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Iran and the World Wait for Biden

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Introduction

Iranian leaders have insisted that the November 3rd US elections will have no real significance for Iran's basic interests. But such assertions should not be taken seriously. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei himself signaled that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) should avoid a dustup with US forces; he was clearly worried that a US-Iran clash might work in President Donald Trump's political favor. Moreover, public opinion surveys suggest that a wide swath of the Iranian populace has watched the US elections closely. Iranians know that a win by former Vice President Joe Biden could open the door to an effort to rework US Middle East diplomacy in ways that could pose challenges—and opportunities—for Iran.

But if Iran and the rest of the world are waiting to see what a Biden administration will do, the road to a revived or new multilateral US-Iran reengagement will be long and arduous. The immediate challenge in both Washington and Tehran will be domestic: Biden and his advisors will take months to forge a new Iran policy, and nothing is likely to happen in Iran until after its June 2021 presidential elections. Finally, enduring strategic realities will complicate efforts to move the United States, Iran, and their respective allies from a state of continuous lower level conflict to something resembling a real process of diplomatic engagement.

Oil Development versus Resistance: The Two Key Camps

When it comes to diplomacy, Iran basically has two big interest groups: the “oil development” camp and the “resistance” camp. Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh has summarized the position of the first; as he put it, a “Return to its oil market share is Iran's priority... Normal trade with the world is Iran's priority.” This camp holds that oil and gas production is the key to Iran's political and social stability. Nuclear energy cannot substitute for this vast sector and experience shows that the international community will not tolerate any quest by Iran to gain a nuclear program with the means—however implicit or partial—to threaten Israel. Thus, what this camp seeks is a revival of the basic exchange that was at the heart of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), namely a return to the previously agreed—and strictly monitored—cap on uranium enrichment in return for ending nuclear-related sanctions and opening Iran's economy.

The “resistance camp” sees things very differently. Its leaders want the benefits of oil exports, but they fear that any nuclear agreement will be a slippery slope to opening Iran up to the “toxic” western cultural, economic, social, and even political influence. Their greatest nightmare is that a nuclear agreement might open the door to normalizing relations with the United States. For the resistance camp, opposing—or at least containing—the influence of Washington and its regional

friends is vital. Commenting on the latest normalization agreements between the UAE and Bahrain with Israel, former IRGC Commander Mohsen Rezaei said that there was no doubt that the United States will be expelled from the region and the thrones of its regional allies will not be protected.

If those are fighting words, the record shows that IRGC leaders pick their battles carefully and are not eager to ignite a costly conflict with the United States or Israel, not to mention Washington's Gulf allies. But the resistance camp's leaders believe that Iran's future lies in the East; thus, they support a diplomacy that underscores this strategic and ideological stance. Indeed, because they believe that any return to one version or another of the JCPOA will produce another needless detour on the path to resisting the West (and the United States) in particular, these leaders assert—perhaps with ample cause—that Iran cannot return to the negotiating table.

The Supreme Leader's job is to mediate between these two camps (and many others). His heart—and much of his head—has long been with the resistance camp. In fact, his embrace of the latter intensified after the Trump Administration's repudiation of the JCPOA discredited the oil development camp. But in a strange echo of a dictum attributed to Henry Kissinger that Iran “must decide whether it is country or a cause,” Khamenei appears to believe that Iran has both concrete and ideological interests and thus it *must be both*. Indeed, because the country (and state) of Iran needs global oil sales, this Supreme Leader, and his successor, will not permanently shut the doors to a deal with the global community on the nuclear file.

Factional Fighting across the Development/Resistance Divide

The above two camps do not easily align with labels such as “reformists” and “hard-liners” or with a third faction that sometimes is called the “pragmatic conservatives.” Leaders from the hard-liner and pragmatic conservative factions have flirted with both sides of the development/resistance divide. In fact, some hard-liners believe that they can get the benefits of western investment while continuing to expand trade and investment eastward and, at the same time, to use a spectrum of tools—ranging from pure force to blocking social media—to limit the “contagion” of western influence. Some hard-liners even argue that this formula might even be easier to realize by reaching a deal with a reelected Trump. As one Iranian security official put it, “Tehran needs sanctions to be lifted and Americans want a calm Middle East. A win-win solution can be reached,” he added, and that “it will be easier with Trump. He is a businessman and does not want problems during his second term.”

This certainly seems like wishful thinking. It is true that Trump bragged during the campaign that “the first call I get when we win will be from the head of Iran, let's make a deal.” However pumped up, a reelected Trump is very unlikely to agree to dropping what has been a nearly explicit policy of regime change. Even if he somehow abandons this position, Iranian leaders will never accept what is surely a key Trump White House demand, namely that Iran accept “zero enrichment” and, by implication, agree to the provision of energy grade uranium from outside Iran's borders. No Iranian leader could endorse this position without committing political suicide.



Iran's Spring 2021 Presidential Elections Will Reinforce the Resistance Camp

Then there is the question of Iran's presidential elections coming in June 2021. With this poll looming, no one will risk proposing an opening to Washington. On the contrary, a crowded field of hard-line contestants will create incentives from all the candidates to flex their anti-American muscles. Still, some reformist candidates might risk making a case for negotiations. It is hard to recall a time when their ranks were more depleted, however. Veteran reformist writer Sadegh Zibakalam's assertion¹ that reformists should not run in the next elections because "people will not vote for reformists anymore" seems a little over the top. After all, Iranian politics has a way of generating surprises. As another reformist writer notes,² while the reformist current remains "alive and well ... due to its 'virtual activism' and 'social networks,'" the struggle for change is now led by the protests of workers, teachers, and other vulnerable social groups, most of which are in the provinces rather than the political capital of Tehran.

The problem is that these popular groups have few ties to the formal political arena. As a result, they cannot strengthen the bargaining leverage of a reformist camp that faces a determined hard-line elite. Indeed, many of the latter are being bandied about as serious candidates for the presidency. These include Saeed Jalili, the former Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and Iran's former nuclear negotiator; Mohsen Rezaei, who now is the Secretary of the Expediency Council and formerly headed the IRGC; and Ali Shamkhani, a two-star general who also is the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council. All are very close to Khamenei or are part of the security apparatus. One possible contender, Justice Chief Ebrahim Raisi, is in fact widely considered a potential successor to Khamenei. Therefore, there is likely to be little ideological or strategic daylight between Iran's next president and the Supreme Leader—a sobering prospect whose implications for Iran's foreign relations in general, and its relations with the United States in particular, are hard to predict.

In fact, by mustering the domestic political cover that a more reformist candidate lacks, hard-liners might just get the space to pursue talks with the next US president. Such a paradoxical—if still unlikely—development could happen only if the occupant of the Oval Office accepts the basic idea that real talks require real concessions from Tehran and Washington. Biden's statements show that he agrees with this premise. But whether he will have the will and the means to engage with an Iranian leadership (that, in any case, has no reason to trust US commitments) remains to be seen.

Biden Faces a Tough Road Ahead

Richard Fontaine, a former foreign policy advisor to the late Senator John McCain, argues that "Trump has generated considerable leverage over adversaries and allies alike." Biden, he argues, "would do well to use some [of the leverage] Trump would leave behind." Biden will get some of this leverage from the expanded set of sanctions imposed by the Trump White House. He will also inherit an emerging alliance between Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia that, if used smartly, could strengthen his hand. Moreover, Biden will enjoy a burst of relief and enthusiasm in Western Europe that will translate into considerable US diplomatic capital.

Some of these very assets could also create constraints. Israel and Washington's Gulf friends will resist US efforts to reengage Iran. Tehran will probably insist that Washington withdraw the many different sanctions imposed by Trump before talks begin; it may even want to extract a promise from Washington to compensate Tehran for financial losses it incurred when the Trump Administration abandoned the JCPOA. Iran will also surely balk if a Biden administration, one that seems eager to show US domestic audiences that it is not rushing to an agreement with Tehran, chooses to use piecemeal concessions by offering to remove some sanctions but to leave others in place. This will be a non-starter.

Of course, Iran's dire economic situation—compounded by the still raging COVID-19 virus—provides the ultimate source of US and western leverage. But with a hard-line leadership that has isolated Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif (who is most likely to depart after the June presidential elections), Iran will not make major concessions merely in return for US promises of sanctions relief—promises that Tehran fears will not be kept. Moreover, Iran has considerable assets of its own. These include an expanded enrichment program that Tehran has openly pursued with the goal of upping the diplomatic ante (a move that seems linked to Iran's apparent efforts to build an underground enrichment facility at its Natanz nuclear plant). Tehran also has a range of lethal military assets in the Gulf, Iraq, and Syria and a complicated if vital relationship with Russia. Given these advantages, when it comes to Iran's domestic politics, a weakened oil development camp will have little leverage to push for reviving a nuclear deal that already seems on its last legs.

JCPOA Plus: Smarter, but Easier?

The vastly widened breach between the United States and Iran means that a Biden administration will have little to gain from limiting its Iran policy to resuscitating the ailing JCPOA. Tony Blinken, who was a deputy secretary of state under President Barack Obama, has signaled as much, insisting that after Iran comes “back into compliance” with the JCPOA, “we would use that as a platform with our partners and allies ... to negotiate a longer and stronger deal.”

Biden has repeated this position by promising Tehran “a credible path back to diplomacy,” one that would not be limited to the JCPOA but also addresses “other issues of concern.” The latter presumably includes Iran's ballistic missile program, which it has thus far refused to discuss. This is surely, as he says, a “smarter” approach than “maximum pressure,” a self-defeating policy that, as Biden further notes, has allowed Iran to stockpile something like “10 times as much enriched uranium as it had when President Barack Obama and I left office.” Nevertheless, it is far from clear that Biden's wider-angle policy will be any easier to pursue.

Much will depend on how quickly Biden can repair Washington's frayed relations with its western allies. The expectation is that his first overseas trip will be to Europe, where he will make reenergizing diplomacy with Iran a key US priority. He might then move on to Israel and the UAE, while skipping Saudi Arabia and its problematic crown prince. In stopping off in Israel, East Jerusalem, and Abu Dhabi, Biden could signal to the world that the purpose of US diplomacy is not merely to secure transactional deals between states and leaders who share mutual interests, but also to foster peacemaking agreements between long-standing rivals and even bitter enemies.