulf states and Iran. The US blamed Iran as the attacks rattled the global oil market, but Iran denied the accusation. Following this, on June 17, the US deployed 1000 more troops to the Middle East. On the same date as the US troops deployment, Iran said it was ten days away from surpassing the limits set by the nuclear deal on its stockpile of low-enriched uranium. Iran said it could reverse the move if European powers made an effort to bypass US sanctions. In early July, Iran officially surpassed the cap on uranium enrichment, breaching the nuclear deal set in 2015.

On June 19, President Trump approved a military strike against Iran, which was ultimately called off before its launch. The strike would have been in retaliation for the shooting down of an unmanned US RQ-4A Global Hawk surveillance drone, which was struck down in the morning of the 19th by an Iranian surface-to-air missile. The missile was launched from the Iranian coast along the Gulf of Oman. Instead of a military strike, the US retaliated with cyber attacks on the IRGC's missile-control systems and requested a meeting with the UN Security Council in order to address regional tensions. The following week, the Trump administration announced new sanctions against the Iranian government, aimed at preventing top Iranian officials from using the international banking system or any financial vehicles set up by European nations or other countries. The sanctions would block potentially billions of dollars in assets. Iran said the new sanctions prompted a "permanent closure" of their diplomatic ties, and the regime said they would refuse to negotiate with Washington until the sanctions were lifted.

At the beginning of July, an Iranian oil tanker was seized by Britain in the Strait of Gibraltar on the grounds that it was trying to ship oil to Syria in direct violation of European Union sanctions. Later that same month, in the Strait of Hormuz, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards seized a British oil tanker, the Stena Impero, for allegedly breaking maritime rules. The ship's seizure sparked a diplomatic crisis between the United Kingdom and Iran, and the UK warned that there would be serious consequences if the tanker was not released. On July 25, the UK announced a change in its maritime policy, explaining that all oil tankers traveling through the Strait of Hormuz would now be accompanied by British warships.¹¹

¹⁰Stewart, Phil. "U.S. Releases Video It Says Shows Iran's Military Recovering Mine." Reuters, Thomson Reuters, 14 June 2019, www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-tanker-usa-release/u-s-releases-video-it-says-shows-irans-military-recovering-mine-idUSKCN1TF071.

¹¹ "Iran's apparent attacks on tankers in May and June share some characteristics with events in the mid-to-late 1980s during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war. 1987-1988 represented the height of the "tanker war," in which both Iran and Iraq were attacking ships in the Gulf. The United States backed Iraq during that war, and sought to limit and deter Iranian attacks on shipping, but there were several U.S.-Iran skirmishes in the Gulf. To protect commercial shipping, the United States launched "Operation Earnest Will" in July 1987, in which the United States reflagged 11 of Kuwait's oil tankers and the U.S. Navy escorted them through the Gulf. Almost immediately after the operation began, one of the tankers, the Bridgeton, was damaged by a large contact mine laid by Iran. In August 1987, U.S. forces captured the Iran Ajr, an Iranian landing craft being used for covert minelaying. However, Iran continued attacking, including with missiles; on October 16, 1987, an Iranian Silkworm missile struck on a U.S.-flagged Kuwaiti tanker, Sea Isle City, 10 miles off Kuwait's Al Ahmadi port. In response to that attack, U.S. destroyers and Special Operations forces blew up an Iranian oil platform east of Bahrain. On April 14, 1988, an Iranian-laid mine struck the U.S. frigate Samuel B. Roberts on patrol in the central Gulf, an attack that led to an April 16, 1988, naval confrontation in which the United States, in Operation Praying Mantis, put a large part of Iran's naval force out of action, including sinking one of Iran's two frigates and rendering the other inoperable. On July 3, 1988, mistaking it for an attacking Iranian aircraft, the guided missile cruiser USS Vincennes shot down Iran Air commercial passenger flight 655, killing all aboard." Congressional Research Services 2020 Report <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R45795.pdf>

On July 19, President Trump claimed that a US navy assault ship, the USS Boxer, had destroyed an Iranian drone in the Strait of Hormuz. US officials said that the drone had flown too close to the ship, and their actions were strictly defensive. Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister, Abbas Araqchi, denied that any Iranian drones had been brought down. On 14 September, drones and a coordinated cruise missile were used to attack the state-owned Saudi Aramco oil processing facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais in Saudi Arabia. The United States and Saudi Arabia both publicly stated that Iran was behind the attack, contradicting the Houthi rebels' claim that they perpetrated the attacks in connection with the Yemeni Civil War. Shortly after the incident, Pompeo Tweeted: "Amid all the calls for de-escalation, Iran has now launched an unprecedented attack on the world's energy supply. There is no evidence the attacks came from Yemen."¹² Iran rejected the accusations that they had any involvement. President Trump announced that the US was ready to respond militarily to the attacks, but held back on military action. The incident raised questions regarding the security of America's regional allies.

On December 27, a rocket attack in northern Iraq killed an American contractor and wounded several US and Iraqi military personnel, setting off several days of heightened tensions in the region. Two days later, the US carried out several military strikes against pro-Iran militia bases in Iraq and Syria, in retaliation for killing the American contractor. At least 25 fighters were killed in the strikes, including at least four Kataib Hezbollah commanders. On December 31, supporters of pro-Iranian paramilitary groups in Iraq, angered by the US strikes, broke into the US embassy compound in Baghdad and set parts of its perimeter on fire, prompting US embassy employees to evacuate to safe rooms. The US sent an additional 100 US marines to reinforce the embassy.

Assassinating Qasem Soleimani

On January 3rd, 2020, President Trump gave an order for the drone assassination of Major-General Qasem Soleimani which drew widespread attention from the international community. Soleimani, the head of the extraterritorial Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps was one of Iran's most powerful officials. Many are now pointing to the US's attack in January 2020 as a potential indicator that there may be some activity before the upcoming US election. It was the only outright attack on Iran by the US in 2020. Still, it was followed by multiple accounts of suspicious activity that were alleged to be the work of US or Israeli operatives acting on behalf of the US.

On September 14, 2020, Trump tweeted, "According to press reports, Iran may be planning an assassination, or another attack, against the United States in retaliation for the killing of terrorist leader Soleimani, which was carried out for his planning a future attack, murdering US Troops..." He claimed this was a mark of the US's newfound seriousness in confronting Tehran's threatening activities in the Middle East. These claims were made by President Trump after US intelligence sources claimed that Tehran was planning to assassinate the US Ambassador to South Africa, an allegation that Iran immediately

¹² Secretary Pompeo on Twitter. 3:59 PM, September 14, 2019.

dismissed. The Iran Foreign Ministry also described the allegation as a US resort to use lies against Iran on the threshold of the US presidential election with the aim of increasing pressure on the Iranian nation.¹³

Throughout the summer months, several mysterious explosions occurred in research facilities and weapons development bases across Iran. In June, there was an enormous explosion just outside Tehran - in proximity to major military and weapons development bases. The New York Times reported that “a Middle Eastern intelligence official said Israel planted a bomb in a building where advanced centrifuges were being developed.”¹⁴ A further report concluded that this resulted from a joint American-Israeli strategy that has evolved out of the recent CIA action plan to engage in offensive strikes against Iran. In early July, there was an explosion deemed “suspicious” in an Iranian nuclear research facility, which also happens to be a site of Iranian centrifuge production. The cause of the explosion, whether bomb or airstrike, is still unknown. The following week on July 15th, “seven ships caught fire at an Iranian shipyard. Other mysterious fires and explosions have hit industrial facilities, a power plant, a missile production factory, a medical complex, a petrochemical plant, and other sites as well.”¹⁵

Media speculation began in the late summer as more information about these events came to light. Many felt they seemed to suggest a trend leaning towards military escalation.

Imminent war: fact or fiction

According to a 2020 Congressional Research Report, The US-Iran tensions still hold potential to escalate into all-out conflict. Most experts interviewed in this report agreed that there always exists the possibility of accidental military conflagration. However, there was resounding consensus regarding the notion that it’s unlikely that the two countries will go to war anytime soon, especially before the upcoming elections.

Eytan Gilboa explains that it would not be in Iranian interests to push the boundary too far with America considering the upcoming elections. Gilboa argues that Iranian military action against the United States would be foolish, “because this would give more votes to Trump than to Biden.” He says this is mainly due to the fact that Biden is talking about making appeasement and conciliations, and an aggressive move would give Trump the opportunity to gain support by retaliating accordingly. Gilboa added that Iran is waiting and will not instigate a conflict because they want Biden to win. He concludes, therefore, that nothing will happen in the remaining weeks before the election. Intelligence officials have previously stated that “Tehran is against another term for President Trump, which it believes will result in a continuation of US pressure on Iran.”

Dr. Lerman, Israel’s former Deputy National Security Advisor for three terms, explains that he would not expect an attack on Iran by America either, simply because there’s no reason for them to escalate the conflict any further right now. In the world, “other things are happening that obviate the need for such an all-out

¹³ TOI Staff. “Trump Threatens '1,000 Times Greater' Response to Any Attack by Iran.” *The Times of Israel*, 15 Sept. 2020, www.timesofisrael.com/trump-threatens-1000-times-greater-response-to-any-attack-by-iran/.

¹⁴ Dreyfuss, Bob. “Will War with Iran Be Trump's Election Eve Shocker?” *Asia Times*, 12 Aug. 2020, asiatimes.com/2020/08/will-war-with-iran-be-trumps-election-eve-shocker/.

¹⁵ Ibid.

attack.” He offers that what could happen is “the use of American power where it is most effective. Mainly interlocking naval blockades.” Given the United States superior naval capacity, this cannot be ruled out, even with the current discussions in the UN, and the fact that the US has no interest in putting more boots on the ground. This would not be an all-out war. This is in line with his policies that were already promoted during the Obama administration. However, stability in the region is ultimately the most important thing. He adds that he does not think that an act of aggression “is beyond the Trump Administration,” but echoes the other experts in saying that the possibility is extremely low.

Donald Trump is not intent on going to war with Iran. Instead, he wants a better deal than Obama was able to secure: one that eliminates the option of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons and addresses the issues of missile development as well as regional destabilization. Middle East affairs analyst, and editor at Israel’s Jerusalem Post, Seth Frantzman, says that President Trump approves of and cares about the economic approach. Frantzman points out that Trump has openly expressed that he felt that John Bolton, the former United States National Security Advisor, had been too aggressive. When it comes to Pompeo, the longest surviving member of the administration, the President approves of his actions.

It’s true that, as of January 2020, an additional 14000 troops had been deployed to the Gulf region. While it may be tempting to view this as preparation for war, Dr. Lerman explains that “It’s more a question of having a credible military threat.” The United States needs to demonstrate to Iran that if necessary, the US military has the capacity to act swiftly and effectively. According to the logic, as long as Iran thinks there is a threat, they will act accordingly. If viewing the situation purely politically, in terms of Trump’s decision making, the chances of him choosing to act aggressively against Iran are at the lowest percentage points. But it is not impossible. Throughout his presidency, Trump has made dramatic decisions based on opportunities to act, so it is never out of the question that President Trump will make an unexpected decision.

“If the Americans want Iran to concomitantly negotiate a way, or its intention to become a nuclear-neutral power, there needs to be a credible military threat.” This is something that the Obama administration also understood. The Obama administration realized during their first term in office - something Israel had known all along - that Iran would not be deterred simply by the force of sanctions.

Has “Maximum Pressure” worked?

In abandoning the 2015 nuclear deal, Trump promised that “maximum pressure” on Iran would lead to a better outcome than remaining within the JCPOA.¹⁶ However, since launching the campaign, Iran seems to have become more antagonistic towards America, and the situation appears to have worsened overall.

¹⁶Slavin, Barbara. “Five Reasons Why US 'Maximum Pressure' on Iran Has Backfired.” Atlantic Council, 14 May 2020, www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/five-reasons-why-us-maximum-pressure-on-iran-has-backfired/.

Many analysts have suggested that Trump's policy decisions had closed the potential for diplomacy with Teheran.¹⁷ Joe Biden called the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran "a failure" and said "the nation is closer to a nuclear weapon now than it was when Trump came to office," this despite several sanctions that choked Iran's oil exports and other sectors.¹⁸ Because of Trump's chosen path, the Iranian regime thus far "has remained defiant and refused to meet with Trump officials."¹⁹ Another consequence of this decision is the increasing isolation the US has found at the United Nations Security Council, "where 13 of 14 other countries on the panel – including several US allies – have rejected its bid to reimpose, or snapback, restrictions targeting Iran's nuclear program."²⁰

In a strict sense, Trump's strategy has not been entirely successful as it has failed to bring Iran to the negotiating table. However, at the same time, the campaign of "maximum pressure" has "cut down Iran's ability to threaten other countries and project its power," explains Seth Franzman.²¹ This is because "Iran has less cash at the moment, and we see that their economy has really suffered from the lack of oil export revenues, among other things, such as the coronavirus outbreak." The Iranian government has been withdrawing money from its foreign currency reserves, which according to the International Monetary Fund, will decline by \$19 billion this year.²² In September the annual inflation rate increased to 34.4% and since the reimposition of sanctions the rial has lost 70% of its value.²³ The experts say it's a good thing because Iran will have difficulty paying various terrorist groups and proxy forces it supports, such as Hezbollah. If Iran is not provided with an injection of funds soon, "maximum pressure" may just work. However, should Iran be given a lifeline, the country that does so will be contributing to further instability.

Joe Biden says this policy has failed. In an editorial for CNN, he said there was "a smart way to be tough on Iran", pledging to push back the country's "destabilizing activities" while also offering it a "path to diplomacy".²⁴ On multiple occasions, Biden has expressed his intent to re-enter a deal with Iran if elected in November. Notably, Dr. Lerman points out that no matter the outcome of the election, Teheran will face a dilemma - "they will not get a better deal compared to the Obama deal." Dr. Lerman believes that due to the grim economic conditions in Iran, the regime may be forced to negotiate with President Trump in order to prevent economic collapse. Any support provided to the Iranian regime will hinder the prospects of bringing Iran back to the negotiating table.

¹⁷ Toossi, Sina. "Iran Is Becoming Immune to U.S. Pressure." *Foreign Policy*, The Slate Group, 2 July 2020, foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/02/iran-united-states-maximum-pressure/.

¹⁸ Wadhams, Nick, and Saleha Mohsin. "Trump Admin Mulls New Sanctions on Iran's Financial Sector." *Middle East News | Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera Media Network, 28 Sept. 2020, www.aljazeera.com/economy/2020/9/28/bbtrump-admin-mulls-news-sanctions-on-irans-financial-sector.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ SIGNAL Interview with Seth Frantzman

²² Rivlin, Paul. "Iran's Battered Economy." *Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies*, 16 Sept. 2020, dayan.org/content/irans-battered-economy.

²³ Fassihi, Farnaz. "With Inflation Ravaging Currency, Iran Is Changing Names and Numbers." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 4 May 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/05/04/world/middleeast/iran-currency-inflation-rial-toman.html.

²⁴ "US Election 2020: Who Do Russia, China and Iran Want to Win?" *BBC News*, BBC, 5 Oct. 2020, www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2020-54293489.

Speaking to the deep seated, historical, cultural, and ideological factors at play, Prof. Litvak argues that regardless of whether or not there will be a newfound nuclear agreement, this will not change the deep fears and animosity that Western and Sunni countries feel towards Iran. It will not change Iran's ambitions to be a leading power in the Middle East. There will always be a risk of destabilisation when dealing with Iran (under the current leadership). He went on to explain that an agreement may potentially ease tensions between Iran and the West, but structural change will not be seen in the short-term.

US policy moving forward: Trump vs. Biden

President Trump has declared that if he is reelected, he will reach an agreement with Iran within one month. He has also said that if he is reelected, he will continue his policy of maximizing pressure.²⁵ It is unclear exactly how President Trump will pursue both of these tactics simultaneously, but if he wins reelection, he would be in an improved position to offer Iran a deal where he reduces sanctions in order to bring the Iranans to the table for renegotiation. In this situation, he would have leverage to address the deficiencies of the previous deal.²⁶ While it is unlikely that in the current political climate this would occur within one month of his reelection, the possibility remains for a new deal to be developed with the Iranians if Trump does reduce some of the currently imposed sanctions.

Some believe that Trump is considering new sanctions in an attempt to hinder Biden's ability to reenter the JCPOA, since it is clear at this point in time that Biden intends to revisit the nuclear deal if elected president. Considering that Biden is now polled to win by a landslide, Trump may well double down on the pressure. The prospects of facing an embarrassing loss could increase the President's tendency to pursue a military option. The main argument in support of the US government's new sanctions is that the measures would be difficult to rescind, because a Biden administration would need to be able to demonstrate that Iran is no longer working on missile proliferation or associating with terrorist actors in order to relieve or lessen the sanctions.

Professor Litvak thinks the Iranians are waiting for Biden to be elected. They are holding onto a hope that they can maybe improve their relations, and have some of their sanctions lifted with a Biden administration. Joe Biden had said that if he gets elected, he is interested in returning to the agreement. This would mean that sanctions will be lifted from Iran and various restrictions will be changed. The Iranians feel that they are in a better position and have better opportunities if Biden is elected. Currently, Iran does not see an incentive to negotiate with Trump before the elections. If Trump is reelected, Iran may be forced to negotiate, and even though Trump wants to advance this relationship now in the face of the election, Iran understands it is more advantageous for them to wait.

Assessment and Conclusion

²⁵ SIGNAL Interview with Prof. Meir Litvak

²⁶ SIGNAL Interview with Prof. Eytan Gilboa

Traditionally, Washington's policy towards Tehran since the Iranian revolution has been characterized by containment. President Obama shifted the US approach, creating the "dual-track strategy" that integrates diplomacy and sanctions with strong emphasis on negotiations. Critics, including Netanyahu and Gulf state leaders, disapproved of the sunset clause and pointed out that the agreement does not address ballistic missile development or Iran's destabilizing behavior in the region. However, Obama viewed the nuclear deal as a gateway for future change within Iran, which will lead to different behavior in the region. This didn't happen. In 2018, President Trump unilaterally withdrew from the 2015 JCPOA, calling it the "worst deal ever," and imposed a new campaign of "maximum pressure." Thus far, the campaign has failed to bring Iran to the negotiating table; however, it has constrained its ability to support destabilizing behavior. In May 2019, tensions escalated dramatically in the waterways of the Persian Gulf. The subsequent assassination of the IRGC's commander in chief, coupled with increasing US military deployments to the Middle East, pundits are speculating that war is imminent.

The political climate in Iran has decisively turned hostile to any talk of negotiating with the United States, reestablishing a taboo that existed for years before the nuclear negotiations during the presidency of Barack Obama. In order to maintain stability in the region during a period of global uncertainty, however, the US is unlikely to intentionally escalate tensions in the immediate future. The possibility of an accidental military conflagration escalating into all-out conflict is always, to some degree, possible. Trump has proven to be unpredictable, and if threatened by losing the presidential race, could be inspired to pursue some military feat. However, based on the present assessment findings, it seems highly unlikely that an escalation of such magnitude is imminent (before the election). It is neither in Iran's nor America's interest, especially before the election - as Iran does not want to strengthen Trump's support base.

President Trump has taken several actions to promote stability in light of the upcoming election, including the normalization agreements between Israel and the UAE, and Israel and Bahrain. This alignment of forces in the region demonstrates American commitment to the forces of stability and consolidates cooperation between not just the US, Israel, and the Gulf states, but also Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. The agreements were seen as a boost to his strategy of "maximum pressure" on Iran. Joe Biden also welcomed the agreements, demonstrating the bipartisan nature of these commitments, and underlining the fact that both presidential candidates are focused on maintaining stability in the Middle East.

Meanwhile, it is important to emphasize that Trump's intention has never been war. He wants a better deal and believes the pressure will bring Iran back to the negotiating table. Nevertheless, this does not mean that there will be no confrontation; US-Iran relations are complex and historical enmity runs deep. The US shows no signs of backing down from its "maximum pressure campaign." The US is likely to continue strengthening its military capabilities in the Persian Gulf region, particularly its Navy, to pose a credible threat and deterrence. Iran is poised to continue disrupting maritime activity in the Gulf region, and America may look to implement blockades. At present, the situation remains volatile, and while an imminent war is highly unlikely, the pressure hasn't yet reached its maximum. Provided Iran doesn't find lifelines in the international community to save its economy, it may have no choice but to settle for the deal. What's certain is that regardless of which candidate becomes US president, the deal will be worse than that of Obama's. This begs the question: Is that something Iran is willing to accept?

