

*A.K.M. Anisur Rahman***THE UNITED STATES, IRAN AND THE NEW CONUNDRUM IN THE MIDDLE EAST****Abstract**

Tensions are rising progressively over the last couple of years in the Middle East as the acrimony in the relationship between the United States (US) and Iran is mounting. The US pulled itself out of the nuclear deal last year, imposed economic sanctions and took initiatives to cut off Iran's oil exports. In the rejoinder against the moves by the US, Iran has threatened to end compliance with its obligations under the 2015 nuclear deal with six world powers. With this backdrop, this paper attempts to discuss how the regimes in the US and Iran contributed to build-up the current tension. It also analyses the current negotiations between the two countries in details and explores the opportunities of utilizing Track II diplomacy to aid the regular diplomatic efforts. It comes up with the recommendation that diplomatic efforts are to be wielded to reintegrate Iran into the international community so that it becomes more subject to international norms, regulations and laws. This paper concludes that the Iranian government is to be convinced to open up to create an environment where the Iranian people would be able to flourish and socialize across the world.

Keywords: US-Iran Relations, Middle East, Nuclear Programme, New Conundrum

1. Introduction

The United States (US) — pointing to information about an imminent threat of an Iranian attack in the Middle East — swiftly moved an aircraft carrier group into the region in early May, 2019¹. In quick succession, it then shored up defenses and evacuated personnel from the embassy in Baghdad, the Iraqi capital. But the Trump administration has not provided specific details about the supposed threat from Iran. Therefore, US allies in Europe and the gulf region are quite skeptical given the history of faulty intelligence that led to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, led by the US².

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¹ Sarah Aziza, "The Saudi Government's Global Campaign to Silence Its Critics", *The New Yorker*, available at <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/the-saudi-governments-global-campaign-to-silence-its-critics>, accessed on 15 September 2019.

² S. Legrenzi, "Recent Crisis in the Middle East", available at https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2018/gcc-crisis/?f_n=43081, accessed on 18 September 2019.

In response to the initial moves by the US mentioned earlier, Iran said it would end compliance with its obligations under the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and six world powers³. The deal with the US, China, France, Germany, Russia and the United Kingdom was intended to curb Tehran's nuclear ambitions in exchange for relief from economic sanctions.

Tensions have risen steadily since the beginning of the Trump administration. President Trump pulled the US out of the nuclear deal last year, imposed oppressive sanctions, moved to cut off Iran's oil exports and designated an Iranian military unit as a terror organisation.

The deterioration in U.S.- Iran relations takes place against the backdrop of a battle for regional influence between Iran and Saudi Arabia, including proxy wars in Yemen and Syria, as well as strategic competition in Lebanon and more recently in Iraq. Amidst the situation, the Iranian population is increasingly caught between the pressure of sanctions from Washington and the authoritarian repression of the regime in Tehran. In this context, the development of current tension between the US and Iran is anticipated to upsurge the existing turmoil in the Middle East.

This paper focuses on the main argument that an apparent lack of admiration and recognition for the numerous diplomatic efforts of Iran over the years has armored the anti-American sentiment within the Islamic Republic's government. But it should be kept in mind that the US has less at stake as relations between the two countries rally. If Iran had been reintegrated into the international arena, it would be more subject to international norms and laws to curb its uranium enrichment.

To substantiate the major argument mentioned above, this paper extensively reviews the existing literatures and elaborately discusses the role of the regimes of both the USA and Iran to result into current turmoil. It then explains the different aspects of current negotiations between the two countries and justifies the utilisation of Track II diplomacy to strengthen the conventional diplomatic efforts. Keeping the different features of current negotiations in mind, this paper comes up with key recommendations to ease the recent entanglement. Finally this paper concludes that all the variables involved in the current imbroglio must be thoroughly and carefully examined to ensure a viable and sustainable solution.

³ "Regional Powers from a Historical Perspective", *Human Rights Watch*, available at https://www.hrw.org/node/?jd_5180, accessed on 14 September 2019.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Obama's Assumption of Power*

In 2008, Barack Obama was elected president of the US, campaigning on a platform of change. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had decimated American image and credibility abroad, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa, and Obama was eager to prove that his administration would not repeat Bush's mistakes⁴. In his first year as president, Obama embarked on a tour of the Middle East and North Africa, attempting to stimulate open dialogue. In a Cairo speech addressed to the Muslim world, Obama emphasised the dignity and accomplishments of the Middle East and North Africa, accomplishments that paved the way for the European enlightenment. He emphasised on his personal relationship with Islam, and acknowledged that, while no single speech can eradicate years of distrust, he was anxious to create a new relationship based on mutual respect⁵.

One of Obama's main points in the speech was the Iranian nuclear programme. He acknowledged the tumultuous relationship shared by the US and the Islamic Republic, the 1953 Iranian coup d'état of Mohammad Mosaddegh and the Iranian Hostage Crisis spanning from November 1979 to January 1981, and the inescapable fact that the Islamic Republic defines itself, in part, in opposition to America⁶. Obama became the first American president since 1979 to officially recognise the Islamic Republic as such, stating his willingness to move forward, and overcome the decades of mistrust that had built up between the nations.

Obama continued to shift the rhetoric of the US towards the Islamic Republic in 2009 with his Nowruz statement⁷. Speaking directly to the Iranian people, Obama recognised the achievements and historical clout of the Persian Empire, and its contributions to civilization. He cited the respect that the US has for the Islamic Republic, and his administration's commitment to diplomacy. True to his word, the Obama administration began full participation in the nuclear negotiations. Additionally, the Obama administration moved away from demanding complete cessation of uranium enrichment, which was crucial to the

⁴ Robert Jankowski, "The Practice and Culture of Arab Nationalism", *International Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 4, 2018, pp. 297-315.

⁵ Efraim Katzir, "Nuclear Deal: Does It Make a Difference for the Middle East?", *Review of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2018, pp. 251-271.

⁶ Rami G. Khouri, "The Implications of the Syrian War for New Regional Orders in the Middle East", *MENARA Working Papers*, No. 12, September 2018.

⁷ Bahgat Korany, "The Middle East since the Cold War", in Louise Fawcett (ed.), *International Relations of the Middle East*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

success of the negotiations. Iran viewed its right to peaceful nuclear power as inalienable, and was not willing to cease all enrichment⁸.

In addition to the Obama administration's recognition of Iran's right to uranium enrichment, secret talks began between the governments of the US and the Islamic Republic. Mediated, for the most part, by Oman, the talks began in 2009 with the Islamic Republic testing Obama's commitment to diplomacy. Among other things, the Iranian government asked for the release of multiple Iranian prisoners and an increased number of visas for Iranian students. The Obama administration acceded on many demands, facilitating the release of four prisoners, and doubling the number of Iranian students in the US⁹. All of these events, however, happened during Obama's first term, when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was still president of Iran, which meant that there was little change in relations between the two governments.

The importance of Obama's shift in rhetoric, however, must be understood. In the history of US-Iran relations there had been little direct confrontation between the two countries¹⁰. For the US, there was the Hostage Crisis and attacks made by an Iran-affiliated terrorist group on the US embassy and military barracks in Lebanon in 1983. For Iran, there was the coup of Mossadegh in 1953 and the imposed war from 1981 to 1989. For the most part, however, threat perceptions of the two governments were based in rhetoric and perceived intention. When Obama came to office there were few concrete measures that he could take to amend relations with Iran—there was no war, there was no occupation to end. Shifting rhetoric was one of the few and one of the most effective ways to improve relations with the Islamic Republic. The Obama administration made it more difficult for the Iranian government to claim that the American government still aspired to regime change, and had no respect for Iranian sovereignty¹¹. When this argument lost value, Iran was forced to restructure its threat perception of the US.

2.2 *Rouhani's Election*

In 2013, the political situation in Iran shifted with the election of Hassan Rouhani. The election of Rouhani, who was the only moderate among the six candidates approved by the Guardian Council, surprised the international community as well as Iranian citizens, who had expected Ayatollah Khamenei

⁸ Roger Owen, *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*, London: Routledge, 2004.

⁹ Christian Reus-Smit, "The Constitutional Structure of International Society and the Nature of Fundamental Institutions", *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 4, 1997.

¹⁰ Lawrence P. Rubin, *Islam in the Balance: Ideational Threats in Arab Politics*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014.

¹¹ Christa Salamandra, "Sectarianism in Syria: Anthropological Reflections", *Middle East Critique*, Vol. 22, No. 3, 2012, pp. 303-306.

to rig the election in favour of a conservative candidate. The controversy around Ahmadinejad's re-election may have alerted Khamenei to the dangers of disregarding the wishes of the Iranian people. The wish to retain what little amount of legitimacy the regime still held was more powerful than the need for a conservative president¹². Hassan Rouhani campaigned on a platform of reform, promising to work with the international community to relieve sanctions that were crippling the Iranian economy. Rouhani promised to regain Iran's dignity, which had been deeply diminished by the unpredictable and irrational Ahmadinejad.

A testament for the Iranian people's yearning for reform and moderation, Rouhani won the election in a landslide, receiving more than three times the number of votes than any other candidate. Three days after his inauguration, Rouhani called for the nuclear negotiations to be resumed, and offered to be more transparent regarding Iran's nuclear programme. The Obama administration reacted enthusiastically, and a phone call between Obama and Rouhani became the first direct contact between the American and Iranian presidents since the 1979 revolution.

2.3 *Turmoil during President Trump's Era*

While Donald Trump's administration has maintained Obama's policy toward Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), it has differed widely in its approach to Iran. The stark reality of this difference becomes prominent when it comes to the Iran nuclear agreement. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed in April 2015 by Iran, the US, Russia, China, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany (the so-called "P5 + 1"). The agreement put substantial limits on Iran's nuclear programme—particularly on the enrichment of uranium—for periods ranging from 10 to 15 years. In return, Iran received relief from US, EU and U.N. sanctions.

¹² Bassel F. Salloukh and Rex Brynen, "Pondering Permeability: Some Introductory Explorations", in Bassel F. Salloukh and Rex Brynen (eds.), *Persistent Permeability?: Regionalism, Localism, and Globalization in the Middle East*, London: Routledge, 2004.

Table 1 given below depicts the constraints that the JCPOA accord places on Iran’s uranium route to a bomb, its plutonium route to a bomb, and the timeframe Iran has agreed to observe the constraints¹³.

Table 1: Restrictions on uranium route, plutonium route and the stipulated timeframe

Uranium Route	Plutonium Route	Stipulated Timeframe
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No enrichment above low enriched uranium level ▪ Stockpile of low-enriched uranium reduced to less than 1 bombs-worth ▪ No new facilities ▪ Fordow: No uranium enrichment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No construction of additional heavy water reactors 	15 years
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 6,000 centrifuges at Natanz ▪ One year breakout ▪ No enrichment using advanced centrifuges (some Research & Development permitted) 		10 years
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No reprocessing of spent fuel for weapon ▪ All spent fuel from Arak shipped out of country for lifetime of reactor 	Permanent
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Destruction or removal of Arak core ▪ No production of weapons-grade plutonium 	Unspecified Duration

Source: Compiled by the Author.

Table 2 as below illustrates the comparison between Iran’s nuclear capability after the accord is implemented and its programme before the interim agreement¹⁴.

Table 2: A comparison between Iran’s nuclear capability after and before the implementation of the accord

Specific Nuclear Capability	After JCPOA	Before JCPOA
Uranium Route		
First generation centrifuges installed	6,104	18,472
Advanced centrifuges installed	0	1,008

¹³ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “The Exclusionary Turn in GCC Politics”, *Arab Center*, available at http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analyses/the-exclusionary-turn-in-gcc-politics/, accessed on 21 August 2019.

¹⁴ Ian S. Lustick, “The Absence of Middle Eastern Great Powers: Political Backwardness in Historical Perspective”, *International Organisation*, Vol. 51 , No. 4, 1997.

Breakout time for weapon	1 year	1-2 months
Research & Development of new centrifuge technology	Constrained	Unconstrained
Stockpile of low-enriched uranium	660 lbs	15,770 lbs
Stockpile of medium enriched uranium (close to bomb grade)	0 lbs	430 lbs
Plutonium Route		
Arak reactor	Core dismantled and reactor reconfigured	Under construction to produce 1-2 bombs-worth of plutonium annually
Verification and Monitoring		
Previous research on nuclear weapons	Iran to address IAEA concerns	No cooperation
Unknown nuclear sites	IAEA access to suspicious nuclear facilities anywhere	No mechanism
Inspection regime	Strictest IAEA protocols implemented	Not implemented

Source: Compiled by the Author.

The Obama administration expended a substantial diplomatic effort in negotiating the JCPOA. It also invested significant political capital in fighting back congressional efforts to kill the agreement¹⁵. The JCPOA is clearly one of the signature foreign policy achievements of the Obama administration. But it was and remains highly controversial. Congressional support for the deal largely fell along partisan lines with Republicans opposing it. In the 2016 Republican primary, then-candidate Donald Trump was not the only contender who opposed the JCPOA; indeed, most of the major Republican candidates announced their opposition to the deal. The agreement was also controversial in Middle East, with Israel publicly opposing it and Saudi Arabia’s uneasiness, at the very least, with what it viewed as a weakening US commitment to the kingdom’s security¹⁶. President Trump remains hostile to the JCPOA. He has twice decertified Iranian compliance under the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act of 2015. But he has refrained from pulling the US out of the JCPOA by re-imposing sanctions.

¹⁵ Marc Lynch, “The New Arab Order”, *Foreign Affairs*, (September/October), 2018.

¹⁶ Nabeel A. Khoury, “The Arab Cold War Revisited: The Regional Impact of the Arab Uprising”, *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2013.

President Trump has apparently been persuaded by senior figures in his administration such as former Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster that simply walking away from the JCPOA would be counterproductive. Iran would oppose any such effort, and all the other parties to the agreement are generally satisfied with it. Moreover, the unilateral re-imposition of sanctions could create a rift with US allies in Europe¹⁷. The administration may push for additional sanctions—by the US and perhaps the EU—related to Iran’s ballistic missile programme and its support for groups like Hezbollah. The Europeans, however reluctantly, appear prepared to at least discuss additional measures against Iran. China and Russia—the other P5 + 1 signatories of the agreement—are, however, are less likely to accommodate US desires. President Trump’s nomination of CIA director Mike Pompeo to replace Rex Tillerson as secretary of state further clouds the JCPOA’s future, as Pompeo is widely considered to be a hawk when it comes to Iran and has been a harsh critic of the nuclear deal.

The Trump administration’s hostility to the JCPOA is merely part of a broader policy of confronting and rolling back Iran’s influence throughout the region. Once in office, Trump moved quickly to consolidate the US relationship with both Israel and Saudi Arabia, two of Iran’s most bitter enemies¹⁸. He clearly sees Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman as key partners in his strategy of confronting Iran. The Trump administration has announced major arms sales to both countries, given a major concession to the Israeli government by announcing the US would recognise Jerusalem as the country’s capital, and continued to support the Saudi intervention in Yemen.

Early on in the dispute that broke out among the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) last summer, President Trump appeared to be aligning the US with Saudi Arabia and its allies against Qatar, but with time, the administration has taken a more even-handed approach. US policy in Syria appears to be driven in part by an attempt to constrain Iranian and Russian influence within that country¹⁹. The Trump administration also supported Israel’s February 2019 airstrikes against targets in Syria in the wake of an Iranian drone entering Israeli airspace. Despite its harsh line against Tehran, however, some critics have argued that the current administration has not gone far enough—as of yet—in countering Iran in the region.

¹⁷ Raymond Hinnebusch, “The Sectarian Revolution in the Middle East”, *Revolutions: Global Trends and Regional Issues*, issue. 4, 2012, pp. 120-152.

¹⁸ Raymond Hinnebusch, *The International Politics of the Middle East*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015.

¹⁹ Mark L. Hass, “Ideological Polarity and Balancing in Great Power Politics”, *Security Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 4, 2014, pp. 715-753.

3. Analysis of Current Negotiations

The negotiations began again, but Iran's red line remained the same. Iran refused to concede to complete cessation of uranium enrichment. Iran's nuclear programme began under the supervision and guidance of the US government, but the programme was shut down after the 1979 revolution. The programme was resumed in the mid 1980's due to the Iran-Iraq War. Saddam Hussein was seen as a direct threat to the Islamic Republic, and Iran wanted to remain a step ahead²⁰. After the American government toppled the Iraqi regime, the Islamic Republic stopped their military nuclear programme. Many of the inconsistencies and setbacks in prior negotiations were caused by the Islamic Republic attempting to cover up their past attempts to achieve a nuclear threshold state, rather than current, on-going attempts to create a nuclear bomb. By 2003, Iran's nuclear programme had been opened up to intense international scrutiny, their primary security concern, Saddam, had been taken care of, inadvertently, by the US, and the Islamic Republic did not want to test the international community's willingness to engage in direct military confrontation²¹.

For these reasons, experts believe that the Islamic Republic has ended its military nuclear programme²². However, the Islamic Republic has always maintained its right to peaceful nuclear power. The Iranian government is proud, and unwilling to be treated differently or talked down to; pursuit of peaceful nuclear power is a right of all Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) signatories, and Iran is not prepared for Western powers to take away that right. The Obama administration realised this, and moved away from requesting complete cessation of uranium enrichment. The new red line drawn by the Americans was Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon. It was from these two stances that the governments of the US and the Islamic Republic attempted to reach a compromise.

When viewed as a necessary compromise that releases steam from a region in turmoil, the deal is a successful starting point. JCPOA, concluded in July of 2015, requires the neutralisation or dilution of half of Iran's twenty percent enriched uranium, and the cessation of enrichment above five per cent. There is to be no further development of enrichment plants or the heavy-water reactor at Arak, no new enrichment locations, no reprocessing or development of a reprocessing facility, no new centrifuges, and a reduction by two-thirds of its current centrifuges. The

²⁰ Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

²¹ Deniela Huber, "Arab Regionalism: A Post-Structural Perspective", *Global Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 2015.

²² Mohamed M El-Doufani, "Regional Revisionist Client States under Unipolarity", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1992, pp. 255-265.

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is allowed to inspect both declared and undeclared facilities, has access to Iran's nuclear supply chain, and all uranium mines and mills²³.

The JCPOA features a detailed and thorough inspection and verification system, due to the history of cheating, dissimulation, renegeing on past agreements or procrastination by Iran. The US government estimates that these provisions move Iran's breakout timeline—the time that it would take for Iran to acquire enough fissile material for one weapon—from where it rests now, at two or three months, to one year. In return for these concessions, Iran is receiving sanctions relief. After verifiable proof that Iran has fulfilled the commitments outlined in the JCPOA, all UN Security Council resolutions on the Iranian nuclear issue will be lifted, as well as nuclear-related sanctions by the US and European Union (EU). If, at any time, Iran fails to comply with its commitments, the sanctions can be immediately put back in place. In keeping with the mistrustful relationship between America and Iran, the US has taken a hesitant approach to relieving sanctions. The US has kept its trade embargo on Iran, as well as all sanctions relating to human rights abuses, terrorism, and ballistic missiles. Distrust for the Islamic Republic can be clearly seen in the domestic backlash against the deal in the US.

In arguments against the deal, opponents often used tired rhetoric, accusing the Islamic Republic of being irrational and untrustworthy. The argument that the US cannot trust Iran is a simple attempt at explaining a complex regime: the Islamic Republic is not crazy or irrational simply because it is different. In many ways, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his fanatical rhetoric was a gift to those who would call Iran crazy and irrational, but this argument, already weak during Ahmadinejad's presidency, does not hold up against Rouhani's pragmatism²⁴. In the US Senate, a Republican effort to block the deal failed to reach the necessary number of votes. All 54 Senate Republicans as well as four Democrats voted to block the deal, with 42 Democrats opposing. Tired rhetoric aside, Senators in opposition to the deal did voice valid criticism²⁵.

Many Senators in opposition believed that the US should kill the current deal and start over again, enacting tougher sanctions and pushing the Islamic Republic to accept more invasive provisions. Opponents of the deal need to consider, however, the history of US-Iran relations, and the impact of the US

²³ Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.

²⁴ Leon Carl Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.

²⁵ Rasmus Alenius Boserup and Silvia Colombo, "Hybridization of Domestic Order-Making in the Contemporary MENA Region", *Barcelona Centre for International Affairs*, No. 6, 2017.

backing out on the deal. International negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme began in 2003. The JCPOA, twelve years later, is the first comprehensive deal struck between Iran and Western powers. The Obama administration enacted crippling sanctions that helped devalue Iranian currency by 300 per cent. Iran was forced to the negotiating table in a way that it previously had not been, but the continuation and augmentation of sanctions would have been both inhumane and ineffective²⁶.

As markets and economic relationships develop between Iran, China, Russia and India, sanctions become increasingly less effective and the efficacy of future sanctions, if threatened by countries in the West, could have very little impact on the Iranian economy, which remains the eighteenth largest in the world even with international sanctions. Aside from the danger of inefficacy, the political implications of backing out on the deal would have manifold consequences on US-Iran relations.

The election of Rouhani and the negotiations have resulted in the highest, most robust level of communication between the two governments in the history of the Islamic Republic. If the US had backed out on the deal, it would have been another example of the Great Satan's disregard for Iranian efforts at diplomacy, akin to the Grand Bargain or Iran's aid in the fight against the Taliban²⁷. This time, however, the disregard would have been incredibly public, sending a message of disrespect not only to the Iranian government but also to the Iranian people. The US proving its untrustworthiness, once again, would have strengthened the positions of the most conservative, hard line parts of the Iranian government, and weakened the legitimacy of moderates like Rouhani.

Hard line conservatives, most notably Khamenei, have maintained anti American rhetoric throughout the negotiations. The Ayatollah's Twitter feed was a stream of anti-American commentary, returning over and over to the dangers of trusting the US. Two examples are the Ayatollah's tweets on 21 October 2015, including "US deceptive involvement in nuclear talks has been intended to advance their hostile policies towards Iran" and "POTUS (the President of the US) claims in his 2 letters to me that he is not after regime change in Iran soon proved as a lie with him backing internal conspiracies"²⁸. Tweets and rhetoric illustrate a fundamental

²⁶ Pinar Bilgin,, "Region, Security, Regional Security: Whose Middle East? Revisited", in Elizabeth Monier (ed.), *Regional Insecurity after the Arab Uprising: Narratives of Security Threat*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

²⁷ Charles T. Call, "Beyond the 'Failed State': Toward Conceptual Alternatives", *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2011.

²⁸ Galip Dalay, "Break-up of the Middle East: Will We See a New Regional Order?", *Middle East Eye*, 14 September 2017, available at <https://www.middleeasteye.net/big-story/break-middle-east-will-we-see-new-regional-order>, accessed on 20 September 2019.

aspect of the Iranian regime. Founded in opposition to America, letting go of this fundamental definition would hurt the regime's legitimacy. Distrusting America and Western powers was not a transitional aspect of the Islamic Republic; it was founded in a deep rejection of imperialism and imposed Western values. As relations between Iran and the US move towards normalization, the rhetoric of the Iranian regime will be the hardest to change.

4. A Case for Track II Diplomacy

In light of these dilemmas, one could suggest cultural diplomacy as an excellent tool in reestablishing relations. Cultural diplomacy revolves around the themes of dialogue, understanding and trust, all lacking elements in Iran-US relations. However, between the citizens of each nation, feelings are far less belligerent. It would appear then that the political leaders and diplomats have too far entrenched themselves in their respective positions to allow for the flexibility required. Athletes, artists and students do not have these limitations and would represent the ideal cultural ambassadors²⁹.

In this regard, the cultural exchanges initiated under the Clinton-Khatami administrations have borne fruit. The case of Hamed Ehadadi can be a good example. Ehadadi is an Iranian basketball player who visited the US on a State Department sponsored athletic exchange. This was noticed by National Basketball Association (NBA) talent scouts and offered a position on the Memphis Grizzlies Basketball team³⁰. Doing so was not easy as entering into contracts with Iranian nationals is prohibited under US sanctions regime, an example of the ability of private citizens to achieve where politicians cannot. Since joining the NBA, Ehadadi has served as a cultural ambassador.

Another example is the frequent Greco-wrestling exchanges between Iran and the US that were also begun during the Clinton-Khatami period. These exchanges have gone a long way in establishing a dialogue and fostering understanding³¹. During the exchanges, both Iranians and Americans take advantage of the off-mat time to meet their foreign counterparts and learn more about each other's respective cultures. After a recent competition in 2007, member of the Iranian Junior Wrestling delegation, Abbas Ali Genii mentioned, "This programme has changed my outlook on the US. I really felt the spirit of cooperation and friendship".

²⁹ Raffaella Del Sarto, *Israel under Siege: The Politics of Insecurity and the Rise of the Israeli Neo-Revisionist Right*, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2017.

³⁰ "Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader Makes Hitler Look Good", *Axios*, available at <https://www.axios.com/saudi-crown-prince-mohammed-bin-salman-iran-supreme-leader-c699f834-7a10-4306-b020-dcf8e3593b29.html>, accessed on 15 September 2019.

³¹ Rima Majed, "Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East", *Global Change, Peace and Security*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2019.

Yet athletics are not the only thing that can unite Iranians and Americans. In March 2010, an American film delegation of actors and producers visited their Iranian counterparts. The visit was not without controversy, as Ahmadinejad's cultural advisor demanded the delegation first apologize for negative depictions on Iran in American movies³². Regardless, Hollywood Producer Sidney Ganis described the focus of his trip to Iran this way, "To communicate with our fellow filmmakers.... to meet, talk, express, visit and understand the problems of Iranian filmmakers, and express to them universal problems of filmmaking and just generally exchange ideas." When asked about future possibilities of cooperation Ganis replied, "Well, we're ready to go, filmmakers to filmmakers. That's why we're here. We're open; the Iranian filmmakers are also open, to even more mutual dialogue."

In closing, few nations have maintained their mutual animosity as Iran and the US have. Simply having conflicts is not a good enough explanation for thirty years of bitterness³³. Russia and Germany have cordial if not good relations; two of America's strongest allies, Japan and Germany were at one time mortal enemies of the US. Something lies at the heart of the US-Iran issue. Internal Iranian politics have combined to create a dynamic where re-establishing US relations amounts to political suicide as leader after leader use an anti-American slant to slander opponents. Additionally, the regime in Iran uses the threat of American intervention to maintain its control over many of its people. At the same time, the US perpetuates the conflict simply because it can. As the world's last superpower, there is little that Iran can do to compel the US's behaviour. Leadership in the US seems to take the position that the responsibility to make the first move rests solely on Iran; Obama's 'unclenched fist' statement being a good example of this policy. In either case, governments have only succeeded to institutionalise disagreements³⁴. All of this works counter to what the people of each nation desire. Both sides have expressed a desire to conduct talks.

5. Key Recommendations

The next US presidential team has to assume that the American question will become even more partisan in Iran as moderates and hardliners gear up to contest the succession process for supreme leader. In many ways, the American question is merely a pawn in an intra-regime fight, but this reality bodes for added Iranian

³² Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal 'abd Al-Nasir and His Rivals*, London: Oxford University Press, 1975.

³³ David A. Lake, *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World*, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.

³⁴ Helle Malmvig, "Power, Identity and Securitization in the Middle East: Regional Order after the Arab Uprisings", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2013.

policy inconsistencies toward the US and beyond. This needs to be factored in as Washington formulates its post Obama approach to Tehran.

The ability of any US president to shape the outcome of the decision making process in Tehran is finite. Still, Washington has to acknowledge the basic fact that the moderates in Iran see détente with the US as a source of domestic and international empowerment, while hardliners see it as a direct challenge to their narrow domestic and foreign interests. Empowering the moderates in Iran through continued engagement with the Rouhani government may result in greater flexibility in Iran's regional policies that are causing much angst to America's allies. The opposite effect is equally plausible. Many in Washington do not consider Rouhani a moderate, but, in the context of Iranian politics, he does promise alternatives to some of the policy orthodoxies that the Islamic Republic has maintained since 1979.³⁵ The next US president needs to quickly decide whether the political distance between Rouhani and his hard line rivals is worth banking on.

While Rouhani comes from a camp in the Iranian regime that has a long and mixed track record in seeking ways to reduce tensions with the US, Khamenei will remain decidedly suspicious of overtures to Washington. For Khamenei, the process of negotiations with the US was aimed at one thing: the removal of international sanctions³⁶. He has made it clear that unilateral American diplomatic and economic action against Iran does not deter him. Khamenei's reading is that the US no longer has the capacity to mobilise the international community against Iran as it did between 2006-2013 — whether on the nuclear issue or other matters — and he will, therefore, be more reluctant to go along with Rouhani's agenda of broadening the US-Iran conversation to include non-nuclear disagreements. To shape Khamenei's calculations, the next US president has to identify additional leverage points that will be harder for Khamenei to ignore.

6. Conclusion

The US government must remember not only recent events, like the failure of the Grand Bargain, but ancient history, like Cyrus the Great and the vast Persian Empire. Iran has a long, venerable history, forming a strong collective identity and culture. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries cemented a deeply anti-imperialist sentiment into the Iranian identity, and the US cannot forget the role that it played in disrespecting the values and wishes of a sovereign nation.

³⁵ László Póti, "Russian Policies towards the MENA Region", *MENARA Working Papers*, No. 9, 2018.

³⁶ Bassel F. Salloukh,, "The Arab Uprisings and the Geopolitics of the Middle East", *The International Spectator*, Vol. 48, No. 2, June 2013, pp. 32-46.

The neo-imperialism of the US combined with a perceived lack of respect and recognition for the multiple diplomatic endeavours of the Islamic Republic over the past decades has reinforced the anti-American foundation of the Islamic Republic's government³⁷. The negotiations were able to succeed in spite of this fundamental lack of trust, primarily due to the efforts of the Obama administration in reforming the aggressive rhetoric of previous American presidents.

There has still been, however, a major backlash against both the negotiations and the JCPOA in the US. Iran has behaved questionably in past negotiations, and this has augmented the lack of trust for the Iranian government in the US. It is understandable that, after thirty six years of antagonistic rhetoric and little to no direct communication with the Iranian government, many perceive it as untrustworthy and thus view the JCPOA as a dangerous concession.³⁸

The JCPOA is not destined for success no matter what: that is to say, it is vital that the US government continues to promote positive relations with Iran and hold up its end of the agreement. However, because so much of the antagonistic relationship between the US and Iran is based in rhetoric, a Republican president like Trump, who reverses the positive steps taken by Obama in this regard could do heavy damage to the US-Iran relations.

On the other hand, if relations between the US and Iran can get better in the future, Iran will be reintegrated into the international community, and will be more subject to international norms and laws. The Iranian government will be forced, to some extent, to open up, creating an environment where the Iranian people will be able to thrive and make connections across the world. This deal could be a starting point for substantial diplomatic relations between the US and Iran, but it requires continued effort and cooperation by both governments.

As of now, there are too many variables to accurately predict the future of the US-Iran relations. In such a tumultuous region, the progression of Iran towards reintegration will have manifold ramifications, the importance of which cannot be understated. The future of the Islamic Republic must continue to be thoroughly studied as it unfolds, with a complete and nuanced understanding of the past.

³⁷ Anthony Shadid, "Turkey Predicts Alliance with Egypt as Regional Anchors", *The New York Times*, 18 September 2011, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/19/world/middleeast/turkey-predicts-partnership-with-egypt-as-regional-anchors.html>, accessed on 22 September 2019.

³⁸ Matthew D. Stephen, "Rising Regional Powers and International Institutions: The Foreign Policy Orientations of India, Brazil, and South Africa", *Global Society*, Vol. 26, No. 3, July, 2012, pp. 289-309.