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Institutional Interactions of the Trump Administration and its Foreign Policy on Iran

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The former US President Barack Obama believed a nuclear deal between Tehran and the P5+1 group would curb Iran's nuclear ambitions and restrain its destabilizing policies in the Middle East. In addition, President Obama believed the reintegration of Iran within world markets would motivate it to change its destructive policies and become a constructive regional power.⁽¹⁾

On the contrary, the new US President Donald Trump's policy on Iran is not only linked to Iran's compliance with the nuclear deal, but also to its destabilizing role in the region. All in all, President Trump described the Iranian regime as dictatorial and cruel, as well as describing its ideological trend as being destructive and supportive of terrorism. President Trump developed his policy on Iran relying on the interaction between formal and informal foreign policy-making institutions in the United States. According to the constitution of the United States, the system of checks and balances guarantees the separation of powers so that no one branch of government- whether legislative, executive, or judicial- can become powerful enough to dominate over the others. Also, the relationship between the three branches of government in the United States rests on the system of separated institutions sharing power.⁽²⁾ This study will try to figure out how decision-making institutions in the United States have impacted President Trump's policy on Iran. This will be done by handling four aspects: the decision-making institutions, the relationship between these institutions during President Trump's era, the view of these institutions on Iran, and President Trump's policy on Iran given the interaction between these institutions.

The United States Decision-Making Institutions

The process of decision-making in the United States is complex and interrelated. Many formal and informal institutions- lobbies and think tanks- are involved in shaping policies. The Legislative Authority, the US Congress, plays a major role in shaping foreign policy. It has various powers and responsibilities as enshrined in the constitution of the United States. It can make political and economic laws, once ratified, the Executive Authority is bound to them even if the latter might be discontented with these laws. Foreign policy, defense, and intelligence committees in both houses of Congress- the Senate and the House of Representatives- can call on experts and governmental officials involved in foreign policy-making for testimony. Also, Congress has other rights protected by the constitution like the "Power of the Purse" which means that it must authorize the President's budget requests to fund agencies and programs.⁽³⁾ The constitution of the United States provides the Congress and the President with legal authority to shape US foreign policy. It recognizes that it is only the federal government which has the power to discharge foreign policy. The constitution lists other powers of the Congress such as, regulating commerce with foreign countries, the declaration of war, and the power to raise and support the US army and navy.⁽⁴⁾ At the same time, Article II, Section 2 of the constitution unequivocally states that the president is the commander in chief of the US army and navy. Although congressional approval is required to declare war, the president has the authority to respond to any attacks against the United States.⁽⁵⁾ Indeed, the pioneers of the constitution intended for congress to declare war; however, presidents do not always check

with Congress and instead rely on Article II Section 2 of the constitution. In 1973, Congress passed the War Power Act in reply to Presidents Johnson's and Nixon's prosecution of war in Vietnam without congressional declaration. Under this Act, the United States president has 90 days once he has sent troops into war to acquire congressional approval of that action,⁽⁶⁾ but in most cases, presidents have ignored the War Power Act, citing Article II, Section 2 as their authority to declare war.

Institutional Rivalry Inside the Trump Administration

In his first few months in office, President Trump counted on his advisor, his son in law, Jared Kushner and ignored other experts in key decision-making institutions. This resulted in rivalry inside the executive authority and conflict between institutions involved in foreign policy making. Nevertheless, this rivalry lessened after many of those advisors left the White House. This provided ground for President Trump to develop his policy by consulting with military personnel, such as the Secretary of Defense James Mattis, the National Security Advisor Herbert Raymond McMaster, and John Kelly, the White House Chief of Staff. In addition, President Trump marginalized the role of the State Department in foreign policy. This strained relations between the president and his former Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, over North Korea and Qatar. Tillerson used diplomacy in dealing with these files while President Trump insisted on using hard power, such as military power and a coercive policy. In his first eight months President Trump granted his son in law, Kushner wide powers of the Secretary of State, which⁽⁷⁾ resulted in the State Department being deprived of about 21% of its foreign policy specialists.⁽⁸⁾ President Trump does not believe diplomacy can strengthen US foreign policy, so he decreased the Department of State's budget by 6.6 billion USD. This budget is typically directed towards foreign aid, assisting refugees, natural disasters, supporting democratic movements, and fighting the spread of HIV (AIDS). On the other hand, President Trump increased military spending by 54 billion USD which is equivalent to the Department of State's budget. This reflects the fact that President Trump believes in military power more than diplomacy and that countries respond more positively to intimidation rather than persuasion.⁽⁹⁾ On March 12, 2018, President Trump dismissed his Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson and replaced him with Mike Pompeo, the CIA director. Under Pompeo's leadership, the Department of State is expected to resume its role in foreign policy knowing that Pompeo is close to President Trump given the intelligence he provided him and the similar views they share on foreign policy. The Republican Party- President Trump's Party- constitutes a majority in the Senate and the House of Representative. However, the relationship between the executive authority and the legislative authority is confrontational. This was evident when the Senate declined many of President Trump's administration candidates. In addition, the president and his advisors frequently clash with Republican lawmakers who

criticize President Trump and his policies, such as Senator John McCain, the Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee and Bob Croker, the Chairman of the Senate's Committee on Foreign Relations.

The view of the Trump Administration Institutions on Iran

Despite the significant difference between the members of the Trump administration on how to approach crises and on an unilateral withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal, there is a unanimous agreement between them on adopting a hard line policy towards Iran and its destabilizing influence in the region. The view of the US decision-making institutions on Iran can be discussed as follows:

» The White House

President Trump criticized the Iranian nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 on his first day as the Republican candidate for presidency in November 2016. He believed the deal was the worst in the history of the United States and described it as disastrous, as it did not serve the interests of the United States, harmed Israel and its interests in a direct way. In his speech before the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), President Trump promised that revoking the nuclear deal would be his top priority and that he would not increase relations with Iran throughout his presidency.⁽¹⁰⁾ After his inauguration on January 20, 2017, President Trump did not change his posture on the nuclear deal. He believed the agreement strengthened Iranian nuclear ambitions. Earlier, the United States and its European allies recognized Iran's right to enrich uranium, as well as permitting Iran to research and make development plans to build advanced centrifuges and update its old atomic infrastructure. In addition, the agreement revoked the sanctions on the Iranian regime and its financial system.⁽¹¹⁾ President Trump believed the nuclear deal revived Iran's political and economic lifeline, as sanctions were revoked, enabling it to escape domestic demands resulting from American and international pressure. Sanctions relief permitted Tehran from taking back more than 100 billion USD including 1.8 billion USD of Iranian assets. In all his statements, President Trump insisted that the agreement paved the way for Tehran to continue developing its nuclear program. Also, He has mentioned that the United States could carry out limited inspection operations to investigate Iran's nuclear sites. Indeed, President Trump believes the United States is in compliance with the terms of the nuclear deal while Iran continues to heighten tensions in the Middle East.⁽¹²⁾ In his speech in the Arab-Islamic-American Summit held in Riyadh on May 21, 2017, President Trump said that Iran was a safe haven for terrorists, provided them with money and social status for deployment. He added that Iran financed, armed, and trained terrorists, militias, and extremist groups in the region. Therefore, President Trump called on its allies to cooperate and

work on isolating Iran and preventing it from supporting terrorism.⁽¹⁵⁾ President Trump's view on Iran was articulated in the US national security strategy announced in December 2017. President Trump said that Tehran used the state of instability in the region to expand its influence through its partners and proxy militias. He added that Tehran was continuing to destabilize the region, endorse violence, develop its ballistic missile program, and increase its intelligence capabilities.⁽¹⁴⁾

» **Department of Defense (Pentagon)**

James Mattis was a critic of former President Obama's policy on Iran and called for military strikes on this country for arming anti-US militias in Iraq. However, since being appointed as the US Secretary of Defense, he has changed his position and advocated a moderate policy towards Iran. Last year 2017, Mattis differed with President Trump when he said that the Iranian nuclear deal was "an issue the president has to stick to."⁽¹⁵⁾ Mattis opposed the nuclear deal, but never called for its cancellation. He believed in reviewing some of its terms and the addition of new terms to restrain Iran. His position on the Iranian nuclear deal did not prevent him from criticizing Tehran's regional policies. He believes in the necessity to punish Iran and its allies for their practices. He has suggested carrying out secret operations to arrest or kill Iranian forces and to confront it in the Gulf. Many times, Mattis has said that Tehran was the biggest threat to the Middle East.⁽¹⁶⁾ Similarly, the US national defense strategy for the year 2018 released by the US Department of Defense stated that Iran was the biggest challenge for stability in the Middle East. It added that Iran was still spreading violence and instability by seeking to have nuclear weapons and sponsoring terrorism. The strategy stated that Tehran had competed with its neighbors on regional control by carrying out terrorist activities, spreading a wide network of proxy militants and developing its ballistic missile program to achieve its goals. So, the United States strategy called for supporting its coalition in the Middle East to face Iran and its existence in Syria.⁽¹⁷⁾ All in all, the Pentagon reported the challenges the Department of Defense faced in the fiscal year 2018, stating that Iran represented a big universal threat for the United States because of its regional ambitions and the development of its nuclear capabilities. The report mentioned Iran's support of Bashar Assad, the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Houthi rebels, militarily and financially, that toppled the legitimate government in Yemen. In this report, Pompeo, said that Iran was trying through its proxy militias- Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria- to establish its new Shiite crescent that extends from Tehran to Beirut. The report asserted that Hezbollah, Iran's proxy militia, was about to achieve its goals and that Iran's policy targeted Israel and US allies in the Middle East in direct ways.⁽¹⁸⁾

» Department of State

Mike Pompeo's approval as Secretary of State, means that the Department of State will be consistent with President Trump's view towards the Iranian nuclear deal after it was against a withdrawal under Tillerson's leadership. President Trump's and Tillerson's dispute on the future of the nuclear deal was one of the reasons behind Tillerson's dismissal. This was stated by President Trump when he said, "I believed this was a bad deal while Tillerson believed it was good. I wanted to cancel or review its terms, but Tillerson had another way of thinking."⁽¹⁹⁾ On the contrary, Pompeo is a supporter of President Trump's hard line on Tehran.⁽²⁰⁾ He is against the Iranian nuclear deal since he was a legislator in Congress and described it as, "Irrational agreement that exposes all Americans to danger," because, as he said, "it halted the Iranian nuclear program for few years, but, practically, it will enable Tehran from building nuclear weapons by the end of the stated period in the agreement." Pompeo asserted that the Iranian regime is insistent on destroying the United States. In the first anniversary of the nuclear deal in 2016, Pompeo went further than just criticizing the agreement and called for toppling the theocratic regime in Tehran. After Trump's succession to presidency, Pompeo announced his willingness to cancel the Iranian nuclear deal after using President Trump's description of the agreement when he said that it was "Disastrous." While he was CIA director, Pompeo called for releasing all classified documents retrieved from Osama Bin Laden's complex in Abbottabad, Pakistan, including documents that confirm contact between Iran and the former Al-Qaeda leader.⁽²¹⁾

» Legislative Authority (Congress)

Many Republican and Democrat lawmakers oppose some of the term of the Iranian nuclear deal. However, they refuse an unilateral withdrawal from the international pact, as this move would isolate the United States from its European strategic partners- especially France, Britain, and Germany who played a major role in bringing this agreement into reality. A US withdrawal from the agreement would give a bad impression to its allies and rivals as would indicate a lack of commitment to an international pact. As a result of these considerations, most lawmakers have insisted on working, with international partners to discuss the addition of new terms to the Iranian nuclear deal instead of working alone on this issue. They presented new draft laws to levy new sanctions on Iran away from its compliance or in-compliance with the nuclear deal to overcome Iranian destabilizing activities in the Middle East. Other draft laws targeted the Iranian ballistic missile program and all those involved in these activities- such as banks and the IRGC.⁽²²⁾ The legislators discussed new sanctions on transporting conventional arms from and to Iran and human rights violations to give the Trump administration additional tools to hold Tehran accountable for its destabilizing activities in the Middle East, such as developing illegal missile technology, and

sponsoring terrorism.⁽²³⁾ In addition, the lawmakers discussed sanctions on Iran's proxy militias- especially the Lebanese Hezbollah and the IRGC , as well as taking a hard position on Iran without canceling the nuclear deal.⁽²⁴⁾ Congress held three hearings in which officials and experts on Iranian affairs, nuclear arms, and the Middle East talked about the impact of removing the Iranian nuclear deal on regional and international security⁽²⁵⁾ and President Trump's next step in not certifying Iran's compliance with the terms of the nuclear deal.⁽²⁶⁾

The Policy of the Trump Administration on Iran

President Trump's top political advisors like his Chief Strategist Steve Bannon, his Deputy Assistant Sebastian Gorka, and his senior Advisor Steve Miller played a major role in convincing President Trump in exerting more pressure on Tehran, revoking the nuclear deal, and levying a new round of sanctions. However, most Trump administration members, except the former CIA director Mike Pompeo, declined these suggestions. They believed an unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear deal would isolate the United States on the international arena and severe relations with its European partners who support this international pact. In addition, they believed withdrawal would negatively impact American influence on the agreement, would be considered as a violation of the nuclear deal, and strengthen Iran's position. This group included the Secretary of Defense James Mattis, the former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the former National Security Advisor Herbert Raymond McMaster, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford. However, this group lost its battle to the ideologists in the Trump administration.⁽²⁷⁾ With the resignation of many of the president's advisors opposing the nuclear deal, the pragmatic team won the battle temporarily.⁽²⁸⁾ President Trump gave Congress until October 2017 (sixty days) to ratify laws preventing Iran from resuming its nuclear program for military purposes, and its ballistic missile tests. If Congress failed to do so, President Trump vowed to unilaterally withdraw from the agreement.⁽²⁹⁾ On January 12, 2018, the White House announced that it would not levy new sanctions on Iran related to its nuclear program for the third time since President Trump's inauguration to keep the United States in compliance with the international pact. However, President Trump warned that it would be the last time and gave Congress two options: either review the disastrous terms of the nuclear deal or withdraw from the agreement.⁽³⁰⁾ Earlier, on October 13, 2017 the White House announced a comprehensive strategy to face Tehran as the Iranian threat went beyond incompliance with the terms of the nuclear deal. According to the White House, Tehran was still developing its ballistic missile program, providing financial support to terrorism, supporting human rights violations in Syria, promoting hostility to Israel, and threatening international shipping lanes in the strategic Arabian Gulf. Also, Tehran was involved in cyberattacks on the United States, Israel, and the United States allies, and unfairly

arresting foreigners including US citizens.

The White House strategy on Iran consisted of four aspects:⁽³¹⁾

- » Working with its allies to face any Iranian destabilizing activities and its proxy terrorists in the Middle East.
- » Levying new sanctions on the Iranian regime to stop its support of terrorism.
- » Tackling Iran's ballistic missiles and weapons threatening its neighbors, international trade, and the freedom of navigation.
- » Depriving Iran of having nuclear weapons.

Accordingly, President Trump authorized the Department of Treasury to impose rigorous sanctions on the IRGC and its senior officers, agents, and companies working under its umbrella. Also, the Department of Treasury called on its allies to levy new sanctions on the Iranian regime away from the nuclear deal and target the regime's ballistic missile program, its support for terrorism, and its destructive activities in the region. To face the Iranian destabilizing influence in the Middle East, the US administration levied new sanctions on Iran's proxy militias and entities- especially the Lebanese Hezbollah and Hamas. In January 2018, the US Attorney General, Jeff Sessions announced the formation of a special team for fighting Hezbollah- classified by Washington as a terrorist organization- and drug smuggling activities. The Secretary of Treasury, Steven Mnuchin announced new sanctions on six individuals and seven companies in contact with Hezbollah in what Mnuchin described, the "First wave" of many sanctions to come. At the end of January 2018, the Department of State added the Iranian-supported Hamas Political Chief, Ismail Haniyeh and the *Sabirin* Movement on its black list of terrorists.⁽³²⁾ Furthermore, the Department of State announced a financial award of twelve million USD for anyone that helps in the arrest of two of the most prominent Lebanese Hezbollah Leaders, Talal Hamiyah, the head of the Foreign Operations Unit in Hezbollah and Fu'ad Shaker, a senior military officer for Hezbollah operations.⁽³³⁾ Within the same context, President Trump set four major terms for passing any draft law presented by Congress on Iran to tackle all Iranian threats **to the United States and its allies**:⁽³⁴⁾

- » Asking Iran to allow immediate inspection operations of all sites requested by international inspectors.
 - » Preventing Iran from having nuclear weapons.
 - » Unlike the nuclear deal, these requirements cannot expire- because the United States policy relies on preventing Iran from having nuclear weapons. In case Iran does not comply with any of these requirements, the US sanctions would be resumed automatically.
 - » Any draft law on Iran should include Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile program. Iran's development and testing of ballistic missiles should face rigorous sanctions.
- After President Trump's threat of withdrawal from the nuclear deal if Congress failed

to review its terms, some Republican and Democrat lawmakers endeavored to please President Trump without harming the nuclear deal by introducing a draft law that is in align with his requirements. For the time being, the House of Representatives is discussing a draft law to harden sanctions on Iran and new measures to restrain Iran's nuclear activities indefinitely. The draft law extends to include all entities and companies owned or controlled by the Iranian armed forces, directly or indirectly, like the IRGC, Basij, army and police forces.⁽³⁵⁾

Conclusion

President Trump's hard position on Iran and his threats to withdraw from the nuclear agreement, despite stiff resistance, is reflective of interior politics in the United States. In his presidential campaign, President Trump relied on the support of the opponents of former President Obama and his former Secretary of State and Democratic candidate for the Presidency Hillary Clinton by taking a hard line on the nuclear deal to the extent that he vowed to rip up the agreement when he was president. To preserve his electoral support under all internal challenges, it is expected President Trump will continue his hard position on Iran and its nuclear program. President Trump's policy on Iran coincides with the policies of former presidents since 1979 except the second term of former President Obama. Since the Iranian 1979 revolution, all United States presidents, whether a Republican or Democrat, believed Iran was sponsoring terrorism, destabilizing the Middle East, and violating human rights. The US presidents worked to change the Iranian regime by adopting a policy of sanctions and isolation, mobilizing regional powers against Iran, selling weapons to Iran's regional rivals, supporting opposition movements, and levying constraints on the Iranian economy and its armament system.⁽³⁶⁾ As a result of the interaction between the US decision-making institutions concerning the nuclear deal and the 120-day deadline President Trump gave to the Congress and US allies to review the nuclear deal and amend its disastrous terms, there will be two possible scenarios for Trump's policy on Iran after **the end of this deadline**:

US unilateral withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal

Since his electoral campaign in 2016 and his inauguration on January 20 2017 until today, President Trump has been talking about the Iranian regime's incompliance with its nuclear deal commitments. However, this scenario is unlikely to happen despite the dismissal of former Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson and the appointment of Mike Pompeo who agrees with President Trump's hard position on Iran for **five reasons**:

» Key decision-making institutions played a major role in changing President Trump's mind about the cancelation of the nuclear deal, mainly, the Department of State and many opponents to a withdrawal such as, the Department of Defense and the Congress.

» The current national security team that is in charge of decision-making is against a withdrawal from the nuclear deal as the alternative would be disastrous for the United States.

» It is likely Pompeo's opposition to the Iranian nuclear deal would weaken because of the influence of the Secretary of Defense James Mattis. Pompeo will no doubt carefully study the consequences of a withdrawal from the agreement on national interests and security, not only in the Middle East, but all over the world.

» A unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear deal will result in international isolation for the US and weaken its relations with Europe.

» A unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear deal will harm the US and the international community's exertions in curbing North Korea's nuclear program, as well as averting proliferation.

Imposition of new constraints on Iran outside the nuclear deal

This scenario is most likely to happen. Before the end of the 120 day-deadline given by President Trump to review the terms of the nuclear deal, Congress, in both of its houses, will work, in cooperation with other decision-making institutions to pass an act to prevent the president from withdrawing from the nuclear deal, along with new US and international restrictions on Iran to restrain its nuclear ambitions and its ballistic missile program, as well as its destabilizing policies in the Middle East. President Trump's dismissal of his Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson can be viewed as a message that Washington is working on tightening its position on Iran, as President Trump's deadline for reviewing the terms of the nuclear deal on May 12, 2018 draws closer.⁽³⁷⁾

Finally, many of Trump's administration members, European allies, Russia, and China oppose a US unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear deal. However, President Trump might announce a withdrawal from the international pact after the 120-day deadline, as he known to make his own decisions which more often than not contradict with the recommendations of key decision-making institutions. This is evident when President Trump started restructuring his national security team by dismissing the former National Security Advisor, McMaster who opposed many of President Trumps' decisions and appointed John Bolton, an extreme right-wing ideologist who advocates the use of force against Iran and North Korea. Indeed, President Trump has strengthened his supporters' control of high-ranking positions in the United States decision-making institutions, knowing that the president relies, in all his foreign policy-making choices, on the inner circle around him.

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