

Iran and Biden

Assal Rad

Assal Rad works at the National Iranian American Council (NIAC). She assesses the possibilities of restoring constructive diplomacy between Iran and the US.

Though harrowing images from Afghanistan in the wake of the US departure have shocked the world, the outcome of America's longest war is hardly surprising to specialists and scholars who knew the history of Afghanistan and that of US intervention. Anti-war advocates were woefully vindicated as the world witnessed first-hand the futility of US militarism as a means to bring peace or stability in the region. While US hawks will continue to argue for even more military force, this moment of reckoning can and should serve as a turning point in US foreign policy.

Decades of failed policies and costly wars have wreaked havoc in the Middle East and other parts of the world, caused immeasurable suffering for millions of innocent people, wasted American tax-dollars, and maintained hostilities that could lead to even greater conflicts. If war has offered us no real solutions, the next logical step is to shift strategies and embrace the art of diplomacy. Nothing illustrates the benefits of diplomatic tactics as well as the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – also known as the Iran Nuclear Deal – which brought two long-time adversaries, the United States and Iran, to the negotiating table to resolve an issue of global security and avert the devastation of another war.

Before the reckless decision of the Trump administration in May 2018 to withdraw from the deal, reimpose brutal sanctions, and attempt to dismantle the agreement entirely, Iran was abiding by the limitations to its civilian nuclear program set forth in the JCPOA and even continued to do so¹ for a full year after the US broke

its promises. While President Biden was a staunch critic of his predecessor's Iran policy, his administration was slow to address the restoration of the Iran Nuclear Deal and in many ways has continued President Trump's 'maximum pressure' policy. The debacle in Afghanistan must be a warning to the Biden administration to avoid any further conflicts in the region and pursue diplomacy with Iran with more determination than ever.

Mutual grievances

Watching Iran and the United States locked in a state of shared enmity over the last four decades, some may draw the conclusion that this animosity is a fixed reality. Both states point to the other's historical record to validate their own aggressive rhetoric.

For Americans, the original sin of the Iranian state goes back to November 1979, when Iranian students – still navigating the aftermath of the revolution of that year, which toppled the institution of monarchy and ousted its dictator king Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who was a strong US ally – seized the US embassy in Tehran and took 52 Americans hostage. Images of Americans blindfolded with their hands tied behind their backs flooded television screens across America. Seen as a humiliation for the United States, US news media covered the story persistently over its 444-day saga from November 4th, 1979 to the freeing of the hostages on January 20th, 1981.

The impact of the hostage crisis on the American psyche and how it shaped American views about Iran is evidenced in how the crisis entered into American popular culture². For instance, in a 1981 episode of the skit comedy series, *Saturday Night Live*, Eddie Murphy jokes about taking an Iranian drug dealer hostage after he failed to deliver³. The live audience burst into uproarious applause after Murphy's line, 'so, I took the dude hostage and I ain't givin' him back'. As the audience reaction suggests, the issue of retribution was central to the American view of Iran and the crisis. These images have remained part of the US view on Iran despite the passage of time. In fact, President Trump invoked the memory of the hostage crisis when he threatened to bomb 52 Iranian cultural sites for the 52 Americans held hostage in Iran⁴, after bringing the US and Iran to the edge of war with the assassination of its top general, Qasem Soleimani, in January 2020.

Of course, the irony of this quest of justice for past wrongs is that often missing from the US account of events is the reasoning behind the 1979 embassy seizure, which harks back to the original sin of the US from the

Iranian perspective: the 1953 coup. As has been well-documented⁵, the United States and United Kingdom carried out a coup in Iran in 1953 that ousted its popular Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, and propped up the Shah who unleashed a massive crackdown on political dissidents after the coup.

Iranian revolutionaries and students seized the US embassy in November 1979, just two weeks after President Carter allowed the deposed Shah of Iran to enter the United States for cancer treatment. For Iranians who had launched a revolution to remove the same man who had been reinstated by the CIA in 1953, the Shah's entrance into the US was seen as a threat and some Iranians feared another US coup was in the making. For those acquainted with this history, Carter's decision was a clear misstep. As Ambassador John Limbert – one of the 52 hostages held in Iran for 444 days – aptly observed⁶, 'When President Carter agreed to let the Shah come to the United States, he ignored history and the ghosts of 1953'.

As these historical moments show, both Iran and the United States have legitimate mutual grievances that have carried over into decades of mutual hostility. However, as John Ghazvinian outlines in his study of the history of US-Iran relations⁷, antagonism of this kind was not the nature of their interactions prior to 1953. To the contrary, Ghazvinian's examination reveals a history of mutual respect, which demonstrates the fact that enmity need not be inevitable.

Long-awaited détente

Notwithstanding the decades of distrust and the naysayers who argued it was impossible, the United States and Iran were able to participate together in a successful diplomatic process. After years of painstaking negotiations between world powers and Iran over the nature of its nuclear programme, the P5+1 [China, France, Russia, UK, US plus Germany] reached a historic agreement in 2015 that promised Iran economic relief and the lifting of international sanctions, in exchange for Iran placing strict limitations over its nuclear programme. By allowing inspections and international oversight over its nuclear facilities, the Iran Nuclear Deal ensured that Iran could not acquire the materials and capability for a nuclear weapon.

It is also important to note that Iran is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) – an international treaty that aims to stop the spread of nuclear weapons and allows for peaceful uses of nuclear technology and energy. As such, Iran is allowed under the treaty and

international law to pursue peaceful nuclear technology. Despite this fact, US political discourse and media have consistently portrayed Iran's programme as inherently dangerous. From the outset, Iran has been painted as a nuclear threat and an overall menace in a way that has impacted public opinion, which does not reflect the reality on the ground.

For example, a recent report from the Brookings Institute found that 60.5% of Americans believe Iran possesses nuclear weapons, while only 51.7% believe Israel possesses nuclear weapons⁸. This is a staggering statistic given that Iran has never been known to have and does not currently have a single nuclear weapon, while Israel is known to have an arsenal of nuclear weapons⁹ without them being officially acknowledged by Israel or the United States. The fact that more Americans falsely think Iran possesses nuclear weapons than think Israel does, suggests the American public is being provided with misleading or directly untrue information.

This is precisely the kind of rhetoric hawks employ to argue against diplomacy with Iran, and for even greater pressure and sanctions under the guise of preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. However, advocates of 'maximum pressure' wilfully ignore that the deal was working, Iran was abiding by its limitations, and that all of this was accomplished through diplomacy rather than war.

The Iran Nuclear Deal was a breakthrough that should serve as a model for global non-proliferation efforts, and proved that détente between the US and Iran was not only possible, but also mutually beneficial by providing sanctions relief for Iran and an opening of Iranian society. The 2015 deal is yet another piece of evidence that shows conflict between Iran and the United States is most certainly avoidable.

Renewed need for diplomacy

Unfortunately, these gains were quickly squandered by the Trump administration, which appeared more focused on undoing the policies of its predecessor than in maintaining a deal that worked and peaceful, if not friendly, relations with Iran. By every measure, Trump's 'maximum pressure' was unsuccessful. Iran did not negotiate a new deal under duress, tensions increased to the brink of war, Iran has taken calculated steps to reduce its compliance with the deal, and its nuclear programme along with its uranium stockpile continues to expand. That being said, nuclear experts have still argued¹⁰ that Iran's advances do not indicate the pursuit of a weapon, and Iran continues to state its programme is peaceful in nature.

President Biden's own critiques of his predecessor's Iran policy, calling

the US withdrawal from the deal under Trump a ‘profound mistake’¹¹, make a case for the efficacy of the deal and the need for diplomacy. In January 2020, after the US assassination of Iran’s General Soleimani, Biden lambasted President Trump and stated, ‘The Iran deal was not only accomplishing a critical mission that it was designed for, it also created an environment where diplomacy was possible. But Trump, he walked away, not Iran, Trump walked away. Trump made the US the international outlier.’¹²

In this sentiment, President Biden has the support of the American people. No doubt the lack of appetite for endless war is in part why Americans support a mutual return to the deal¹³. Decades of wars, and the utter failure to defeat the Taliban after 20 years and trillions of dollars spent in Afghanistan, illustrate the waste and ineffectiveness of militarism as a predominant approach to foreign policy. In contrast, the JCPOA illustrated the benefits of diplomacy.

Yet, despite these advantages and the perceived promises from Biden as a candidate to return to the deal, the Biden administration was initially slow to address the JCPOA. In doing so, the Biden administration continued Trump’s ‘maximum pressure’ policy by maintaining the previous administration’s harsh sanctions. While Trump’s policy undermined the moderate and reformist camps in Iran – who had pushed for the JCPOA – and helped harden Iranian attitudes, ushering in a less engagement-friendly administration in Iran under Ebrahim Raisi, Biden exacerbated this situation by overlooking the Iranian election and the restoration of the JCPOA as a priority.

Even before President Biden took office, analysts in Iran saw a brief window for the Rouhani administration to act. They argued¹⁴ that if Biden took action within the first weeks of his new administration to restore the deal, then Rouhani would be able to return to the agreement unconditionally and potentially give the moderates and reformists a boost in the upcoming election. But for weeks, no Biden announcement on the deal was forthcoming and, to observers in Tehran, there was little difference from the prior administration.

The Biden administration foolishly began its approach with the idea that Iran would have to return to compliance first¹⁵, losing precious time to an illogical stance, which ignored the fact that it was the US that had quit the deal in the first place. However, after this initial misstep, the administration changed its language to reflect an openness to mutual return to compliance and negotiations in Vienna finally began in April 2021¹⁶. Regrettably, it seems too much time had passed and the parties were not

able to finalize a return to the deal before the Iranian presidential election in June, which saw the controversial¹⁷ ascension of Ebrahim Raisi to the office of president after most candidates had been disqualified from running by Iran's Guardian Council.

Though talks in Vienna were stalled due to the transition to a new administration in Iran, there is reason to believe the US and Iran can still restore the nuclear deal. Significant foreign policy decisions like the JCPOA are determined by a consensus in Iran's political system, and Raisi has already signalled that he will seek diplomacy among Iran's neighbours, wants to see sanctions lifted on Iran, and in his inaugural speech called nuclear weapons 'religiously forbidden'. An EU official reiterated this view in early August, stating that Iran wants to achieve an agreement and return to negotiations in September¹⁸. However, unlike the previous administration in Iran, which sought more engagement with the US, under the Raisi administration the JCPOA could be a ceiling to diplomacy with the United States.

Part of the current impasse is over a US demand for the guarantee of further talks and the Iranian demand for a guarantee that the US will abide by its promises this time around. But the US is not in a position to credibly ask for more when it has failed to uphold its end of the deal. The Biden administration should focus instead on rebuilding trust and restoring the deal before asking for more. The current stalemate is also emblematic of an inherent imbalance built into the deal that only punished Iran for violations, while allowing other parties to the deal – such as the US – to violate the deal with no accountability. This speaks to the central issue of approaching an agreement from a position of force rather than genuine cooperation. For a deal to work the US must consider measures that show it is serious about maintaining the agreement and institute accountability for any party that violates it.

Despite the rhetoric from opponents of the deal, the reality is the US did not make strong concessions, but simply eased pressure in order for Iran to make strong concessions on its nuclear programme and agree to strict limitations. Those who argue otherwise are not looking for a new or better deal, but merely oppose diplomacy with Iran altogether, on ideological grounds.

For diplomacy to be successful, the Biden administration must abandon failed approaches such as 'maximum pressure' and put the US back on a path that avoids more conflicts in the region that could draw a US military response. Neither the US nor the region can afford to get bogged down in yet another military conflict. Especially when we consider the fact that the

wars in Afghanistan and Iraq would pale in comparison to a conflict with Iran – which is a much larger country in land and population, and has a well-entrenched, large and complex bureaucracy.

While the US wasted a historic opportunity to build a more peaceful relationship with Iran, now more than ever we must restore the deal and renew our efforts to resolve issues through diplomacy. For better or worse, Iran is a central power in the region and there are further opportunities for co-operation with mutual benefit that can help to stabilize the region and create a broader security architecture. Talks will hopefully resume, as the new administration in Tehran gets settled in and forms its cabinet. The Biden administration must take concrete steps to restore the deal, heed the calls of the majority of Americans who support a diplomatic resolution to the nuclear issue with Iran, and not allow those who sabotaged this historic deal to continue undermining the progress toward its restoration.

Notes

1. Francois Murphy and Robin Emmott, “Iran is complying with nuclear deal restrictions: IAEA report,” *Reuters*, August 30, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear/iran-is-complying-with-nuclear-deal-restrictions-iaea-report-idUSKCN1LF1KR>.
2. Assal Rad, “The Hostage Crisis is Damaging U.S.-Iran Relations Today. Yet Too Few Understand It,” *Newsweek*, November 4, 2019, <https://www.newsweek.com/hostage-crisis-damaging-us-iran-relations-today-yet-too-few-understand-it-opinion-1469465>.
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6jzbsuBRB8A>. Last accessed August 17, 2021.
4. Dennis Romero and Yuliya Talmazan, “Trump threatens attacks on 52 sites if Iran retaliates for Soleimani killing,” *NBC News*, January 4, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/trump-threatens-iran-attacks-52-sites-n1110511>.
5. NPR Staff, “Declassified Documents Reveal CIA Role in 1953 Iranian Coup,” *NPR*, September 1, 2013, <https://www.npr.org/2013/09/01/217976304/declassified-documents-reveal-cia-role-in-1953-iranian-coup>.
6. John Limbert, “Events of four decades ago continue to cast their malevolent shadows over a relationship that should have long since become more productive,” *American Foreign Service Association*, November, 2019, <https://afsa.org/lingering-poison-tehran-40-years-later-what-have-we-learned>.
7. Ghazvinian, John. *America and Iran: A History, 1720 to the Present*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2021.
8. Shibley Telhami, “Most Americans, including half of young Democrats, disapprove of Biden’s handling of recent Gaza crisis,” *Brookings Institute*, July 29, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/07/29/most-americans-including-half-of-young-democrats-disapprove-of-bidens-handling-of-recent-gaza-crisis/>.
9. Arms Control Association, “Nuclear Weapons: Who Has What at a Glance,” *Arms Control Association*, August, 2020, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Nuclearweaponswhohaswhat>.

10. Robert Kelley, “Iran is actually reducing its weapons-usable uranium inventory,” *Atlantic Council*, January 28, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-is-actually-reducing-its-weapons-usable-uranium-inventory/>.
11. <https://twitter.com/JoeBiden/status/993957007337148417?s=20>. Last accessed August 19, 2021.
12. <https://twitter.com/AssalRad/status/1325166047876456449?s=20>. Last accessed August 19, 2021.
13. Dina Smeltz, Amir Farmanesh and Brendan Helm, “Iranians and Americans Support a Mutual Return to JCPOA,” *The Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, March 30, 2021, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/research/public-opinion-survey/iranians-and-americans-support-mutual-return-jcpoa>.
14. Robin Wright, “Biden Faces A Minefield In New Diplomacy With Iran,” *The New Yorker*, January 4, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/biden-faces-a-minefield-in-new-diplomacy-with-iran>.
15. Tom O’Connor, “Biden Administration Dodges Iran Offer to Coordinate Nuclear Deal Return,” *Newsweek*, February 2, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/biden-administration-rejects-iran-offer-coordinate-nuclear-deal-return-1566310>.
16. BBC News, “Iran nuclear deal: US joins Vienna talks aimed at reviving accord,” *BBC News*, April 6, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-56643178>.
17. Patrick Wintour, “Iranian hardliners fight to ensure Ebrahim Raisi wins presidential election,” *The Guardian*, June 16, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/16/iran-hardliners-fight-to-ensure-ebrahim-raisi-wins-presidential-election>.
18. RFE/RL, “EU Official Says Iran Ready To Restart Nuclear Talks In September: Reports,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 7, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-nuclear-restart-eu/31398715.html>.

