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US-IRAN RELATIONS SINCE THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION: MIDDLE EAST AS A GROWING FLASHPOINT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Abstract

The US-Iran relationship has been on a roller-coaster since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. For four and half decades, the relationship between Iran and the US (United States) has been marked by rows and conflicts, ranging from hostage-taking and sanctions to military confrontation. Subsequent US administrations followed a policy of “carrots and sticks”, although, more often than not oscillated between the two from one administration to another. A significant improvement in the relationship occurred during the Obama administration with the inking of the Iran nuclear deal in July 2015. However, after Obama, when President Trump came to power, a major policy shift was evident that eventually resulted in the withdrawal of the US from the Iran nuclear agreement. The early 2020 conflagration in the relationship, due to the killing of Major General Qassem Suleimani, Commander of the Quds force within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) had drawn the two countries onto the brink of a war. That and subsequent incidents had increased the likelihood of a conflict manifold – low-intensity conflict or a proxy war if not a full-fledged or total war. The relationship, however, did not deteriorate further as some observers predicted. During the Biden administration, a status quo was maintained albeit few sporadic incidents. All this changed abruptly due to the Israel-Hamas war that transformed the Middle East as a growing flashpoint. Accordingly, the paper seeks to answer the crucial question: what are or would be the implications of intensifying tension between the US and Iran, and especially, if there is an escalation into military conflict direct or indirect. The paper upholds the view that a military conflict would generate serious implications, engendering immense consequences at the global, regional and national levels severely undermining global peace and stability.

Keywords: US-Iran Relations, Low-Intensity Conflict, Dangerous Escalation, Proxy Fighters, Middle East as a Flashpoint

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1. Introduction

The US-Iran relationship has been on a roller-coaster since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, that overthrew the last Shah of Iran, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi and installed an orthodox *Shariah* based regime circled around a Supreme Leader who exerts critical sway and control over the governance and foreign relations of the country. The revolution of 1979 and the US Embassy in Tehran hostage crisis that followed, left a deep mark on US-Iran relations and have been instrumental in the beginning and continuation of animosity between the two countries. Since then, the two countries repudiated diplomatic relations and developed foreign policy orientations that essentially entrenched their hostile relationship. Divergence and discord on numerous issues ranging from Iran's nature of a "pariah state" and respective positions on issues of human rights and democracy, international order and Western dominance to very critical issues of Iran's nuclear programme, Israel-Palestinian conflict and regional ambitions of both the countries perpetuated hostility in their relations over the last four and half decades.

Subsequent US administrations followed more or less similar policies towards Iran comprising both the "sticks and carrots" although, more often than not, oscillated between the two from one administration to another. A significant breakthrough in their relationship had been witnessed during the Obama administration with the inking of a landmark JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) among the P5+1¹ under the leadership of the US, popularly known as the Iran nuclear deal. Although, the agreement was about Iran's nuclear programme but reaching to an agreement demonstrated a major policy shift in both the countries in terms of their willingness to resolve the decades-old disagreements. An incremental process could have been followed to resolve disagreements in other areas as well. On the contrary, President Donald Trump after assuming power adopted an opposite foreign policy direction towards Iran. From the beginning of his administration and even during his election campaign, Donald Trump renounced the JCPOA and repeatedly stated that it was against the national interests of the US. For Trump, as it appears, Israel and Saudi Arabia comprised the two most important pillars of his Middle East policy which essentially necessitated and created scope for the Trump administration to relinquish its relations with Iran.² Accordingly, the Trump administration followed "only the sticks" policies such as imposing new sanctions, creating pressure for regime change,

¹ P5+1 include the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council viz., the United States, China, France, Russia and the United Kingdom plus Germany.

² Ayman Saleh Albarasneh & Dania Koleilat Khatib, "The US policy of containing Iran – from Obama to Trump 2009–2018", *Global Affairs* 5, no. 05 (2019): 372

undermining Iran's regional and global aspirations through derogatory narratives and, threatening to withdraw from the JCPOA to pressurize Iran to heed its demands. Consequently, the relationship between the two countries deteriorated and each followed a policy of harming the other's national and regional interests. Iran responded with its various overt but mostly covert initiatives in the region of the Middle East to harm and frustrate US initiatives and interests. To mention a few: providing support to various extremist groups in Palestine viz., Hamas and Hizbullah whom the US designated as 'terrorist groups', assisting the Assad regime in Syria, providing support to extremist groups in Yemen, extending assistance to various groups in Iraq viz., Kataib Hizbullah and harming the interests of Saudi Arabia.

However, the latest developments in US-Iran relations since early 2020, have placed the relationship on a sharp edge. It all started with the killing of Major General Qassem Suleimani, the Commander of Quds force within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) of Iran, a special division whose primary responsibility is to carry out foreign military and clandestine operations. In an unprecedented display of force, the US orchestrated a drone attack on the night of 02 January 2020 that killed General Suleimani who had been considered the second most powerful person in Iran after the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and his right-hand.³ The attack also killed four other Iranian nationals and five Iraqi nationals including Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis founder and commander of Kataib Hizbullah as well as the deputy chairman of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) - the *Hashd al-Shaabi* – a coalition of Iran-backed militias which is made up of masses of fighters who responded to the call of Shiite clerics in 2014 to fight against ISIS.⁴ However, killing General Suleimani shocked the world and devastated Iran. It was unthinkable and many observers termed it as disproportionate. Various scholars, policymakers and analysts dubbed this act of the Trump administration as "a dangerous escalation", "reckless", and "severe revenge". Iranian leadership including the Supreme Leader expressed his strongest outrage and vowed to take ultimate action and revenge. Supreme Leader Khamenei, wrote on Twitter the next morning, "A #SevereRevenge awaits the criminals who have stained their hands with his & the other martyrs' blood last night, Martyr Suleimani is an Intl figure of Resistance

³ Samia Nakhoul, "U.S. killing of Iran's second most powerful man risks regional conflagration", 04 January 2020, *reuters.com*, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-blast-soleimani-analysi/u-s-killing-of-irans-second-most-powerful-man-risks-regional-conflagration-idUSKBN1Z21TJ> accessed on 08 July 2024.

⁴ Brian Finucane et. al., "Understanding the Risks of US-Iran Escalation amid the Gaza Conflict", *International Crisis Group Q & A*, 10 November 2023, available online at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/q%26a-iran-us-10xi23%20%282%29.pdf>, accessed on 25 September 2024.

& all such people will seek revenge.”⁵ Immediately after the incident, various US military bases were attacked, although, without any casualties. In many instances, intermittent missile attacks on US military bases in Iraq and other places in the Middle East were continuing.⁶ The Trump administration had also been worried and ordered all American civilians to leave Iraq. However, contrary to many prognostications, a direct and large-scale war did not occur between the US and Iran during the Trump administration.

During the Biden Administration, the relationship improved to some extent albeit failure on both sides to reinstate a nuclear agreement and disagreements over the Middle East and on many other issues continued. However, there was no significant conflict except few sporadic incidents. All these have changed with the 07 October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel that killed nearly 1500 Israelis⁷. Israel’s response and its war on the Gaza Strip have drawn many parties to the conflict viz., Hezbollah, the Houthis of Yemen and most importantly Iran. There were many attacks and counter-attacks between Iran and Israel and Israel’s retaliatory attacks are supported and backed by the US, the staunchest ally of Israel. There have been some strikes and counterstrikes even between the US and Iran especially, the US attacks on Iran-backed militia groups in Syria and Iraq that followed these militia groups striking back on US forces and military establishments located in Iraq and Syria. This situation raised an inescapable question: what are or would be the implications of intensifying tension between the US and Iran, and especially, if there is an escalation into military conflict direct or indirect that eventually turns the volatile Middle East into a global flashpoint.

In international relations, any bilateral relations can evolve towards one of the three major directions: (a) reconciliation and substantial improvements in bilateral relations towards a cooperative and friendly framework; (b) business as usual meaning maintaining the existing framework of relations; and (c) gradual and/or rapid deterioration in bilateral relations culminating into military conflict i.e., war. In case of US-Iran relations, the present paper upholds the view that a significant improvement in the relationship at least in the short-term is very unlikely and

⁵ “‘Dangerous escalation’ and ‘severe revenge’: The world responds to the US killing of Iran’s top general”, *cnc.com*, 03 January 2020, available at <https://www.cnc.com/2020/01/03/qasem-soleimani-death-world-responds-to-us-assassination-of-irans-top-general.html>, accessed on 10 July 2024.

⁶ “US-led coalition closing some bases in Iraq following rocket attacks”, *cnn.com*, 16 March 2020, available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/16/politics/us-closing-bases-iraq/index.html> accessed on 01 July 2024.

⁷ Efraim Karsh, “The Israel-Iran Conflict: Between Washington and Beijing”, *Israel Affairs* 29, no. 06 (2023): 1075.

especially, with the existing political structure, and foreign policy orientations in both the countries and even if the Democratic Party remains in power. Between the second and third propositions, the paper upholds the view that the possibilities for business as usual or conflict are almost equal, although, given the recent conflagration and attacks and counter-attacks between Israel and Iran including attacks by Iran's supported groups, the probable scenario of future at least in the short term is tilted more towards conflict, proxy or limited war, if not a full-fledged war or 'total war'. Commensurate with this proposition, the main objective of the paper is to explore and analyse the implications of US-Iran relations in the present context of "dangerous escalations". However, to explore the implications, the "levels of analysis" approach has been adopted for a more structured analysis. Hence, the discussion includes analysis of implications at the global, regional and national levels. Moreover, given the fluid and rapidly changing conflict scenario in the Middle East, the present paper covers incidents and events that occurred till 30 September 2024.

The analysis and arguments, presented in the paper are based on secondary resources and materials viz., books, journal articles, research reports, credible and objective online resources, newspaper op-eds and news reports. For convenience of analysis, the paper is divided into six sections. Following introduction, the second section mainly focuses on the past of US-Iran relations. However, while delineating the history, effort has also been made to reflect on the roots of discord and disputes between the two countries, which happened to be "strategic allies" prior to the 1979 revolution. The third section highlights the changes and directions of US-Iran relations since the Trump administration. Here, specific attention has been given to highlight the factors and trajectories that led to the recent escalation in their relationship. The fourth section delineates the nature and ramifications of recent escalations. What are or would be the implications of these dangerous escalations, which is the main focus of the paper, have been discussed and analysed in section five. Section six is the conclusion of the paper.

The paper has few limitations. There is a plethora of academic work on US-Iran relations in general and on the recent deterioration of their relationship in particular. The paper is not an exhaustive study covering all of them. Moreover, even though, sincere efforts have been made to study and analyse the writings and academic works of Iranian scholars based in Iran but most of them are available in vernacular language. As a result, the paper suffers from a lacuna of Iranian voices or analysis of Iranian scholars. Moreover, due to the dominance of writings of Western scholars and analysts, the author runs the risk of ending up with a biased assessment of the issues. However, conscious efforts have been made to warrant objectivity in the analysis.

2. US-Iran Relations since 1950s and the Roots of Disputes

To comprehend the contemporary nature of US-Iran relations, it is important to reflect on the history of their relations particularly, to grasp the nature and reasons for mistrust and discord that developed over the years. The friction between the US and Iran started in 1953, when the CIA along with the British Intelligence Service (MI6), staged a coup (Operation Ajax) to depose the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, following his decision to nationalize the oil industry and strengthened the monarchical rule of Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi. The Shah was one of America's best allies. In the following years, Nixon used the twin pillars where he relied on alliances with Iran and Saudi Arabia as a shield against the Soviets and as a guarantee for the secure flow of oil.⁸ During the later periods till 1979, the Cold War dynamics dominated and determined the nature and direction of US-Iran relations, which transformed into 'strategic partnership' with relative stability and certainty. All these changed abruptly with the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

The revolution took the world by surprise. The Shah fled the country and ended up in the US. The revolutionaries demanded the US to turn in the Shah. However, if the US had turned in the Shah it would have risked losing credibility and then every wavering dictator would have been encouraged to change camps and to join the Soviets.⁹ To pressurize the US, the revolutionary college students took over the American embassy and held hostage of 52 American diplomats and citizens for 444 days from 04 November 1979 to 20 January 1981. The crisis triggered sanctions on Iran. Moreover, the hostage crisis had a great effect on Jimmy Carter's presidency. Seen as a foreign policy blunder, the crisis helped Reagan, his Republican rival, to be elected. In 1984, after determining that Iran was behind the bombing of Marine barracks in Lebanon the year before, the Reagan administration increased the sanctions against Iran.¹⁰ Nevertheless, as Albarasneh & Dania Khatib noted, given the strategic location of Iran and the fact that it hosts important oil reserves, even a revolutionary Iran was too important to be completely cut off from the US foreign policy ambit.¹¹

However, shortly after the revolution broke out, the Iran-Iraq war started. Though the US was supporting Iraq in the war, President Reagan feared that Iran would join

⁸ N Gonzalez, *Engaging Iran: The rise of a Middle East powerhouse and America's strategic choice*, Westport CT: Praeger Security International, 2007, book review in *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 41, no.03 (2008): 775–776.

⁹ Ayman Saleh Albarasneh & Dania Koleilat Khatib, "The US policy of containing Iran – from Obama to Trump 2009–2018", p. 373.

¹⁰ W Sherman, "How we got the Iran deal, and why we'll miss it", *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 06 (2018): 186–197.

¹¹ Ayman Saleh Albarasneh & Dania Koleilat Khatib, *op. cit.*

the Soviet camp. However, a theological regime was ideologically at odds with the communist system. The US sold weapons, 100 American-made TOW antitank missiles, to Iran despite the embargo, which resulted in the famous Iran–Contra scandal. In July 1988, while the US Navy warship USS Vincennes was engaged in a fight with Iranian gunboats, it shot by mistake a civilian Iranian airliner. Two hundred and ninety people who were on-board the plane died among which 66 were children.¹² The incident contributed to the increase of animosity between the two countries.

During the first Gulf War, Iran remained neutral and its neutrality was seen positively. After the first Gulf War, the Clinton administration adopted a strategy termed as the dual containment pioneered by Martin Indyk, the NSC (National Security Council) director for the Middle East in which Iraq and Iran, both regimes seen as hostile to the US and Israel, hence, were to be contained. During the Clinton administration, sanctions on Iran increased. He also banned US energy companies from investing in Iranian oil fields. The second Clinton term coincided with the election of President Khatami in Iran. Khatami's main objective was the modernisation of Iran and the opening up to the West. Khatami also endorsed the dialogue of civilizations and a glimpse of rapprochement was evident at the moment. The Secretary of State Madeleine Albright apologised for the US 1953 coup and the administration announced lifting sanctions on the trade of some goods. In the period following 11 September 2001, the interests of Iran and the US seemed aligned. The Taliban was hostile to both Iran and the US. Iran helped topple the Taliban regime and to install the government of Karzai. However, despite the cooperation in Afghanistan, in the 2002 State of the Union, President Bush denounced Iran as a member of the 'axis of evil' along with Iraq and North Korea. During the second Gulf War, Iran again maintained its neutrality. The US toppled the Saddam regime and ended up putting in place a Shia regime sympathetic to Iran. However, the ease with which the US invaded Iraq scared Iran. Its leadership saw that the Islamic Republic could be the next target. Moreover, the ideologically oriented President Bush continued insisting on regime change in Iran and asked for funding from Congress in this regard as shown in Table 1.

¹² *Ibid.*

Fiscal Year	Funding Details
FY2004	US\$1.5m to advance democracy and human rights in Iran
FY2005	US\$3m for democracy promotion, priority areas: political party development, media, labour rights, civil society and human rights
FY2006	US\$11.15m earmarked for democracy promotion in Iran from the regular foreign aid appropriation
FY2006 supp.	US\$66.1m for democracy promotion earmarked for Voice of America and Radio Farad broadcasting, cultural exchange and public diplomacy
FY2007	No funds were requested
FY2008	US\$60m for democracy promotion, including non-violent efforts to limit Iran’s influence in other countries. US\$33.6m for Persian language broadcasting via VOA & Radio Farda
FY2009	No specific funds for Iran, but US\$25m for Near East Regional Democracy programme
FY2010	No specific request for democracy promotion in Iran, but the US\$40m for the Near East Regional Democracy programme
FY2011	No specific request for democracy promotion in Iran, but \$40m requested for the Near East Regional Democracy programme

It is evident that throughout the Bush administration following the regime change in Iraq, regime change in Iran was a dominant aspect or agenda of Bush’s Iran policy. However, there existed duplicity in US-Iran relations during the Bush administration as it had the pro-Iran group in Iraq as their allies while having a hostile relationship with their patron. Moreover, in the midst of all this, Iran’s nuclear ambitions became evident in September 2005, when President Ahmadinejad gave a speech at the United Nations declaring that Iran has the right to develop a peaceful nuclear power programme. Although, earlier in August 2002, Iran’s nuclear programme became public as a group of Iranian dissidents in the National Council of Resistance of Iran revealed in Washington the existence of undeclared nuclear facilities in the south of Tehran including the Natanz enrichment complex.

During the Obama administration, President Obama’s approach towards Iran apparently represented a continuation of the G. W. Bush strategy (a carrot and stick policy) of his second term. However, there existed significant contrast as Bush depended extensively on the sticks through sanctions and sometimes threatened with using military force. Obama, on the contrary, leaned largely from the beginning of his

¹³ The table has been extracted from Shahram Akbarzadeh, “Democracy Promotion versus Engagement with Iran”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 41, no. 03 (2011): 473.

first term on the carrots by emphasizing diplomacy and rapprochement with Iran.¹⁴ These policy directions of Obama in fact, reflected his campaign promises articulated in the statement that his foreign policy techniques and instruments would be different from his predecessors and would focus on engagement with Iran.¹⁵ However, in 2009, several factors pushed Obama to adopt a more coercive approach. Iran's crackdown on the popular uprisings and its refusal to accept compromises to limit its nuclear programme coincided with the discovery of a new nuclear facility. Obama administration also imposed sanctions against Iran during the 2010–2013 period. However, in his 2013 UN General Assembly speech Obama welcomed President Rouhani's statement that Iran would not go after the bomb and he directed John Kerry to join the European Union to step up diplomacy to negotiate a deal with Tehran. Consequently, the Obama administration signed the interim nuclear deal with Iran on 24 November 2013, and then the nuclear agreement in 2015. The deal seeks to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon capability and at the same time to enable Iran to normalize its relations with the Western world by lifting the imposed sanctions. As one scholar asserts, despite the objection of American allies in the Middle East including Saudi Arabia and Israel as well as substantial opposition domestically especially from the Republicans, "the deal has been touted as a potential beginning of a thaw in US–Iran relations".¹⁶ However, when Donald Trump assumed the Office of President, US–Iran relations witnessed a significant deviation from the Obama administration.

Following this cursory review of US–Iran relations and before we delve into the nature and directions of US–Iran relations in the post-Obama era, a question begs some discussion about the roots of US–Iran disputes. Numerous factors have been pointed out and numerous explanations are put forward. The majority of the scholars uphold the view that the disputes are rooted in divergent and contradictory interests.¹⁷ This argument has greater currency as the two countries' foreign policy orientations and agendas are so incompatible that they have had led to increasing confrontations over the years. As for instance, diverging orientations and agendas on issues of human rights and democracy, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, on terrorism and on nuclear

¹⁴ K Pollack & R Takeyh, "Doubling down on Iran". *The Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 04 (2011): 7–21.

¹⁵ D Rothkopf, "Obama's pivot to Iran", *Foreign Policy*, 29 January 2015, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/29/obamas-pivot-to-iran/> accessed on 07 July 2024.

¹⁶ Chintamani Mahapatra, "US–Iran Nuclear Deal: Cohorts and Challenger", *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 03, no. 01 (2016): 36–46.

¹⁷ See for instance, Penelope Kinch, *The US–Iran Relationship: The Impact of Political Identity on Foreign Policy*, London & New York: I.B.Tauris, 2016, and Barbara Slavin, *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, the U.S., and the Twisted Path to Confrontation*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007.

energy differ to an extent that they appear almost impossible to reconciliation. Scholars like Martin Indyk also highlighted similar issues as early as in 1994.¹⁸ However, some renowned scholars believe that there exist several groups¹⁹ in both the countries who are more interested in fuelling conflict and discord rather than creating an environment of meaningful dialogue and negotiation to resolve the disputes. The best examples of such groups are the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) which pursue Israel's interests in the US often contradictory to US national interests.²⁰ Others²¹ have put more emphasis on ideational factors or to the mindsets of the two countries' leaders and their epistemological origins. Related to this is the differences between the US governments' materialistic and Iranian leaderships' idealist, ideational and identity-oriented approaches that have led to the diverging perceptions on various issues at stake. Still, there are others, who believe, it is the 'pariah' nature of the Iranian state that is responsible as it offers an alternative vision of world power to the developing world. As Tarock noted, "it is not Iran's military and political power but its messianic cultural power that Washington sees as a threat which therefore must be contained."²² Whatever are the roots, US-Iran relations once again turned into a hotspot for potential war during the Trump administration and even worse, during the Biden administration, the Middle East turned into a global flashpoint.

3. Changes and Directions since the Trump Administration

Obama attempted from the outset to pursue a policy that encompassed change in discourse towards Iran intending to exhaust the diplomatic efforts before contemplating military options. After Obama, when President Donald Trump came to power, he maintained Obama's policy toward the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) but differed widely with regard to Iran. And the stark reality of this difference

¹⁸ Some of these issues were outlined by Martin Indyk in 'Symposium on dual containment: US policy toward Iran and Iraq', *Middle East Report* 03, no. 01 (1994): 1026; similar points were made by Assistant Secretary of State, John Djerejian, in his address to the House Foreign Affairs Committee in July 1993. Quoted in Adam Tarock, "US-Iran Relations: Heading for Confrontation?", *Third World Quarterly* 17, no. 01 (1996): 150.

¹⁹ See for instance, Mirijam Koch, "A Liberal Perspective: The Role of Interest Groups in US Foreign Policy Towards Iran", *ECPR General Conference 2015*, The Université de Montréal, Montreal, available at <https://ecpr.eu/Filestore/PaperProposal/63c3ea1d-6a0e-4556-a2bc-c1d0f868729d.pdf> accessed on 02 July 2024

²⁰ Two very renowned scholars who pointed to AIPAC and its lobbying as a deciding factor for US foreign policy towards Middle East in general and to Iran in particular include J Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt. See John Mearsheimer and Stephen M Walt, "Is It Love or the Lobby? Explaining America's Special Relationship with Israel", *Security Studies* 18, no. 01 (2009): 58–78; also see John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

²¹ Mohammad Reza Chitsazian and Seyed Mohammad Ali Taghavi, "An Iranian Perspective on Iran-US Relations: Idealists Versus Materialists", *Strategic Analysis* 43, no. 01 (2019): 28.

²² Adam Tarock, "US-Iran relations: Heading for confrontation?", *Third World Quarterly* 17, no. 01 (1996): 151.

became prominent when it came to the Iran nuclear agreement. The Trump Administration repeatedly highlighted that the JCPOA had deficiencies and weaknesses as it tackled nuclear issues only and ignored other disputed issues. According to Donald Trump, the Iran nuclear deal was one of the “worst” deals in US history, “so poorly negotiated”, and “the deal does nothing to constrain Iran’s destabilizing activities, including its support for terrorism”.²³ Moreover, it hindered the US’s ability to roll back Iran’s activities and its military and missile capabilities. So, through shifting the policy, the Trump Administration sought to: (1) exert pressure on Iran’s economy; (2) compel it to renegotiate the JCPOA; and (3) prevent Iran from accessing new funds that it would use to strengthen its military capabilities and limit its ability for intervention in the region. President Trump called on European allies to negotiate better terms as Iran was not in compliance with the deal from his point of view. Eventually, on 08 May 2018, Trump announced that the US would withdraw from the JCPOA and reinstate sanctions. He declared that “the Iran deal must either be renegotiated or terminated” and he adds, “therefore, I am announcing today that the United States will withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal”. On 21 May 2018, the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo announced a return to a US strategy of pressuring Iran through re-imposing sanctions and on 05 November 2018, the sanctions were imposed again.

Trump’s aggressive Iran policy has been mainly driven by John Bolton, Trump’s National Security Advisers and Mike Pompeo, the then US Secretary of State, both are known as anti-Iran hardliners. As a Congressional Research Service report noted, the JCPOA reduced the potential threat from Iran’s nuclear program, but did not contain strict or binding limits on Iran’s ballistic missile program; its regional influence; its conventional military programmes; or its human rights abuses.²⁴ Moreover, Trump’s policy shift towards Iran has been highly hailed by Washington’s allies in the Middle East viz., Israel and the Arab Gulf states, the Republican majority in Congress, along with many Democrats. Arguably, the Trump administration is committed to abandon the traditional objective in Iran policy, i.e. containing Iran’s power and turn to the more comprehensive target of rolling Iran’s power back to its territorial borders. In other words, the Trump administration seeks to check and roll back Iran’s growing regional influence as policy officials in the Trump administration explicitly expressed their concern over Iran’s regional politics and its increasing

²³ *The White House*, Remarks by President Trump on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, 2018, quoted in Ayman Saleh Albarasneh & Dania Koleilat Khatib, op. cit.

²⁴ K Katzman, “Iran: Internal politics and U.S. policy and options,” *Congressional Research Service*, RL32048, VERSION 346, 2019.

influence in the region, especially after lifting the sanctions on Iran which enhanced its economic gains that could be exploited to stretch its power and foster its leverage. Consequently, the Trump administration and especially, President Trump took a hardliner position vis-à-vis Iran and opted for military option when situation permitted.

4. Latest Conflagration onto the Brink of War

On 02 January 2020, in an unprecedented display of force, the United States carried out a drone attack on the convoy carrying and accompanying Qassem Suleimani and killed him along with all who were accompanying him. The incident took everyone by surprise and emotionally devastated Iran. There were massive rallies in Tehran protesting the act and chanting the name of General Suleimani. The government declared three days of national holidays and national mourning. The Supreme Leader expressed his strongest voice and vowed to take actions against such heinous act. Some Iranian scholars are calling it an act of war. According to Phillip Smyth, a Shiite Islamist militarism expert and senior fellow at the Washington Institute, it's "the most major decapitation strike the U.S. has ever engaged in."

The U.S. had been pursuing the shadowy leader for decades. Suleimani was the face of Iran's military interventions overseas and what the U.S. government describes as the country's "malign activity," including training and deploying proxy fighters and supporting Bashar Assad in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthi rebels in Yemen and Shiite militias in Iraq. His operations within Iraq at the height of the Iraq war killed hundreds of US personnel. According to a State Department report in 2019, Iranian proxies in Iraq have killed more than 600 Americans since 2003.²⁵ Moreover, a military option for Iran has always been on the table and there have been widespread debates going on around such options. The former US Defence Secretary Robert Gates outlined his objection to using military force to halt Iran's nuclear programme as bombing Iran "will only buy us time and send the programme deeper and more covert".²⁶ He emphasized that the US had "no choice but to sit down at the table with the Iranians" to discuss and negotiate the development of the nuclear programme.²⁷ In a related vein, former Secretary of Defence James Mattis warned against US military escalation toward Iran, favouring diplomacy over force in relation to the rising tensions with Iran. Similarly, Ben Rhodes, who served as Deputy National

²⁵ Details of the report are available at <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2019/04/04/iran-killed-more-us-troops-in-iraq-than-previously-known-pentagon-says/> accessed on 10 July 2024.

²⁶ Blair, D., "Robert Gates: Bombing Iran would not stop nuclear threat," UK: The Telegraph, 2009.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Security Adviser under the Obama administration blamed President Trump for escalating tensions with Iran. Rhodes, one of the chief architects of Obama's Iran nuclear deal said, "Everything's gotten worse... Trump has made the nuclear threat worse and he's made the risk of war worse and this was eminently predictable".

However, there are very strong advocates for military options. National Security Adviser John Bolton pushed heavily for a confrontation with Tehran's regime. Scholar like Matthew Kroenig wrote an article in *Foreign Affairs* back in 2012, in which he calls for action against Iran.²⁸ He criticizes those who stand against war assuming that "the cure would be worse than the disease". According to him, the opponents fail to estimate the true danger that a nuclear-armed Iran would pose to US interests in the Middle East. Hence, he believes that a well-planned military strike against Iran could spare the region and the world a very real threat, "With atomic power behind it, Iran could threaten any US political or military initiative in the Middle East with nuclear war." On the contrary, Stephen M Walt provided a counterargument to Kroenig that he is overestimating the consequences of inaction and portraying a growing threat down the road if a military action is not taken.²⁹ While Kroenig assumes that Iran is likely to cross the threshold soon, Walt argues that Iran has had a nuclear programme for decades and still has no weapon. Moreover, the 2007 and 2011 National Intelligence Estimates concluded that there was no conclusive proof that Iran was pursuing an actual bomb.³⁰

International reactions toward the killing of General Suleimani on the other hand, condemned the act whereas some leaders vowed to take revenge. For instance, former Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi also condemned the "assassination" — which was carried out in Baghdad — calling it "an act of aggression on Iraq" and "breach of sovereignty that will lead to war in Iraq, the region, and the world." On the other hand, Hassan Nasrallah, the now deceased leader of Lebanon's Hezbollah, the small country's most powerful Shiite political and militant entity, vowed to "continue the path" of the Iranian general and described the punishment of the U.S. as a responsibility of all Hezbollah fighters.³¹

²⁸ Kroenig, M. "Time to Attack Iran, Why a Strike is the Least Bad Option". *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 01 (2012): 76–86.

²⁹ Walt, S. M., "The worst case for war with Iran", *Foreign Policy*, 21 December 2011, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/12/21/the-worst-case-for-war-with-iran/>

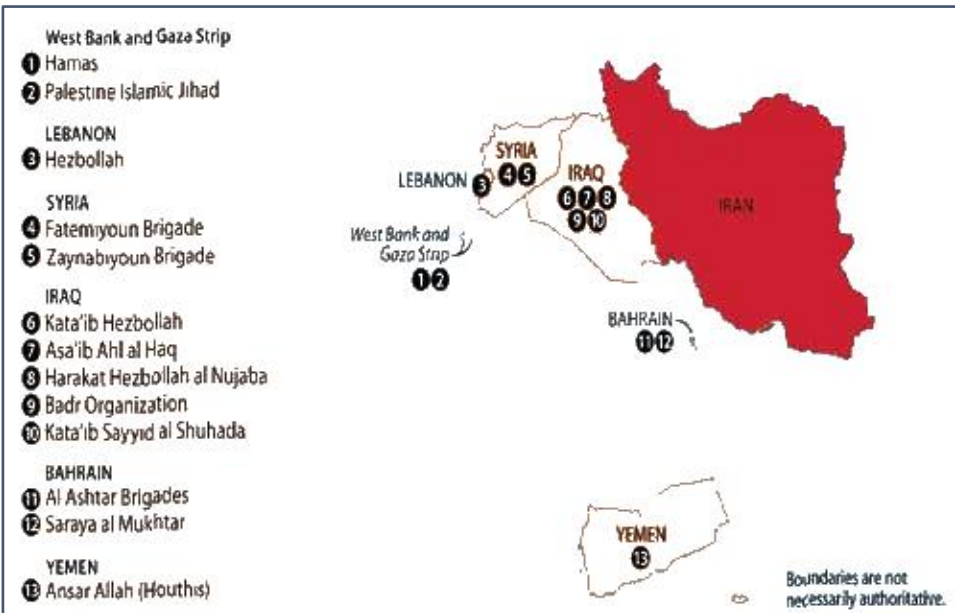
³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ 'Dangerous escalation' and 'severe revenge': The world responds to the US killing of Iran's top general, *cncb.com*, 03 January 2020, available at <https://www.cncb.com/2020/01/03/qasem-soleimani-death-world-responds-to-us-assassination-of-irans-top-general.html>, accessed on 10 July 2024.

However, contrary to many predictions, the US and Iran did not engage in direct and large-scale war during the Trump administration. During the Biden Administration, the relationship improved to some extent. Nevertheless, both sides failed to make any significant headway as they could not reinstate a nuclear agreement and disagreements over the Middle East and on many other issues continued. There were few sporadic incidents although no significant conflict occurred especially, of the scale such as killing General Suleimani. All these have changed with the 07 October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel.

Israel’s response to the Hamas’ attack essentially led to its initiation of war on the Gaza Strip. These have drawn many parties to the conflict viz., Hezbollah, the Houthis of Yemen and most importantly Iran. There were many attacks and counter-attacks between Iran and Israel. And Israel’s retaliatory attacks on Iran are presumably supported and backed by the US, the staunchest ally of Israel. What is more important is the fact that, there have been some strikes and counterstrikes even between the US and Iran. Following the Syria and Iraq based Iran-backed militia groups’ (see Figure 1) strikes on US forces and military establishments located in Iraq and Syria, the US attacked these groups and Iran’s establishments in Syria and Iraq.

Figure 1: Selected Iran-Backed Groups³²



³² Clayton Thomas, “Iran: Background and US Policy”, *Congressional Research Service Report*, R47321, 22 April 2024, p-3.

The spiral occurred last year during the months of October-November. On 17 October 2023, there were drone attacks and indirect firing on US forces based in Iraq and Syria and the Iran-backed groups³³ based in Iraq and Syria were the only actors claiming responsibility for these attacks.³⁴ The US retaliated with two strikes: one on 26 October 2023, when US forces launched airstrikes on targets in eastern Syria that Washington described as “facilities used by the IRGC and IRGC-affiliated groups for command and control, munitions storage and other purposes”;³⁵ and the second one was another strike on “a weapon storage facility” in eastern Syria “used by the IRGC and affiliated groups” on 08 November 2023.³⁶ Hence, the US and Iran appear to be in an escalatory spiral of attacks and counterattacks that turns the Middle East a growing flashpoint. To worsen the situation, Israel carried out a strike on an Iranian consular facility in Damascus, killing several of the IRGC senior commanders including General Mohammad Reza Zahedei, commander of the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards in Syria and Lebanon, which Tehran considered a direct hit on sovereign territory. In response, Iran for the first time mounted a direct military attack codenamed “Operation True Promise”³⁷ with short-range ballistic missiles against Israel albeit informing the US about the impending attack beforehand.³⁸ Another blow came in July of 2024, when an Israeli operation killed the Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh while he was in Tehran for the inauguration of Iranian President Masoud Pazeshkian. Therefore, the escalatory spiral is continuing with no sign of cessation. Security analysts, foreign policy scholars and even some policymakers all pointed to “dangerous escalation” from the US side while “living dangerously” from the Iranian side, hence, the budding of the inescapable question: what are or would be the

³³ An umbrella entity calling itself the Islamic Resistance (al-Muqawama al-Islamiya) has claimed responsibility for the majority of the attacks on US forces in both Iraq and Syria. This entity appears to comprise Iraqi groups linked to the ‘axis of resistance’ viz., Kataib Hizbullah, Harakat al-Nujaba, Kataib Sayed al-Shuhada, Asaib Ahl al-Haq and the Badr Organisation; network of Iran-aligned states like Syria; and non-state actors viz., the Houthis in Yemen, Hizbullah in Lebanon and the Palestinian groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

³⁴ Brian Finucane et. al., “Understanding the Risks of US-Iran Escalation amid the Gaza Conflict”, *International Crisis Group Q & A*, 10 November 2023, available online at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/q%26a-iran-us-10xi23%20%282%29.pdf>, accessed on 25 September 2024, p-1.

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ See <https://besacenter.org/operation-true-promise-irans-missile-attack-on-israel/> for discussion on “Operation True Promise”, accessed on 20 September 2024.

³⁸ Ali Vaez, “Iran’s Year of Living Dangerously: How the Failure of Tehran’s Strategy Is Raising Its Appetite for Risk”, *Foreign Affairs*, 11 October 2024, available online at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/iran-year-living-dangerously-tehran-strategy-ali-vaez> accessed 15 October 2024.

implications of intensifying tension between the US and Iran and, especially, if there is an escalation into military conflict direct or indirect.

5. Implications of Growing Flashpoint

The ongoing escalation between the US and Iran and its potential for a conflict or war poses serious implications. The mere fact that one party to the conflict is a superpower with unprecedented and unmatched military capability portrays the possibility of a shorter war with heavy casualties to the Iranians. But recent experiences of the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan critically upset such proposition and engender the probability of a prolonged conflict whatever is the nature: low intensity or total war and especially, if a low-intensity conflict, which has the most likelihood to happen. In any case, the implications are widespread and would be severe not only for the US and Iran but for the Middle East region and eventually for the world. Hence, a ‘levels of analysis’ approach is more prolific to discuss and analyse the implications.

5.1 Regional Implications

The ongoing tension between the US and Iran has severely increased the possibility of a military conflict or war between the two countries and the theatre of war would be the Middle East. In terms of overall military strength, the Iranian armed forces ranked 14th in the world out of 145 countries that are ranked in 2024 by Global Firepower and Business Insider. With some 610,000 active-duty forces and another 350,000 reserves, Iran has the largest standing military in the Middle East.³⁹ However, until now, Iran does not have the capability to engage in direct confrontation with the US or attack directly in the mainland USA. Hence, arguably, the war would be centred in the Middle East with serious implications for other countries of the region.

On the other hand, if the conflict is a low-intensity conflict or a proxy war which has more likelihood than a total war and, actually to some estimate presently going on in a small sporadic scale will also impact and already impacting the region of the Middle East. As one scholar noted back in 2020, that the development of tension between the US and Iran that time is anticipated to upsurge the existing turmoil in the

³⁹ Global Firepower, “2024 Iran Military Strength,” https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=iran, accessed on 25 September 2024.

Middle East.⁴⁰ If the US-Iran tension does not de-escalate, Iran is likely to continue with its regional operations which involve providing increasing support to various extremist groups and militias from Yemen, Syria and Iraq to Palestine and continue to pose threats for countries who are key allies of the US in the region. Such entanglements will definitely deteriorate peace and stability in the Middle East.

Some scholars are also highlighting the fact that, the way Iran, its affiliated groups and its interests in the region are attacked by Israel and the US, Iran may opt for nuclear weaponisation as an ultimate deterrent strategy. According to CIA Director William Burns, Iran now has the capability to enrichment of weapon grade in a week or two and then a month to produce viable delivery system.⁴¹ However, this is a strategic dilemma for Iran since, any such effort will engender two adverse consequences for Iran. Firstly, there may be pre-emptive strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities both by Tel Aviv and the US. Iran's nuclear facilities have been repeated targets of Israel and US' attacks. Recent instances include: in April 2021, Natanz – the flagship facility of the Iranian nuclear programme was hit by explosion that reportedly destroyed the plant's centrifuge power supply system, causing severe disruption to Iran's nuclear objectives. And to add to the damage, after a hiatus of nearly nine years in assassination of Iranians associated with the country's nuclear programme, on 27 November 2020, a remote-controlled gunfire killed Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, known as 'the father of the Iran's nuclear programme' while riding his car with his bodyguards in Tehran.⁴² Secondly, any prospect for negotiation regarding further lifting of sanctions at least by the European Union will not materialise if Iran pursues nuclear weapon, hence, the country will have to face severe economic challenges.

Moreover, any escalation of the conflict will generate more difficulties and uncertainties for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. In fact, given the present level of conflict in the Middle East, the prospect for Palestinian statehood became elusive. In contemporary times, a major problem with the Israel-Palestinian conflict is that no party sees the benefits of peace in comparison to continuing the conflict. Moreover,

⁴⁰ Arne Kislenko, "The long history and current consequences of the Iranian-American conflict.", *The Conversation*, 14 January 2020, available at <https://theconversation.com/the-long-history-and-current-consequences-of-the-iranian-american-conflict-129771> accessed on 10 July 2020.

⁴¹ Ali Vaez, "Iran's Year of Living Dangerously: How the Failure of Tehran's Strategy Is Raising Its Appetite for Risk", *Foreign Affairs*, 11 October 2024, available online at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/iran-year-living-dangerously-tehran-strategy-ali-vaez> accessed 15 October 2024.

⁴² Marta Furlan, "Israeli-Iranian relations: past friendship, current hostility", *Israel Affairs*, 28, no. 2, 2022, 178.

there now exist many subsidiary groups who have their own interests in sustaining the conflicts and any support they get from any country will only empower them.

However, there is one regional outcome that immensely favours the US and its regional foreign policy objectives which is the strengthening of US alliances in the Middle East, especially with Israel. Israel has been constantly asking for stern actions against Iran. Israel was frustrated during the Obama administration due to the nuclear deal and lifting of sanctions against Iran. Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear deal and the policy shift towards Iran have been praised by Israel and other regional allies as well. However, contrary to US' expectations, the moral standing and regional dominance of the US has waned to a great extent due to the escalation and will continue to erode if the conflict escalates further. The death of more than 40,000 Palestinians including 6,000 women and 11,000 children⁴³ due to Israel's offensive in Gaza and Lebanon is seen by the World as a failure of the US and its policies in the Middle East. Nevertheless, apart from regional implications, there are global implications as well.

5.2 *Global Implications*

If a direct war breaks out between the US and Iran, there is all likelihood that other major powers as well as many other countries might get involved in the conflict, although, the Middle East may remain as the epicentre. Both the US and Iran have their alliances although, in case of Iran more of informal alliances. If the conflict escalates, world powers like Russia, China and regional countries might all get involved. Hence, the possibility of a global conflict is extremely high. In fact, such a possibility was one of the reasons for not opting for military action in the case of Iran by earlier US administrations. However, the escalating conflict for last one year demonstrated China's position clearly regarding Israel's offensive in the region. Contrary to many analysis,⁴⁴ which highlights burgeoning Israeli-Chinese relationship emphasising Beijing's involvement in key infrastructure and hi-tech projects in Israel, events unfolded in the Middle East since, Hamas' attack of 07 October 2023, clearly demonstrates China's position not siding with Israel in the conflict.

⁴³ For details see <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/more-women-and-children-killed-gaza-israeli-military-any-other-recent-conflict> accessed on 03 October 2024.

⁴⁴ For discussion on Israel's strategic dilemma regarding its relations with both the US and China, see Efraim Karsh, "The Israel-Iran Conflict: Between Washington and Beijing", *Israel Affairs*, 29, no. 06 (2023): 1075.

On the other hand, in recent years, we have seen warming of relationship between Russia and Iran especially, in the defence sector. As alleged by the US, Iran has transferred short-range ballistic missiles to Russia for its war in Ukraine. Moreover, Iran also provided its Shahed drones to Russia during the Russia-Ukraine war. This significant development in defence cooperation between Russia and Iran may indicate Russia's position if the US-Iran conflict escalates. It may be assumed that given the present context of the US-Russia relations and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, there is more credence to the proposition that Russia would side with Iran. All these may lead to extreme polarisation and division among the major powers if the US-Iran conflict escalates and worsen the situation with propensity for global conflict.

Now, referring back to the act of killing General Suleimani, this also has global level implications especially, the modus operandi of the actions has severe implications for international law, international norms and also for laws of war. In a probe in July 2020, by Agnes Callamard, the UN special rapporteur investigating extrajudicial and summary executions, claimed that the targeted killing of General Suleimani was unlawful and risked eroding international laws that govern the conduct of hostilities.⁴⁵ She noted that the US drone strike that killed Suleimani as he arrived in the Iraqi capital, Baghdad, could only be justified in international law as a response to an imminent threat. The US had provided no such evidence. In fact, the probe was intended to draw the attention of the international community to the challenges posed by the use of drones for international law and norms. The damage is more severe than the concept of "pre-emption" formulated during the Bush Presidency immediately after the 9/11 attacks and used as justification for invading Afghanistan and Iraq. However, the context was different i.e., the 9/11. But this time, it's about the targeted killing especially, by drone attack and also not in a war environment. It might encourage other countries to follow the same path undermining international norms and values.

Moreover, contemporary acts and policies of the US demonstrated its more emphasis on militarism than diplomacy and the use of hard power instead of soft power. US being the superpower, the use of hard power by the country is viewed by the world community as rash, hasty and arrogant, therefore, undermining US image, soft power and the US leadership role. Some might argue that the US has already lost those due to the Afghanistan and Iraq wars and the failure of the superpower in

⁴⁵ "The killing of Qassem Soleimani was unlawful, says UN expert", *bdnews24.com*, 10 July 2020, available at <https://bdnews24.com/world/middle-east/2020/07/10/the-killing-of-qassem-soleimani-was-unlawful-says-un-expert> accessed on 11 July 2020.

stabilizing and ensuring peace in these two countries. It can be argued that Iran and the volatilities in the Middle East were posing an opportunity for the US to regain its global role in terms of norms setting and providing leadership. In that respect, present situation in the Middle East is a blunder. The most powerful nation has to realise that violence leads to violence only and it should be the responsibility of the great powers to avert widening of the conflict and turn into a global conflict. However, there are serious national-level implications as well if the conflicting US-Iran relations transform into direct or indirect war.

5.3 National Level Implications

Iran has been suffering tremendous losses since the Trump administration. It started with the killing of General Suleimani. He was the second most powerful person in Iran and the most trusted figure of the Supreme Leader. According to Professor Abbas of Stanford University, no person has been so close to Ayatollah in the last 30 years. He was the commander of the Quds force, the key instrument of Iran's foreign operations, hence, its regional ambitions.⁴⁶ According to Jake Sullivan, currently National Security Adviser of President Joe Biden, General Suleimani was equivalent to the US Director of National Security Agency (NSA), Director of CIA, and Commander of US Special Operations all together in the embodiment of one person. His assassination has definitely weakened the regime and its military capability as well.

Subsequent attacks and the US-Iran tussles have worsened the situation further. It can be said that the numerous attacks carried out both inside Iran and on its affiliated groups have only pushed Iran into a corner, where the country may take excessive risks in escalating the conflict. This will have serious implications for Iran. The country is already suffering from decades of sanctions that severely weakened its economy. The increasing defence expenditure is also exerting pressure on the economy. A full-fledged war for Iran would be devastating at least for its ambition to emerge as a regional power with economic and military strength.

For the US, present conflict with Iran and any further escalation has both negative and positive implications. US's support towards Israel is deep rooted in history and US domestic politics. And as already mentioned earlier, the infamous Israel lobby plays crucial role in shaping US policies towards Israel. However, US's conflict with

⁴⁶ Expert Opinion, "Implications of the Assassination of Qasem Soleimani", The Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs, available online at <https://shiism.hds.harvard.edu/files/shiism-global-affairs/files/1-17-20.pdf> accessed 22 September 2024.

Iran is strengthening its alliances with Israel. This is also benefitting the US in two ways. Firstly, it is a demonstration to all alliance members about US's commitment towards the countries who are in US orbit. This in turn will lead to other countries to reciprocate and strengthen their commitments toward the US, which will assist US to play greater regional and global role. Secondly, improved US-Israel relations are beneficial for US's domestic politics. As for instance, the Biden administration is vehemently criticised for not being able to stop wars in Gaza and also in Lebanon. It is assumed that the Biden presidency is giving more priority to domestic politics especially, due to the upcoming presidential election. A US policy not favouring Israel may impact US voters in voting against the incumbent president. However, there are negative implications as well.

US-Iran conflict escalation especially, if the conflict transforms into direct war, this will severely jeopardise peace and stability in the Middle East but also at the global level. But this may also lead to severely undermining of US image and standing among the global community. As an 'indispensable nation' – a phrase former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright used to invoke frequently – and also as a leader of the so called 'free-world', conflict prevention and maintaining global peace and security are presumed to be the responsibilities of the US. War with Iran, which has the tremendous potential of a nuclear fallout will be viewed by the global mass as a failure of the superpower. This will severely strain US's leading position in many other regional and global issues and crisis.

For many Muslim-majority countries including Bangladesh, the ongoing escalation will definitely have significant impacts. Countries like Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia including Bangladesh enjoy cordial relations with Iran. Bangladesh's relations with Iran are to some extent characterised by limited exchanges. However, there are many efforts to strengthen the relationship in recent times viz., signing MoUs, preferential trade agreements, asking for help for nuclear power plants and establishing more oil refineries. It is to be noted that the only oil refineries we have was built with Iranian assistance.⁴⁷ Bangladesh has yet to repay the loan taken from Iran in the 1980s as could not repay all, due to sanctions. Hence, if there is a conflict or war, Bangladesh will have a difficult time to strengthen its relations with Iran. A US-Iran conflict or war will have severe impact on oil and global trade of oil, and eventually on global economy, which will also affect Bangladesh adversely.

⁴⁷ "Tehran ready to negotiate gas pipeline project with Dhaka", *Dhaka Tribune*, 01 September 2015, available online at <https://www.dhakatribune.com/uncategorized/2015/09/01/tehran-ready-to-negotiate-gas-pipeline-project-with-dhaka> accessed on 12 July 2020.

Last but not least, a military attack on Iran may be construed as an attack on the Muslim Ummah at least by the Islamists in Bangladesh. Ideologically and emotionally, the people may support the Iranian cause but under the influence of international order dominated by the Western world, Bangladesh as a state may find itself in disarray in taking sides while maintaining neutrality will also be extremely difficult.

6. Conclusion

The US-Iran relationship has been going through turbulence for over four and half decades now. The relationship nosedived following the 1979 Iranian revolution and the simultaneous US Embassy hostage crisis. Since then, subsequent US administrations, followed more or less identical foreign policy towards Iran comprising both the “sticks and carrots” although, while one administration gave more emphasis on carrots, another favoured the ‘sticks’ approach. A significant improvement was evident during the Obama administration with the achievement of the JCPOA, popularly known as the Iran nuclear deal. However, when President Donald Trump came to power, he repeatedly denounced the JCPOA as insufficient as it included Iran’s nuclear programme only and left aside all other issues especially, Iran’s various other military programmes and its entangling regional activities. Eventually, the Trump administration withdrew from the deal and re-imposed sanctions on Iran. Following such policy shift, Iran also undertook various initiatives to create pressure on the US which included among others providing support to various extremist groups and militias in Yemen, Iraq and Palestine as well as allegedly carrying out missile attacks on various US interests including Saudi Arabia.

The US responded with military action and display of force and killed General Suleimani creating a tense situation and increasing the potential of a conflict or war between the two countries. Furthermore, the Israel-Hamas war that began last year has resulted in a spiral of attacks and counterattacks between Iran and Israel and also between the US and Iran and Iran affiliated armed groups. As of now, there are too many variables to accurately predict the future of US-Iran relations. However, the paper upholds that a total war is unlikely whereas significant improvement in bilateral relations will also be difficult given the existing format of leadership, political structure and national interests of the respective countries. Whatever is the scenario, there are serious implications at the regional, global and national levels.

There is a serious possibility of war in the Middle East and if not total war, a low-intensity conflict that would not only upset regional peace and stability but will also result in shattering the prospect of a Palestinian statehood. At the global level, the

conflict will have an extreme possibility of dragging other major powers as well as various regional countries into the conflict hence, resulting in a global conflict. At the national level, a US-Iran war will put tremendous strains on Iran's military capability as well as its already overstressed economy due to sanctions. It may also hinder Iran's prospect for regional leadership as short of nuclear war, Iran may be devastated by the war. For the US, a war may strengthen its alliance in the Middle East region, however, US' entrance into another war in the 21st Century will severely undermine its leadership role in the world and the U.S. will be held responsible for undermining global peace and stability.

Appendix

Key Requirements and Actions Mandated by the JCPOA	
Enrichment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For 10 years operating centrifuges reduced to 5,060 IR-1 machines, total machines is 6,104 IR-1s • Excess centrifuges (over 13,000) dismantled and stored under IAEA monitoring • For 15 years level of uranium enrichment capped at 3.67 percent uranium-235 • For 15 years enrichment only at Natanz • For 10 years no production of additional IR-1 centrifuges • Between years 11-13 Iran can replace IR-1s with the equivalent capacity of IR-6 and IR-8 machines and limits lasting to years 14-15
Uranium Stockpile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For 15 years the stockpile is kept under 300 kilograms of 3.67 percent enriched uranium in total (all forms) • Excess enriched uranium sold, shipped abroad for storage, or diluted to natural uranium levels • Uranium oxide and scrap material enriched up to 20 percent fabricated into fuel for Tehran Research Reactor, blended down, or shipped out
Fordow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Converted to research facility for stable isotope production with Russian cooperation • 1,044 IR-1 centrifuges in six cascades will remain here, 328 for production, the remaining 700 are idle • For 15 years no introduction of uranium at the facility
Advanced Centrifuge Research and Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For 8.5 years Iran may conduct research with uranium on a single IR-4, IR-5, IR-6 and IR-8 centrifuge at Natanz • After 8.5 years test up to 30 IR-6s and 30 IR-8s • After 8 years manufacture up to 200 IR-6s and 200 IR-8s centrifuges without rotors • For 10 years Joint Commission review and approval of changes to the research and development plan
Arak Reactor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remove and disable the original core of the Arak reactor • Replace the core of the Arak reactor to reduce weapons-grade plutonium output, certified by the Joint Commission • For 15 years no reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel with an intention to never reprocess • Permanent commitment to ship out spent nuclear fuel • For 15 years no he 15 years no heavy water reactors in Iran • For 15 years no accumulation of accumulation of heavy water in

	<p>Iran</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construction of hot cells or shielded glove boxes of certain specifications subject to approval of the Joint Commission
<p>Monitoring and Verification</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By 15 October 2015 Iran fully implements PMD "roadmap" agreed with IAEA • For 10 years approval of the purchase of dual-use materials by the Joint Commission working group • For 25 years continuous monitoring of Iran's uranium mines and mills • For 20 years continuous monitoring of Iran's centrifuge production facilities • For 15 years Joint Commission oversight of IAEA access requests to inspect undeclared sites • Permanent prohibition of certain weaponization related activities • Implementation and eventual ratification of an additional protocol to Iran's safeguards agreement • Permanent implementation of modified Code 3.1 of the Subsidiary Arrangements to its Safeguards Agreement
<p>Joint commission</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For 25 years Joint Commission (composed of P5+1, EU and Iran for a total of 8 voting members) will hold quarterly meetings, or by request, to oversee the deal • Dispute resolution mechanism within 35 days: 15 day dispute resolution mechanism within the Joint Commission, with optional 15 day ministerial review and/or arbitration opinion from a 3 member panel, followed by 5 day review of the arbitration opinion. If no resolution and complaining party sees action as "significant non-performance," the unresolved issue can be treated as grounds to cease performing commitments in whole or part, complaining party will notify UN Security Council • Any party can go to the UN Security Council to put sanctions back in place if there is noncompliance by vetoing a resolution calling for the continuance of sanctions
<p>Un Sanctions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UNSC resolution 2231 endorsing JCPOA outlines termination of all previous resolutions targeting Iran's nuclear program-1696 (2006), 1747 (2007), 1803 (2008), 1835 (2008), 1929 (2010)-on implementation day. • For 10 years sanctions are subject to snapback by veto of a resolution calling for the continuation of suspension • After 10 years UN will cease to be seized of Iran's nuclear file • For 5 years the heavy arms embargo will remain in place

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For 8 years the ballistic missile restrictions will remain in place
<p style="text-align: center;">U.S. Sanctions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cease the application of economic sanctions against Iran's oil and banking sector allowing Iranian banks and companies to reconnect with international systems • Will remove designation of certain entities and individuals • Allows for licensed non-U.S. entities that are owned or controlled by a U.S. person to engage in activities with Iran permitted under JCPOA • Allows for the sale of commercial passenger aircraft to Iran • Allows for license for importing Iranian-origin carpets and foodstuffs into United States • United States takes appropriate measures to address laws at state or local level preventing full implementation of JCPOA - United States will actively encourage officials to adhere to JCPOA policy • For 8 years after Adoption date, or sooner if IAEA concludes that all nuclear activity in Iran remains peaceful, U.S. will seek legislative action to terminate/modify nuclear related sanctions • U.S. sanctions on Iran targeting human rights, terrorism and missile activities remain • United States can impose additional sanctions for non-nuclear issues (terrorism, human rights, etc.)
<p style="text-align: center;">EU Sanctions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Terminate all provisions of the EU Regulation related to Iran's nuclear program • Includes: financial and banking transactions; transactions in Iranian Rial; provision of U.S. banknotes to Iranian government; access to SWIFT; insurance services; efforts to reduce Iran's crude oil and petrochemical product sales; investment; transactions with Iran's energy and shipping sector; trade in gold and other precious metals; trade with Iran's automotive sector • Removes individuals and entities designated under sanctions • EU refrains from re-introducing sanctions terminated under JCPOA (Iran views any re-introduction as grounds to cease performing its commitments) • Refrain from policy intended to adversely affect normalization of economic relations with Iran • For 8 years after adoption day or at the finding of the IAEA broader conclusion EU's arms embargo and restrictions on transfer of ballistic missiles remain