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Demanding Better: A Just Vision for US-Iran Relations

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Iran may be the most sanctioned country in history and is currently the nation that the U.S. imposes heavily targeted sanctions against the most.¹ The United States placed sanctions on the Islamic Republic of Iran ten days after Iranian students seized the American Embassy in Tehran in November of 1979. In response, President Jimmy Carter issued Executive Order 12170, freezing all Iranian government assets held within the United States, which began decades of sanctions against the Iranian people. The relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States of America has been one of animosity and tension ever since.

There is a need for the removal of unilateral economic and secondary sanctions against Iran, not only in the interest of the United States, but also in the interest of U.S.-allied countries (specifically European partners), and the interest of other countries in West Asia. By providing sanctions alleviation, engaging diplomatically, and allowing countries within West Asia to openly work with one another, the United States of America will find that the Islamic Republic of Iran will be more willing to cooperate with them – directly or indirectly.

The current sanctions policy against Iran does not work and in fact increases the likelihood that Iran will act in a manner that runs counter to U.S. interest. Because the Biden administration has left the sanctions component of President Trump’s “Maximum Pressure” strategy in place, former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s “Twelve Demands” of Iran can act as a metric of success; however, evidence shows that not even the more modest versions of Pompeo’s desired demands were met. For example, Pompeo’s likeliest unachievable goal of halting Iran’s enrichment program actually backfired and made Iran’s enrichment program more dangerous. In fact, the sanctions regime against Iran allowed for the Iranian government to strengthen their influence in the region, provided an outlet for them to turn toward China for support (as opposed to European allies), and ramp up both their missile and nuclear production programs.

A Fool's Errand: U.S. Policy Towards Iran

The most recent shift of major importance in Iran-U.S. relations occurred when President Trump decided to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in May of 2018 and subsequently begin the implementation of his "Maximum Pressure" campaign. The Maximum Pressure campaign reimposed all pre-JCPOA sanctions against Iran and imposed additional intensified sanctions. The scope of these sanctions is so broad that targets include Iran's banking, health, and humanitarian trade sectors.² Proponents of this ideology believe that, by imposing harsher sanctions on Iran, they can either weaken Iran to a point where the government will be forced to adhere to U.S. demands, or that it would make life so difficult for the average citizens that they would rise up and overthrow their government in protest. As of the publication of this paper – and after forty plus years of various forms of sanctions – neither of these scenarios has reached their conclusion.

Additionally, Iran has recently elected a new president who hails from the 'Principalist' camp and is in no rush to return to the negotiating table with the United States.³ Instead, Iran relies on a new "resistance economy" to circumvent sanctions. This system of economic activity entails more black-market methods of trade and pushes Iran further away from Euro-American reliance toward a more regional and China-centric model.⁴ In other words, Iran is cozying up to the United States's biggest economic rival, trading with neighbors and building stronger ties with them than the United States has in the past two decades, and is flexing its muscle by skirting U.S. imposed blockades under a new leadership that champions this sort of anti-Western action. Thus, the U.S. is not left with a necessarily weaker adversary, but a more adaptable and resourceful one in a region where U.S. diplomatic capital has notably depleted in the past few years.

Currently, the Biden administration has left the sanctions component of the Maximum Pressure campaign in place. Therefore, an analysis of current U.S. sanctions policy against Iran isn't so much determined by which administration is in power, but rather which administration's doctrine is. With the recent imposition of even further sanctions against Iran, the Biden

administration shows that while their rhetoric may lean toward diplomacy their actions prove otherwise.⁵ Thus, any sound analysis of U.S.-Iranian relations must consider the current status quo of U.S. imposed sanctions against Iran, which is former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's Twelve Demands.

Pompeo's Twelve Demands

On May 21, 2018 former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, announced a list of demands Iran would have to comply with to prevent the U.S. from imposing crippling unilateral economic sanctions against the Iranian government. The twelve demands are as follows:

- Iran must declare to the IAEA a full account of the prior military dimensions of its nuclear program, and permanently and verifiably abandon such work in perpetuity
- Iran must stop uranium enrichment and never pursue plutonium reprocessing (this includes closing its heavy water reactor)
- Iran must provide the IAEA with unqualified access to all sites throughout the entire country
- Iran must end its proliferation of ballistic missiles and halt further launching or development of nuclear-capable missile systems
- Iran must release all U.S. citizens, as well as citizens of partners and allies
- Iran must end support to "terrorist groups," including Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad
- Iran must respect the sovereignty of the Iraqi government and permit the disarming, demobilization, and reintegration of Shia militias
- Iran must end its military support for the Houthi militia and work towards a peaceful political settlement in Yemen
- Iran must withdraw all forces under Iranian command throughout the entirety of Syria
- Iran must end support for the Taliban and other terrorists in Afghanistan and the region and cease harboring senior Al-Qaeda leaders
- Iran must end the IRGC Quds Force's support for terrorists and militant partners around the world
- Iran must end its threatening behavior against its neighbors. This includes its threats to destroy Israel, its firing of missiles into Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. It also includes threats to international shipping and destructive cyberattacks.⁶

In addition to these demands, Secretary Pompeo later added the vague notion of "improving human rights" to his original dozen demands.⁷ The list of demands

– announced in a speech given at the Heritage Foundation – may in fact seem reasonable to those viewing the situation in a vacuum and strictly from a lens focusing on U.S. interests.⁸ However, these demands essentially cede Iran’s own interests to those of the United States. Assessing the situation from a realist perspective offers insight into how Iran’s leaders view the current state of affairs. The U.S. had already overthrown Iran’s neighbors to the east and to the west while continuing to militarily occupy both countries, it withdrew from an agreement that already had many of the points Pompeo listed effectively in check, and the U.S. would go on to assassinate one of Iran’s top military leaders less than two years after withdrawing from the JCPOA. On top of this, Iran has also witnessed Israel make regular military threats against them and assassinate sensitive figures in the government at pivotal moments either to obstruct improvements to Iran-U.S. relations or to deter Iran from accruing regional power.⁹ Regardless of anyone’s categorization of what sort of state Iran is, it would be absurd of Iran to relinquish so many of its security tools on the off chance that the United States would be more amendable to their needs. Pompeo’s list of twelve demands are simply unrealistic non-starters created in bad faith in order to claim that Iran is not a trustworthy party to engage with diplomatically.

Setting some of the redundancies aside, the list of demands can ultimately be placed in the following categories: Iran’s nuclear activity, Iran’s weapons capabilities (specifically missile and UAV development), Iran’s influence in the region, Iran’s engagement with other nations, and Iran’s economy. Through the assessment of these five metrics it’s clear not only were Pompeo’s demands not met but his demands were actually rebuked in a strong way by Iran.

Measuring the Effectiveness of Sanctions

To assess the effectiveness of the United States sanctions policy toward Iran, I will look at the five key metrics previously stated, and measure each according to whether or not the stated goals were met after the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA. The metrics derive from former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s Twelve Demands of Iran and will be measured through primarily quantitative assessments

but may also include some qualitative assessment for reinforcement. Certain quantitative assessments will have easily accessible and verifiable numbers such as information regarding Iran’s nuclear activity as gathered by the IAEA. Other measurements, such as Iran’s weapons capabilities, will include quantifiable numbers as well as descriptions of certain attacks or power that new weaponry possesses. The crux of this analysis is to prove whether unilateral economic and secondary sanctions against Iran are justifiable from an understanding of numbers. In other words, does the reality match the hypothesis when it comes to whether U.S. sanctions against Iran promote U.S. interests?

Iran’s Nuclear Activity Has Increased

Secretary Pompeo’s demands that relate to Iranian nuclear activity essentially set up a moot point. Looking at the first two demands alone, they call for an abandonment of all domestic nuclear programs. As a signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Iran is entitled to pursue a peaceful nuclear energy program aimed at providing energy for civilian purposes. However, Pompeo’s demands would make this pursuit all but impossible.

Since the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, Iran has only sped up its nuclear activity and increased uranium enrichment. As it currently stands, Iran has gone from having one nuclear power plant to two (the second one currently under construction as of 9/27/2019), and it will have a stockpile of 25kg of 60% enriched uranium from the JCPOA designated 3.67%.¹⁰ Iran also installed advanced centrifuges at its production-scale uranium-enrichment plant in Natanz.¹¹ These centrifuges would allow Iran to make nuclear material faster and in smaller facilities which can complicate political and military responses to a breakout attempt while making the program easier to hide. Additionally, Iran is granting severely limited IAEA inspections of its nuclear sites as opposed to the IAEA inspection understanding agreed upon through the JCPOA. Even these limited inspections are only due to the recent Vienna talks after having restricted international inspections in 2019.

Iran Is Building Its Weapons Capabilities

The relationship and posturing of U.S. allies toward Iran are of significance to the United States's policy toward Iran. No ally is cited more frequently than Israel as either a hindrance to or a reasoning for certain U.S. policy toward Iran. It is of such consequence that Israeli leaders will come to Washington to speak directly about whether they believe certain U.S. policy to be smart or disastrous.¹² Even with rogue actions such as the aforementioned circumvention of political protocol, the assassinations of Iranian scientists, and statements from top Israeli officials discussing the possibility of "taking action" to prevent "a nuclear Iran," the Israelis know that they are too weak to engage in full-scale war against Iran without major support from the United States.¹³ Thus, in an effort to appease its allies in the region and prevent the United States from being dragged into another conflict in West Asia, containment and preventing an expansion of Iran's weapons capabilities became a goal for the United States.

First, it is important to note that Iran halted pursuits for nuclear weapons in 2003 as per U.S. intelligence assessments.¹⁴ It is imperative to keep this in mind to cut through the rhetoric surrounding Iran's nuclear program and focus on what Iran's weapons capabilities amount to according to the U.S. government. A 2019 Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) report on Iran's military power acknowledges that ballistic missiles constitute a primary component of the country's strategic deterrence.¹⁵ Due to sanctions, Iran has faced difficulty in modernizing its military forces through procurement – specifically in regard to its air force – however, it has seriously invested in its domestic infrastructure, equipment, and expertise in order to develop and produce increasingly capable ballistic and cruise missiles.¹⁶ The DIA report goes on to express how Iran has created more precise short-range ballistic missiles with extended range, how it uses unconventional warfare capabilities to serve as a means of power projection, and how it has invested in more "safe, low-cost" methods of contemporary warfare – primarily in the arenas of cyberspace, intelligence, and space/counterspace capabilities.¹⁷ Through the proliferation of its unmanned aerial vehicle and space launch vehicle programs, Iran has ensured that it remains on the cutting edge of deterrence strategy in spite of sanctions, and regardless of who the subject

of this deterrence strategy is – be it Israel or the United States. Of course, there is no discussion of Iranian military potential without including the Millennium Challenge 2002 (MC02) in which a simulated "Red Team" – whom many identified as Iran – defeated the U.S. "Blue Team" in a fictional war. The Red Team's unconventional tactics and use of defensive weapons was projected to result in over 20,000 Blue Team deaths in a real war scenario.¹⁸ While there is much to be said surrounding the fictional MC02 scenario versus the realities of an Iran-U.S. war, it's undeniable Iran's weapons capabilities are focused on denial and defense rather than regional domination.

Pompeo's demands go beyond limiting Iran's weapons potential and instead push outright non-negotiables. For example, if we disregard the insincere demand of Iran ending its development of a nuclear-capable missile system – which, as mentioned, U.S. intelligence refutes – the additional demand of Iran ending its proliferation of ballistic missiles cuts right to the heart of Iran's military defense strategy. Additionally, Pompeo demanded that Iran cut ties with its allies in the region. Iran uses its regional ties in lieu of long-range strike capabilities as both a form of deterrence and a method of creating stronger partnerships throughout West Asia. For Pompeo to ask, for example, that Iran "respect the sovereignty of the Iraqi government" removes all agency from the Iraqi government itself and is also disrespectful to anyone who recognizes how the United States has had an utter lack of respect for the sovereignty of the Iraqi government since the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Consequently, these demands were not only disregarded, but also helped to create a reality in which Iran would benefit from acting directly against such demands.

Iran's Influence in the Region Has Grown

In the early to mid 2010's it seemed as though Iranian influence in West Asia was going through a period of waning. Several neighboring countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq were still under U.S. military occupation and thus had very strong ties to the United States, while allies like Syria were engaged in a devastating war. Meanwhile, Iran's biggest rivals in the region had just withstood the Arab Spring by crushing dissent while receiving little to no international condemnation for their actions. While the JCPOA was a boon to Iran's credibility on the global stage,

countries like Israel that vociferously opposed the deal established campaigns to ensure that those who supported the deal – be they Democrats in Congress or everyday Iranians – would rue the day that they allowed it to pass. Iran was a country navigating itself in a changing landscape where its rivals grew stronger by the day and its allies were almost nonexistent.

Enter U.S. foreign policy blunder after U.S. foreign policy blunder. The United States has presented Iran with several opportunities to strengthen their relations with scorned neighbors throughout the region. For example, the U.S. failure to contain Daesh (ISIS) in Iraq led to a fatwa declared by Grand Ayatollah Sistani calling upon all able individuals to take up arms against the organization.¹⁹ This led to a large group of, mostly Shia, volunteers in need of military training and Iran was more than happy to fill the role of training these militias. Another example was the U.S. support of the Saudi Arabian-led intervention against Yemen. Obviously, the Saudi-U.S. relationship is complex and well outside the scope of this paper; however, it's reasonable to argue this alliance does not require U.S. military support when engaging with a country such as Yemen. While the United States supplied arms and expertise to the Saudis, it did not control the manner in which the Saudis would pursue their military intervention and thus dramatically worsened the humanitarian crisis Yemen to the point that twenty million Yemenis face starvation and eighty percent of the population is dependent on humanitarian assistance.²⁰ The group Ansar Allah, also known as the Houthis, who are the primary adversaries of Saudi Arabia in this conflict, intensified their ties with Iran and have become one of its more dependable partners in the region when it comes to enacting pressure against Iran's adversaries.

Through its foreign policy decisions, the United States has left the door wide open for Iran to strengthen its ties to countries in West Asia and bolster groups who may have simply been a flash in the pan otherwise. Furthermore, adversaries with U.S. ties are even looking to ease tensions with Iran after recognizing how unreliable a partner the United States can be in the region.²¹ While the U.S. is right in choosing to scale down its presence in West Asia, their intended goal of leaving the region with an understanding that the U.S. can be counted upon to provide guidance and leadership in the region is far from the reality. Instead,

Iran has strategically gained the upper hand at a point most beneficial to them and can continue to enact its foreign policy and sidestep its own blunders due to U.S. malfeasance in the region. Regardless of how the power politics of West Asia look from an aerial view, the situation on the ground is clear that Iran has grown its influence in certain pockets and is entrenching itself while the U.S. faces setbacks.

Iran Is Shifting Eastward in Its Engagement

Even after President Trump decided to withdraw from the JCPOA, the Rouhani administration still believed it could work with Western governments and prove that being a good actor would gain points with other world powers. The Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX) was poised to offer just the opportunity needed for Iran to be that good actor. By continuing to abide by the guidelines of the JCPOA, Iran attempted to utilize this special-purpose vehicle (SPV) to continue its facilitation of non-USD and non-SWIFT transactions with European nations. INSTEX was a way for countries like France and Germany to maintain trade relations with Iran without breaking secondary sanctions imposed by the United States. INSTEX went unused for over a year into its creation and was only able to be used to cover an import of medical equipment to combat COVID-19.²²

After the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA and the failure of the Europeans to find a workaround, it was all but inevitable for Iran to look east. China was already planning to work with Iran as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), but the signing of a twenty-five-year cooperation agreement sent a clear message that Iran would also look to China when needing to work with a major world power.²³ Furthermore, Javad Zarif's successor as Iranian Foreign Minister, Hossein Amirabdollahian, has indicated that he is a proponent of a more regional and eastward focus when it comes to Iranian foreign policy. Amirabdollahian's "balanced foreign policy" determines levels of engagement with other countries based on how the nations act toward Iran, with a particular focus on neighbors in the near and broader region, except for Israel.²⁴ When it comes to China in particular, the Foreign Minister has lauded the Chinese for their support of including Iran as a member of the Shanghai

Cooperation Organization and stated that Chinese and Iranian ties span centuries and should be regarded as such a strategic and traditional friendship.²⁵ Although it seems like Iran's foreign policy focus is shifting, they continue to implement a perceptive strategy for engaging with the world.

Iran's Economy: Bent but Not Broken

While it is true that the Maximum Pressure campaign did cripple Iran's economy significantly, the goal of doing so to bring regime change did not pan out. What the Maximum Pressure campaign did do to the Iranian economy was force it to become more diverse thus allowing it to take on the economic impact of COVID better than rivals like Saudi Arabia and better handle U.S. sanctions unlike Lebanon or Syria.²⁶ This isn't to imply that the Iranian economy and people thrived during this time, but Iran was able to build what it dubs a "Resistance Economy" aimed at combatting U.S. sanctions through direct and indirect means. The direct means are through substitution of local inputs for imported goods, the smuggling of goods, and an increase in barter trade. The indirect means are through the implementation of more ideological measures – similar to a war economy where every citizen is understood to collectively "do their part" to support the nation. The Iranian Resistance Economy as defined by Supreme Leader of Iran Ali Khamenei has ten elements: creates dynamism, resists against threatening elements, relies on domestic capabilities, adopts a jihadi outlook, makes the people the pivot, provides security for strategic and fundamental goods, reduces oil dependency, reforms the norms of consumption, combats corruption, and promotes a knowledge-based economy.

The Stated Goal of Regime Change Has Not Occurred

The Iranian Rial has reached unprecedented levels of inflation due to sanctions, yet the Iranian economy has not reached extreme levels of economic crisis such as Lebanon. Many of Iran's traders in the Tehran Stock Exchange are unphased by U.S. pressure and have been riding a bull market they don't believe will be significantly affected unless a war were to break out.²⁷ In fact, the Resistance Economy has allowed Iran to export oil to countries such as Lebanon and

Venezuela, directly defying a U.S. blockade of those countries.^{28,29} With that said, the stock market is no indication of the actual health of an economy, and just because the government and national products are sustaining does not mean the everyday Iranian is faring well. U.S. sanctions have not achieved their political goal, and instead produced suffering and created economic woes. Labor strikes sprang across the country calling for increased benefits and imbursement of unpaid wages.³⁰

With that said, the government has acquiesced to certain demands enough to maintain their control, and government officials still point to the U.S. as the primary antagonist of Iran's economic troubles.³¹ By resorting to band aid solutions to keep the economy afloat, the Iranian government hedges on the fact that the United States will be forced to alter their position before the Iranians run out of alternative solutions to their economic problems. As one Iranian official put it, "if we are going to be treated like bandits, we might as well behave like bandits."³²

Alternative to the Status Quo

If the current state of affairs does not benefit Iran or the United States, then what is to be done? Is it possible to reach a deal that will be in the interest of both nations? The answer is yes. The biggest misconception that members of the foreign policy establishment believe is that Iran is an avowed enemy of the United States with absolutely zero shared interests. This leads many to also believe that any deal must include every single component of U.S. grievances because there will be no room down the line for further negotiation.

However, Iran has proven it is willing to engage through diplomatic measures, whether that means the Iranian government abiding by the JCPOA for a time after the United States withdrew, or the Iranians using backchannels to prevent escalation of tension after the assassination of General Qassem Soleimani. Below are four recommendations to help improve Iran-U.S. relations. These recommendations are not a panacea for the acrimony that exists between the two nations, but it is a reasonable and smart approach toward a future with fewer conflicts and greater opportunity for positive dialogue.

Sanctions Relief For the Iranian People

The U.S.'s policy of unilateral economic and secondary sanctions against Iran has produced the exact opposite effect of what their supporters claim they will. Lifting these sanctions should be the first part of a new approach to Iran-U.S. relations. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has repeatedly stated that the Biden administration's foreign policy will be centered around human rights. COVID-19 provides President Biden the perfect opportunity to engage in sanctions relief efforts for Iran – in fact, a precedent for this sort of sanctions relief was already set by President George W. Bush in 2004.³³ This reversal of sanctions could also be seen as a sign of good faith as both countries continue to play a cat and mouse game around their Vienna talks.

Opponents of sanctions relief make the claim that by reversing sanctions, the United States gives up the only leverage it has without even getting the JCPOA back in return.³⁴ First, the argument could easily be made for Iran returning to compliance prior to a new deal being struck, even though it was not the party that initially withdrew from the JCPOA and even made efforts to remain compliant. Second, the United States has several bargaining chips at its disposal including economic and trade negotiations and military understandings. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi has made his wishes clear by stating, “Iran has never left the negotiating table. We are serious about results-oriented negotiations. For the other side, a readiness to lift sanctions can be a sign of that seriousness.”³⁵ However, there is a way to move toward sanctions relief without immediately offering them up without a new deal.

A preliminary unfreezing of Iranian assets preceding a negotiated, larger deal around sanctions is an idea that Hossein Amirabdollahian has hinted at that would save face for both countries.³⁶ While Amirabdollahian was referencing Iranian assets that the U.S. has frozen, the United States could also open the path to allow for some of its allies' frozen Iranian assets to be unblocked instead. For example, South Korea – who has played a key role in diplomacy between Iran and some of its Western adversaries – possesses seven billion dollars in frozen Iranian assets due to U.S. sanctions.³⁷ If the U.S. were to allow that money to return to Iran it would show tremendous goodwill and

could convince the South Koreans to unfreeze assets of Iranian students studying in South Korea as well.³⁸

Additionally, the Office of the Deputy for Economic Research of the Majlis Research Center presented a report entitled “Verifying Sanctions Relief” in which they detailed what a verified sanctions relief may look like.³⁹ The report aims to address what Iran claims are “asymmetries” in the ways in which Iran's nuclear commitments under the JCPOA and the sanctions commitments of the P5+1 are overseen and implemented.⁴⁰ What is noticeable about this report is the practicality of the measures presented. It calls for a more institutional and technical approach to sanctions relief that incorporates a checklist which policymakers can use to ensure compliance on an ongoing basis.⁴¹ The three main measures that the report calls for are as follows: the designation of an Iranian body to oversee verification of sanctions relief, a verification checklist that the body can use to both check specific actions and targets related to American and European sanctions relief commitments as well as focusing on ongoing efforts to decrease the risk of doing business with Iran once sanctions have been lifted, and ongoing monitoring of JCPOA-related sanctions relief.⁴²

Finding Common Ground Through Diplomacy

While a full restoration of diplomatic ties seems extremely unlikely, it is not out of the realm of possibility for Iran and the United States to continue using third parties or engage in multilateral conversations when dealing with issues outside of emergency dialogues. Popular belief states that Iran and the United States are the antithesis of one another – two states with complete diametrically opposed ideologies. While there are several ways in which this may seem like the case, the two countries in fact possess a multitude of common interests that they can engage on. For starters, a stable Afghanistan is important for both countries. Iran welcomed the departure of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, but the ruling Taliban have not always had the best relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Although their friction waned over the years of Taliban control pre-U.S. occupation, there is growing concern of a Daesh element known as ISIS-K to cause trouble in the region. Iran and the United States could find themselves as unlikely allies in the effort to combat Daesh in Afghanistan as they

did in Iraq, except this time their efforts could incorporate more official coordination and intelligence sharing to boost the likelihood of eradicating ISIS-K from Afghanistan.⁴³

While similar in concept, albeit more challenging in practice, a stable Iraq is also of significant importance for both countries. Iran has subtly indicated that its foreign policy under President Raisi will be more regionally focused. For instance, when Raisi replaced the English-speaking Javad Zarif with the Arabic-fluent Hossein Amirabdollahian as his Foreign Minister.⁴⁴ Although Iran hopes to engage with Iraq in a more collegial atmosphere it still faces an uphill battle. The militias that Iran supports in Iraq have acted more erratically than Iran would like and some key players in Iraq are looking to curb Iran's influence in the country.⁴⁵ Iran and the United States can meet on similar footing – as two countries with influence in Iraq who find their relationship with the Iraqi government in a state of constant flux. Working together, the two countries can work in coordination with the Iraqi government to aid Iraq in stabilizing the region instead of working separately and shooting themselves in the foot in the process.

Finally, ensuring that Israel no longer engages in rogue operations against Iran without U.S. approval or support is yet another issue that both countries should ideally wish to work together on resolving. As with the case of Saudi-U.S. relations, addressing Israel's presence in West Asia or its relations with the United States goes well beyond the scope of this paper, however it goes without saying that Israel's provocations against Iran are detrimental to U.S. interests. In short, the U.S. is in a better position to engage diplomatically with Iran and many other countries throughout the region when Israel feels U.S. pressure to disengage from its threatening activities. The prevention of Israeli attacks on Iran – specifically in the form of airstrikes which Israel has threatened repeatedly – should be the beginning of a continued dialogue between Iran and the U.S. to help bring stability and lasting peace to the region.

Supporting a Regional Détente

The United States should support a regional détente amongst Iran and some other key states in the region – namely the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the

United Arab Emirates. As previously stated, Saudis have already shown signs that they wish to lean in this direction, and as of a few short weeks ago it seems as though the Emiratis may be rushing to outdo the Saudis in this endeavor.⁴⁶ A détente emerging from dialogue among regional players would remove much of the specter of a U.S. role in the region thus offering a sense of autonomy by the nations involved.

The United States could support this by helping to facilitate via third party nations or by encouraging their allies to engage in such talks. The Saudis have already shown a keen interest in thawing tensions with Iran. They have slowly been losing ground in their conflict against Ansar Allah in Yemen and see engaging with Iran has more beneficial than continuing to operate in regionally unpopular alliances with the United States and covertly with Israel.^{47,48} The Saudis already recognize that the U.S. wishes to withdraw more of its troops from the region and feel that the ideal time to negotiate with Iran is during the pending talks surrounding a return to the JCPOA.⁴⁹

Both the Emiratis and Saudis have now shown through measures such as high-profile meetings of top government officials as well as humanitarian aid relief that they wish to engage more positively with Iran.⁵⁰ The Biden administration should support these efforts by Abu Dhabi and Riyadh. While it would be nearly impossible for Israel to agree to such a truce with Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE receiving the blessing of the United States could speed up the conversations already taking place and would open up diplomacy on issues of shared interest to the United States such as Yemen and trade through the Strait of Hormuz. Moreover, it would bring stability to the region and allow the U.S. to feel more amenable to reallocating its resources out of the Persian Gulf.

Humanitarian Aid and Other Assistance Efforts

Between the COVID-19 pandemic which ravaged the country and a water shortage in the province of Khuzestan which led to several protests in the summer of 2021, Iran has been faced with a tremendous amount of stress in recent years. Human Rights Watch even declared that sanctions against Iran threatened the very livelihood of the Iranian people.⁵¹ Concerns

which normally could be aided if not entirely alleviated through humanitarian aid have been blocked by U.S. sanctions.

The United States should open humanitarian “lines of communication” with Iran to take a step in the direction of positive relations. One avenue the Biden administration could achieve this is through vaccine diplomacy. The United States should allow Iranians to obtain vaccines from U.S. manufacturers and assure vaccine manufacturers and international entities that they will not face the repercussions of sanctions if they assist in this effort.⁵² Not only does this help Iranians who have been ravaged by the COVID-19 pandemic, but it also negates the idea that Americans wish to cripple the Iranian people to the point where the Iranian government is forced to capitulate or that the people overthrow them.

The easing of sanctions related to food distribution and supply chains would also be seen as a crucial humanitarian gesture. The COVID-19 virus altered the eating habits of Iranian families and caused them to consume less meat due to high cost and weak supply chains.⁵³ Through such efforts, the U.S. would be showing a tremendous sign of good will by alleviating some of the pressure faced by Iranian households in lower economic standings.

Furthermore, these assistance and relief efforts can move beyond the function of humanitarian aid. For instance, the United States can assist Iran with its emergency response agencies, specifically firefighting. Iran has been ravaged by hundreds of brush and wildfires in recent years and has also faced instances of devastating urban catastrophes due to fire and infrastructure related issues.^{54,55} If the United States worked to assist and modernize Iran’s firefighting capabilities it could be seen as a good faith effort to aid in a way that is unrelated to U.S. interest.

Iran, like other countries in the region, is facing the effects of climate change at a rapid pace. The International Panel on Climate Change estimates that countries in West Asia will face an increase in temperatures of up to two degrees Celsius in the next fifteen to twenty years and up to four degrees Celsius by the end of the century.⁵⁶ This means an increase in heat waves and a decrease in rainfall as well as other climate ramifications due to CO₂ emissions and other

shifts related to climate.⁵⁷ The United States can work cooperatively with Iran to tackle global challenges and demonstrate its leadership on the world stage.

Conclusion

While the U.S. remains dedicated to a failed policy of isolation and sanctions, Iran has found ways to adapt and circumvent to the latest iterations of a four decades long policy. The Maximum Pressure campaign of President Trump proved how flawed U.S. sanctions policy toward Iran really was by imposing sanctions so immoral and debilitating that even U.S. allies attempted to find ways around them. Much like the decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan, President Biden must admit what other presidents before him could not, that this is not the proper path.

The United States does not need to become allied with Iran much in the same way that Iran does not need to abandon all its interests and become a U.S. proxy. The understanding that a U.S. which recognizes the shared goals it has with Iran and works toward those goals leaves a much safer world than a U.S. which chooses to only view Iran as an adversary is the sort of principled leadership that must come out of the White House at this moment. The evidence supports this as do the multiple situations which have put American and Iranian lives in jeopardy.

It is said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. If that is the case, then the U.S. must end its insane sanctions regime against Iran and instead work toward a rational approach. If the United States wishes to further its interests in West Asia, prevent Iran from interfering with those interests, and help promote a more stable region, then it must begin by lifting its unilateral economic and secondary sanctions on Iran.

Endnotes

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