



# **State, Governance And Regional Integration In Africa**

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## **From Friendship to Economic Sanctions: An Analysis of America-Iran Bilateral Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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### **Abstract**

*Relations between the United States of America and Iran at some point could be said to have been fairly cordial and friendly. When Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was the Shah (from 1941 until his overthrow in 1979) the U.S. was a strong supporter of Iran and the Shah. In 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini seized power and the Iranian Revolution occurred. He was named Supreme Leader and the country was renamed the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Iranian legal system was replaced by a set of Islamic laws and regulations called velayat-e faqih. Since then, American-Iranian relations began to deteriorate. This study examines the twist and turns in the relations between both countries in the face of mounting hostility by the United States towards Iran by the Trump administration. It adopts a qualitative research method with reliance on secondary sources of data and discovered that relations between Iran and America had some remarkable improvement during President Barrack Obama's administration. The study equally discovered that Iran's opposition to American hegemony and control alongside thickening anti-Iranian sentiments and passion by America and that of America in the Middle East lies at the heart of the frosty bilateral relations between the two countries. It concluded that the United States and its Western allies must have the political will to deal with Iran peacefully, diplomatically and with the understanding that military actions will not advance long-term normalization of relations.*

**Key words:** Friendship, Sanctions, Bilateral Relations, America, Iran.

### **Introduction**

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the United States and Iran have seen each other as enemies. The revolution triggered the attack on the U.S. embassy in Tehran and a 444-day hostage crisis. Nearly 40 years of mutual animosity, distrust and broken diplomatic relations have rendered these hostile attitudes on both sides as status quo. No one dared to make gestures to break the status quo until the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia and China agreed to engage Iran in nuclear negotiations. This effort resulted in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Iran's nuclear program is one of many issues that have negatively affected Iranian-Western relations; Western powers, Israel and the West's Sunni allies in the Middle East are alarmed by the thought of a nuclear-powered Iran (Alvi, 2018).

On September 11, 2001, when al Qaeda supporters flew planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in Washington, D. C., and attempted to fly into

the White House, Iranian-American relations plummeted. In 2002, President George W. Bush designated Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as the “Axis of Evil” and declared Iran a terrorist state. President Obama’s attempts to persuade the US Congress to ratify an antinuclear agreement with Iran in 2015 sparked a Republican political blow-back and reignited anti-Iranian passions (Alvi, 2018).

Today, condemnations of Iran are fairly common. Politically conservative commentator Ann Coulter referred to Iranians as “ragheads. Brent Scowcroft, a one-time National Security Agency advisor, called the Iranian people “rug merchants” (Paige, Hatfield and Liang, 2015). The Columbus Dispatch recently ran a cartoon portraying Iran as a sewer with cockroaches crawling out of it. Debra Cagan, a senior official at The Pentagon, declared: “I hate all Iranians”. In March, 2015, John Bolton, one-time U. S. ambassador to the United Nations, in a New York Times op-ed piece, advised, “To Stop Iran’s Bomb, Bomb Iran” (Paige et al., 2015).

As President Donald Trump’s rhetoric against Iran heats up again, it is worth recalling the deep history of mutual respect and friendship that once existed between the US and Iran. In the 1800s, American missionaries journeyed to what was then called Persia. The missionaries helped build important institutions, schools, colleges, hospitals and medical schools in Persia, many of which still exist. So when Dr. Joseph Plumb Cochran, an American physician fluent in Persian, Turkish, Kurdish and Assyrian, died at Urmia in Northwestern Iran in 1905, over 10,000 people attended his funeral. Cochran founded a hospital in Urmia in 1879, as well as Iran’s first medical school (Potts, 2018). This image clashes with most American stereotypes of Iran and its people, and is at odds with decades of anti-Iranian sentiment emanating from Washington. From 1834, when the first Protestant American mission was established in Urmia, to 1953, when the CIA’s involvement in Iran’s internal affairs set the United States on the road to conflict with Tehran, Americans were the good guys (Potts, 2018).

Similarly, other contemporary factors and configurations within the Middle East region, and Western and Russian involvement in them, strongly affect the behavior of the Iranian regime. These factors go far beyond the oversimplified caricatures of regional competition boiling down to “Iran versus Saudi Arabia,” or Shi’ism versus hardline Sunnism/Wahhabism, respectively. Various U.S. administrations have viewed Iran differently, and U.S. foreign policy has led to intense negative reactions towards Iran in the region. For example, when the Obama administration forged the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, Saudi Arabia and its Sunni allies were enraged. They felt that by lifting economic sanctions against Iran, the nuclear deal handed Iran the assets and means to finance its regional agendas which the Sunni belt views as sheer mischief to undermine and destabilize Sunni interests and agendas. As much as Saudi Arabia was furious with the Obama administration for making the nuclear deal, Iran today is equally furious with the Trump administration for withdrawing from it (Alvi, 2018).

Yet, if President Trump wants to understand Iran and how to approach its leaders, he needs to know that Iran’s grievances pertaining to the United States go much further back than his decision to withdraw from the JCPOA (though the

withdrawal gives Iran yet another reason to distrust the United States). For example, Iranians will never forget two incidents in history. On August 19, 1953, the CIA overthrew a democratically-elected, secular Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, derailing Iran's democratization. Then, on July 3, 1988, the U.S. Navy's USS Vincennes shot down Iran Air Flight 655 in the Persian Gulf, killing 290 passengers and crew members. Conversely, the U.S. cannot forget that on Oct. 23, 1983, Iran's terrorist militia, the Lebanese Hezbollah, murdered 241 U.S. Marines in the Beirut barracks suicide truck bombing. In addition, Iran has supported militias targeting U.S. troops in Middle Eastern conflict zones, and the regime's Republican Guard Forces harass U.S. Naval assets patrolling in the Persian Gulf. Iran's verbal threats against Israel are alarming to the United States; though it would be equally dangerous to regional stability and security should Israel decide to attack Iran militarily (Alvi, 2018).

Of all the international interactions the United States has had with the nations of the world, one of the most contentious relationships has been with the country of Iran. The United States has completely and utterly refused to have diplomatic relations with Iran in the last 39 years, after the infamous Iran Hostage crisis (Morgan, 2015). Over the years, espionage, covert operations and deceit have characterized the U.S and Iran's bilateral relationship. Although Obama and other western leaders made effort to rebuild the relationship through JCPOA, Trump's renewed altercation has strained this move.

It must be noted that there are plethora of extant literature on the relationship between the U.S and Iran. Similarly, scholars, analysts and commentators have reacted differently to the changes in the relationship between both countries as influenced by successive regimes in Tehran and Washington. For instance, Shari Paige, Elaine Hatfield and Lu Liang (2015) have captured in much detail the role of religion in the perceptions of prejudice and discrimination between the two countries. Douglas Little (2011) discusses the cordial relationship and friendship between the U.S and Iran since 1900 while Daniel Potts (2015) views Iran-U.S. relations as a forgotten friendship. Similarly, Ariane Tabatabai and Anne Tracy Samuel (2017) highlights the critical lessons from the Iran-Iraq war in managing U.S-Iran relations while Cody Morgan (2015) views the relationship between Iran and the U.S as a history of covert action and a promising future. However, none of these studies discusses the renewed onslaught and call for sanctions and cancellation of the JCPOA between Iran and the U.S by Donald Trump, the present president of the United States of America. This gap, our study intends to fill. However, studies by Haiyat Alvi (2018) which advises Trump to take cognizance of history in dealing with Iran, and Bill Chappell (2018) which dwells on the issues involved in the recently terminated U.S 1955 Treaty with Iran, addresses the current face-off between both countries without highlighting in the process their past history and the reaction of the international community to this recent call for stiffer sanctions against Iran by the U.S which is addressed in this study.

Thus, this study is not only intended to fill the above identified gaps in knowledge in studies on Iran-United States of America relations but to also proffer

policy options that could influence positively relations between the two countries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We therefore begin with a theoretical orientation that could explain the state of this relationship, the reaction of the international community towards this recent face-off, and an examination of the contending issues between Trump and Rouhani in the unfolding frosty relations.

### **Realist Thesis of U.S-Iran Frosty Relationship**

Realism is one of the most basic theories in international relations that explain the motivation of states in the pursuit of power in the global arena. Realism further advances the notion of self interest upon which all states operate as the greatest factor which causes nations to diverge from morally guided behavior. Realist theory draws its roots from the writings of Nicolo Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, Thucydides and Sun Tzu. However, the actual theory of realism didn't come about until World War II. These ancient writers that related the same ideas as modern realism have been adopted as the "founding fathers" of this theory, but Hans Morgenthau and E.H. Carr are considered most instrumental in establishing the tenets of classical realism theory in the modern era (Mearsheimer, 2014).

There are many definitions that sprout from realism theory, but all of these various definitions have a similar thing in common. The foundation of realism is that all human beings act according to their own self-interest or survival and that nation-states are similarly guided by this same self-interested need for survival. This theory divorces all considerations of legality and moral guidance from state policy and holds that all states are capable of breaking any law, treaty or alliance if they feel it is necessary to advance their interests and power (Morgenthau, 1978).

Hans Morgenthau was a leading postwar intellectual of political realism in the international relations discipline and, at times, an outspoken critic of U.S. foreign policy. In his 1949 article, "The Primacy of the National Interest, Morgenthau criticized the Truman Doctrine for placing universal moral principles (e.g., the promotion of freedom and democracy) above the national interest as the standard for U.S. foreign policy, and in the 1960s he became a vocal opponent of the Vietnam War. For Morgenthau (1978:62), the main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics is the concept of interest defined as power." Morgenthau believed that international politics is fundamentally a struggle for power (understood in terms of the mutual relations of political control between nation-states), and that peace is often tenuous in a world lacking a sovereign authority that can protect the interests and survival of individual states (an insight that has been codified in the neorealist conception of "international anarchy"). As a result, the "national interest" is primarily concerned with the resources (especially military and economic capabilities) and limitations (primarily the balance of power) that determine the national power of the state in international politics (Morgenthau, 1978).

From the above realist prism and in league with the American crave for the pursuit of power in order to protect its national interest; the U.S has never hidden her intention to create some sort of regional balancing as far as the Middle East is concerned. Admittedly, it is hard to credit Donald Trump with having a coherent

strategy of any kind, given the recurring contradictions in what he says and his penchant for reversing course without warning or explanation. But in the Middle East, at least, one could argue that Trump is trying in his own ill-informed, impulsive, and erratic way to return to the strategy of offshore balancing that the United States pursued more or less successfully in this region from 1945 to 1992 (Walt, 2018).

After World War II, U.S. leaders recognized that the Middle East was of increasing strategic importance. Oil and natural gas were fueling the world economy, and the Middle East contained enormous and readily accessible reserves. Accordingly, preventing any single power from dominating the region and gaining effective control of these critical resources became a central U.S. objective. But the United States didn't try to protect Middle East oil by colonizing the region or garrisoning it with its own troops. Instead, it relied on Great Britain (until the late 1960s) and a variety of local clients to maintain a regional balance of power and prevent the Soviet Union from acquiring excessive influence. America had also adopted a policy of noninterference with military force in the affairs of these Middle Eastern countries until it did so in Lebanon in 1958 and Iraq in 1990 to liberate a seized Kuwait. Because that invasion posed a serious threat to the regional balance of power, it made good sense for the United States (and many others) to intervene to expel Iraq and demolish much of its military machine. The United States abandoned this sensible strategy after the first Gulf War, however, opting first for dual containment and then regional transformation (Walt, 2018).

However, Donald Trump who had been critical of successive U.S. government's policy in the Middle East and promised to act differently during his campaign has not shown any sign of policy shift either in Syria or Iran. In fact, Trump's approach to the Middle East has been to let America's local clients namely Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and the Syrian Kurdish militias, do more to counter various regional opponents such as Iran, Syria, and increasingly Russia, as well as non-state troublemakers, including al Qaeda and its offshoots, the Islamic State, Hezbollah and Hamas (Walt, 2018). To aid these efforts, the United States will sell or give its allies lots of sophisticated weapons (which helps reduce the trade deficit) and provide them with diplomatic cover at the United Nations. Washington will also turn a blind eye to whatever foolish cruelties its regional partners decide to inflict on mostly helpless victims and forget about trying to promote democracy, human rights, regional transformation, or any of that idealistic sob stuff. Iran remains one of the greatest recipients of this policy by the United States (Walt, 2018).

President Trump has not hidden his disdain for the Islamic Republic of Iran since his ascension to power aside from the general Middle East policy of regional balancing. In a renewed show of power and strength over the Asian country, the U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo outlined 12 ambitious requirements for a "new deal" with the Iranians. His demands include a complete halt to uranium enrichment, unqualified access of International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors anywhere in the country, a ban on the development or flight-testing of nuclear-capable missiles, the end of Iranian support for Hezbollah and other regional proxies, the withdrawal

from Syria of all forces under Iranian command, and the cessation of Tehran's threatening behavior toward U.S. regional partners ((Einhorn, 2018). The administration believes that, by withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal and re-imposing sanctions that were suspended under the deal, it could compel Iran to accept U.S. demands or face the prospect of regime collapse.

Addressing the United Nations for the second time in his presidency, Donald Trump reserved his strongest warning for Iran in a continuous show of contempt and demonstration of America's power over Iran. He stated categorically that "Iran's leaders sow chaos, death and destruction. They do not respect their neighbors or border, or the sovereign rights of nations. Instead, Iran's leaders plunder the nation's resources to enrich themselves and to spread mayhem across the Middle East and far beyond". For Trump, the Iran deal was a windfall for Iran's leaders as the country's military budget grew nearly 40 percent in the years the deal was reached (Schaefer, 2018). He further accused the Iranian dictatorship of using the funds to build nuclear-capable missiles, increase internal repression, finance terrorism, and fund havoc and slaughter in Syria and Yemen. Trump stated that America cannot allow the world's leading sponsor of terrorism to possess the planet's most dangerous weapons and 'we cannot allow a regime that chants "death to America and that threatens Israel with annihilation, to possess the means to deliver a nuclear warhead to any city on earth'. He made clear that the United States will continue to ratchet up pressure on Iran through sanctions and urged other nations to "support Iran's people as they struggle to reclaim their religious and righteous destiny." Iran is a serious threat, and the administration is right to confront it, Trump concluded (Schaefer, 2018).

In a reaction to America's realist posture and hegemonic tendencies, Iran has persistently rejected America's effort to subjugate its sovereignty in the guise of fighting terrorism. Iran's President Hassan Rouhani reacted swiftly to President Trump's statement withdrawing America from the nuclear deal and restituting crippling economic sanctions. He went on state TV to attempt to salvage the nuclear deal upon which he has staked his political career. Rouhani said Iran would stick by the terms of the agreement if the other signatories, the U.K., France, Germany, China, Russia and the E.U. could prove they would meet their commitments (Sarjoie, 2018). Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zariff on his part stated categorically that "allegations, threats and profanity will never intimidate Iranians. Trump will eventually discover this, as every predecessor did". The most emphatic reaction, however, was from Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Sayyed Khamenei. Addressing his people, he said, "You heard what worthless things the American president said last night," he told Iranians in a televised speech. "He lied maybe up to 10 times and he threatened the state and the nation. I tell him on behalf of the Iranian nation: Mr. Trump, you can't do a damned thing!" (Sarjoie, 2018). These reactions towards America by Iranian officials are all pointers to the fact that Trump and his policies must be rejected and Iran is in no position to be subjugated.

Realism also emphasizes external factors, such as balance of power and geography, and downplays the role of individual leaders. But the Trump presidency is an eloquent and worrisome reminder of the damage that individual leaders can do and

especially when they are convinced that they are “the only one that matters”. Nonetheless, Trump’s singular incompetence isn’t sufficient reason to toss realism aside completely. For one thing, realism still helps us understand how Trump can get away with the thinking that the United States is still so powerful and secure that it can do a lot of dumb things and suffer only modest losses. More importantly, realism remains an extremely useful guide to a lot of things that have happened in the recent past or that are happening today. And as Trump is proving weekly, leaders who ignore these insights inevitably make lots of dumb mistakes (Walt, 2018).

Realism has a long history and many variants, but its core rests on a straightforward set of ideas. As the name implies, realism tries to explain world politics as they *really* are, rather than describe how they *ought to be*. For realists, power is the centerpiece of political life. Although other factors sometimes play a role, the key to understanding politics lies in focusing on who has power and what they are doing with it. The Athenians’ infamous warning to the Melians captures this perfectly: “The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must” (Walt, 2018).

### **Western Powers and International Reaction to the U.S-Iran Frosty Relationship**

For the first time in the history of the UN, the United States, a permanent member of the Security Council with veto power is engaging in penalizing nations across the entire world; not for violating a security council resolution, rather, for abiding by it. The resolution in question, UN Security Council resolution 2231, was authored (including by the US itself) and passed unanimously by the council. After more than a year of holding the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, known also as the Iran deal) to ransom and demanding Iran make a spade of unilateral nuclear and non-nuclear concessions, ultimately, on 8 May 2018, the Trump administration withdrew from the JCPOA (Khoshroo, 2018). Simultaneously, Trump signed a presidential memorandum to reimpose all US sanctions lifted or waived in connection with the Iran deal. As a result, the agreement that was the culmination of more than a decade of negotiations and was endorsed by Security Council resolution 2231 now faces an existential moment, especially as the first set of US sanctions come into effect (Khoshroo, 2018). The U.S did not only withdraw from the JCPOA but also revoked the Treaty of Amity of 1955 between it and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Security council resolution 2231 underlines “promoting and facilitating the development of normal economic and trade contacts and cooperation with Iran” as an essential part of the JCPOA and calls upon all member states to support its implementation, including to ensure Iran’s access in areas of trade, technology, finance and energy, and refrain from actions that undermine it. As part of the JCPOA itself, the US alongside other JCPOA participants, undertook to refrain from any policy intended to directly and adversely affect the normalization of trade and economic relations with Iran (Khoshroo, 2018). The Trump administration is nonetheless now targeting countries across the world for actually re-engaging Iran economically in accordance with their obligations under Security Council resolution

2231. The US withdrawal from JCPOA and re-imposition of its sanctions is deemed by many as a serious breach of its legal obligations under the UN charter, which entails its international responsibility. This development has attracted diverse reactions from western powers and other members of the international community. While some have risen in utter condemnation of the U.S, others have offered some palliatives to redress the situation. In fact, several global powers have decried President Donald Trump's administration for reinstating tough economic sanctions against Iran, while actively calling on businesses to ignore the White House over the decision ((Meredith, 2018).

The European Union (EU) reacted through its foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini calling for Europeans to increase their business dealings with Iran in defiance of bellicose statements from the US president. The EU stepped up efforts to save the Iran nuclear deal by encouraging its companies to ignore the White House as Trump vowed to block those trading with Iran from the U.S market (Boffey and Dehghan, 2018). He said Brussels would not let the 2015 agreement with Tehran die, and she urged Europeans to make their own investment decisions. During a trip to Wellington, New Zealand, Mogherini said: "We are doing our best to keep Iran in the deal, to keep Iran benefiting from the economic benefits that the agreement brings to the people of Iran, because we believe this is in the security interests of not only our region but also of the world. For him, "If there is one piece of international agreements on nuclear non-proliferation that is delivering, it has to be maintained while he stated categorically thus: "we are encouraging small and medium enterprises in particular to increase business with and in Iran as part of our security priority" (Boffey and Dehghan, 2018).

In his reaction, Iran's ambassador to the UN, Gholamali Khoshroo (2018), stated that the community of nations has a duty to stand up to lawlessness and contempt for agreed norms and 'the international community must act in the face of this international intimidation and affront towards the international legal order'. He observed that what the Trump administration has done, through threatening economic revenge against the countries that continue their economic ties with Iran, is to weaponize its economy. For him, it is a clear rejection of diplomacy and multilateralism; a clear call for confrontation rather than cooperation; an open invitation to resorting to logic of force instead of force of logic. Such reckless and menacing behaviour by the Trump administration renders it responsible for the ensuing adverse consequences, and it must be held accountable for such blatant material breach of its obligations under the JCPOA; for the consequences of its wrongful acts that fly in the face of the UN charter and international law; and for the damages and irreparable harm it has caused to Iran and its international business relations (Khoshroo, 2018).

Furthermore, the Iranian ambassador observed that the Trump administration's abdication of the deal is a tragedy for multilateral diplomacy and will leave a deep scar on the credibility of such needed diplomatic ventures for some time to come. For him, the specter of extreme unilateralism, terminal intransigence and the unwinding of vital global institutions is a threat not just to Iran, but to every

nation. In his words, "It may be tempting to hope for the proverbial passing of the storm, but at this point in time that is clearly no longer a sustainable approach". He concluded by stating thus: "It is our true belief that each and every member of the community of nations has a duty to stand up to lawlessness and contempt for the rule of law in international relations; in particular, by refusing to give effect to irresponsible acts and by holding any law-breaking party accountable for the consequences of its acts" (Khoshroo, 2018).

Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu praised the decision, calling it "historic." Netanyahu, a leading critic of the deal, said leaving it unchanged would be "a recipe for disaster, a disaster for our region, a disaster for the peace of the world." He said Iran's aggression has grown since the deal, especially in Syria, where he says it is "trying to establish military bases to attack Israel". Netanyahu concluded that despite the deal, the terrorist regime in Tehran is developing a ballistic missiles capability, "ballistic missiles to carry nuclear warheads far and wide, to many parts of the world" (Morin, 2018).

Similarly, President Trump's call for other countries to join U.S. sanctions against Tehran were rejected by the other signatories of the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran namely, Britain, France, Russia, China, and Germany. This rejection came after Trump presented his arguments on September 26, 2018 at a Security Council meeting that he chaired on the nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, accusing the Iranian government of exporting "violence, terrorism and turmoil" (Gearan and DeYoung, 2018). Meanwhile, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani told journalists on the sidelines of the UN meeting that Tehran would continue to meet its obligations under the nuclear deal as long as his country benefits. The response from Washington's European allies also served to highlight their disagreement with Trump's decision earlier to unilaterally withdraw the United States from the 2015 accord, which Trump insists will not prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons (Gearan and DeYoung, 2018).

But French President Emmanuel Macron and British Prime Minister Theresa May both disagreed with Trump's assessment on the Iran nuclear deal, insisting that it is the best way to prevent Tehran from developing nuclear weapons. Macron and May also implicitly referred to the "America First" foreign policy that Trump enunciated on September 25, 2018 in his speech to the UN General Assembly (Meredith, 2018). For May, ensuring nonproliferation of nuclear weapons "requires collective leadership of the type that led to the agreement" on the Iran nuclear deal in 2015 and "for many years, the scale and nature of Iran's nuclear program raised serious international concerns," She concluded that the Iran nuclear deal "remains the best means of preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, and we are committed to preserving" the accord "as long as Iran continues to abide by its obligations in full". Macron said Trump had created a "serious crisis of confidence" by unilaterally withdrawing the United States from the deal, and that UN Security Council resolution supporting the accord need to be "respected by all members of the Security Council" and added that "we need to build together a long-term strategy in order to manage this crisis and it cannot just boil down to sanctions and

containment"(Meredith, 2018). U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said he was "deeply disappointed" by the decision and he called on the other signatories "to abide fully" by their commitments.

On his part, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told the Security Council that Trump's decision to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal "poses a serious threat" to the international nuclear-nonproliferation regime. He said Russia was actively working with the European Union, China, and Iran to preserve the Iran nuclear deal. Similarly, his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi told the Security Council that the Iran nuclear deal was a "hard-won achievement of multilateralism" that bolstered nuclear nonproliferation as well as peace and stability in the Middle East (McKenzie, 2018). Wang said that "there is no international agreement that is perfect," but the Iran nuclear deal "has been endorsed unanimously by the UN Security Council" and the past three years had shown it is "a viable agreement." For him, China encourages Iran to continue to fulfill all commitments it has made, while at the same time, the legitimate right of all countries to normal economic relations and trade with Iran should be respected." He concluded that "China calls on the relevant parties to bear in mind the big picture, think long-term, and uphold the sanctity and integrity" of the Iran nuclear deal (McKenzie, 2018).

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) in its reaction and through its judgment ordered the US to ease sanctions it re-imposed on Iran after abandoning a nuclear deal in May 2018. Judges ruled that the US had to remove "any impediments" to the export of humanitarian goods, including food, medicine and aviation safety equipment. The US argued the ruling was a "defeat" for Iran, saying it already allowed humanitarian-related transactions. Iran had earlier argued the sanctions violated the 1955 Treaty of Amity, Economic Relations, and Consular Rights between Iran and the US, which grants the ICJ jurisdiction over disputes. It also said the reasons cited by President Donald Trump for re-imposing the sanctions were unfounded because the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) had repeatedly confirmed that Iran was complying with the terms of the 2015 nuclear accord signed by Tehran and six world powers (Holligan, 2018).

The 15-judge panel rejected Iran's call for them to order the reinstated US sanctions to be terminated without delay, and for the US to compensate Iran for the revenue losses it has incurred. But the judges did order the US to "remove, by means of its choosing, any impediments arising from the measures on 8 May, 2018 to the free exportation to the territory of the Islamic Republic of Iran" of medicines and medical devices, foodstuffs and agricultural commodities, spare parts, equipment and services necessary for the safety of civil aviation. This is essentially the first time international judges have ruled on what's been described as a case of "economic warfare". However, the two countries reacted differently to the judgment. While the Iranian foreign ministry said the decision "vindicates the Islamic Republic of Iran and confirms the illegitimacy and oppressiveness" of US sanctions, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo accused Iran of abusing the ICJ for political ends and said the court had rejected all of its "baseless requests" (Holligan, 2018).

Lastly, senior European officials have castigated U.S. President Donald Trump's renewed sanctions on Tehran as "illegal" and in violation of a U.N. Security Council resolution and they vowed to intensify efforts to thwart the U.S. measures and preserve the Iran nuclear accord. The effort to preserve the nuclear deal, led by the EU and by the three European architects of the accord France, Germany and the U.K. puts the United States in direct conflict with its largest and most powerful NATO allies (Herszenhorn, 2018). It represents the sharpest break between Washington and its European partners on foreign policy since Trump took office and began calling into question decades of diplomatic norms. Trump unilaterally withdrew from the nuclear accord, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), in May 2018. Other parties to the accord the Europeans, as well as Russia and China have repeatedly reaffirmed their commitment to it, citing multiple inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency showing Iran to be in compliance (Herszenhorn, 2018). The bulk of the efforts by western powers is that of persuasion and avowed commitment to keeping to the terms of the deal. There is however all indications that the US under President Trump is not willing to be persuaded neither is it ready to heed international calls for the suspension of stiffer sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran.

#### **America, Iran and the Twist and Turns in Bilateral Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

For more than 100 years, the United States and Iran have engaged in an ambivalent relationship. Although the American and Iranian people have usually regarded each other as friends, their governments have frequently treated each other as enemies. Throughout the 20th century and into the 21st, America and Iran have butted heads over issues as diverse as oil, communism, radical Islam, and nuclear proliferation, often framing their mutual antagonism as a clash between civilization and barbarism. Yet with the advent of President Barack Obama's administration in Washington eager to improve U.S. relations in the Muslim world and with young men and women calling for democracy in the streets of Tehran, the old 'friendly enemies' would have realized that they have more in common than they think.

In fact, the popular protests that rocked Tunis, Cairo, and Tripoli, and so many other cities during the "Arab Spring" of 2011 evoked memories of the violent confrontation between Iranian dissidents and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Islamist regime in the streets of Tehran eighteen months earlier. As in Tunisia and Egypt, Facebook and Twitter helped spread the word in June 2009 that Iran was teetering on the brink of revolution, and as in Libya, the ruling elite cracked down instinctively with brutal force. Unlike Libya's Muammar Qaddafi, however, Ahmadinejad stopped short of unleashing the Iranian air force against his opponents. Yet, some Americans nevertheless expected that Iran's quest for nuclear weapons, its support for Islamic radicals like Lebanon's Hezbollah, and its destabilizing influence on the geopolitics of the Persian Gulf would eventually require U.S. military intervention. This expectation did not manifest through an Obama presidency but there are indications that the same may not happen with the way President Trump feels about the government of Hassan Rouhani and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

With the coming to power of Barrack Obama in the U.S., relations between the two countries witnessed an increased tempo of cordiality which peaked with the signing of the P5+1 nuclear deal tagged the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) which came into effect in January 2016. Iranians hailed the JCPOA nuclear deal as the dawn of a new era for their country. At least, they would be able to settle disputes with the United States and its allies diplomatically. Moreover, President Hassan Rouhani and his team had built on the nuclear deal to tackle other contentious issues at the negotiating table. To this end, they began a dialogue on various domestic and regional matters with the European Union and, for a short time, with the United States (Tabatabai and Samuel, 2017).

On 12 January 2016 two US Navy patrol boats wandered into Iranian waters in the Persian Gulf. Iranian military forces detained the ten mariners on board on Farsi Island. Parallels were quickly drawn between Iranian actions in this instance and the similar episode in 2007 when British sailors and marines entering Iranian waters were detained for over two weeks (Sanger, Schmitt and Cooper, 2016). A swift resolution seemed extremely unlikely, particularly given an incident in December 2015 when an Iranian military vessel fired on a number of ships including a US aircraft carrier and destroyer (*The Guardian*, 2015). Yet, remarkably, by the next morning Iran had released the two vessels and their crews. While some suggested the quick resolution was due to gains made through US President Obama's strategy of engagement with Iran, others such as Senator John McCain suggested that such an inference was 'ludicrous' and that the 'administration's craven desire to preserve the dangerous Iranian deal at all costs evidently knows no limit' (McCain quoted in Sanger et al, 2015).

Regardless of opinion on how it came about, the swift and peaceful solution to the intrusion into Iranian sovereign territory by US sailors came as a surprise to many. Even Secretary of State John Kerry, himself a key figure in diplomatic efforts to secure the release of the mariners, alluded to the unprecedented nature of Iran's decision, stating: 'We can all imagine how a similar situation might have played out three or four years ago.' Kerry and his counterpart in Tehran, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, were central to the surprising release of the US sailors, speaking on the phone at least five times in the hours immediately following the incident and announcing the successful outcome on Twitter (Duncombe, 2017).

Kerry and his counterpart in Tehran, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, were central to the surprising release of the US sailors, speaking on the phone at least five times in the hours immediately following the incident and announcing the successful outcome on Twitter. Kerry posted that the 'peaceful and efficient resolution of this issue is a testament to the critical role diplomacy plays in keeping our country secure and strong', while half an hour later Zarif stated that he was 'happy to see dialog and respect, not threats and impetuosity, swiftly resolved the *sailors episode* (Duncombe, 2017).

The above examples represent the diplomatic gains recorded between the United States and Iran during the leadership of the World power by President Obama. Instead of building on these efforts, President Donald Trump has attacked the nuclear

deal while upping the ante with Iran on all fronts, including declaring his intention to designate the Revolutionary Guards as a terrorist organization (Tabatabai and Samuel, 2017). Trump has succeeded in revoking the deal and has called for stiffer sanctions against the Islamic republic in defiance of the ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) reprimanding the U.S. over its re-imposition of sanctions on Iran. The court also ordered Washington to lift restrictive measures linked to humanitarian trade, food medicine and civil aviation. This judgment seemed to have been victory for Iran though Mike Pompeo, the United States Secretary of State indicated that the U.S. will ignore the ruling. True to Pompeo's statement, the U.S. has kept its words by not only revoking the nuclear deal but terminating the 1955 pre-revolutionary friendship treaty dubbed the Treaty of Amity. There are also threatening statements from both Washington and Tehran in ways that is difficult to predict how the fisticuffs will end.

### **Implications of Trump's Iranian Policy on the US-Iran Relations**

The decision to pull America out of JCPOA is no doubt Trump's most significant foreign policy decision to date. While he cast the U.S. action as essential for national security and a warning to Iran and any other nuclear aspirant that "the United States no longer makes empty threats," it could also increase tensions with key U.S. allies that heavily lobbied the administration in recent weeks not to abandon the pact and see it as key to keeping peace in the region. They tried to convince Trump that his concerns about "flaws" in the accord could be addressed without violating its terms or ending it altogether (Gearan and DeYoung, 2018).

However, the truth remains that America's withdrawal from the deal has put the U.S-Iran relations in reverse and has rubbished the successes recorded by the Obama administration which negotiated the agreement in the first instance. It is also speculated that instead of restraining Iran from further nuclear exploits, it could instead propel Tehran's interest in getting neck deep into nuclear program to the disadvantage of non-proliferation. This is more so because while the U.S. exit does not render the rest of the deal moot, it is not clear whether there is enough incentive on the part of Iran to sustain the agreement. Relief from U.S. banking sanctions was a main reason for Tehran to come to the table in the first place (Gerang and DeYoung, 2018).

For most analyst, scholars and public commentators Trump's actions and utterances are seen as counterproductive. The best way to address the various challenges associated with Iranian behavior meaning the one most likely to succeed and to bolster long-term U.S. security interests would have been to preserve and build on the nuclear deal. Doing so would enable Iran to reconsider the lessons of the Iran-Iraq War, which taught it that it cannot trust the international organizations and world powers that seek to isolate it and undermine its security. For one, economic sanctions or sanctions in whatever form will definitely not affect the Iranian leadership alone but will bring untold hardship to the peoples of that Islamic republic who may not even understand the nuances of foreign policy decisions. Truth be told, America cannot distance itself from the suspicion of its desire to effect proper control of the

conduct of the Iranian government and Iran would also not dissociate itself from the glaring tendency of resisting American hegemony in Iran particularly and the Middle East in general. From the tone of the drums that is beating there is every tendency to think that America's Iran policy will not be a replay of the situation in Iraq, Libya and others where America had once raised issues against their leadership.

Going beyond the above analysis, with the past covert conflicts between Iran and the U.S. freshly in mind, it is important to discern where the two nations are now, and more importantly, where they could be in the nearest future. As things sit now, the United States has a total blanket embargo against Iran, nothing comes in and nothing goes out. More than that, Iran is continually demonized in the American media. Iran has continually claimed that her nuclear plan and program is very transparent, that they have nothing to hide as everything is on the table, and that they are supervised by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the regulatory body for nuclear programs. It goes without saying that anyone can say one thing and do another, especially with track record of threats by Ahmadinejad's government, especially ones where he used nuclear weapons against Israel, which is one of the sticking point for U.S. lawmakers as Israel is one of, if not the, most important global allies. However, the advent of a Rouhani government should provide the potential first step to building bridges with Iran. The United States, just as much as Iran, cannot take a hard line stance when it comes to these nuclear issue. The U.S. must be willing to concede. As Middle East expert Vali Nasr has pointed out, "the tightening of the screws is making Iran increasingly determined to get nuclear weapons not necessarily to start a war, but to prevent one" (Morgan, 2015). If the U.S. applies a rethink, there is every tendency of improved relations with Iran but the question of when remains a mirage.

### **Conclusion**

This paper examined the changing pattern of America-Iran relations since the Cold war era and highlighted in the process the twist and turns in the bilateral relations between the two countries. It uncovered that prior to the present level of bitterness between them; both countries had been friends at some point. In the light of this, one thing is clear in the current U.S.-Iran political climate: neither side is able to decode the other in terms of intentions, agendas and will to act, meaning, do words equal the will to act on them? President Trump set the precedent for a "seesaw" policy of name-calling a leader and harshly criticizing a given country, and then conveying his willingness to communicate with the same leader and/or even to meet, as in the case of North Korea.

Iran's President Hassan Rouhani has rejected President Trump's suggestion of a meeting. The United States needs to convey foreign policy with clarity, consistency and seriousness, especially with high-stakes situations such as U.S.-Iran relations. Game-playing in these contexts could lead to costly mistakes and opportunities lost for productive diplomacy. The status quo only empowers the hardliners in both Washington and Tehran prolonged distrust and hostility. The

United States and Iran must be cognizant of the political sensitivities that each side harbors in their relations.

Equally important is making assurances about meeting security requirements. Conflict resolution must be the clear and resolute will of both sides. As the bickering between both countries continues the world is waiting on the edge to see how these twists in the relations between onetime friendly allies will end. The onus is on the U.S. and even the World powers to adopt a policy of strategic engagement that will reintegrate Iran into the comity of nations, preserve and build on the nuclear deal, and open the way for sustainable solutions to the challenges stemming from Iran's behavior.

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