

# Iranian Foreign Policy After Trump: Challenges and Opportunities

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**PUBLISHER**

TRT WORLD RESEARCH CENTRE

*February 2021*

**TRT WORLD İSTANBUL**

AHMET ADNAN SAYGUN STREET NO:83 34347

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## Introduction

**T**his discussion paper focuses on the potential shape of Iran's foreign policy in the post-Trump era. Tensions between the United States and Iran have escalated since Donald Trump came to the White House. The détente that occurred during the Obama term as a result of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement was wiped away when Trump pulled the US out from the agreement in 2018. Trump's presidency and the "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran have created severe challenges for the Islamic Republic's foreign policy. Along with sanctions that have crippled the Iranian economy, in January of 2020, the US targeted and killed Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's elite Quds Force, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the deputy commander of the Iran-backed group in Iraq known as the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), and Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, the mastermind of Iran's nuclear programme.

With Joe Biden inaugurated as the 46th American President, expectations for a new round of US-Iran rapprochement have emerged. Indicating that there is a "smarter way" to be tough on Iran, Biden has indicated he plans to restart negotiations and restore the JCPOA agreement (Biden, 2020). Some regional players have also started to reposition themselves. Within this framework, diplomatic ties between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain have been restored and Turkey and Israel, two other important regional actors, are signalling the potential for improved ties. Besides, Biden's presidency will inevitably bring changes to regional politics in Asia, particularly China's relations with the US, which went through a tense period during Trump's presidency. Given the centrality of the US position on Iran to the Islamic Republic's foreign manoeuvrability, the Biden administration's moves will serve to indirectly launch a new period in Iran's foreign policy. Given this, Iran's status in the Middle East and its relations with the West, alongside with other global and regional actors, are still matters of question.



*People attend a demonstration at Tahrir Square to commemorate the first anniversary of the killing of Iranian Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani and the vice president of the Hashd al-Shaabi group Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, on January 03, 2021 in Baghdad, Iraq. ( Murtadha Al-Sudani - Anadolu Agency)*

## The Iran-US Impasse and the JCPOA

One of the greatest issues for the Biden administration's foreign policy agenda will be ending the impasse with Iran and returning to the JCPOA agreement. This impasse is defined by mutually eroded confidence and the implementation of assertive measures against the interests of the other. As a result, both countries expect the other side to take the first step towards any renewed agreement. Biden's previous experience during the initial negotiation of the JCPOA deal should prove helpful for him in this effort. Returning to the deal does not require congressional action since it was already approved by Congress in 2015. Such a step is also crucial for showing good intention for de-escalating tensions between the two states. Promoting mutual understanding and reconciliation in advance by relaunching talks on Iran's nuclear activities is necessary for both sides to negotiate over potential disputes in the future.

Iran has also demonstrated a similar political will for such a process. Last December, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said that even though Iran needs to focus more on nullifying the sanctions rather than having them lifted, if possible, they should not hesitate to work for the removal of sanctions (Khamenei, 2020). For experts, Khamenei's statements contain the same motivation as the previous secret talks between the US and Iran in 2013, which ultimately ended up with the JCPOA agreement, namely reaching a "stable economic footing in the time of transition to his successor (Rozen, 2020).

Despite the affirmative sentiment on the nuclear agreement, some problems overshadow this mood: The Trump administration's policies created a legacy of severe challenges and loss of mutual confidence. After reneging on the nuclear deal, Trump-led a "maximum pressure" campaign to force Iran to submit to the demands of the US and its allies. Along with the pressure on its nuclear activities, the US-led alliance sought to force Iran to retract its presence in the Middle East via proxies in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. In this period, Washington simultaneously implemented sanctions and targeted some of Iran's top operators like Soleimani and Fakhrizadeh.

As a result of this attitude, Iran's nuclear policies and actions in the Middle East became more assertive. Regarding nuclear activities, for instance, the IAEA stated in a recent report that Iran has a nuclear stockpile of 2,442.9kg with a purity of 4.5% enriched uranium, whereas only a stockpile of 202.8kg with a maximum of 3.67 per cent purity at was allowed in accordance with the JCPOA (IAEA, 2020). Iran also increased assertiveness in its regional operations. Together with alleged sabotage operations against tankers and ships in the Persian Gulf, the Islamic Republic has launched its new air missile defence system (Vahdat & Gambrell, 2020) and its proxies in Yemen and Iraq attacked the US and its allies on several occasions (BBC

News, 2020). As another indicator of this assertiveness, Iran also supported the assault in Idlib on Turkish targets in February 2020, a move that hindered the progress of the Astana process.

In any negotiation process in this post-Trump period, Iran may be more demanding in response to efforts to make it withdraw from this assertive stance. It may seek further compensation from the US in terms of sanctions removal, whose effects became further entrenched after the devastating impact of the pandemic on the Iranian economy. Although domestic production and barter-type trade with neighbouring countries could provide relief for Iran from some of the impacts of sanctions (Vatanka, 2020), the Covid-19 pandemic severely hit the country's economy in 2020, the effects of which are expected to continue in 2021. According to World Bank data, Iran's GDP in 2020-21 is forecast to contract by 4.5 per cent and overall economic contraction is projected to increase in the second half of 2020-21 (World Bank, 2020). In such a negative outlook on the economy, the oil embargo on the country has played a significant role. Following the implementation of the embargos in 2018, Iran gradually lost its share of world oil production. According to OPEC data, daily crude oil production in Iran in the last two years decreased into half of the pre-2018 period production levels (Trading Economics, 2020).

Furthermore, Iranians seem to have lost faith in the JCPOA agreement. According to a poll conducted by the University of Maryland, the number of Iranians who approve of the nuclear deal is less than half of all respondents for the first time, and about 60% of Iranians believe that Iran should withdraw from the deal. 58% of the respondents also oppose extending the duration of the agreement only for the sake of sanctions relief. Regarding the perception on the US, more than 80% said they have negative feelings, which is the highest level recorded in 13 years, including during the Iraq War (Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland, 2019).

All these reasons show that the Biden administration needs to re-build confidence in the eyes of both Iranian officials and society. Yet, despite indications of a willingness to restore the nuclear deal, the US also has some additional expectations from Iran. In an op-ed article for CNN, Biden previously explained that regardless of what happened concerning the JCPOA issue, the US will continue to push back Iran's destabilising activities in the region and use sanctions if needed (Ibid). In this regard, the US stipulates that the removal of sanctions and conducting negotiations depends not only on nuclear activities but also on the missile systems and regional policies, which will be a breakthrough for the future of the JCPOA as well.



## 2021 Presidential Elections

One of the factors that will affect the future of Iran's foreign policy is the upcoming presidential elections. Hassan Rouhani's two-term presidency will end in June and his departure stands to usher in a new period in Iran's domestic affairs. Even though the authority of the presidential seat remains relatively symbolic compared to the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the presidential office is still significant as a marker of the political rivalry between the modernisers, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-linked securocrats, and the principlists, who represent the more conservative wing in Iranian politics with a hawkish stance on defending the revolution, within the domestic sphere. The result of this rivalry in the June elections will reveal the relative political influence of each group. This political rivalry and the election results also hold potential to shape the Biden administration's strategy towards returning to the JCPOA agreement.

After gaining influence with Rouhani's election in 2013 and signing of the JCPOA in 2015, the reformist/modernising camp in Iran saw its influence reduced following the election of Trump and his subsequent decision to withdraw from the nuclear agreement. On the one hand, modernisers have lost credibility because the benefits of the nuclear agreement were very short-lived, and people did not see the real impact of the agreement on the economy. On the

other hand, the principlists and the securocrats, which keeps a lower profile in the public political sphere but maintains a key relationship with Khamenei (Geranmayeh, 2020), have further dominated the political scene since Trump withdrew from the nuclear agreement. These two intra-related groups are currently supported by Khamenei and the next president of the Islamic Republic is likely to be affiliated with this camp. In the event of their winning of the presidential race in June, this camp's hostile perception towards the US and the West in general after the failure of the JCPOA may diminish the possibility of future productive talks between Iran and the West.

Among the groupings within the principlist camp, the Paydari (The Islamic Revolution Stability Front) group is expected to seize the presidential office in 2021. Known for their ardent opposition to the West, this group staunchly supports hard power solutions for Iran's challenges. Among the camp's prominent figures are Saeed Jalili, the nuclear talks chief under Ahmadinejad's term and Ebrahim Raisi, head of Iran's judiciary and former rival of Rouhani in 2017. After the assassinations of high-ranking Iranian officials like Soleimani and Fakhrizadeh, this group can derive legitimacy from the need for solidarity and the prevention of any resurgence from the moderniser camp in the next period.



Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu (R) and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif (L) hold a joint press conference at Dolmabahce Palace in Istanbul, Turkey on January 29, 2021. (Cem Özdel - Anadolu Agency)

## Iran and the Middle East

### Syria

Following reduced intensity in the conflict in Syria over the last few years, Iran has started to implement a different strategy in the war-torn country. In addition to fortifying its military presence through agreements to give air defence and technological support to the Assad regime (Mehr News Agency, 2020), the new strategy included policies to expand the network Shiite militias in Syria. In accordance with this agenda, Iran has carried out charity activities, developed relations with Syrian businessmen (Saban, 2020) and transferred money to Syrian banks in 2020 (Fars News Agency, 2020). A significant pillar of this strategy includes an element of demographic engineering in Syria meant to replace Sunni Muslims that fled from the country with Shiites (Chulov, 2017). Amidst the need for a political solution, these efforts are set to continue in the next years. However, several factors have also diminished Iran's influence in Syria.

First, the assassination of Soleimani has considerably damaged Iran's military capacity in Syria. Beyond losing probably the most important actor in the region, Iran also realised that its men are not untouchable. Soleimani's legacy will not disappear overnight (Makki, 2020); however, finding a Soleimani-like influential actor in the region will be an arduous task.

Second, Israeli airstrikes against Iran-linked targets in Syria represent a significant barrier for the Islamic Republic's objective of expanding its influence in the country. With the Trump administration's unfettered support, Israel has intensified the number of airstrikes since 2017. Aviv Kochavi, Israel's Defence Force Chief of Staff, said last December that they had hit more than 500 targets in 2020, which "slowed down Iran's entrenchment in Syria." (Al-Khalidi, 2021). Accordingly, Iran has to tread carefully in its Syria agenda, particularly in the southwest, which serves as a bridge between Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iran-affiliated forces.

Third, after years of an alliance aimed at keeping the Assad regime in power, tensions between Russia and Iran became more blatant in the last couple of years (Jasem, 2020). Iran's strategic achievements and influential network in the war-torn country threatens Russia's long-term interests there. Russia hopes to receive financial support from the Gulf monarchies to reconstruct Syria (Saunders, 2020) and feels concerned about Iran's attempts to spoil this plan. At the same time, the Gulf states are also seeking Assad to return to the Arab League (Aslan, 2020). These developments concern Iran for maintaining its political and economic presence in the post-war state.

Lastly, Iran is gradually being isolated by Turkey and Russia in Syria. This pushes the Islamic Republic to undermine Turkish-Russian efforts by following assertive steps in Idlib. Despite reports that Iran's operational capacity has been seriously damaged (Loui, 2020) following Turkey's retaliatory operations against the regime targets in February of 2020, some Iranian military officials threatened Turkish forces by warning that they are "within firing range" of the Iranian forces (Fars News Agency, 2020). A similar attitude towards Turkey's efforts was also seen when Turkey initiated Operation Olive Branch in 2018. Condemning the operation, Iran is also known to have given support to PKK-linked YPG militants by sending Shia militias to Afrin during the offensive, which revealed an agreement between the Assad regime and the YPG (Pitel & Solomon, 2018). Even though Ankara and Tehran's interests overlapped occasionally (Uygur, 2019), what happened in Afrin demonstrates the fragility of this cooperation.

### Iraq

Since the 2003 US invasion, Iraq has been an arena of conflict between the US and Iran. After the assassination of Soleimani last year in Baghdad, tensions between Washington and Tehran have skyrocketed and Iran-affiliated militias have continuously attacked US targets. Even though there has recently been a relative decline in those attacks, with the upcoming Biden administration, Iran may use its

capacity to damage American targets as leverage, or in the event of talks proving unsuccessful. This will also depend on the result of the June presidential elections in Iran. However, as in Syria, it is obvious that Iran will also feel the absence of Soleimani in Iraq.

Tehran's relations with Baghdad may face further strain in the future, particularly with regards to the issue of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF). Regarding this issue, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei said that the militant group is "another great blessing in Iraq, which should be safeguarded." (@khamenei\_ir, 2020). This glorification is an indicator that Iran has given its consent to Mustafa al-Kadhimi's government in Baghdad on the condition that he will not touch the group (Ahmadian, 2020). If al-Kadhimi attempts to break Iran's influence by taking steps to control the group's influence, it may exacerbate already existing tensions between the two states. Moreover, Iran slashed the amount of natural gas it exports to Iraq last December and threatened further cutbacks, which may cause electricity shortages in Iraq (Al Ansary, 2020).

Iran's influence may also face setbacks from growing discontent in Iraqi society. Leader of the Shiite Sadrist Movement, Muqtada al-Sadr, voiced such discontent when he condemned the Iran-affiliated Shia militias-led attack on the US embassy in Baghdad, despite his well-known anti-US stance (Shiite News Network, 2020), and called for an alternative natural gas exporter in response to Iran's decision to cut exports (Middle East Monitor, 2021). Tensions between Iran and the Sadrist movement further escalated when Rami al-Shabani a leader in the movement, was shot dead in southern Iraq last December, allegedly by pro-Iran militias (Saleh, 2020).

Considering the worsening economic situation in Iran, Iraq's likely intensifying of contacts with the Gulf states, amidst the reconciliation process between Qatar and several other GCC states, may also shape the dynamics in Iran's Iraq agenda. These may prompt Iran to further retreat from the Iraqi political scene (al-Salhy, 2020).

## Gulf Reconciliation and Arab-Israeli Normalisation

One of the issues that will shape Iran's foreign policy agenda in the Middle East is the ongoing reconciliation in the Gulf. Enjoying warmer relations with Qatar since the Arab Quartet imposed a blockade on the emirate, Iran welcomed the latest reconciliation efforts that ended the three-year-long rift within the GCC (Reuters, 2020). Whether such a positive attitude is due to Iran's expectation of decreasing tensions in the region and renewed dialogue with GCC member states remains an open question. However, as a development that might confirm such expectations, Qatar has called on Gulf states to open a dialogue with Iran and offered to mediate any talks (Al Jazeera, 2021).

However, these expectations of decreasing tensions may come to nothing should the motivation of the Arab Quartet in reconciling with Qatar be taken into consideration. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt aim to improve the Gulf position vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic. Regarding this objective, during the latest GCC summit in Saudi city of al-Ula, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS) called for efforts to counter the threat posed by Iran and said that Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs and "subversive and destructive plans" require serious action from the international community (Alragawi, 2021).

New regional engagements in preparation for the Biden administration have also eroded Iran's capacity to balance the Arab Quartet's hostility via relations with Qatar and Turkey. New regional alignments will reduce Qatar's dependence on Iran, particularly its reliance on accessing Iranian airspace (Shahwan, 2021). Moreover, relations between Turkey and Iran were strained in the wake of the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Tensions have intensified after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan recited a nationalist poem about the Aras River on the Iranian-Azerbaijani border in celebration of Azerbaijan's victory, touching on a subject that is highly sensitive to Iran (Gürbüz, 2020). Ultimately, even though Tehran will continue to enjoy relatively good relations with Ankara and Doha, it will feel more isolated as these two capitals increase cooperation with states whose relations with Iran are problematic.

Iran's regional agenda will also be shaped by Arab-Israeli rapprochement. One of the reasons the UAE and Bahrain decided to formalise relations with Israel was to solidify an anti-Iranian alliance in the region. Regardless of the outcome of any future negotiations over the country's nuclear programme, Iran will continue to instrumentalise its ballistic missile and Shiite militant recruitment capacity as means of political leverage in the region.



Chinese President Xi Jinping (L) and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani (R) listen to national anthems during an official ceremony prior to their meeting at Saadabad Palace in Tehran, Iran on January 23, 2016. (Pool / Iranian Presidency - Anadolu Agency)

## Iran and Asia

### Relations with China

Both Iran and China had strained relations with the United States during the Trump presidency. This motivated Tehran and Beijing to intensify bilateral relations in trade and develop partnerships in several other sectors. Along with Russia, China was among the few countries that maintained economic relations with Iran amidst the “maximum pressure” process and became a lifesaver for the collapsing Iranian economy. Even though US-led sanctions caused a sharp decline in China’s oil imports from Iran, trade relations still maintained between the two states. Although China has continuously urged Iran to show restraint in its uranium enrichment activities (Reuters, 2021), it still supports the Islamic Republic’s position on the issue of economic sanctions.

Regardless of the outcome of the Biden administration’s efforts to renegotiate the JCPOA, the rising trend in Iran-China relations is set to continue for two reasons. First, Iran seeks to upgrade its relations with China as a means of diversifying its trade and commercial relations that have traditionally been heavily reliant on Europe. Even some pro-Europe reformist political figures favour deeper relations with China since it has “strengthened its foothold in Iran without trying to interfere in Iran’s political stability, security and independence.” (Bozorgmehr, 2020). Second, as mentioned previously, the modernist camp has lost credibility in the Iranian domestic political sphere and the anti-West principlist camp is expected to become more powerful over the next few years. With this change, Iran’s relations with China will be much more developed. Iranian hardliners see China as serving Islam by suppressing “Wahabi Takfiri Muslims, which is a hard-line brand of Saudi-backed Islam.” (Haqiqatnezhad, 2020). Hardliners in favour of deepening ties with China may be at least partially accounted for by the fact that the IRGC has sought deals

with China to improve its weaponry through the purchase of missiles (Kordestani). This silent attitude to China even goes to the extent that the Uighurs were called “terrorists” by then-President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009, and Khamenei’s silence was criticized by some Iranian politicians, such as the former chief commander of the IRGC, Mohsen Rezaei (Alfoneh, 2018).

Having said that, trade volume between the two states is not at the level of Iran’s expectations. For example, China has been Iran’s largest trading partner since 2009, but Iran has a minor share in China’s trade volume and was outperformed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE in this regard (Xiyue, 2020). To achieve a better level of trade relations, Iran may make more concessions to China in the next years and encourage Beijing to invest more in the country. As part of this effort, Iran may offer its strategic geographical location as a trade route for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is crucial to further the long-term economic and security interests of China (Naseer, 2020).

The greatest attempt to further this can be seen in the recent 25-year strategic partnership deal, which is expected to be signed in the coming period. When signed, Beijing will invest a total of \$400 billion in Iran and the two states will launch projects for the reinforcement of Iran’s information and communications infrastructure, including a 5G network by Huawei. In exchange, China will receive heavily discounted Iranian oil throughout the agreement and increase its influence over construction projects of the ports in the Persian Gulf (Fassihi & Myers, 2020). For some analysts, such an extensive trade deal has an inevitable potential for military cooperation as well, particularly considering the speculation in Iran’s local media that the strategic Kish Island was handed over to China to turn into a military base (Bakeer, 2020).

## Relations with India

Since the emergence of the nuclear programme in the country, Iran has had a volatile relationship with India. India's attempt to balance between Iran on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia, Israel and the UAE in the other, has strained relations between Tehran and New Delhi. The deterioration of relations has been exacerbated by Iran's efforts to stay close to China, the main rival of India in Asia. Iran's likely signing the 25-year agreement with China will likely fuel more tensions in its relations with India.

Nevertheless, the two countries have an opportunity to manage disputes in the period ahead. In this framework of opportunity, the two countries can still cooperate in some energy and transportation projects. For instance, India, Iran and Uzbekistan held a meeting last December on the Chabahar port, which represents a strategic location for India's trade route to Western Asia and the Middle East. (Sharma, 2020). It is also reported that the two states are still negotiating the proposed Chabahar Zahedan Railway project (India's Ministry of External Affairs, 2020), which aims to build a railway to connect India and Afghanistan through Iran. Though facing challenges, these developments show that two states still demonstrate a willingness to maintain good relations.

## Pakistan and Afghanistan

As a result of strained ties between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan over the Kashmir dispute, Tehran could take the opportunity to strengthen its relationship with Islamabad. Last December, the two states decided to open the second gateway on their border in order to foster bilateral trade relations (Mehdi, 2020). With its large population, Pakistan represents a market into which Iran wants to expand its export network, while Pakistan also aims to decrease its dependency on Saudi Arabia through strong economic relations with Iran.

## Conclusion

This discussion paper has sought to portray how Iran's foreign policy would proceed in the post-Trump era. Following the devastating legacy of Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign, with Biden in the White House, Iran hopes to regain the achievements of the détente situation secured during the Obama administration. Along with the re-emerging debate over returning to the JCPOA deal, Iran is also hopeful about relations with its eastern neighbours. However, sever-

This positive trend in Iran-Pakistan relations may continue. However, a rivalry is also brewing between the two states regarding relations with China and the BRI (Güler, 2020), and such rivalry may impact the optimistic mood felt in both capitals. Moreover, a possible US-encouraged attempt to break the ice between Riyadh and Islamabad may push Pakistan to return to its traditional policy of balance between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Ultimately, this may change the dynamics in the future of Iran-Pakistan relations.

Meanwhile, Iran has increased its involvement in the peace process between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Along with managing diplomacy with the Afghan government, Iran also improved its communication channels with the Taliban by hosting leading figures of the movement in recent months. This latest leap in diplomacy manifests a shift in Iran's foreign policy attitudes regarding the peace process in Afghanistan and offers a more positive outlook for the Taliban. The Islamic Republic is also concerned with being excluded from the peace settlement process with its northern neighbour, leading the process to become more open to Saudi Arabia and Pakistan's influence.

Within this framework, Iran is also promoting a similar model in the case of the PMF in Iraq and has encouraged the Fatemiyoun Brigades — a militia group of Afghan refugees that Iran deployed in Syria to fight in the ranks of Assad regime — to get involved with the Afghan army. In a recent interview with an Afghan TV channel, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif said that they are ready to help the Afghan government to regroup these forces under the leadership of the Afghan National Army (TOLONews, 2020). In the next period, this Iranian initiative may continue according to the course of events in Afghan peace talks, but the Taliban will rebuff these attempts, with the potential of it turning into a sectarian conflict in Afghanistan.

al developments in the Middle East and the economic wreckage caused by US sanctions and the Covid-19 pandemic, also reveal that Iran will face challenges to maintain its influence across the region. On the top of that, while representing more of a symbolic power compared to the Supreme Leader, the next president to be elected in June of 2021 and his political alignment will be one of the most significant factors for Iran's foreign policy agenda in the years to come.

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