

# Who Wants What from Iran Now? The Post-Nuclear Deal U.S. Policy Debate

President Donald Trump's decision in May 2018 to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal (formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA) threw open the question what to do next? President Trump explicitly declared his intent to negotiate a better deal with Iran, and both houses of Congress, sidelined in the JCPOA process, immediately began discussing drafts to improve on aspects they believed were deficient including ballistic missile development and use, inspection of suspected military installations, and Iran's military activities in the Middle East region. As this process unfolds, a range of individuals and organizations will articulate, once more, their understanding of what constitutes the U.S. interest in a possible future nuclear deal and more broadly in relation to U.S. policy toward Iran.

The most strident critics and advocates of the deal are relatively well-known. President Trump's earlier well-publicized view that the deal was "the worst deal I've ever seen negotiated"<sup>1</sup> first found formal expression in the December 2017 National Security Strategy, explicitly identifying Iran as a dictatorship threatening U.S. interests across a number of dimensions beyond the nuclear file.<sup>2</sup> The then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson summarized the new strategic orientation declaring that "the flawed Iran nuclear deal is no longer the focal point of our policy

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toward Iran. We are now confronting the totality of Iranian threats.”<sup>3</sup> In response, two of Obama’s chief negotiators with Iran defended the JCPOA as the “best” possible agreement.<sup>4</sup>

As the U.S. debate embarks on an uncertain path over the next several months and years to refashion feasible restrictions on Iranian nuclear and regional activity, it is critical to understand the central concerns of the constituencies involved in making U.S. policy toward Iran. That political opinions over a contentious issue can diverge sharply is hardly a surprise in a democratic society, even when groups agree broadly on goals but differ strongly over the means—just look at the history of the U.S. disputes over the strategy of containment during the Cold War. The debate over the Iran nuclear issue is different. What is at stake is not merely disagreement over the best means of achieving a commonly agreed upon goal. Even the stated positions of the president or Congress comprise several different layers of objectives and justifications representing different long-standing strategic options. These differences reflect principled positions and thus cannot be interpreted as a case of brinkmanship motivated purely by the desire for short-term political advantage.<sup>5</sup>

It is generally assumed that the 2015 Iran nuclear deal arose from a limited focus on Iran’s alleged nuclear weapons-related activities. But in fact, from the early 2000s, the array of concerns expressed around what the proper policy responses should be to Iran’s nuclear energy activities were broader than the singular issue of nonproliferation and the Iran nuclear program. (This author participated in 2004 and 2005 as a member of a delegation of human rights advocates calling on the administration not to restrict talks with Iran to the nuclear file.) To make better sense of the contending positions, it is necessary to shift our focus to the divergent objectives that proponents and critics believed to be at the heart of the deal. These broader objectives can be a guide to the range of arguments that will be on the agenda again in the coming months and even years.

**There are four primary objectives advanced by four identifiable constituencies.**

Examined carefully, it is possible to discern four primary objectives advanced by four identifiable constituencies around negotiations with Iran: nuclear nonproliferation; regional stability in the Middle East; restoring U.S.-Iran bilateral relations as well as reintegration of Iran into the international community; and promoting (“Western”) human rights and

democracy inside Iran. Each group is defined by the adoption of one of these four objectives as the overriding priority for any deal. Of course, these goals are not necessarily mutually exclusive; in fact, most arguments in favor of the JCPOA invoked a mixture of all four. Nonetheless, the four groups are

distinguishable by espousing one of the four as the paramount goal. Needless to say, there are unavoidable trade-offs between these objectives, and only in an ideal world could all of them be pursued equally. Therefore, the more future U.S. policy is based on a clear understanding of the costs and benefits of basing the deal on one or another of the four objectives, or on some combination of them, the more effective and sustainable it will be over the long run.

## **Nuclear Nonproliferation**

The goal of nuclear nonproliferation played the central role in shaping the deal adopted by the Obama administration and its supporters in the arms control community. This was understandable given the International Atomic Energy Agency's 2005 judgment that Iran's clandestine enrichment program violated its Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) commitments.<sup>6</sup> But the U.S. approach was also shaped crucially by the broader agenda of combatting nuclear proliferation and the vision of nuclear disarmament reaffirmed by Obama in Prague in 2009.<sup>7</sup> As Martin Indyk, the former National Security Advisor on Iran to President Bill Clinton recalls, Obama "was adamant about blocking all Iran's paths to a nuclear weapon not because failing to do so would have further destabilized the Middle East, but because it would have decisively undermined the non-proliferation regime, a critical pillar of his global agenda."<sup>8</sup>

Adopting this goal placed arms control advocates and diplomats at the center of the process. Robert Einhorn, the senior adviser to the Obama negotiating team, spelled this out asserting that "the threshold test for the nuclear deal is whether it achieves its essential goal of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons."<sup>9</sup> This first group also included Pentagon military planners who reasoned that fulfilling their mission in the Middle East—including assuring a stable supply of strategic natural resources and defending treaty allies—would be considerably easier if confronting a conventional rather than a nuclear-armed adversary. The vice chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff told the Senate Armed Services Committee in July 2017 that he was reasonably confident that the JCPOA effectively blocked Iran's pathway to a nuclear weapon; he added that two provisions—the so-called intrusive inspections and continuation of nonnuclear-related sanctions—made it a significant improvement on the earlier North Korean agreement.<sup>10</sup> The military's cautious endorsement of the JCPOA—reaffirmed by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs in September 2017 and by Obama's Defense Secretary, Ash Carter—accounts for why even the military (who could hardly be accused of being "soft" on Iran) became targets of Trump's most vociferous supporters.<sup>11</sup> The removal of H. R. McMaster as National Security Advisor and later Tillerson as Secretary of State was no doubt hastened by their divergence from President Trump's implacable hostility to the deal.<sup>12</sup>

The argument for a narrow focus also enjoyed some bipartisan support in Congress and, unsurprisingly, broad support in the nuclear disarmament community. For example, in 2015 the Arms Control Association (ACA) organized a joint statement by over 70 of the world's leading nuclear nonproliferation specialists in support of the JCPOA declaring that it was "A Net-Plus for International Nuclear Nonproliferation."<sup>13</sup>

### Critics

Yet as critics of the deal were quick to point out, the danger of making the preservation of the *global* arms control framework the foremost priority was that it resulted in empowering a hostile adversary of the United States with extensive concessions including financial resources and international legitimacy, while simultaneously undermining any internal opposition to the regime.<sup>14</sup> Of course, whether the Trump administration's declared support for the peaceful opposition inside Iran translates to actionable policy, especially in light of the administration's pronouncement that the United States is out of the democracy promotion and

**U.S. policy toward Iran cannot be reduced to one policy arena (and never has been).**

nation-building business, only time will tell.<sup>15</sup>

A more significant criticism of the JCPOA was that the deal was ineffective on its own terms. Contrary to the claims of the Obama team, acceding to Iran's demand for the "right" to enrichment essentially gutted the "No ENR" (no enrichment and reprocessing) clause that had been held up as the gold standard for U.S. nuclear agreements, such as those with the Gulf Arab countries that now

faced the danger of unraveling. Senators Bob Corker's and Bob Menendez's warnings of the negative implications of the precedent garnered only limited attention.<sup>16</sup> The justification for the more permissive stance was expressed tellingly by leading expert and former U.S. nuclear negotiator with North Korea Mark Fitzpatrick, who conceded that "[t]he concession to legitimize uranium enrichment in Iran was necessary to strike a deal that limited this capability" but went on immediately to state that this precedent "should not be used as an excuse for other states to pursue dual-use technologies."<sup>17</sup>

Finally, other critics of the deal protested that contrary to the nonproliferation experts, the devil did *not* lie in the details; in their view, all the technical minutia merely served to obscure what should have been at the core of the negotiations, described by one expert, former State Department staffer Jeremy Shapiro, as "Iran's challenge to U.S. leadership in the Middle East and the threat that Iranian geopolitical ambitions pose to U.S. allies."<sup>18</sup> Nuclear nonproliferation

and strengthening the NPT regime should remain critical components of U.S. foreign policy, especially in light of the perilous state of international arms control frameworks. Yet, the very pressing significance of this goal obscures the fact that, in reality—particularly given that Iran remains many years away from an effective nuclear arsenal even if they wished to weaponize—U.S. policy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran cannot be reduced to this one policy arena (and in fact never has been). Future policy options should be defined equally if not more strongly by at least three other objectives.

### **Regional Stability in the Middle East**

The second goal of the Obama team was to use the deal to recalibrate the U.S. role in the Middle East by reducing its footprint and disengaging from sectarian conflicts. President Obama himself declared memorably that it was in the interest of the region as a whole if Iran and Saudi Arabia were allowed to “share the neighborhood.”<sup>19</sup> This must have been music to the ears of a second group of experts who, while acknowledging the importance of pursuing nuclear nonproliferation, insisted that the primary objective in negotiating a deal should be its ability to contribute to regional stability.

After more than a decade and a half of chaos and war in Iraq and Afghanistan, arguably with little if not nothing to show for it, supporters of this view contended that the priority for the United States should be crafting a foreign policy that moved the region toward peace. This group urged policymakers to grasp the opportunity afforded by the nuclear deal with Iran, according to expert Stephen Walt, to move away from the “failed strategy of militarized liberal hegemony the United States has pursued since 1993,”<sup>20</sup> toward the goal of regional stability. Walt’s analysis illustrated the contrast with the first group crisply: “The real issue isn’t whether Iran gets close to a bomb; the real issue is the long-term balance of power in the Persian Gulf and Middle East ... America’s main strategic interest in the Greater Middle East is a balance of power in which no single state dominates.”<sup>21</sup> The title of a statement published in 2015 by Middle East and international relations scholars expressed clearly what they believed the priority objective for the deal should be: “The Nuclear Agreement with Iran: A Plus for Regional Stability.”<sup>22</sup> And former U.S. NATO official and diplomat Robert Hunter contended that, with the Iran nuclear deal, Obama “has taken the first, difficult step toward repairing ... the frightful damage that his predecessor did in the Middle East and to United States interests by ... shattering what passed for order and stability throughout the region.”<sup>23</sup>

#### **Critics**

Yet, not everyone was so optimistic about the geopolitical and regional impact of the nuclear deal. Critics pointed out that by accepting the narrow scope of the

negotiations to include only the nuclear file (which was a key demand of Iran's Supreme Leader for agreeing to negotiations in the first place) and setting aside Iran's role in the regional geopolitics of the wider Middle East, particularly Syria, the United States would be forced to acquiesce to Iran's greater conventional military role in the region for fear of upsetting the deal. They noted that Iran had already skillfully achieved an unprecedented degree of international legitimacy as a result of the negotiating process. In fact, there was even speculation among some U.S. Iran hawks that Obama's decision not to attack Syria in August 2013 in response to the alleged use of chemical weapons was driven primarily by his overwhelming desire to come to a nuclear agreement with Iran. According to this view, the disturbing implication of Obama's alleged underlying calculus was that if the price of a nuclear deal was "handing over" Syria, and by extension Southern Lebanon, to Iran (Russia entered only later), and thereby strengthening Bashar al-Assad's position and the concomitant continuation of the high casualty conflict, then so be it.<sup>24</sup> Although little direct evidence has emerged to support this theory, it is perhaps understandable given Obama's surprising last-minute decision to renege on his own red line. Seeing the writing on the wall, two former Secretaries of State, Henry Kissinger and George Schulz, observed shrewdly in 2015 that "America's traditional allies will conclude that the U.S. has traded temporary nuclear cooperation for acquiescence to Iranian hegemony."<sup>25</sup>

For many at the time, it was clear that the Iran nuclear deal would not mean less violence or war, but rather by emboldening Iran's regional ambitions, would instead escalate conventional conflict as countries jockeyed for position and territory in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> Kissinger and Schulz warned that "The Middle East will not stabilize itself, nor will a balance of power naturally assert itself out of Iranian-Sunni competition." And they added sharply that "Even if that were our aim, traditional balance of power theory suggests the need to bolster the weaker side, not the rising or expanding power," which they obviously saw as the consequence of the deal.<sup>27</sup>

Given the enormous impact of the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan in altering the politics of the Middle East—not to mention the cost in blood and treasure for the United States itself—it is understandable why some view the nuclear deal with Iran through a geopolitical rather than nonproliferation lens. There is no doubt that the United States must translate some of the hard-learned lessons from this experience into a more feasible and coherent set of strategies and tactics vis-à-vis the region—whether that is offshore balancing, containment, alliances, "fighting or fleeing," or any mix of these and other approaches.<sup>28</sup> By the end of 2017, it was hard to argue that the deal had generated peace through equilibrium, even if however reluctantly, one yields to the cynical but perhaps unavoidable calculus that accepting a greater number of small conventional wars was the price of

avoiding a nuclear arms race, and even possible nuclear war, in a volatile region of the world.<sup>29</sup>

Be that as it may, the 2018 National Defense Strategy shifts 180 degrees from the implicit assumption underlying the JCPOA—namely that Iran could be part of the solution to regional instability—to declaring Iran as “the most significant challenge to Middle East stability.”<sup>30</sup> The United States has now refocused its Iran policy around the aim of “countering and deterring” Iran’s “rogue” activities in the region. Iran’s expansionism throughout the Middle East, belligerence against Israel, and even provocative support for Islamist groups in African countries such as Nigeria and Morocco, which caused the latter to break off diplomatic relations with Tehran in May 2018, all provided ample support for the charge that Iran had violated the spirit of the JCPOA.

**The assumption underlying the deal was that Iran could be part of the solution to regional instability.**

## **U.S.-Iran Normalization**

There was a third goal hinted at, often guardedly, by the Obama team in support of the deal: namely, that it might furnish the opening for Iran to “come in from the cold,” unclench the fist it had held up against the United States for four decades, and take a step toward normalization. As Robert Gates, former Secretary of Defense in both the George W. Bush administration and the Obama administration saw it, the JCPOA rested “on the overly optimistic belief, the hope really, that [removing] sanctions will lead Iran over time, in effect, to become a normal country.”<sup>31</sup>

It is a striking fact that there are only two countries on planet Earth that reject hosting a U.S. embassy: North Korea and Iran. (Cuba resumed diplomatic relations in 2015, and Bhutan, while having no diplomatic relations with any of the permanent members on the UN Security Council, nonetheless maintains friendly relations with the United States.) Despite this estrangement, several factors ensure that U.S. political interest in rapprochement with Iran will persist. These include the long history of U.S. involvement in Iran before the Islamic revolution; its traumatic termination after the U.S. embassy hostage crisis; a lingering desire to compensate for “losing” Iran; a genuine respect among many Americans for Iran’s culture and civilization; the pressure from one million persons of Iranian descent residing in the United States; the centrality of Iran for Middle Eastern politics; and not least, Iran’s attractiveness as a potential market for Western business interests.

Notable U.S. proponents of leveraging the nuclear deal toward normalization include organizations such as the American Iranian Council (AIC) and the National Iranian American Council (NIAC). The AIC, whose board includes several former U.S. Senators and European politicians, contends that the “core issue” between the two countries is “mistrust,” stating that “a peaceful nuclear resolution must be used as an opportunity to pivot toward ... the goal of normalizing US-Iran relations.”<sup>32</sup> NIAC’s younger and energetic cadre of former congressional staffers is more visible around Washington (a former Iranian-American NIAC staffer was on Obama’s National Security Council) and has broader support from several prominent foundations and think tanks. It is also more controversial for its recommendations to “embrace and empower” Tehran through engagement, an approach that came to fruition in Obama’s nuclear deal but which their detractors view as amounting to appeasement. NIAC sees its approach as the necessary antidote to hawkish prescriptions ranging from “isolate and contain” to those advocating regime change—all options that NIAC believes will only increase the possibility of direct military conflict between the United States and Iran, and in their view set back prospects for meaningful reform inside Iran. For NIAC, the real payoff of engagement through the nuclear deal (given the assessment that Iran was in reality years away from a nuclear weapon) was that it would smooth the way for future U.S. administrations “to pursue broader rapprochement with Tehran.”<sup>33</sup>

### Critics

Pointing to the extremely fraught history between the two countries, not to mention the Islamic Republic of Iran’s principled declarations of enmity toward the United States, prioritizing rapprochement as the primary justification for the deal was, in the view of many critics, an entirely quixotic exercise. Critics highlight two false assumptions held by advocates for normalization that will always thwart hopes for rapprochement. The first is the idea that there exists a widespread desire among Iran’s leadership for normalization with the United States and the West, but that U.S. animosity is the primary obstacle impeding repairing the broken relationship. The second is the implausible belief that external governments’ foreign policies can significantly influence political alignments within Iran.

Turning to the first misleading assumption, consider the highly influential assessment by an erstwhile Iranian diplomat, Seyed Hossein Mousavian, eagerly embraced by Western pundits and allegedly also by Obama’s National Security Council, who informed his American audience that “the dominant viewpoint inside the *nezam* [the Iranian political system] including that of the Supreme Leader, is to end the hostilities with the United States based on mutual respect, non-interference, and mutual interest.”<sup>34</sup> He then reproached his hosts stating

“the regime change policy of the United States ... is the *primary factor*” driving the Iranian rejection of any compromise with the United States.<sup>35</sup> This claim is strictly speaking inaccurate; the nearest U.S. policy came to adopting a policy of regime change was formalized in the 2006 Iran Freedom Support Act calling the U.S. government to “support a transition to democracy in Iran” through “pro-democracy broadcasting into Iran and the dissemination of accurate and independent information to the Iranian people through various media.”<sup>36</sup> Subsequent legislation never reached the specificity of the 1998 Iraq Liberation Act calling for the *removal* of Saddam Hussein’s regime.

In fact, Trump’s Iran Strategy announced in October 2017 makes no mention of democracy and refers to human rights abuses mainly to buttress a policy of pushback against Iran’s regional activities. While the strident endorsements of regime change by close aides to a sitting U.S. president is unprecedented (during a rally organized by the People’s Mojahedin Organization of Iran (MEK) opposition group at the end of June 2018<sup>37</sup>), many doubt this will translate into the United States taking active measures to install that group in Tehran. In fact, the Secretary of State’s much anticipated address entitled “Supporting Iranian Voices,” less than a month later, conspicuously made no mention of the MEK but more significantly made clear that the United States would do no more than publicize the Iranian regime’s human rights abuses (the word “democracy” did not appear even once). Instead, the demands articulated there centered on Iran’s regional behavior and the sanctions aimed to target that behavior.<sup>38</sup>

In the view of the critics of the goal of normalization, the assumption that the main obstacle to normalization is to be found in Washington is, moreover, hard to square with the considered and consistently articulated views of the leadership in Tehran. The most important is the explicit and long-standing view of the Supreme Leader in Tehran (fully consistent with his predecessor Ayatollah Khomeini) who has over the last almost three decades repeatedly articulated Iran’s principled enmity towards what he refers to as the *neẓam solte*, the U.S.-led hegemonic world order. These critics note with great plausibility that the speeches of the Supreme Leader contain arguably the only reliable guide to Iranian strategic posture.<sup>39</sup> In fact, one would never know from the kind of analysis found in Mousavian’s book and echoed by many in the normalization school of thought that there even exists a deep ideological chasm between a Western and an Islamic conception of world order and international relations.<sup>40</sup> When the Supreme Leader declares that “[t]he United States of

**Critics highlight two false assumptions held by advocates for normalization.**

America is the epitome of global arrogance ... When we say, 'the enemy,' it means this"<sup>41</sup> he is articulating a consistent and official position of ideological enmity towards the United States.

The dominant perspective within Iran is that, given the outsized U.S. role and power as global policeman, its unjust domination of international institutions, its maintenance of naval superiority globally as well as in the Persian Gulf, and its support of Israel, among other aspects of the U.S.-led global order that Iran rejects, Iranian leadership is justified in concluding that it would be pointless in waiting for the United States to change its spots. And given the Iranian regime's implacable opposition to the state of Israel, it's hard to see how rapprochement could get off the ground without a very significant transformation in Iran's posture vis-à-vis this close U.S. ally.

The second dubious assumption underlying optimism for rapprochement is the belief that domestic politics inside Iran can be significantly affected by the foreign policies of external governments; it was this assumption that underlay the optimism that the nuclear deal could be an effective means to strengthen the hand of moderate political forces inside Iran. This assumption is born of an overly simplistic understanding of Iranian domestic politics which are more complex and much more shaped by indigenous trends and factors than usually supposed by outside observers. This is not to deny some impact of foreign policy but the notion that foreign policy can be calibrated by the West to strengthen one faction over another betrays a misunderstanding of the Iranian leadership and the process shaping its foreign policy.

**Inducing Iran from enemy to unfriendly adversary is the best case for the foreseeable future.**

That formal diplomatic relations between countries need not be predicated on empathy and shared values is a staple of realist teaching about the basic anarchic nature of the international system in which self-interest, self-preservation, and potential threats from other states are permanent features of international arrangements. The United States is generally pragmatic and maintains diplomatic relations

with the widest range of friendly and not-so-friendly states. But there is a marked difference between adversaries and enemies, and so far, the United States has not succeeded in inducing Iran to shift from hostile enemy to unfriendly adversary (the best that might be hoped for in the foreseeable future). Until such time that the United States and the West can persuade Iran that they do not pose an existential threat to Iranian and Islamic revolutionary ideals, a U.S. embassy opening in Tehran is practically inconceivable.

## Human Rights and Democracy

It seems a long time ago now that anyone has spoken with any seriousness about making democracy and human rights the core priority of U.S. Iran policy. Too much has happened since President G. W. Bush announced his Freedom Agenda in 2003, and too much has gone wrong with Western democracy promotion; not only is there a loss of appetite in Washington for crusades for freedom—arguably for many valid reasons—but the entire space for Western democracy promotion has shrunk dramatically in the face of a worldwide backlash.<sup>42</sup> Evidently absorbing those lessons, President Obama did not highlight democracy promotion to justify the value of the JCPOA.

Despite this inhospitable environment, several Iranian human rights advocacy groups, including Iranian dissident groups as well as several independently funded foundations and think tanks engaged in “freelance diplomacy,” represent a fourth set of motivations that lined up for or against the nuclear deal. By some accounts, some of those freelance diplomats supporting the JCPOA deal played significant roles in preventing Congress from effectively blocking it in 2015.<sup>43</sup>

Leaving aside the advocates of the armed overthrow of the Islamic state in Iran, most Iranian exiled dissident groups share the long-term objective of bringing about a structurally different political system than the one currently existing in Iran—at a minimum, a political system that would legalize full religious and political pluralism as well as maintain cooperative relations with the United States. Whether explicitly articulated or not, such an outcome would in practice amount to a change of regime. Thus, the Iranian government reasonably views these groups, whether the groups themselves are conscious of it or not, as advocates of “soft revolution” and as threats to national security defined as the preservation of the current Islamic political system. (I know because this is what I was tried and imprisoned for in 2007 and 2009.)

Where dissidents diverge is whether to support coercive diplomacy,<sup>44</sup> causing the exiled oppositionists also to split over support for the JCPOA in 2015 and again over Trump’s decision to withdraw from the deal and reimpose sanctions on Iran. Having accepted Obama’s questionable argument that war was the only alternative to an agreement, the larger and more prominent group of dissidents came out in support of the deal, reasoning that avoiding war (at almost any cost) was the *sine qua non* for keeping alive a democratic future in Iran. A statement endorsed by a large number of prominent Iranians living outside Iran—including the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi and journalist Maziar Bahari, both former political prisoners—declared that the JCPOA “has the potential to energize the struggle for democracy in Iran” and would “encourage Western governments to include serious support for human rights as they

engage Iran in trade and investment negotiations.”<sup>45</sup> A 2015 article in *The Atlantic* titled “Why a Nuclear Deal with Iran Would Be a Victory for Human Rights” quoted an Iranian dissident, well known for calling for a secular government in Iran (which is why he is in exile in the United States), saying that the framework deal was “a great victory for Iran and Iranians, if we look at it from a democracy angle.”<sup>46</sup> Several Western Iran experts agreed.<sup>47</sup> The knowledgeable Iran observer Gary Sick was quoted saying that he believed a deal could begin a process of change inside Iran: “If you want regime change in Iran, meaning changing the way the regime operates, this kind of agreement is the best way to achieve that goal.”<sup>48</sup>

### Critics

A smaller group of dissidents, less influential in Washington especially during the Obama administration, took a much more uncompromising stand against the deal stemming from their conviction that the *Nezam* of Iran is basically unreformable in the direction of Western norms of human rights. They rejected the idea that any deal could improve the human rights situation inside Iran, reasoning that domestic repression has almost nothing to do with international tensions.<sup>49</sup> In their view, the deal would in fact make matters worse, as preserving it would require going soft on human rights just as in other countries such as Saudi Arabia. They held that it was pointless to bet on reform or on the reformers inside Iran to bring about structural democratic change.<sup>50</sup> This group was attacked by their opponents as warmongers because their views aligned with several prominent neoconservative think tanks who had lobbied against the deal, and in fall 2017, gained the vocal and explicit support of some hawkish members of Congress, most notably Senator Tom Cotton.<sup>51</sup>

A similar group of dissidents reiterated this position in an open letter sent to President-elect Trump urging him to scrap the deal and “to support the pro-democracy Iranians whose goal is to replace the Khomeinist regime of Tehran with a liberal-democratic government.”<sup>52</sup> This was followed up in July 2018 when anti-regime dissidents called on the U.S. State Department to expand sanctions to Iranian state broadcasters.<sup>53</sup> Although these dissidents distance themselves from the MEK, a group whose commitment to liberal human rights is widely doubted, they surely must have felt irked to see several of Trump’s close confidants, including National Security Advisor John Bolton and personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani, overtly endorse the MEK as their choice for an alternative government in Tehran.

Despite the current marginalization of democracy promotion in U.S. foreign policy, the grievances expressed in the nation-wide protests inside Iran as 2018 began, and continue to some extent, will no doubt be invoked by supporters of

regime change and human rights positions as evidence of the illegitimacy of the regime for some time to come. At the same time, the nature of the four-sided debate is such that not all will be persuaded to make regime change or human rights a priority, however compelling the grievances of demonstrating Iranians may be. Trump's national security team (Bolton, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Secretary of Defense James Mattis) seems to lean more paleo-conservative hawk than neoconservative in outlook, which will likely translate to more rhetorical than active support for a democratic transition inside Iran. On the other hand, the administration sees maximum pressure through crippling economic sanctions as the instrument most consistent with containing Iran and even collapsing the regime, while avoiding direct renewed U.S. military commitments for regime change in a region that has been nothing but trouble for the United States.

### The Options Ahead

The four objectives I have outlined—strengthening the global nuclear nonproliferation regime; enhancing Middle Eastern peace and stability through regional geopolitical architecture; restoring U.S.-Iran bilateral relations and reintegration of Iran into the international community; and promoting human rights and democracy inside Iran—without doubt will be, and indeed should be, in the basket of objectives that must be part of any future Iran policy. The groups rallying around these agendas matter because they will be the central actors in the months and even years ahead. And they provide a guide to the most likely next steps of policy coming out of Washington.

Looking at the concrete options for U.S. Iran strategy in the immediate future, Washington is faced with four primary policy options:

1. Disarmament: Negotiating a new arms control deal; the focus would be on inspections, sunset clauses, ballistic missiles;
2. Regional Stability: Coercive sanctions calibrated for maximum pressure aimed at containment or rollback of Iran's regional military capabilities. Would involve kinetic operations against Iranian regional assets, mostly via regional allies;
3. Normalization: Seek overlap of interests in region;
4. Democratization: Increasing support for democracy promotion inside Iran. Most Iranian democracy activists desiring regime change reject foreign military intervention, are split over sanctions, but support U.S. soft power such as anti-regime broadcasting.

	Disarmament	Regional Stability; Containment, Rollback	Normalization	Democratization and human rights
<b>Actors</b>	Arms Control Association; Pentagon; foundations like Ploughshares, Rockefeller Brothers Fund	AIPAC; realist school, Bipartisan Policy Center	NIAC, AIC	Dissident Iranians
<b>Approach</b>	Negotiations; isolate nuclear and WMD from all other issues; revisit ballistic missile program	Rollback or containment; offshore balancing; sanctions; negotiations on ballistic missile program	Seek common ground; overlap of interests (e.g. fighting ISIS, drugs; Iraq, Afghanistan)	Media; public messaging; mobilize support against “appeasement”; prepare for regime collapse
<b>Immediate policy</b>	Negotiate nuclear deal, current or revised	Economic sanctions to drain resources for regional operations; kinetic operations against Iranian assets in region via regional allies; new Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF)	Lobby anti-war party in Congress and public opinion	Economic sanctions for regime collapse; push for U.S. democracy promotion support and ultimately regime change

The third and fourth strategic objectives are the least likely to find any traction in Washington. Normalization is the big loser of the Trump JCPOA pullout. Notwithstanding the White House’s mixed signals to Tehran—that the United States is willing to replay the North Korea outreach with Iran (breakthrough by photo-op as one wag put it), but only if accompanied by a significant change in regional behavior of the regime—efforts from both sides to identify common interests (for example in Afghanistan or Iraq) have already been marginalized and will likely

**Normalization is the big loser of the Trump JCPOA pullout.**

remain so for the foreseeable future. Extensive democracy promotion and human rights support likewise will play little role beyond broadcasting and rhetoric, reflecting a broader withdrawal of the United States from these domains.

This leaves the two objectives of disarmament and regional stability. Disarmament will have to be pursued through a combination of

sanctions, enforcing current NPT restraints, and eventually seeking to renegotiate a new deal with Iran (while in the meantime riding on the coattails of the European-backed JCPOA while it lasts). Regional stability will depend on a policy of

“hard” containment or rollback consisting of essentially two prongs—the imposition of extreme economic sanctions and kinetic operations against Iranian regional assets either directly or via regional allies. The Israeli May 2018 no-nonsense military strike against Iranian military installations in Syria is the kind of hard power response entailed by a rollback strategy; although the immediate cause was retaliation for alleged Iranian missiles fired into Israel, in reality Israel’s swift reaction was part of its firm resolution to avoid making another “historic mistake” by letting a Hezbollah-like Iran proxy take root in Syria.<sup>54</sup> This calculus has already paid dividends for Israel and the United States by convincing Russia to see that its future interests in Syria are no longer tied to its support for an Iranian presence there. Parallel to this, U.S. sanctions related to Iran’s support for Hezbollah and human rights violations inside Iran, which are already in place and have bipartisan support, buttress and complement the hard containment strategy. Similarly, possible future negotiations over Iran’s ballistic missile program, as well as new sanctions if Iran ramps up enrichment, are likely to gain the widest degree of domestic political support in Washington.

As for a direct policy of regime change entailing U.S. boots inside Iranian territory—this does not seem to be on the cards at present. First, regime change is not in itself a strategic objective, rather it is a *means* of achieving a set of goals. Second, given the U.S. track record in Iraq and Afghanistan, such ambitions seem to be far beyond the ability of the United States to pull off without making everything worse; at any rate, this option currently has scant political support in Washington. Third, the U.S. military is unlikely to undertake push back operations against Iranian forces, let alone regime change, unless there is new Congressional authorization for the use of military force (AUMF) against Iranian forces in the region. In fact, the CENTCOM commander went so far as to tell Congress in February 2018 that, contrary to some administration declarations, countering Iran is not currently a direct objective of the American-led military coalition in the region.<sup>55</sup> Moreover in May 2018, Congress unanimously reaffirmed that “there is no authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iran.”<sup>56</sup> Absent a new AUMF, it is hard to see how a robust and direct U.S. strategy of rollback could be executed, beyond outsourcing to regional allies.

There does not seem to be much doubt that the Trump administration is willing to exert significant pressure on Iran, militarily via support of local allies and economically by trying to block off Iranian oil exports. Secretary Pompeo laid out just such a maximalist containment or rollback policy in his major Iran strategy speeches delivered in May and July 2018.<sup>57</sup> Less clear is if Iran does come back

**Negotiations over ballistic missiles as well as new sanctions are likely to gain the widest support.**

to the negotiating table, whether the United States will pull back in favor of negotiating a new deal. It is at this point that the regional stability group—particularly the military planners, the more strategically minded members of Congress, as well as civil society groups such as The Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) and others—can play the most critical role in pushing the United States to work toward a stable regional arrangement and steering away from an ill thought-out policy of regime collapse.

For example, The Bipartisan Policy Center’s Task Force on the Middle East has been exemplary in tackling head-on the options available for achieving regional stability and countering Iranian threats to the region.<sup>58</sup> Hopefully, the White House can be persuaded to opt for a settlement that rolls back the Iranian regional military presence and restrains its ballistic missile and nuclear weapons capability rather than a likely futile military operation for regime change involving many U.S. troops on the ground. Advocates for this approach will find support in both regional and European allies. The former would prefer to try hard or zero tolerance rollback and containment first before a regime change option, and even before a regime collapse option that lacks plans for “the day after.” European allies initially came a significant way toward accepting the U.S. position on these two issues, although Trump’s brawling with allies at the G-7 and with NATO in summer 2018 succeeded in squandering whatever European cooperation existed on forging a broader Iran strategy.

Long-term regional stability requires hard thinking about the future of the Middle East and the role of the United States in it. This goes beyond merely checking Iranian influence; it will also require coordination with allies, in the region and in Europe, in exploring a regional architecture that might deliver a relatively stable balance of power with the United States adopting the role of offshore balancer where necessary. Given Trump’s often baffling calculus that jeopardizing long-term alliances for short-term transactional gains is worthwhile (believing, for instance, that naming Canada as a national security threat will provide the United States leverage in renegotiating NAFTA) I am skeptical that the Trump administration can manage to shift its sights from short-term rollback of Iran to long-term regional stability. Without a well-thought-out strategy on Iran, Trump’s nuclear deal decision will have amounted to speaking loudly and carrying no stick.

### **What’s Next for U.S. Iran Policy?**

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In fall 2017, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley asked Americans to welcome an “honest and serious debate” over whether the JCPOA is in U.S. national security interests.<sup>59</sup> Whether one welcomes it or not, the administration’s rejection of the JCPOA means that a reassessment of the United

States' broader strategy toward Iran is now unavoidable; the floor is open. The debate over the future of U.S. Iran policy can no longer be restricted to any single parameter or criteria; the whole range of justifications for and against the deal—what a future deal should look like or indeed whether the United States should work toward a new deal at all—is now the subject of widespread expert and public scrutiny.

A realistic Iran policy will need to go beyond any one of the four goals in isolation. Over the long term, none of the four objectives or the groups promoting them will go away. A wise policy will try to embrace them all, even if tradeoffs and constant tension weighing competing priorities is unavoidable. These four goals will remain among the key ingredients of any national conversation about the future of U.S. policy on Iran's nuclear energy related activities, and beyond that, the U.S. relationship with a persistently challenging country.

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