

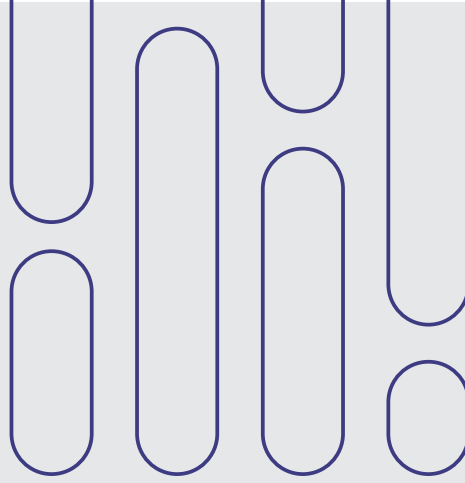
Report

The Extent of Iran's Influence on the US Elections

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introduction



The US administration, in particular President Donald Trump, is aware of Iran's postponement of the decision on negotiation and its strategy of not responding to American pressure at the current stage, hoping that Trump will not win the presidential elections in November 2020. Thus, Trump sent several messages to the Iranians not to await his failure, most recently on June 5, 2020, when he tweeted, "Don't wait until after US Election to make the Big deal. I'm going to win. You'll make a better deal now!"

Although the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded that Iran will not base its policies on internal US matters, such as the elections, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif stated that Mr. Trump's re-election chances are still more than 50 percent. This does not mean that Tehran will stop pursuing its policy to influence the election results in one way or another. The hardline wing believes that the narrowing gap between the competitors is an appropriate opportunity to play a potential role to affect Trump's electoral fortunes, given the large-scale pressures at the present stage. These pressures include the endeavors to undermine the remaining gains of the nuclear agreement, such as the extension of the arms embargo against Iran, which is the last gain of the agreement left to be targeted by the United States, or those aimed to end all American exemptions and intensify Republican-led pressure in Congress to push the Iranian government to the verge of bankruptcy.

These circumstances raise a number of questions, most importantly regarding Iran's motives for interfering in the American elections, and trying to influence its course, the emerging factors that affect Trump's chances of renewing his term, Iran's possible opportunities to influence the elections, and the restrictions Tehran faces in this regard. These questions can be addressed through the following:

Iran's Motives for Interfering in the Elections

American Elections



Trump's first term was a catastrophe for Iran. Since he came to power, Iran has faced the harshest American administration since the 1979 revolution. His policies have undermined some of the gains of the nuclear agreement. The United States has also restored all its nuclear sanctions on Iran. It even unprecedentedly expanded the scope of sanctions, including the major economic sectors that impact national income, and Iranian oil exports which decreased to its lowest levels. In the same context, oil revenues have dropped from \$100 billion annually before the American withdrawal from the nuclear agreement to \$8 billion in 2019. The United States imposed a comprehensive ban on Iran's financial dealings with the world, except for humanitarian support. It also added to its sanctions list government figures including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and those close to him, designated the IRGC as a terrorist organization, targeted the former Commander of the IRGC's Quds Force, General Qassem Soleimani, and strengthened its ability to deter any Iranian threats by allying with regional and international partners.

Undoubtedly, a new term for Trump from the Iranian point of view would be nothing but further pressure compared to the previous one. However, the Republicans are preparing to apply maximum pressure to its fullest extent by ending all exemptions that would provide an outlet for Iran to confront the United States, as further pressure has been

imposed on the Iranian presence abroad including in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and the Arabian Gulf. This is demonstrated by the “Caesar” law which targets the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Iran’s ally. This law decisively restores the effectiveness of the United States in the Syrian file and its role in Syria’s future developments. American pressure is also manifested in the strategic dialogue with Iraq, and the attempt to undermine the remaining gains of the nuclear agreement by extending the ban on the sale of arms to Iran, and to prompt Iran to seriously violate its nuclear obligations by ending all sanction waivers on Iran’s nuclear program. Recently, the Republicans proposed a new law to tighten sanctions on Iran and its arms to impose a new fait accompli on the government.

In addition to previous Iranian motivations for influencing Trump’s chances, the developments on the US internal scene prompted Iran to further undermine Trump’s chances. The latter stood a significant chance of winning a new term a month ago, but the situation has developed rapidly since then. However, Trump’s economic achievements have gone with the wind after the coronavirus crisis wreaked havoc on the stability of the US internal situation. This crisis exposed the government’s weak performance on several levels and across various sectors, including the health sector, and revealed the lack of effective planning to confront the pandemic, especially after the death toll passed 100,000. The economy further deteriorated after a comprehensive lockdown was announced in many states, and employment rates – which Trump took great pride in – declined sharply as the number of unemployed passed 40 million. In addition, the global oil market and America suffered the greatest oil price shock in history. In fact, the whole world along with the largest economic power faces a looming unresolved major crisis.

Apart from the devastating consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, the protests that erupted across all states following the killing of the African American citizen George Floyd by an American policeman, have complicated the electoral scene for Trump, who was confident of winning another term. However, he is now facing major challenges, including the erosion of the support he previously received for the US economy's strong performance during the first three years. As this support dwindles, the focus has shifted to the president's personal behavior more than ever, his ability to manage crises or to inflame them, and his performance.

Trump has issued a long list of confused, hostile internal policies as illustrated by his hostility against the press, and various institutions because of his continuous appointments and dismissals of key government staff for personal reasons, his struggles with prominent personalities, his rhetoric which is often deemed as racist, his confrontational approach with international institutions and traditional allies in NATO, the open conflict with China, and the withdrawal from international agreements. All of these issues could have been overlooked if it were not for the recent developments related to the coronavirus pandemic and the economic crisis which followed, and the protests over the killing of Floyd, and Trump's reactions to these events.

Given these developments, the optimistic expectations for Trump's re-election have weakened. As these expectations remain inconclusive from today until the date of the upcoming American elections, developments in America's domestic arena will be the main determinant of who will be the next president in the White House. International and regional forces await the outcome of these elections given

its major impact on international politics as a whole.

In sum, the change in the polls showing comparable opportunities for the two competing parties, Donald Trump (Republican) and Joe Biden (Democrat) for winning the election prompted Iran to try to influence the outcome of the election, as opposed to a situation where Trump was leading by a wide margin. Therefore, Iran's role in influencing the US election cannot be ruled out.

Tools and Opportunities Which Enable

Iran's Influence the US Elections



Since the Iranian government acknowledged that Trump remaining in the White House poses a grave danger to Iran, leading it to face a more severe crisis than the one it faced during his first term, or succumbing to Trump's conditions and accepting a deal that would be insulting, a fatal blow to the government, or eroding its legitimacy and gains internally and externally, Iran will direct its efforts at weakening Trump's chances of winning a second term.

In this context, Iran may seek to influence Trump's fortunes by embarrassing him through escalating the confrontation with the United States in the region in the coming months, as was the case in the hostage crisis which Iran succeeded in using against former US President Jimmy Carter. The confrontation may extend beyond the region and target American interests abroad through one of its arms, such as the Lebanese Hezbollah.

Evidence indicates over the past period that Iran will revert to the policy of indirect escalation. For example, Iranian speed boats confronted American military naval vessels in the Arabian Gulf, and Tehran pressured Baghdad to end the American presence in Iraq through political and other military tools. This has forced the United States to start a strategic dialogue with the Iraqi government, and reposition its forces to avoid ongoing military attacks against its forces by militias affiliated with Iran in Iraq. The latter is one of the most important countries where Iran

has the ability to influence the United States. We have seen how the attack on the American embassy and the killing of the American ambassador in Libya in 2012 was used back then to influence the fortunes of former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Iran may be ready for such an operation through its proxies in any of the countries of the world, in order to influence Trump's fortunes. Indeed, the Hezbollah militia in Iraq carried out attacks on March 11 and March 14, 2020 killing two American soldiers and one British soldier, and wounding several others. Undoubtedly, the increasing pace of these attacks is expected as the US elections draw closer.

Tehran may choose to escalate the conflict in the waters of the Arabian Gulf by targeting maritime navigation, threatening to close the Strait of Hormuz, the most important waterway for global oil supplies, or confronting the US Navy as what happened in April 2020. Iran has sent a threatening message by building a model of a carrier aircraft off its southern coast for conducting possible live fire exercises.

Iran may target US allies with high impact strikes, such as those that targeted Aramco's facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais in Saudi Arabia, in order to expose the weakness of Trump's strategy, cast doubt on his promises to his allies, and undermine his strategy toward the region and Iran in particular. Although the US blow against General Soleimani in January 2020 considerably reduced these Iranian threats, they could return as the election date draws closer.

Some would believe that developments in the Middle East have a limited impact on the US elections, but Iran's ongoing attacks would be a disputed issue between the electoral contestants in the presidential debates. Doubts could be raised on Trump's ability to avoid dragging the United

States into war. Iranian attacks may affect the president's image if he does not manage the crisis in a convincing manner. This will give his opponent Biden an opportunity to criticize Trump's policy towards Iran, added to the broad criticisms of his way of managing foreign policy, which are likely to influence Trump's popularity.

The prospect of Iran resorting to escalation is due to the fact that the struggle between the contestants has become more intense, and that Trump's great fortunes have diminished following the outbreak of coronavirus which has had implications for America's domestic situation. The polls show equal proportion between the competitors. However, further embarrassment would tip the scale in favor of Biden. If the polls indicate that Biden is the leading candidate, in this case, Iran may prefer not to interfere and wait for the outcome of the elections. By rushing to provoke a regional crisis against Trump, Iran may perceive the regional and international shifts in its favor, given Trump's open conflict with major international powers, and various international institutions, the international criticism of his speeches, practices, and multiple sanctions on Russia and China. Tehran can frame this as a polarization, to protect it from American reactions, even indirectly.

Iran is encouraged by its perception that American public opinion is against engaging in military confrontation, which is demonstrated by the law passed by Congress to prevent Trump from using military force against Iran. Trump vetoed this law so as not to restrict himself from dealing with any circumstance or reality imposed by Iran in the next critical period.

Iran has less influential tools such as piracy, leveraging social media, and carrying out attacks on election infrastructure. It will be assisted by the availability of cyber

infrastructure and the ability to carry out cyberattacks in order to influence the results of the US elections. Iran has strengthened in recent years its ability to launch coordinated cyberattacks and use them in the interest of its policies. Many American institutions have been exposed to these attacks during the recent period. This medium is appropriate for its low cost and the availability of its capabilities. Iran will possibly use some of its lobbies to undermine Trump's electoral fortunes, through the influence of these lobbies in research centers, universities and the media, and their influence and links with some figures and institutions in the United States.

The Challenges Ahead for Iran



Iran will not escalate tensions before the US elections, as it cannot effectively respond to Trump's reactions to its attacks. Trump may use Iran's escalation to improve his image in the elections. He may also launch an indirect attack against Iran or a direct one against Iran's nuclear or cultural facilities — as he previously threatened. He can use the IAEA reports – which confirm that Iran breached its nuclear commitments – as well as European discontent over Iran's breaches. He might be responsive to the pressure of the hawks in his administration, the Republicans, and his regional allies like Israel.

This scenario is likely to happen because re-electing US presidents amid crises has happened before. Former US President Abraham Lincoln was re-elected though his administration was contending with a civil war. Franklin Roosevelt also was elected for a third term on the night of the WWII. George Bush was elected after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. However, it is not always the case; George H. W. Bush did not win a second term though he succeeded in the liberation of Kuwait and the collapse of the Soviet Union during his term.

At the current time, Iran cannot handle the cost of inciting further conflicts and crises in the region because it needs to maintain international support for the nuclear deal to stop the United States from extending the UN arms embargo. Furthermore, Iran's escalation may trigger the international powers to change their positions and call for the re-imposition of all international sanctions and the termination of the nuclear deal.

Iran is wary of increasing international isolation and jeopardizing the political system's legitimacy, especially amid the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic and its economic ramifications which exposed the government's poor management of the crisis. Thus, Iran will not trigger further crises with the United States before the elections — especially if the Iranian political system is confident to endure further sanctions or has an alternative plan to deal with a second term of President Trump.

Moreover, Iran cannot really affect the outcome of the US elections. The Iranian-Americans do not constitute a powerful lobby inside the United States, given the fact that most of them are opponents, who fled from the oppression of the Iranian political system. Rarely do we find a country that succeeds in affecting the outcomes of the elections of a rival country, regardless of its power and influence. There is a huge gap in power and influence between the United States and Iran. Moreover, there is a negative stereotypical image about Iran amongst Americans.

Iran even does not have political funds, which is instrumental in election campaigns and for mobilizing the media, nor influential media outlets or extra money to play this role in the US elections, taking into account its current economic crisis which hampers the Iranian government from addressing basic needs whether at home or abroad.

In a nutshell, despite its claims that it does not craft its foreign policy based on US internal affairs including the elections, Iran exploits whatever cards it has available to make Biden win the elections. Iran has never faced such intensified pressure and comprehensive sanctions like those imposed by the Trump administration. If he won a second term, he would continue to impose further pressure on Iran and will curb the Iran nuclear deal completely.

His pressure may bring it to the edge of collapse. If Biden wins the elections, a new US understanding will be forged with Iran, which may restore its old gains from Washington. Maybe Iran will not be able to restore the same gains of the nuclear deal but it will definitely suffer fewer losses.



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