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Issue Brief

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Recalibrating US Iran Relations

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Though Iran is a priority for the Trump administration, his policy position remains ambiguous; whilst his administration's outlook on Iran, like most of his other foreign policies, has not been clear. At a personal level, Trump's ideas remain hawkish towards Iran while proposing sanctions as well to renegotiate - dismantle and tear up at best the US-Iran nuclear deal. There exist two blocks in the US with different approaches towards Iran. One mindset that was formed under the Obama administration, which believes in workable relations with Iran, the other follows the narrative formed by President Trump. The current dilemma is that how Trump and his administration will manage to take on board the Iranian regime?

The US plans to develop a new strategy, which focuses more on the US's interest rather than setting up a more calibrated collective approach towards the existing problems between the two nations. The sphere of the US policy towards Iran is moving from that of accommodation, which was practiced by Obama's administration, to confrontation. Trump administration's best strategy, at a short term level, has remained to internationally bully Iran and make ground for its isolation. The officials in the Trump administration have openly criticised Iran on all forums, national and international.

The major bone of contention remains the US-Iran nuclear deal and the progress Iran has achieved, which is seen by the Trump's administration as threatening not only to the region but also directly to the US. The US has often conveyed its discomfort to Iran and threatened them with dire consequences, even though Iran has proven itself to be a responsible country developing its peaceful nuclear programme under the IAEA safeguards. Although vary of the Iranian strategic designs, President Trump and his team want to keep up with the US-Iran nuclear deal in play, contrary to the criticism Trump did during his campaign but strictly based on the US's interests even though the State Department has certified Iran's technical compliance with the deal. There exist enormous pressures on President Trump regarding his views on Iran by the US's allies, national security establishment, who also strongly advocate not rolling back on the US-Iran nuclear deal as it has been able to provide both the counties a workable ground. Furthermore moving back on the deal will be not only difficult but also be unsafe geopolitically. Trump's administration has proposed to renegotiate the deal with Iran to avail better terms and option for the US.

Another irritant for the US remains to be Iran's consistent development whether strategic and otherwise post 2010, that has enabled Iran to expand its influence in the Middle East. The US is calling Iran the 'Arc of Influence'¹ as it has been able to develop a strong hold on Iraq, gaining momentum in Syria, and significantly influencing Hezbollah in Lebanon. All these factors contribute towards developing anxiety in the US especially inside the Trump administration. The US is planning to develop a strategy solely to break what it believes to be the hegemonic designs of Iran, which threaten the US and its allies in the Middle East.

The only risk is a rhetorical war and exchange of harsh language between the two nations. The US recently has tried to isolate Iran and lobbied against it in recent Trump's visit to the Saudi Kingdom, where he advocated bringing all the Islamic states together to isolate Iran not only in the region but also globally. They labelled Iran as the regional rival of US ally in the Middle East and accused Iran of having an extremist ideology, and an aspiration to take over the Muslim world.²

The Trump administration refers to Iran as amongst the destabilising factor in the Middle East and recommends sanctions. Earlier, under the Obama Administration, although the US and Iran ties were not exactly ideal yet were somewhat workable. Their preoccupation with Iran is driven by the conviction that the Obama administration's diplomatic outreach toward the Islamic Republic empowered its leadership and extended its reach across the Middle East.³

The new US strategy towards Iran can be best said as a 'push back'⁴ strategy. Where the US adheres to minimise the expanding role of Iran in the affairs in the Middle East, Syria and any other ground they are active in. By design or default, Trump has elevated a national security team that shares an Iran-centric interpretation of the problems that plague the Middle East and threaten vital American interests there,⁵ failing to do so, the US suggested a military action to 'disrupt' the Iranian regime.⁶ The US also believes

¹ Martin S. Indyk, "US Strategy Towards Iran," March 28, 2017, *Brookings Institute*, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/u-s-strategy-toward-iran/>

² "Dialogue With Iran Is Impossible, Saudi Arabia's Defense Minister Says," *New York Times*, May 2, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/02/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-iran-defense-minister.html?_r=0

³ Suzanne Maloney, "Under Trump, US Policy on Iran is Moving from Accommodation to Confrontation," May 11, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/05/11/under-trump-u-s-policy-on-iran-is-moving-from-accommodation-to-confrontation/>

⁴ Indyk, "US Strategy towards Iran."

⁵ Maloney, "Under Trump, US Policy on Iran is Moving from Accommodation to Confrontation."

⁶ "General calls Iran 'destabilising' force, suggests US 'disrupt' regime by military means," *CNBC*, March 29, 2017,

that Iran provides some support to the Taliban and Haqqani Network and has publicly justified its relationships as a means to combat the spread of the ISIS-K threat in Afghanistan. This undermines the Afghan Government's credibility, adds to instability in the region, and complicates strategic partnership agreements.⁷

Iran is wrongly seen by the US as a pillar of instability, where in actuality it can prove to be a pillar of stability in the Middle East, the Persian Gulf and its extension. The bigger question now is what if the US's diplomatic curvature fails in Iran under the auspice of the new administration led by President Trump. The US is well aware of the price of a military engagement with Iran, however, the US can weigh its options to either put sanctions on Iran or to isolate it completely in the region. The best option remains is to involve in talks and discussions with the Iranian regime through its allies in the region or any other back channels, which can be possibly explored.

<http://www.cnn.com/2017/03/29/general-calls-iran-destabilizing-force-suggests-us-disrupt-regime-by-military-means.html>

⁷ "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan," Report to the Congress, Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015, Department of Defense, June 2017, https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/June_2017_1225_Report_to_Congress.pdf