

Iran – US relations

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The US withdrawal from the nuclear deal with Iran (JCPOA) in May, 2018 and the tough sanctions that followed, have escalated recently into new tensions between the West and Tehran. The “war on tankers” and the shooting down of an American drone over the Strait of Hormuz were met by Washington with the strengthening of its military deployment in the region. Meanwhile, Iran – disillusioned with European attempts to save the JCPOA - took the enrichment of uranium above the limits allowed by the nuclear deal. It seems that the Middle East is on the verge of a new war which could not only shake the region and the pillars of the European Union but change the political landscape of Europe.

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Iran-US relations: an overview

From the end of World War II until the Islamic revolution, Iran was an ally of the Western world. Having a strategic partnership with the U.S was crucial for the Pahlavi regime as it was surrounded by the USSR and states which were under its influence. At the same time, the Shah and the Pahlavi dynasty were beneficial for the West, especially to the U.S in its fight against the Communist block. Iran played the role of a buffer zone between these two blocs whilst providing security for the world's most important transit route for energy exports, the Persian Gulf. That order changed dramatically in 1979.

After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, anti-Americanism became an official ideology of the new regime. Only months following the revolution, when the US president Jimmy Carter allowed the former Shah of Iran to go to New York City for medical treatment, a few dozen students climbed the U.S embassy's walls in Tehran and captured some diplomats. They demanded the return of the Shah. With the support of the revolutionaries in the new regime, the students kept the American diplomats hostage for 444 days. That event was the turning point in Iran-U.S relations. The U.S imposed a number sanctions on Iran which are still in place.

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The relationship between the two countries worsened further in 1981 when Iraq's President Saddam Hussein attacked Iran. The US, which was aware of the emergence of a new enemy in the region, backed the Iraqi army and Saddam's regime against Tehran. Shortly after the start of the Iran-Iraq war, Israel attacked Lebanon. Iran helped the Lebanese Shi'a militias to organise themselves to resist Israel. Thus, Iran became not only a threat to US interests in the region, but also a menace to Israel.

Eight years of brutal war with Iraq saw a deterioration in Iran – American relations. Around one million Iranians were killed in the conflict and many cities were destroyed. Iran held the U.S responsible for showing the green light to Saddam Hussein's attack on Iran. The Iranian army believed that most of the weapons and equipment which were used to kill Iranian civilians were American-made and that Saddam was merely a puppet of the U.S in the region.

The 21st century started with a series of important events which changed the face of the Middle East. The age of liberalism which had started with the Clinton administration ended with George W Bush's victory in the U.S presidential election in 2000. Just a year after Americans elected a hardliner as president, the 9/11 terrorist attacks took place. The horror of those attacks shook the world and led to the invasion of Afghanistan by

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the U.S. and international forces. In the Bush “war on terror” strategy the world was split into two camps. In a speech president Bush addressed the world saying: “You are either with us or against us.”¹

Iran, which regarded the Taliban regime in Afghanistan as its enemy, began cooperation with the U.S. by providing them with support in order to topple the Taliban regime.² Apart from intelligence gathering, Iran used its well-established ties with the “northern alliance”³ in the U.S interest, as well as using them to establish a future regime in Afghanistan. Despite Iran’s efforts to cooperate with the U.S in Afghanistan, in 2002, in a surprising speech, President Bush called Iran, along with Iraq and North Korea, the “axis of evil.”⁴

¹ “You are either with us or against us”, CNN, 2001.
<http://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/11/06/gen.attack.on.terror/>. Retrieved 14 May 2019.

² Barzegar, Kayhan. “Iran’s Foreign Policy Strategy after Saddam”. The Washington Quarterly, 33/1. 2009. P. 177

³ For more about the Northern Alliance please refer to: Jones, S. G. (2009). In the graveyard of empires: America’s war in Afghanistan. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

⁴ Bush, State of the Union Address. 2002 : <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>. Retrieved 26 May 2018

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By the beginning of the U.S invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran, dissatisfied with U.S strategy after the Afghanistan war, started working against U.S interests in Iraq. Tehran reached out to the Shi'a communities liberated from Saddam's tyranny in order to mobilize them against the U.S presence in the country. Iran was seeking to achieve two goals in Iraq: firstly, to slow down the U.S' conquest of Iraq; and, secondly, to prevent the presence of an anti-Iran regime in Iraq.⁵

Iran's engagement in Iraq was another turning point in Iran-U.S relations. Iran retaliated against the American presence in the region by forming Shi'a militias who saw U.S troops in Iraq as their primary target. These militants inflicted most of the damage on American troops in the country.

In 2003, in the wake of the Iraq war, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported that Iran had not declared its sensitive enrichment and reprocessing activities. This was the beginning of a long term conflict between Iran and the West in general, but with the U.S in particular. The Iranian nuclear program took centre stage of the world's attention as the greatest threat to global peace and security. The U.S both intro-

⁵ Goodarzi, Jubin, M. "Syria and Iran: Alliance cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment." Centre for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies/ORSAM. 2013. P. 48

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duced the toughest economic sanctions in history against Iran and managed to unify its allies in a campaign against Iran.

Finally the Iran Nuclear Deal, also known as Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed in 2015 following 12 years of negotiations. Many viewed that deal as a turning point in Iran-US relations with expectations that Iran would become an active member of the international community. It was no longer seen as a country that would threaten America and its allies' interests in the region. However, within four years of the signing Iran and the U.S are again on the verge of a full scale war.

How did it happen?

The JCPOA was a preliminary framework agreement between the Islamic Republic of Iran and a group of world powers: the P5+1 (the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council—the United States, United Kingdom, Russia, France, and China—plus Germany) and the European Union. The agreement was signed and ratified as a United Nations Security Council resolution in order to give it international legitimacy. However, the deal is not legally binding in the way that an international treaty is. It was merely a multilateral agreement between a few

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states. After Donald Trump took office in the US one of his first moves was to pull out of the nuclear deal.

President Trump went on to impose what are probably the most severe wide-ranging economic and financial sanctions ever introduced, including an embargo on oil sales. He also vowed to punish third countries, including allies such as Britain and Germany, if they continued to trade with Tehran.

The US President justified his actions by calling the JCPOA a “bad deal”. Iran might still build a bomb, he claimed, while the pact did not constrain its ballistic missile program or its “destabilizing” regional activities. He just wanted Iran to act like a “normal” country.

In Iran and elsewhere, this was interpreted as a naked bid to enforce regime change. Indeed, President Trump had encouraged the opposition to organize street protests amid suggestions that the regime’s expensive entanglement abroad was unpopular with Iran’s hard-pressed, tax-paying public.

There is one important difference between the current administration in the White House and its predecessor. The Obama administration never showed any tendency for regime change in Iran, whereas the Trump ad-

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ministration contains some figures, such as the National Security Adviser John Bolton, who are long standing advocates of regime change. This fact may be one of the reasons why there is no possibility of establishing a stable diplomatic channel between the two countries.

The war has already started for Iranian people

Currently, not a single day passes without a new U.S policy against Iran. The American goal is to reduce Iranian oil production to zero. Consequently, the Iranian currency has lost 80 percent of its value since last year, mainly reflecting the collective sense of fear caused by the increased sanctions.

So far, the sanctions have only directly affected the Iranian people and not the regime in Tehran. Almost every day there are reports of food scarcity in the country. Basic food items like rice, pasta and fresh meat are becoming ever more expensive and out of the public reach. Food and pharmaceutical security is the front on which the Iranian people have begun their fight.

Apart of the economic pressure, President Trump's policies have further consequence for Iranian political life as hardliners increasingly seize

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power in the country. American actions are perceived as a serious security threat and – paradoxically - give legitimacy to the most undemocratic factions in Tehran to expand their power domestically. Their empowerment has a direct and severe impact on Iranian civil society and its human rights concerns.

The consequence of a possible Iran-U.S. war for the region

The spillover of a potential conflict between Iran and the U.S. would affect all countries in the region and beyond. Iran's military strategy after the Islamic Revolution has been planned to avoid direct military encounter with its rivals in the Middle East. To achieve this, Iran formed mainly Shi'a militias to fight as its proxies in the region. The importance of such forces became clear after the outbreak of the Syrian war. When the rapid expansion of anti-Assad rebels and the sudden emergence of ISIS caught the Syrian regime off guard and unable to act, the pro-regime Shi'a militias came to the rescue. Most of these paramilitary groups were formed and supported by Iran. Ideologically, the groups are affiliated with Iranian clerics and most of their militants are followers of Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic.

According to Ryan Crocker, former U.S ambassador to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, while Iran is able to maintain its defensive military posture, it

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built a bridge from its capital to Lebanon through its proxies.⁶ The number of paramilitary groups has been increasing especially since 2003. According to Mr. Crocker, “This is the second or third stage of what Iran is planning to do since the birth of the Islamic Republic. Why should they have only one Hezbollah when they can have many?”⁷

All of the Shi’a militias are operating in countries in which the U.S has military bases. If Iran finds itself under US pressure it could launch an attack on any of those bases in the region via its militias. Moreover, such proxy groups could become a threat for the political and economic stability of U.S allies in the region, countries which are responsible for providing the world with energy at a reasonable price.

⁶ Muñoz, Carlo. “Iran reaches new stage in proxy wars in Iraq, Syria”, The Washington Times . 2018. <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/feb/28/iran-reaches-new-stage-proxy-wars-iraq-syria>. Retrieved 03 Jun 2018

⁷ Muñoz, Carlo. “Iran reaches new stage in proxy wars in Iraq, Syria”, The Washington Times . 2018. <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/feb/28/iran-reaches-new-stage-proxy-wars-iraq-syria>. Retrieved 03 Jun 2018

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How would affect a Iran-US war the stability of Europe?

Another major war in the Middle East would bring many issues for Europe with the potential of damaging European stability. Over the past four decades Iran has managed to maintain a level of stability and was acting as a buffer zone between drug traffickers in Afghanistan and their customers in Europe. According to Iranian officials, Iran annually intercepts over 5,000 tons of various drugs on their way to Europe. To this can be added the millions of Afghan refugees who have lived in Iran for decades and who - without a functioning government in Tehran - would find their ways to the European shores.

The issue of migration is the most important concern for European countries. In case of a war in Iran, millions of refugees from there and from other affected countries would seek a better and safer life in Europe. The world could experience a greater refugee crises than it saw in 2015. Such a situation could shake the pillars of the European union and change the European political landscape completely.

Furthermore, a war in Iran might radicalize the Islamic world even more, as the conflict would be perceived as yet another attack on a Muslim land.

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It might provoke more hostility against the west. As a consequence, more terrorist attacks in different corners of the world could be expected, most likely, in European cities.

Considering all these concerns, no wonder European countries and the EU are doing whatever it takes to save the Nuclear Deal and prevent a further escalation between Iran and the U.S. During one of her meetings with the US Secretary of State, the EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini expressed her fears that the intensified tensions between the Washington and Tehran could flare up into military conflict: “US Secretary Pompeo heard very clearly today from us, not only from myself but also from the other ministers of EU members states, that we are living in a crucial, delicate moment where ... the most responsible attitude to take ... should be that of maximum restraint, avoiding any escalation on the military side,” Mogherini told reporters after a meeting in Brussels on 17 May 2019.

Japan’s mediation efforts, and attacks on oil tankers

On 8 April 2019, the US Department of State announced its intention to brand the IRGC (Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps) as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). Moreover, the US Air Forces is deploying air and sea strike forces to the Middle East in response to what it described as “troubling and escalatory indications and warnings” from Iran. On 16

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May, the USS Abraham Lincoln, one of the biggest US aircraft carriers, entered the Persian Gulf. Two days later, four B52 heavy bombers were sent to the Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar which is the headquarters of United States Air Forces Central Command, as a response to what was perceived as a threat from Iran. Even a New York Times report on 13 May 2019, claimed that “at a meeting of President Trump’s top national security aides, Acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan presented an updated military plan that envisions sending as many as 120,000 troops to the Middle East should Iran attack American forces or accelerate work on nuclear weapons.”⁸

Rising tension between Iran and the U.S is of concern to many international players. Iran occupies one of the most critical geographic locations and has absolute control over the security of the Strait of Hormuz which plays a crucial role in world energy security. Approximately one third of the oil which is consumed daily by the great economic powers passes through that route. China and Japan, the Asian economic powers, in par-

⁸ Schmit, Eric & Barenas, E, Julian. “White House Reviews Military Plans Against Iran, in Echoes of Iraq War” The NY Times. 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/13/world/middleeast/us-military-plans-iran.html>. Retrieved on 19 May 2019.

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ticular, are highly dependent on the Strait of Hormuz for meeting their energy needs. Around a half of the oil which they import comes from the Gulf countries via the Strait. Any potential destabilization of these international transit routes would have devastating impact on the Asian economy.

With that in mind, in early June 2019, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who is close to President Trump, expressed his willingness to play a mediating role between Iran and the U.S. On 12 June, for the first time since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, a Japanese prime minister made an official trip to Iran. In a joint press conference with Iranian President Rowhani, Mr. Abe said, “Amid rising tension, it is essential for Iran to play a constructive role in strengthening peace and stability in the Middle East, so that this region won't be destabilized further or accidental clashes won't happen⁹”.

Mr. Abe was the first G7 representative to meet Iran's Supreme Leader. This was something the Islamic Republic had wanted for four decades. It was seen as confirming the international legitimacy which the regime had

⁹ Illmer, Andreas. “Japan's Shinzo Abe in Tehran for talks amid US-Iran tensions”. 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48578314> Retrieved 20 June 2019

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been seeking since its foundation. Many observers thought that Mr. Abe would pass a letter from President Trump to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. However, the Supreme Leader refused to accept it and said: “I do not see Trump as worthy of any message exchange, and I do not have any reply for him, now or in the future.”¹⁰

Coming out of the meeting empty handed was not the only disappointment for Shinzo Abe. Something much more serious had happened during his meeting with Iran’s Supreme Leader. Two oil tankers were attacked in the Gulf of Oman, leaving one ablaze and both adrift. One of the ships was Norwegian and was carrying oil from Saudi Arabia to Taiwan. The other was a Japanese tanker heading to Singapore. The attack was a significant reminder of threat to energy security in south east Asia, which is crucial for Japan, conflict in the Strait might pose.

The U.S. immediately pointed the finger, calling the incident an “unprovoked attack” by Iran. Tehran called the accusations part of a campaign of

¹⁰ “At Trump’s request, Abe asked Iran to release American captives, source says”. The Japan Times. 2019. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/06/14/national/politics-diplomacy/trumps-request-abe-asks-iran-release-american-captives-source/#.XRcnz5MzbR1>. Retrieved 20 June 2019

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American disinformation and “warmongering.” However, a few hours later that afternoon, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that American intelligence agencies had concluded Tehran was behind the disabling of both ships. He pointed to the weapons used, the expertise and resources required, as well as the similarity to other recent attacks attributed to Iran.

The most compelling evidence to support Mr. Pompeo’s claim was video footage released on 13 June by the United States Central Command. A military spokesman, Capt. Bill Urban, said the video showed an Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps patrol boat pulling up alongside the Japanese tanker, several hours after the initial explosion, and removing an unexploded limpet mine in broad daylight.

Iran repeatedly denied the accusations and claimed that those who want more American troops posted to the region were behind the attacks and were trying to implicate Iran. Iranian officials called for an independent investigation by the UN. Although many countries including Russia, China, Germany, France and the EU supported the idea of an investigation, other countries, including the UK, joined the U.S in holding Iran responsible for the attacks.

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The peak of tensions: Iran shooting a U.S. drone

On Thursday, 20 June, Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps claimed it had shot down an "intruding American spy drone" after it entered the country's territory. Shortly after the IRGC's announcement, US officials confirmed that one of their drones had been shot down, but claimed that the incident occurred in international airspace over the Strait of Hormuz.

The location of the drone has become a key point of dispute between the two countries. Iran maintains that the U.S. aircraft was downed on the Iranian territory, with Foreign Minister Javad Zarif tweeting: "At 00:14 US drone took off from UAE in stealth mode & violated Iranian airspace. It was targeted at 04:05."

The United States countered with its own coordinates, suggesting that the drone had been flying in international airspace when it was shot down. US Central Command, which oversees military operations in the Middle East, added further detail in a statement, describing the downed drone as a RQ-4A Global Hawk High-Altitude.

In return, the head of IRGC released a statement in which he said: "the shooting down of the drone had sent a warning to the US. The only way

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for our enemies to be safe is to respect our sovereignty, national security, and the national interests of the great Iranian nation.¹¹” Further, in a provoking tone he added: “Iran does not want war with any country, but we are completely and totally ready and prepared for war.¹²”

The IRGC claimed that the U.S drone had been shot down by a Khordad-3 medium range air defense missile, an Iranian produced missile. After Iran’s nuclear program, the Iranian missile program is a primary concern for the U.S and, to some extent, of the international community. The fact that Iran was capable of shooting down one of the most sophisticated US military drones with one of its domestically produced missiles is perceived as a challenge to the military advantage of the US in confronting Iran.

One day later, on 21 June, President Trump approved military strikes against Iran in retaliation for the drone incident, but pulled back from

¹¹ “Iran shoots down US drone aircraft, raising tensions further in Strait of Hormuz” ABC News. 2019. <https://wnep.com/2019/06/20/iran-shoots-down-us-drone-aircraft-raising-tensions-further-in-strait-of-hormuz/>. Retrieved 21 June 2019

¹² Ibid

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launching the action, reportedly “10 minutes before the strike.¹³” According to an official in the White House, “The operation was underway in its early stages when it was called off. Planes were in the air and ships were in position, but no missiles had been fired when word came to stand down.¹⁴”

In a tweet on the same day, President Trump said that he had changed his mind about the strike after learning that 150 Iranians would be killed in the attack, adding “Not proportionate to shooting down an unmanned drone, I am in no hurry.¹⁵” Conversely, Iranian military officials and the Supreme Leader accused the U.S of bluffing since they were afraid of Iran’s missile power. However, in another tweet, President Trump warned the Iranians, “Iran leadership doesn’t understand the words ‘nice’ or ‘compassion,’ they never have. Sadly, the thing they do understand is Strength and Power.” He added, “Any attack by Iran on anything American will be met with great and overwhelming force.”

¹³ Wintour, Patrick. “Donald Trump ‘cancelled Iran strikes with planes in the air’”. The Guardian. 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/21/united-airlines-halts-some-flights-mumbai-to-avoid-iran-after-drone-attack>. Retrieved 22 June 2019

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid.

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On 28 June, the French military announced that it had evidence suggesting the drone was in international airspace when it was brought down over the Strait of Hormuz by an Iranian surface-to-air missile. French President Emmanuel Macron told reporters in Osaka, Japan at the G20 summit, “So that was an aggression which was one more step in this escalation of tensions.” This statement by the French military as well as the French president added a whole new dimension to the crisis.

Who wants a new war in the Middle East?

Many observers believe that President Trump won the presidential election thanks to his clear position against another U.S. military intervention in the Middle East. According to his former adviser, Fred Fleitz, “This is a president who was elected to get us out of war. He doesn’t want a war with Iran.” In an interview with Foreign Policy magazine, he said, “The decision about holding off on strikes against Iran was a smart move by the president. He wants to create every opportunity for a peaceful resolution.” Indeed, a war with Iran, even a limited one, would be costly for the U.S. More importantly, since the 2020 presidential campaign has started in the U.S, waging war with Iran could have a devastating impact on Trump’s campaign for reelection.

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So far, the U.S is paying almost nothing for its “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran. It has just announced that if a country or company deals with Iran it cannot have any relationship with the U.S and its partners. That was enough to affect profoundly the Iranian economy. In such a situation, Iran might be eager to drag the U.S into a war which will be more costly than sanctions for the American economy. According to Suzanne Maloney, an expert on Iran at the Brookings Institution, “The Iranians don’t simply want to avoid a military strike. What they want to do is deter the president from imposing economic pressure. That’s their end goal, and they haven’t achieved their end goal at the moment.”

Iran is trying to change the status quo which has been in place since President Trump took office in 2017. The country is suffering the most in the ongoing economic war and it seems that its hardline establishment wants to involve the U.S in a regional war to gain international recognition as another victim of U.S. military aggression. Iranian “hawks” are in favor of a limited confrontation with the U.S. as they see it as a chance to harden their grip on power and expand their authority in the country and beyond.

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Despite the fact that both American and Iranian authorities have said that they are not seeking a war, this fragile situation could trigger a conflict which no one wants. A single bullet could determine the future of the whole region.

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Centre for International Relations (CIR) is an independent, non-government analytical centre established in 1996 which deals with Polish foreign policy and the most important issues of international politics. CIR is active in research, education and publishing, organises conferences and meetings, and participates in international projects in collaboration with similar institutions in many countries. CIR creates a forum for debate and exchange of ideas in matters of international politics, relations between states and challenges in the global world. CIR's activities are addressed above all to local-government officials and to entrepreneurs, as well as to officials of the central administration, politicians, diplomats, political scientists and the media. In 2014, CIR was again recognised as one of the best think-tanks in East-Central Europe in the study "The Leading Public Policy Research Organisations in the World" conducted by the University of Pennsylvania.

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