

STUDY

The Conundrum of Iran's Regional Behavior: What Are the Potential Consequences of the Biden Administration's Diplomatic Approach ?

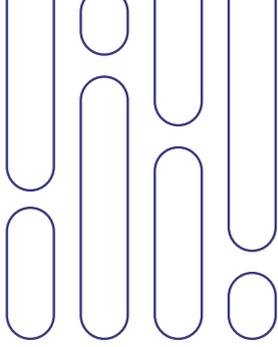
March 2021

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Introduction

The question relating to changing Iran's regional behavior is a critical one which needs to be addressed in order to settle the escalating standoff with Tehran since the United States withdrew from the nuclear agreement in 2018. US President Joe Biden and some members of his administration have expressed the need to change Iran's behavior against the backdrop of open discussions within the White House and with European and regional allies regarding Iran's nuclear file.

On the other side, Iran insists that such issues (i.e., its regional behavior) are undebatable and cannot be included in the nuclear deal. Khamenei indicated this when he reiterated Tehran's commitment to supporting its allies in the Middle East, considering its regional presence "a necessity" which should exist and will continue. He has also refused to terminate Iran's missile program, emphasizing that this program had forced the country's enemies

to reconsider their calculations towards Tehran. The stand-off between Iran and the United States raises several questions about the opportunities and challenges facing the Biden administration when it attempts to address Iran's regional behavior during this phase and the potential consequences of either continuing to pressure Iran or pursue a policy of openness towards it.

I. The Biden Administration and Iran's Regional Behavior

Biden was among those who forecasted a change in Iran's regional behavior following the nuclear deal since Tehran would not pass the opportunity to integrate into the international system after decades of isolation and embargoes. However, Iran has behaved in a way which violates the spirit of the nuclear deal.

This was evident when Iran strengthened its hostile regional policy, which is related to its ideological inclinations and the nature of the Iranian government. Iran continued to support Hezbollah, test missiles, and carry out other forms of hostile behavior as well as continued to back non-state actors in Syria and Yemen. Instead of cooperating with the United States, Iran opted to threaten its interests and allies and adopt a position to drive US forces out of the region as a strategic option.

Based on the foregoing, the United States' position regarding the Iranian file underwent a radical change even before Trump took office. Trump attempted to address Iran's regional behavior as it is one of the major threats which Tehran poses via the policy of confrontation and deterrence. Biden is facing the same challenge, since the reality indicates that there is a genuine problem facing his administration when attempting to counter Iran's threat as well as the difficulties in finding the appropriate tools to do so.

Before he took office, Biden considered the challenges which Iran presents and explained his plans to address them in an article he wrote for CNN in September 2020. First, he highlighted his unshakeable commitment to preventing Iran from possessing nuclear weapons. Second, he offered a credible diplomatic path, if Iran reconciled with the provisions of the nuclear deal, in return, the US would rejoin the deal as a starting point to resuming negotiations.

Third, he emphasized his commitment to resist Iran's destabilizing activities and impose targeted sanctions in response to Iran's human rights abuses, its support for terrorism and the ongoing development of its ballistic missile program.¹

At first sight, these positions seemed overly optimistic. However, soon it became apparent that Biden's positions were nothing but electoral slogans and expressed his political rivalry with Trump. They did not consider Washington's vital interests as they failed to offer a coherent vision when it comes to handling Iran's regional behavior. There is a genuine contradiction between Biden insisting on pursuing the diplomatic path with Iran and returning to the nuclear deal while threatening to curb Iranian threats. It seems as if the United States made concessions for free on disagreements in relation to the nuclear deal to give impetus to the path of understanding — at a time when its foe appears to be in an extremely weak position.

After Biden was inaugurated as president, changes were apparent in his tone and discourse towards the Iranian file as well as in the language of his administration members. US officials began to speak of the conditions of returning to the nuclear deal. The progress on negotiations has become closely dependent on reaching an understanding on other issues related to Iran's regional behavior and its ballistic missile program.² Probably, the United States is learning the lessons of the past and attempting to rectify its mistakes.

On the ground, the new US administration is facing a host of major obstacles regarding Iran's regional behavior. The first conundrum: the Iranian nuclear program. Iran is developing it to express its superiority and to possess an unconventional deterrence force in the face of its foes. Hence, it is one of Washington's main concerns and a crucial priority as it poses a challenge to the US policy to curb nuclear weapons proliferation. The major global powers as well as regional powers share this concern with the United States, as Iran's possession of nuclear weapons would endanger the existing regional balances and push the region into a dangerous nuclear weapons race.

The second conundrum: the Iranian ballistic missile program. Iran ended its defensive nature and adopted a more offensive outlook to threaten and target the interests of regional and global powers in the region, going as far

as threatening the US presence in the region. The concern related to Iran's missile program is of great importance not only to the United States and the regional powers but also to the European countries whose territories are within the range of Iran's missiles.

The third conundrum: Iran's role in some regional countries. This role involves spreading chaos and violence, inciting sectarian wars and supporting armed militias against governments to entrench Iran's clout and maximize its interests. Hence, this role is something that preoccupied the attention of the United States and the regional powers, since Iran's clout impacts existing regional balances. This could result in Iran transforming from an average regional power into a revisionist power which wields more influence in the region.

Based on Biden's and his administration's blueprint regarding how to handle Iran's regional behavior, the following observations can be made:

1. Under the Biden administration, the United States is aware of the need to deal with Iranian threats comprehensively.³

The European and regional powers are throwing their weight behind the United States. It is no longer acceptable to revive the nuclear deal and address the concerns about Iran's nuclear program without considering the main regional concerns.⁴

Regional stability is dependent on a new approximation to curb Iran's role in the ongoing turmoil in the Middle East.⁵

In this context, the United States wants to rejoin the nuclear deal first, to create a common ground to reach comprehensive understandings with Tehran.

2. Iran is not willing to make compromises when it comes to its missile program. Tehran believes this program is its sovereign right, and vital to upholding the country's security and deterring enemy states from threatening and targeting it. In addition, Iran does not want to internationalize the regional dialogue, believing that the contentious issues only concern the regional countries and an understanding could be reached withing a regional framework.⁶

3. In case the United States fails to address the threats posed by Iran; the region could be thrown into open-ended disputes. Some regional powers

will develop their potential and capabilities and even cooperate to counter the dangers that Iran poses. This could keep Iran's conflict with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia open-ended, and maybe Israel will launch an attack against Iran.

4. **Finding comprehensive solutions is difficult for both sides**, since they possess different levers to pressure and bargain. For its part, Iran possesses a strong lever, which is to accelerate its nuclear program. It took several steps to put huge pressure on the Biden administration. It also possesses some regional levers, and it has already begun to set in motion some of them, such as the Houthis' intensifying their attacks targeting the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia since Biden took office. This is in addition to targeting US forces in Iraq and US military maneuvers and movements in the Gulf waters.

On the other side, the United States has an important lever; the continuation and intensification of economic pressure on Iran to force it to submit and agree to a new deal which is acceptable to the United States and its allies.⁷ If set in motion, this lever could delay further attempts to settle outstanding issues, including the regional conundrum in light of Iran's behavior.

II. The Biden Administration's Influence on Iran's Regional Behavior: Challenges and Potential Opportunities

In light of the expansionist inclinations of the Iranian government in Tehran's vital spheres on the one hand, and Iran's regional project transitioning to militarizing Shiites in its spheres of regional influence on the other hand, as well as the positions of successive US administrations towards the Middle East, a host of primary challenges face the Biden administration in relation to influencing Iran's regional behavior – as well as some potential opportunities. These primary challenges are as follows:

1. The Deep-rooted US-Iran Hostility and the Intersection of Geopolitical Interests in the Region

Khomeini made hostility to the United States a main pillar of the Velayat-e Faqih system at home and overseas in 1979. The direction of Iran's foreign policy emerged within the context of hostility towards the United States and it was based on: Islamist globalism, rejecting hegemony and standing up

to the forces of arrogance, independency and self-sufficiency, and Persian nationalism. These principles have been exemplified in Iran's regional behavior as it has searched for a role in the region to expand its clout based on history and religion. The first indication was when the Iranian government adopted the principle of exporting the revolution by creating military arms aligned with it in Iran's vital spheres. This was done to change the regional realities to aid the expansionist Khomeinist schemes inspired by Velayat-e Faqih.⁸

This Iranian vision of a revolutionary expansionist state – of course – clashes with the international system developed by the United States. This international system includes criteria identifying how each country should behave within this system. The countries and actors, which are not fit for this system are labeled as “rogue states.” Post-revolution Iran has breached this international system through adopting ideological positions in its foreign policy, pursuing a policy of nonalignment (No East, No West) and raising slogans of hostility and threatening US interests. Therefore, the Iranian government has been classified as a danger and threat to the United States.

Ongoing events, negative perceptions and mutual realizations widened the confidence gap which rendered it impossible to reach common understandings between the two countries to resolve their differences. In addition, Iran's revolutionary principles and foreign policy direction widened the gap between the two countries. The aforementioned resulted in the image of the United States being deeply-rooted in Iran's political culture, hence it was extremely difficult to remove the United States from Iran's political narrative. This impacted the ruling elite, and prompted it not to accept any potential benefits that could arise via normalization with the United States. Furthermore, the anti-US propaganda has meant that any interactions with Washington will face huge backlash and rejection. This would perhaps also be expressed by some factions in the United States.⁹

Considering this deep-rooted hostility in the Iranian psyche, the US approximation of openness towards Iran is perceived by the conservative elite dominating the political decision-making in the country as an attempt

to destroy the political system, the revolution and Iranian interests. Hence, Iran's option is to continue with its policy of confrontation despite signing the nuclear deal, and strengthening its policies and regional clout and even working to eject US forces from the region.¹⁰

Furthermore, Iran's ongoing position to defy the United States made it an attractive ally to some global powers competing with the United States on the international stage. In this context, Iran has become an important epicenter for countries like China and Russia, with strategic relations at different levels developing between Iran and China and Russia.

This, of course, has had a significant impact on regional balances, the future role of the United States in the region and Iran's clout. Iran is dedicating its efforts to end the US presence in the region as it is a principal impediment to its regional and expansionist ambitions.

2. Shifts in the US Policy Towards the Middle East

Iran's regional behavior has basically hinged on the different approximations adopted by the United States over different historic phases in the Middle East. Before the end of the Cold War, the balance of power in relation to the bipolar world resulted in boundaries of influence being drawn among the global powers. Hence, the United States intensified its presence in the Arabian Gulf region and forged an alliance with the Arab countries there in the 1980s and played a pivotal role in containing the Iranian revolution and preventing its spread. Moreover, it played a huge role in threatening the Iranian government within its own borders through providing extensive support to its neighbors. This US presence continued after the end of the Cold War, with a US-led monopolar world order emerging. The United States further intensified its military presence to guarantee security and stability in the Arabian Gulf region without undermining the checks and balances among the region's countries. The United States isolated Iran due to its hostile ideology.

By the 2000s, which witnessed transformations like the 9/11 attacks and the US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States changed its regional and international strategy in a way that dealt a blow to the balance established in the Middle East. It provided an extensive arena for Iran to expand its clout beyond its borders. Yet, the Obama administration's tackling of this imbalance, through withdrawing and leading from behind,

created a wider regional vacuum which Iran hastened to fill, especially since this withdrawal coincided with the collapse of several countries and the dismantling of collective regional security systems as well as the US security umbrella.

Perhaps Trump's strategy was important when it came to rebuilding alliances and balances and restoring the ability of the United States to deter. But developments have proved that Iran has accumulated considerable power to exert regional influence due to the withdrawal or gradual retreat of the United States and its security and military approximations. Iran has benefited greatly from this.

Yet the indirect US-Iran understandings before the US invasion of Iran's eastern neighbor Afghanistan and its western neighbor Iraq, with Iran supporting the US intent to invade Afghanistan in order to topple the Taliban-Al-Qaeda alliance, a mutual enemy of both Tehran and Washington, and the US invading Iraq to bring down the Iraqi regime, represented a timely opportunity for Iran to widen the scope of its expansionist project.

Iran furthered its expansionist project when popular protests broke out across the Arab world, and major shifts in the US position resulted in: the collapse of the regional order and the dismantling of its functioning balances and alliances, creating a vacuum which led regional powers with expansionist ambitions to fill the void and assume regional leadership positions (Iran, Turkey and Israel) and hastened the entry of other global powers to compete on regional issues (Russia and China).

Iran has gained palpable military, economic, cultural, and political clout in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. For example, without limitation, when it comes to Iran's extensive military clout in Iraq and Syria, General Rahim Safavi, the supreme leader's senior military adviser, acknowledged in January 2021 that the late Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani established nearly 82 brigades in Iraq and Syria, involving fighters from different nationalities. He indicated that up to 60 brigades were established in Syria, involving 70,000 fighters from the Popular Mobilization Forces and from other multinational militia outfits fighting under the supervision of the Quds Force such as the Fatemiyoun, Zainabiyoun and Haidaryoun militias.¹¹

3. The High Cost of Confronting Iran's Regional Project After Its Militarization

The cost of confronting Iran's project depends on the phase of its expansionism. While the cost was low in the first phase – the phase of spreading Shiism – it is significantly higher in the phase of militarizing Shiites for several reasons. First, Iran has expended a significant financial and human price and waits to reap the benefits. Second, Iran upholds an extensive deployment of militias allowing it to have an important lever to escalate tensions via supplying weapons to its proxies. Third, Iran's militias themselves have expanded their clout and are unwilling to concede ground. Confronting Iran in this militarized phase is very costly as it would require the need to establish sectarian armed militias to counter the pro-Iranian Shiite militias. This is burdensome as it would require mobilization, arming, and financing; this task depends on a large financial budget on the one hand, and huge risks on the other hand, such as confrontation and sectarian armed clashes, which could result in the region being destroyed. This phase has posed growing challenges to the countries intending to counter Iran's danger, with the opportunities to do so being little compared to the opportunities available during the two phases of spreading Shiism and politicizing Shiism.

Shiite militarization represents the foremost motive behind the region's arms race, with some Arab and Gulf states opting to develop their military arsenal to counter outside threats, especially the dangers posed by Iran. These countries have transitioned from purchasing "defensive" armament systems to acquiring offensive armament systems, which increases the costs and risks of confrontation.

Several reports focusing on armaments indicated for example – without limitation – that the Gulf states throughout five decades had concluded arms deals with the United States worth \$90.2 billion while they concluded arms deals with the United States during the first two decades of the 2000s worth \$154 billion.¹²

The United States was also prompted to intensify its military presence in Iraq in 2020 to protect diplomatic headquarters and US forces from being targeted by Iranian-aligned militias. It also boosted its presence in some Gulf states such as Kuwait to preempt any Iranian attacks in the aftermath of Soleimani's killing. Yet the United States boosted its military presence in the Strait of Hormuz and the Arabian Gulf to protect international navigation

in the aftermath of consecutive Iranian attacks targeting oil tankers in the Gulf. Iran intended to harm oil exporters and consumers in response to the US economic sanctions.

Tehran also exploited the attacks led by its loyal militias on US targets in Iraq during 2020 which are continuing through 2021. The most recent attack was executed on February 16, 2021. The US Department of Defense announced that 14 rockets were fired at Erbil US military base, killing a civilian contractor and injuring five Americans, including a soldier.

4. Iran's Record of Interactions With the US Regarding Understanding and Openness

The United States tried openness instead of isolation and sanctions, in the hope that this approximation would steer the Iranian government towards openness and changing its behavior, including its regional behavior.¹³ But, the relaxing of international pressure on Iran, the lifting of sanctions and hundreds of billions of dollars of its assets overseas being unfrozen had granted the Iranian government an opportunity to assert its regional clout, especially since the nuclear deal negotiations coincided with Iran's extensive role in a number of Arab countries and the presence of its forces and militias; hence Iran has become a considerable regional power. When the United States attempted to restore its confrontational policy, it discovered that Tehran's gains during the phase of openness had grown so big that it was now hard to return back to square one.¹⁴ Despite the growing challenges facing the Biden administration to change Iran's regional behavior, there are several opportunities to achieve this objective, including:

A. The possibility of building on the maximum pressure campaign imposed by Donald Trump on Iran. Trump has left an important legacy for Biden to continue; a mixture of sanctions and pressure, and the use of deterrence, and forging alliances to counter Iran's behavior and regional threats. Biden could continue with this legacy and increase the pressure on Iran. The policy of sanctions and pressure was effective in curbing Iran's hostile regional inclinations. The sanctions have basically deprived the government of financial resources to spend on its expansionist project overseas. The sanctions were gradually imposed over two decades after the revolution, when the United States started to exert intense pressure on the Iranian government. This also was the case during the Trump era.

B. The viable opportunity for cooperation between the United States and its allies to counter Iran's regional clout. The Biden administration has already started consultations with its European allies, regional partners, and congressmen in this respect.¹⁵

C. The nature of the crisis which Iran is facing and the growing popular discontent amid deteriorating economic and living conditions. This is in addition to the popular rejection of Iran's regional behavior, with the Iranian people considering it to be the principal reason behind the growing socio-economic crisis at home. A significant amount of the country's financial resources was allocated to fund Iran's regional project.

D. International and regional parties vehemently rejecting Iran's regional expansionism which could trigger a regional war with grave consequences. Iran's adventurism has exceeded the redlines set by regional and international actors. Russia has strongly objected to Iran's expansionism across spheres of influence in the Middle East, especially in the Syrian arena. Russian-Iranian divergences are deepening in the Syrian arena with armed clashes breaking out between the brigades supportive of Russia and the armed militias aligned with Iran over a number of contentious issues such as respective spheres of influence in Syria. Then comes the Iranian-Israeli conflict in the Syrian arena through Israel's consecutive and intensified attacks targeting Iranian sites and positions in Syria, since Iran exceeded the Israeli redlines by setting up military bases and outposts near the Israeli borders and transferring weapons to the militias aligned with it in Syria and Lebanon.

III. The Future of Iran's Regional Behavior in Light of Biden's Options

Will the Biden administration opt to revive the nuclear deal without addressing the conundrum of Iran's regional behavior? Or will it insist on resolving this contentious issue? And what are the potential scenarios and their ramifications on Iran's regional behavior? In this context, we can outline the available options and their potential ramifications in light of the opportunities and challenges facing each side:

1. Continuing Pressure, Deterring Iran and Freezing Its Clout

The Biden administration has the time and a great opportunity to address the threats posed by Iran in the region if it desires to do so. But it needs to build on the policy pursued by Trump, which combines both regional deterrence and the intensification of pressure and sanctions, in addition to keeping on the table the option of changing the Iranian government. Historical experiences have shown that the Iranian government responds to pressure particularly when it feels that its survival is at risk, this is a crucial priority, more so at this moment in time when it is suffering from tremendous exhaustion due to the maximum pressure campaign. It is facing difficulties in relation to strengthening its regional clout because it lacks financial resources and is without its regional architect: Qassem Soleimani.

Under Joe Biden, the United States may have a bigger opportunity to put pressure on Iran. The European parties and the cross-Atlantic understanding will allow the Europeans to adopt a position which is more harmonious with the US position on Iran, especially after the European countries stressed the importance of addressing Iran's regional behavior and its missile program side by side with its nuclear program. In a related context, Russia and China will be more cooperative in case of reaching understandings with the United States on bilateral differences. Furthermore, the US administration is intent on including the regional powers in the negotiations to ensure that any policy that will be pursued by it will not be sabotaged.

During the years of pressure and sanctions, the Iranian government was barely able to enforce regional policies in a way to threaten security and stability. It could be said that the pressure has had a genuine impact on curbing Iran's clout or at least limiting it through depriving the government of the financial resources to continue to fund its regional projects. This is in addition to clamping down on the cooperative networks which execute the government's illegitimate policies in the political, military, and economic spheres.

Repeating the recent experience of the United States withdrawing from the region according to any half-fledged deal with Iran will not only be a green light which allows Iran to continue with its expansionism, allowing it to integrate Shiites after their militarization, but it will also be a heavyweight ally paving the way for other global powers to compete with the United

States in the region. This in turn will trigger a cold war, the consequences of which will hit the entire region.

2. Openness and Iran Continuing With Its Regional Project

If the Biden administration is planning an unreciprocated return to the nuclear deal while turning a blind eye to the outstanding issues, it will be committing a strategic mistake, the consequences of which will be extremely dangerous. It will open the door for Iran to once again, as was the case after 2003 and after signing the nuclear deal, to shift the power equations in the region in a radical manner. Maybe the United States does not intend to do so, but it may aim to keep a Sunni-Shiite sectarian balance to secure its geopolitical interests in the region by managing ensuing conflicts. But this will keep the region besieged by tensions and disputes and will create a cutthroat rivalry among the influential parties, and, maybe, will give rise to alliances and a cold war which will not end the region's crises, proxy wars, rampant violence, and terrorism. As for the United States, it will be easy prey for Iran's forces and militias. Iran will also boost its efforts to expel the United States from the areas where Iranian clout is surging as is the case in Iraq today.

Any lenient policy towards Iran will perhaps lead to an extensive regional conflict. The lifting of the US protection umbrella from the region will lead to a bigger Iranian role whether through the direct presence of the Quds Force and the IRGC or through loyal militias and governments, especially since the United States returning to the nuclear deal will allow Iran to make economic gains which it will use – as it did after 2015 – to strengthen its regional clout, modernize its missile arsenal while transferring military hardware and manufacturing technology to its militias in the region, making them a thorn in the side of its foes.

If President Joe Biden decides to divert US priorities and resources from the Middle East to Asia, out of his belief that Russia and China pose the main security challenges because of superpower rivalries, in line with the vision of former and current US national security officials, the current vacuum in the region will continue to provide an arena and an atmosphere enabling Iran to further expand and maximize its clout. Moreover, these global powers who are a source of concern for the United States will aim to counter this new strategy.

Yet the US betting on openness will not result in new regional policies which are different from the previous ones. The Iranian government is still maintaining its ideological inclinations, and the radical elite is still controlling foreign policymaking. Hence, the foreign policy of the Iranian government will continue to show hostility (to the United States) and shun cooperation; two important principles of Iran's regional policy. Therefore, instead of taking advantage of Western openness to integrate into the international community and secure a channel for regional cooperation, Iran will continue to move ahead with its regional project from a religious and nationalist perspective. It will also seek to pursue more expansionist policies to safeguard the political system through moving the confrontation and conflict to different spots in the region. Iran will also adopt a more militarized policy to achieve its ambition of regional and Islamic leadership and put further pressure on the US which impedes its ambitions and expansionist schemes.

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