

## **The Future of JCPOA Under the New Administrations of Iran and the US**

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From chants of “Death to America” from Iran to calls for sanctions on Iran from the US, the two have been pitted in a tense crossfire for decades. Hence, when a deal was struck between the two along with other members, it marked as a monumental moment in the history of their bilateral relations. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), more commonly known as the Iran Nuclear Deal has to be one of the most significant deals of contemporary international diplomacy. However, the fate of this deal continues to rock back and forth in the hands of the different ideological fragments of the two countries, i.e., the Conservatives and Reformists from Iran and Democrats and Republicans from US.

The JCPOA is an agreement between Iran and the P5+1 along with the European Union in 2015, on Iran’s nuclear program.<sup>1</sup> The deal came after years of tensions over Iran’s development of a nuclear program. Although Iran reiterated its stance of the program to be only for peaceful

purposes, several states suspected its intentions. Most prominent among the doubters was the US, as the program exacerbated insecurities within its allies in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia and Israel, both Iran’s bitter rivals. Hence, when the deal was struck Iran agreed to limit the capacity of its nuclear program along with access to the centres for international inspection and in return the sanctions were to be lifted off of the country. What Iran aimed at out of the deal was the lifting of sanctions from the country that are crippling its economy, while the rest of the members hoped to curb the threat of the development of a nuclear weapon from Iran.

However, inhibitions remained high in some states, mainly Israel, calling it “a very bad deal” in the 70<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations General Assembly.<sup>2</sup> The resistance from Israel was enough to rescind US from the agreement in 2018 when Donald Trump came into power pursuing what was called the Maximum Pressure

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Campaign, while further adding 700 new sanctions issued against Iranian individuals and companies, along with bringing back the old ones.<sup>3</sup> Consequentially, Iran went back on the enrichment of its uranium. The IAEA report of 2019 suggested that Iran still did not possess nearly enough uranium for the development of nuclear weapons, yet the move in itself was enough to reinstate the previous tensions.<sup>4</sup> The Republican stance from there was haphazard at best. With Trump's statements like "It's good for the country, good for them, good for us, and good for the world. No preconditions. If they want to meet, I'll meet", while just the following year the USS Abraham Lincoln Carrier Strike Group and a bomber task force was deployed to the strait of Hormuz by John Bolton to warn Iran, followed by Mike Pompeo suggesting all options to be on the table the very next year.<sup>5</sup> What was witnessed then was an ununified Republican strategy on Iran and consequently a possible nuclear deal. Relations further worsened after the assassination of General Qassim Soleimani in January 2020 and the devastating events that followed.

The trajectory of events, however, was met with a tweak owing largely to the change in administration to President Joe

Biden, representing a Democrat government once again. Yet, what was witnessed was a slight reluctance in the very diplomacy Obama had so keenly commenced. In the April of 2021, indirect talks between the US and Iran began in Vienna, the goal of which was to get US back into and Iran in compliance with the deal.<sup>6</sup> The combination of Iran's moderates and American democrats could prove to be an ideal scenario for negotiations as both factions have always been pro-diplomacy, despite the tensions and reluctance during the process. However, the results of the Iranian presidential elections, held in the June of 2021, have added new development to the negotiation dynamics. The appointment of Ebrahim Raisi as the new President of Iran sets the stage for a completely conservative government in the country. Previously, the hardliners or conservatives have not always been warm to the US or the idea of negotiating with them. The stance was restated by Raisi in his first press conference as President with a simple "no" in reply to a question relating to meeting with US President Joe Biden.<sup>7</sup> Raisi's strategy was further explained by his policy to focus on the region and his statement: "Our people have shown that they resist

various pressures and they must know that the foreign policy of our administration does not start with the JCPOA and will not be limited to it either.”<sup>8</sup> The trend seen in Iran with the new administration is the strengthening of the ‘axis of resistance’. Today, the US has more sanctions on Iran than North Korea, Cuba, Venezuela, and Libya combined. The reason lies somewhere between the insecurity of Iran’s nuclear program and its support for the anti-US/Israel factions of the Middle East like Hezbollah and the Assad regime. With Raisi’s step into power, the support seems to only grow as assessed by the government’s first few foreign policy moves, whether it is Iran’s wish to continue to fuel product shipments to Lebanon or the new Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian holding talks with Bashar al-Assad.<sup>9</sup> However, unlike Obama’s desire to curb Iran’s ventures and Trump’s use of pressure tactics, Biden’s aim seems more towards containing the Iran issue as the administration is more focused on

Biden’s ambitious domestic legislative agenda.

Inhibitions seems to be high on both party fronts because of mistrust on Iran’s side due to the previous US withdrawal from the deal with no consequences and US insecurities based on the new Iranian government forming the true ‘axis of resistance’ with all hardliners securing top governmental positions. Iran stays persistent on sanction relief and Biden reiterates his stance to the Israeli Prime Minister, stating “Iran will never get a nuclear weapon on my watch.”<sup>10</sup> Further reemphasized by Raisi’s gloss over of the JCPOA as not being the only option, as well as the weakness highlighted by US’ exit from the deal unpenalized, a future of trusting in the deal by both parties seems unlikely. Hence, with both states maintaining their stances staunchly an agreement outside of the JCPOA may very likely be possible with the aspiration of both states to put the issue to rest.

### Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> The P5+1 refers to the UN Security Council's five permanent members; namely China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States; plus Germany.
- <sup>2</sup> Alisha Weisser, “ISRAEL AND IRAN: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE,” *Georgetown University*, 16 November 2016.

- 3 "US unleashes sanctions on Iran, hitting oil, banking and shipping," *BBS News*, 5 November 2018.
- 4 "Iran begins constructing second nuclear reactor at Bushehr plant," *Al Jazeera*, 10 November 2019.
- 5 Anne Gearan, Karen DeYoung and Felicia Sonmez, "Trump says he's willing to meet Iranian President Rouhani 'anytime' and without preconditions", *The Washington Post*, 30 July 2018. "US sends aircraft carrier and bomber task force to 'warn Iran'," *BBC News*, 6 May 2019. "Pompeo: All Options Are Still On The Table With Iran," *Iran International*, 20 November 2020.
- 6 David E Sanger, Steven Erlanger and Farnaz Fassihi, "U.S. and Iran Agree to Indirect Talks on Returning to Nuclear Deal," *New York Times*, 2 April 2021.
- 7 Faramarz Davar, "Ebrahim Raisi's First News Conference and the Long Shadow of Crimes Against Humanity," *IranWire*, 22 June 2021.
- 8 "Raisi: First Press Conference," *The Iran Primer: United States Institute of Peace*, 22 June 2021 <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2021/jun/22/raisi-first-press-conference>.
- 9 Aziz Taher, "Iran says it aims to continue fuel product shipments to Lebanon," *Reuters*, 7 October 2021, Maziar Motamedi, "Iran's foreign minister holds talks with Syria's Bashar al-Assad," *Al Jazeera*, 9 October 2021.
- 10 Alexander Smith, "Biden tells Israel that Iran 'will never get a nuclear weapon on my watch'," *NBC News*, 29 June 2021.