

# US-Iran Relations: Issues, Challenges and Prospects

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## Abstract

[The US-Iran relations are structurally conflictual since the Islamic Revolution in 1979<sup>1</sup>. The animosity is imbedded in the US-hostage crisis, freezing of Iranian assets and differing views on the security architecture of the Middle East. Despite overtures to normalize the bilateral relations from both sides, many issues impede these positive developments. Although there is convergence of interests on many areas, a few events from the past decade like regional peace process, terrorism, and most importantly, Iranian nuclear controversy continue to impact and cast shadows on the bilateral relations. The domestic politics in both countries and the US regional allies, especially, Israel and Saudi Arabia are other major challenges to their unfettered relations. However, lately the geopolitical position of Iran in the changing regional security environment, the phenomenon of 'Islamic State' and the agreed framework for a comprehensive nuclear deal raise the likelihood for a detente between Iran and the United States. – *Author.*]

## Theoretical Context

There can be many theoretical perspectives to analyse the US-Iran relations; however the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) presented by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever<sup>2</sup> can best comprehend and unravel the complexities in the relations between a global power and a regional power. The theory stipulates that states in geographical proximity share an ambivalence of inimical and amicable relations due to their common security outlook and problems. The security complex works in four overlapping circles; at the local level (within the state), at the regional level, at the intra-regional level and lastly at the global level referred as 'super complex.'<sup>3</sup> These security complexes impact each other from state to region and then global level or vice versa, therefore determine intra-state relations bilaterally and multilaterally. Moreover, the processes of securitization and de-securitization or both are so interlinked that the security problems cannot be analysed or resolved apart from one another.

In order to analyse the US-Iran relations, the RSCT is modified as both these countries are not geographically proximate and have

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<sup>1</sup>Structurally conflictual relationship refers to a conflict that is rooted in the discrepancies resulting from different viewpoints or actions. In structural conflict, conflicts occur due to the external factors rather than the internal factors, for example, rather than personal bias or stereotypes, structural conflicts are caused by time, distance, or proximity etc.

<sup>2</sup>Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 50-53.

common security challenges till the emergence of 'Islamic State.' However, the US presence in Iraq, Afghanistan and its naval fleet in the Persian Gulf makes it proximate to the Middle Eastern regional security complex (RSC), where Iran as an important regional actor is swaying influence from Iraq to Sudan. Moreover, both Iran and the US are in complex and conflictual security relationship that determines their bilateral ties and impacts the regional and super security complexes. Both countries have compelling reasons to resolve their old animosity; for example, the rising spectre of Islamic State for both states, in addition to Iran's, growing influence and power particularly its geopolitical position, as manifested in the latest crises in the Middle East on one hand, continued UN sanctions and declining Iranian economy on the other. Thus the US-Iran relations are so deeply interlinked in the Middle East security complex that these cannot be analysed in isolation.

### Historical Analysis

An analysis of historical context of US-Iran bilateral relations is important to bring forth the analogies to contemporary relations, as the US role in Iranian politics and security has been both crucial and controversial.

The US involvement in Iran dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the American missionaries arrived in Persia and the US diplomatic mission was established there in 1883. However, the US involvement in the region and particularly in Iran remained secondary to its global interests till the discovery of oil in Iran. The American oil giants soon developed commercial interests and Iran became the focal point of US economic interests.<sup>4</sup> However, the US security interests did not come forth till August 1941, when due to the Anglo-Soviet invasion, Iran looked

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to the US as a natural ally. The US not only provided massive economic help but also sent 30,000 soldiers who were stationed in Iran. With the change of regime in Iran, when Muhammad Reza Shah replaced his father with the US help, its involvement in Iran grew stronger.<sup>5</sup> The growing American involvement in Iran was not seen

positively by the nationalist forces and Islamic clergy and it was culminated in a nationalist coup by Mohammad Mosaddegh removing the Shah of Iran in 1953. Once again the US backed counter-coup put Muhammad Reza Shah back in power and strengthened the US involvement in Iran.<sup>6</sup> With the departure of Britain from the Gulf in 1969,

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<sup>4</sup>Barbara Slavin, *Bitter Enemies, Bosom Friends: Iran, The U.S., and the Twisted Path to Confrontation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup>William R. Polk, *Understanding Iran* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 100-108.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 108-116.

Iran became the 'Policeman' of the Gulf and the strongest US ally in the Middle East. The Shah became more assertive regionally but repressive domestically.<sup>7</sup>

The nationalist coup of 1953 had already awakened the Islamic clergy in Iran. Ayatollah Khomeini soon became a symbol of 'resistance and hope' to the common Iranians against Shah's repression and suppression. It took more than two decades for Ayatollah Khomeini to garner enough support to bring a popular revolution and remove the Shah of Iran in 1979, and the US involvement.<sup>8</sup>

Several analogies can be drawn from this historical analysis; the US has been engaged in regime change in Iran, in 1942 and 1953, and still believes that regime change in revolutionary Iran is possible even today for its own interests. The US also tried this option in 2009 presidential elections when Mir-Hossein Mousavi was supported for the presidential race. However, this option was discarded half way through, when it was found that Mir-Hossein Mousavi is also the follower of the same nationalistic Iranian approach.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the continued US involvement in Iran has aroused popular discontentment and anti-Americanism, which later became a hallmark of revolutionary Iran's foreign policy posture. Also, the US has been unable to understand the Iranian national psyche and character studded with religious ideology in the post-revolutionary Iran. Moreover, the Iranian bellicosity and conflictual posturing brought domestic dividends but at the cost of international isolation, which continued during the rule of Ayatollah Khomeini and later during Mahmood Ahmadinejad's presidency.

### **The US and Revolutionary Iran**

The fall of Shah of Iran was a huge loss to the US influence in Middle East. Subsequently, the revolutionary fervour shown by the Iranian leadership and the US counter moves aggravated the bitterness bilateral relations. Revolutionary Iran forcefully followed the policy of 'neither East nor West' and denounced the prevailing bipolar global politics.<sup>10</sup> The taking over of the US embassy staff as hostages in Tehran and freezing the Iranian assets in the US banks were the immediate moves and counter-moves from either side. The Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), and the US/western support to Iraq, and ultimately the shooting down of Iranian passenger plane with 370 people on board by the US in July 1988, further infuriated the Iranian leadership.

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<sup>7</sup>Shireen T. Hunter, *Iran and the World: Continuity in a Revolutionary Decade*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 46-54.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Casey L. Addis, *Iran's 2009 Presidential Elections* (CRS Report for Congress, 2009), <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R40653.pdf>

<sup>10</sup>R.K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East*, (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 21-22.

In the aftermath of Kuwait crisis (1990-91), the US adopted the 'dual containment' policy against Iran and Iraq, which did not yield the desired results.<sup>11</sup> The Iranian opposition to the US involvement in the Middle East and its continuous support to Israel had won popular support for Iran in the region. Iran had found two regional proxies, Hezbollah and Hamas, to undermine the US and Israeli role in the regional security dynamics. Iranian opposition to the 'Peace Process' and continued US

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political and military support to Israel against the Palestinians further hardened the Iranian position vis-à-vis the US. The application of negative terminology by Iran as the 'Great Satan' and by the US such as 'Islamic Fundamentalism' 'Rogue State' and ultimately 'Axis of Evil' proved as added fuel to the fire

in the US-Iran bilateral relations. Therefore, from 'dual containment' to the 'regime change' the US was unable to mould the Iranian position.<sup>12</sup>

The post 9/11 regional security environment brought the US and Iran closer. The US brought down two main regional rivals of Iran; Taliban, an ideological cum political threat in Afghanistan in 2001, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, a regional security threat to Iran in 2003. In return, Iran proffered logistical assistance for US manoeuvres in Afghanistan and softened its positions vis-à-vis the US role in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>13</sup> However, the revelation of Iranian nuclear program in 2002 became an added source of conflict between the two countries. The conflicting stance on the nuclear issue from both sides proved unconvincing for both; Iranian claim of 'right to peaceful uses of nuclear energy under Article IV of non-proliferation treaty' and the US position of 'Iranian pursuit of Weapons of Mass Destruction'. The agreement on Additional Protocol to the NPT and the UN imposed regime sanctions against Iran since 2006 were seen as counter-productive by Iran.<sup>14</sup>

Importantly, despite the differing approaches of the US and Iran on host of bilateral and regional issues, both countries have tried to make positive overtures. Both moderate Iranian presidents, Hashemi

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<sup>11</sup>F. Gregory Gause, 'The Illogic of Dual Containment' *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 1994.

<sup>12</sup>Donette Murray, *US Foreign Policy and Iran: American-Iranian Relationship since the Islamic Revolution*, (London: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>13</sup>9/11 and the Head of the Terrorist Snake' *The Trumpet*, January 1, 2010, available at [www.thetrumpet.com](http://www.thetrumpet.com)

<sup>14</sup>Abbas Maleki and Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, 'Iran's Foreign Policy After 11 September' *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Vol. IX, Issue 2, Winter/Spring 2003.

Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami,<sup>15</sup> continued to have 'critical engagement' with the US European allies, the EU-3.<sup>16</sup> In January 1998, President Mohammad Khatami during an interview to the CNN, proposed the exchange of visits between the US and Iranian academics and writers to promote better understanding between the two nations.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, in June 1998, the then US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, offered to normalize the relations with Iran during the Asia Society speech.<sup>18</sup> However, these positive move could not culminate into any tangible outcome owing to severe 'trust deficit' in their bilateral relations.

The new US president Barack Obama came with the policy of 'change' in his election campaign and did address the Iranian issue. He congratulated the Iranian people on the occasion of *Nowruz*, the Persian national day, advocating for the normalization of relations.<sup>19</sup> However, the Congressional disapproval to Presidential moves and furthermore its hardened position on a Nuclear Deal between P5+1 and Iran eclipsed any possibility of rapprochement. Moreover, Iranian President Ahmadinejad's remarks against the holocaust and 'wiping out Israel' along with his controversial address at the Columbia University in 2008, infuriated the Israeli lobby in the US Congress, Israeli leadership and the neo-conservatives in the US decision-making circles. This also came to depict a sharp divide in the US about detente with Iran.

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With the ending of the first decade of this century, the events in the Middle East took a different stride. On one hand, the 2010 Arab Spring in the region had the US lost its credibility and on the other, it gave impetus to Iranian regional influence through its democracy vs. Stability amidst chaos and unrest' in the entire Arab world. This compelled the US to rethink its policy of 'denial' to 'engagement' with Iran. The continued UN sanctions, deteriorating Iranian economy and the social discontent within Iran also pressed Tehran to rethink its foreign

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<sup>15</sup>Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *After Khomeini: The Iranian Second Republic* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995); and Ghonche Tazmini, *Khatami's Iran: The Islamic Republic and the Turbulent Path to Reform*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

<sup>16</sup>EU-3 is composed of Britain, France and Germany.

<sup>17</sup>Transcript of the interview with Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, *CNN.com*, January 7, 1998.

<sup>18</sup>Secretary of State, Madeleine K. Albright, remarks at 1998 Asia Society dinner' on June 17, 1998, available at [www.fas.org](http://www.fas.org)

<sup>19</sup>President Barack Obama's video greeting to the Iranian people on March 19, 2015, available at [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)

policy approach. In 2013 a pragmatist Hassan Rouhani became the Iranian president and his policy of 'prudent moderation' 'constructive engagement' and 'heroic flexibility'<sup>20</sup> led to the interim nuclear deal in November 2013, freezing of the Iranian nuclear program and easing of sanctions which raised hopes for a long desired rapprochement between the US and Iran.<sup>21</sup> The agreed framework in April 2015 at Lausanne-Switzerland for a comprehensive nuclear deal by June 2015 laid the historic opportunity for normalization of relations after 35 years of bitter hostility.

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### Clash of Interests

The US-Iran relations are marred by a host of issues bilaterally, regionally and globally; however three key issue areas that severely undermine their relations are Iran's nuclear program, Iran's alleged support to 'terrorist entities' and its opposition to Middle East security architecture.

Iranian nuclear program was initiated with the US sponsored 'Atom for Peace Program' in early 1950s. In the late 1970s, Iran anticipated that its oil reserves will not be able to meet the demands of burgeoning population and economic development. Moreover, in 1973, the US-based Stanford Research Institute predicted Iran's need for nuclear energy and recommended the production of 20,000 MW of nuclear electricity by 1990.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, the Shah planned to build 20 nuclear power reactors, and to allay the fears, he joined the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968 and ratified it in 1970.<sup>23</sup>

In 1979, the nuclear program was completely shut down due to the revolution and the Iran-Iraq war. However in 1990, Iranian quest for nuclear energy was revived and work on the Bushehr nuclear power plant restarted, first, with German cooperation and later with Russian assistance. Since then Iran has built a number of advanced nuclear

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<sup>20</sup>Mohammad Javad Zarif, 'What Iran Really Wants: Iranian Foreign Policy in the Rouhani Era' *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2014.

<sup>21</sup>Stephen Kinzer, 'US-Iran Détente will be biggest Geopolitical Story of 2014' *Aljazeera*, January 6, 2014.

<sup>22</sup>Mohammad Sahimi, Pirouz Mojtahed-Zadeh and Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, "Energy: Iran needs nuclear power" *The New York Times*, October 14, 2003.

<sup>23</sup>For details see Esther Pan, "Iran: Curtailing the Nuclear Program" *Backgrounders*, Council on Foreign Relations, May 13, 2004.

facilities spreading all over Iran, including plans to further increase the number of nuclear power reactors.<sup>24</sup>

In 2002, the Iranian opposition in exile, especially Alireza Jafarzadeh, a member of the National Council of Resistance on Iran, made a disclosure of a number of secret nuclear facilities in Iran. In 2003, President Mohammad Khatami in an announcement confirmed the existence of complex nuclear facilities at Natanz capable of producing highly enriched uranium (HEU). In 2003, the IAEA inspectors unearthed very advanced nuclear facilities which had been undisclosed earlier. The IAEA warned Tehran to disclose all alleged activities in the country and open all its nuclear facilities for inspection, or be ready for consequences.<sup>25</sup> These disclosures sent alarm bells around the world and Iranian nuclear program became a daunting and formidable global issue.

Despite Iranian claims that their nuclear program is purely for peaceful purposes, the Western world, particularly the US, does not trust the Iranian stance and points towards its advanced facilities such as the Enrichment Plant. The global apprehensions were manifested in the UN Security Council, which passed a series of resolutions, resulting in to military-economic sanctions against Iran from 2006.<sup>26</sup> This was despite of the fact that Iran had signed and ratified all international arms control treaties and obligations including the Additional Protocol, suggested by the EU-3 and the IAEA in 2004.

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Direct negotiations on Iran's nuclear aspirations began in early 2013 between the P5+1<sup>27</sup> and Iran with the aim to resolve the controversy. The direct talks came about with President Barak Obama's telephonic talk with President Hassan Rouhani in September 2013. Henceforth, an interim deal was reached between the two sides in

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<sup>24</sup>For a detailed account of Iranian nuclear program see Mustafa Kibaroglu, "Good for the Shah, Banned for the Mullahs: The West and Iran's Quest for Nuclear Power" *Middle East Journal*60, no.22006, Muhammad Sahimi. "Iran's Nuclear Program, Part-V" *Payvand's Iran News*, December 22, 2004, and Gawdat Bahgat "Nuclear Proliferation: The Islamic Republic of Iran" *Iranian Studies*39, no.3 (2006).

<sup>25</sup>See Mustafa Kibaroglu, "Good for the Shah, Banned for the Mullahs: The West and Iran's Quest for Nuclear Power" *Middle East Journal*60, no.22006.

<sup>26</sup>UNSCR 1696 of 21 July 2006, 2) UNSCR 1737 of 23 December 2006 3) UNSCR 1747 of 24 March 2007, 4) UNSCR 1803 of 3 March 2008, 5) UNSCR 1835 of 27 September 2008, 6) UNSCR 1929 of 9 June 2010; see Paul K. Kerr, 'Iran's Nuclear Program: Tehran's Compliance with International Obligations' CRS Report for Congress, December 21, 2011.

<sup>27</sup>P5 countries are the permanent members of the UNSC, the US, UK, France, Russia and China plus Germany.

November 2013, which was extended twice for six months till November 2014, ultimately to arrive at a final deal by March 2015 and a technical deal by June 2015. The interim deal stipulated to halt the Iranian nuclear enrichment in lieu of relieving of sanctions. In April 2015 an agreed framework for a final nuclear deal by June 2015 was arrived at Lausanne-Switzerland raising the prospects of an end to the Iranian nuclear issue.

Under the deal, Iran is allowed to keep the nuclear facilities that it insists are for peaceful and civilian purposes, but these sites would be subject to strict production limits. Two, the number of centrifuges will be scaled down by two thirds to 5060, and the stockpile of low enriched

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uranium will be reduced from 10, 000 kg to only 300 kg which will be not enough to produce a nuclear weapon for next 15 years. Three, the heavy water reactors in Arak will not be able to process and produce plutonium. Finally, Iran will get relief from decade long economic sanctions, especially embargo placed on the sale of its oil, and impeded access to the international

financial system.<sup>28</sup> While most Iranians celebrate the finalizing of the deal with fervor, US hawkish allies, especially Israel and Saudi Arabia, consider it as a grave danger to the region and the world.

Another controversial issue between the US and Iran is Palestine. Tehran supports the Palestine issue and is opposed to the so called peace process. Iran has two strong regional allies, the HAMAS and Hezbollah, surrounding Israel and countering its state terrorism, which the US has declared as terrorist organizations. Iran is being allegedly projected as a state sponsoring terrorism in the region, whereas it condemned the 9/11 attacks against the US and supports global efforts against terrorism.<sup>29</sup>

The use of terrorist outfits in Syria is another bone of contention between Iran and the US. Iran supports the Bashar-al-Assad regime with Hezbollah fighters whereas the US supports the anti-Assad forces with weapons and equipment. The Al-Nusra Front and Free Syrian Army are being supported by the US and its regional allies. Both sides have diametrically opposing prescriptions to resolve the Syrian crisis. President Bashar-al-Assad is the longstanding Iranian ally in the Arab

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<sup>28</sup>"The Iran Nuclear deal: What You Need to Know," New York Times, April 03, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/04/world/middleeast/the-iran-nuclear-deal-what-you-need-to-know.html>.

<sup>29</sup>'9/11 and the Head of the Terrorist Snake' *The Trumpet*, January 1, 2010, available at [www.thetrumpet.com](http://www.thetrumpet.com)



world and his country is the strongest link in promoting the Iranian regional influence in the area.

Since the popular uprising in the Arab states in the name of 'Arab Spring' launched by the youth to oust the US supported regimes in 2010, Iranian regional influence has enhanced manifold. Iran termed this as an 'Islamic Awakening' and a result of its proactive role in upholding the Islamic principles and support to the oppressed Arab people. Iran holds its sway from Iraq, Syria, Lebanon into Sudan, and now Yemen too after the takeover of Houthis, also known as the Ansar-Ullah, and had restored relations with Egypt under Mohamed Morsi. The fall of pro-US regimes across the Arab world was a welcome development for Iranian regional role. Even after the reversing of situation in the aftermath of chaos, unrest and civil war in these countries, Iran has maintained its position in the region. Iran is opposed to the continued military presence of US troops in the states surrounding it, such as Iraq and Saudi Arabia. The architecture of post-Arab revolt security environment of the region is being contested furiously between Iran and the US-led regional states. There is a tacit sectarian element to this contest in the guise of 'Shia Crescent'<sup>30</sup> versus the 'Sunni Axis'<sup>31</sup>, a dangerous element to the future of regional security. Therefore, both Iran and the US have clashing high stakes in the future architecture of Middle Eastern security environment being unfolded in the aftermath of 'Islamic State' phenomenon.

## **Challenges**

Besides the above problem areas, there are some more challenges to the normalization of bilateral relations between Iran and the US. It is mainly the US regional allies, Israel and Saudi Arabia, domestic political structures and institutional hardline approach of the US Congress and Iranian Majlis towards each other, in addition to the individuals with conflictual mind-set based on, over three decades of, animosity.

The Iranian nuclear program is seen as an 'existential threat' to Israeli security coupled with Iranian support to Hamas and Hezbollah as regional proxies against Israel. Therefore, Israel is opposed to any normalization of relations between the US and Iran. Israel proposed an

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<sup>30</sup>In the post Iraq invasion, there has been a significant debate on Iran's intentions to create a Shiite crescent from Beirut to the Persian Gulf. A Shiite crescent is seen by the Arab Sunni elites as an attempt by Iran, first, to engage the Shiite masses in the region; second, to build an ideological belt of sympathetic Shiite governments and political factions in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the Persian Gulf region; and, third, to expand its regional role and power. From Kayhan Barzegar, "Iran and the Shiite Crescent: Myths and Realities," *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 15, no.1 (2008): 87.

<sup>31</sup>A 'Sunni Axis' in Middle East geopolitical landscape is seen as a challenge to Iranian influence and power in the region. The emergence of Sunni Axis has been sparked by Iran's advancement in nuclear sphere, Syrian civil war and Iran's regional role. The bloc aims for greater political and security cooperation among Turkey, Egypt and the Arab Gulf states headed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar. From Yoel Guzansky and Gallia Lindenstrauss, "The Emergence of the Sunni Axis in the Middle East," *Strategic Assessment* 16, no.1 (2013): 37-39.

Osarik like strike<sup>32</sup> on Iran's nuclear facilities as well and forced the US administration to contemplating a military option until 2012 when 'all options [we]re on the table.'<sup>33</sup> Even President Barak Obama cautioned that 'there are no guarantees that negotiations will succeed, and I keep all options on the table to prevent a nuclear Iran'<sup>34</sup>. After the nuclear talks between Iran and the P5+1, Israel launched a diplomatic offensive against the deal. Israeli premier, Benjamin Netanyahu, even ventured to address the US Congress against signing a deal with Iran.<sup>35</sup>

Saudi Arabia (KSA), also opposes the US-Iran rapprochement perceiving it as detrimental to its regional position. During the 1970s, Iran and KSA were US regional allies according to the 'US Twin Pillar' policy for the region. However, the fear of export of the 1979 Revolution

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in the region, that could have engulfed the Shia minorities in the Arab world, posed an ideological cum political threat to KSA. The Iran threat was thus countered by the war initiated by Iraq in 1980 and the creation of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981 to form a united front of Arab Gulf States.<sup>36</sup> The military and economic

support of GCC to Iraq and the subsequent clashes between Iranian pilgrimages and security forces during Hajj in 1987 were catalyst events putting the two countries on a bellicose path.<sup>37</sup>

Iran, nuclear pursuit is also seen as a severe security threat to the KSA and regional peace and stability. A nuclear-armed Iran is a dangerous development in the regional security calculus for the KSA. The clashing sectarian ideologies which are now manifested in sectarian wars across the Arab world, like the three years long Syrian crisis, and lately Yemen civil war pose severe security threats to Riyadh. Therefore, the culmination of a nuclear deal is seen as solidifying the already growing Iranian regional influence at the cost of Saudi Arab's security. The Saudi leadership even hinted of a nuclear defence in the light of Iranian and Israeli atomic arsenal.<sup>38</sup> The leadership has time and again raised their voices against the prospects of the US-Iran normalization despite the US

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<sup>32</sup>Iraqi nuclear power plant was destroyed by Israel in 1981.

<sup>33</sup>Elisabeth Bumiller, 'Israeli Strike against Iran? No shortage of Obstacles' *International Herald Tribune*, February 21, 2012.

<sup>34</sup>Remarks by the President in the State of the Union Address' January 20, 2015, available at [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)

<sup>35</sup>Editorial, 'Sabotaging a Deal with Iran' *New York Times*, March 7, 2015.

<sup>36</sup>Gregory Gause, 'Gulf Regional Politics: Revolution, War, and Rivalry' in W. Howard Wriggins ed., *Dynamics of Regional Politics: 4 Systems on the Indian Ocean Rim*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 58.

<sup>37</sup>Christine Marschall, *Iran's Persian Gulf Policy: From Khomeini to Khatami*, (London: Routledge, 2003), 52-54, and Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, 'Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations and Regional Order' *Adelphi Paper 304*, (London: IISS, 1996).

<sup>38</sup>Prince hints Saudi Arabia may join nuclear arms race' *The Associated Press*, December 6, 2011.

trying to allay their fears. Obama himself visited the KSA in January 2015 to assuage the fears of the Kingdom.

Another severe challenge to US-Iran detente is the domestic political set-up of both countries, the US Congress and Iranian Majlis which is dominated by hardline elements like personalities, groups and institutions, that circumvent the brighter prospects for cordial relations.

Understanding Iran's decision-making prism, where the position of clergy is paramount is very important in this regard. This predominance of religious clergy in state's decision making dates back to the Zoroastrianism era and Zoroastrian clergy had preponderance in decision-making. Similarly today, clergy holds an eminent position in state affairs in Iran. Moreover, in today's Iran the credential of the decision maker must have two basic linkages; one is through clergy, and the other through the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Council (IRGC). Thus the decision-making is based upon four different institutions; the Rahbar, the President, the Supreme National Council and the Majlis. The current Rahbar is Ayatollah Khamenei; his position in Iran is pivotal socially, politically, economically and strategically; the Ayatollah has the last and final word in Iran. President Hassan Rouhani is a moderate but it is important to know that Rouhani has credentials of 23 years in the Iranian decision-making structure; he has served as the member of IRGC and secretary of the Supreme National Security Council as well as the chief negotiator on nuclear issues for three years. Presently, the secretary of Supreme National Security Council and former defence minister, *[Name]*, appointed in September 2013 is President Rouhani's nominee. Notably unlike Rouhani, he is a hardliner. Lastly, the Majlis speaker is Ali Larijani, who also holds one of the segments in the current parliament dominated by the hardliners.

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**The culmination of a nuclear deal is seen as solidifying the already growing Iranian regional influence.**

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There are three schools of thought involved in the Iranian decision making: radical, conservative and moderate. The radicals, eminently headed by Larijani and Shamkhani, see inherent enmity between Iran and the West, and therefore view any negotiations with the West as synonymous to defeat. They believe that through negotiation process, the West wants to incapacitate Iran and force their own way. The second school of thought, the conservatives, led by Ayatollah Khamenei, believe that the hegemonic position and policies of the United States is not subsiding or cannot be supplanted at the moment. Thus, unlike radicals, conservatives do not out-rightly reject the option of negotiations despite their strong suspicions. The moderates, including Rafsanjani, Khatami and Rouhani, two former and the current presidents respectively, are at the other end of the prism and support negotiations.

Nevertheless, at the same time, they believe that the United States and the West are naturally hostile towards Iran. The moderates deem Iranian and the US interests as converging presently, regarding Islamic State (IS). All these groups, in spite of the discrepancies and variations in their approaches, have an indispensable role in the decision-making in Iran.

Likewise, the US political decision-making structure<sup>39</sup> rests on multiple organizations such as the White House backed by the National Security Council (NSC) and CIA, State Department, the Department of Defence, the Pentagon and the Congress. The NSC is the key decision-making body which assists the president, as its head, in formulating security policies. The NSC includes key cabinet members, secretaries of State, Defense and Treasury besides the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Security Advisor.

The decision-making structure under President Barak Obama is constituted as following, Vice President Joe Biden, who has served as Chairman Senate Foreign Relations Committee since 1997 and is a key architect of Iraq war since 2011 and a staunch supporter of Israeli security; Secretary of State, John Kerry, a moderate who mostly follows presidential line; Secretary of Defence Ashton Carter, who has served in DoD since 1996; National Security Advisor, Susan Rice, former US ambassador to the UN, who is considered hardliner; Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, a veteran of Operation Desert Storm and Operation Enduring Freedom, who has served in KSA and was Commander of the US CENTCOM.

The US Congress, under the law can enact any legislation deemed 'necessary and proper', which oversees the presidential powers. At Present, the US Congress is largely dominated by the hardliners and

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The House Speaker John Boehner and House majority leader Kevin McCarthy are both from the Republican Party. Presently, both Houses have pre-eminence of Republicans. The House of Representative has 245(R) and 188(D), and the Senate has 54(R) and 44(D). The House Committee on

Foreign Affairs headed by Edward Royce (R) and Senate Committee on

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<sup>39</sup>The analysis of this section is based on the information obtained from various official websites of the US organizations and institutions and the understanding of the author on the US political system.

<sup>40</sup>Stephen Lendman, "Congress and Israel Aim to Sabotage Iran Nuclear Deal," *Global Research*, April 06, 2015, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/congress-and-israel-aim-to-sabotage-iran-nuclear-deal/5440903>

Foreign Relations headed by Bob Croker (R) are powerful committees influencing the US policies. Therefore, President Obama's foreign policy is considerably circumvented by the majority of the Republicans in the US Congress. The Congress wants to oversee the nuclear deal with Iran and was poised to put additional sanctions on Iran, which President Obama threatened to veto. The letter sent by the Congressmen to the Iranian leadership stating that a deal made now could be revoked by the next US president is seen both as undiplomatic and unprecedented in the US political system.<sup>41</sup>

Another important element influencing the Congress is the strong Israeli Lobby backed by the, America Israel Public Affairs Committee, (AIPC). This lobby maintains regular contacts with key Congressmen and Congressional Committees involved in foreign policy making of the US.<sup>42</sup> The AIPC's cumbersome role in the Iranian nuclear deal case and the Israeli Premier's address to the US Congress, in March 2015, against it is the clear manifestation of strong influence of this lobby. There are presently serving and former key administrative officials in the Congress who believe in the military solution to the issue, such as John Bolton has who suggested to "bomb Iran to stop the bomb"<sup>43</sup> and Republican Senator John McCain, suggesting Israel to strike Iran.<sup>44</sup>

The Iranian leadership has been following the tougher stance vis-à-vis the US in its initial years; however the two pragmatist presidents, Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami, tried to develop amiable relations. They extended 'critical engagement' with the US European allies such as Britain, France and Germany. The era of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was both provocative and rhetorical which hardened the positions from both sides. The coming of Hassan Rouhani with his moulded foreign policy approach has encouraged the dialogue and debate with the US, even though strong hardline approach adopted by the Iranian Majlis.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, from Jimmy Carter to George Bush, the US policy towards Iran has been tough being manipulated by the 'alarmist' approach. The successive administrations have followed actions that were seen negatively by Iran.<sup>46</sup> However, Obama with his policy of 'change' has adopted a conciliatory and accommodative

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<sup>41</sup>Editorial, 'Republican Idiocy on Iran' *New York Times*, March 11, 2015.

<sup>42</sup>For details see John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and the US Foreign Policy* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 280-305.

<sup>43</sup>John R. Bolton, 'To Stop Iran's Bomb, Bomb Iran' *New York Times*, March 26, 2015.

<sup>44</sup>Speech in the US Senate Armed Services Committee on March 24, 2015, see Jon Rainwater, 'McCain Joins Bolton, Invites Israel to Bomb Iran' *Huffington Post*, March 31, 2015.

<sup>45</sup>Shane Hickey, "Iran's Supreme Leader Questions Hassan Rouhani's Diplomacy with US," *Guardian*, Oct 05, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/05/iran-ayatollah-ali-khamenei>

<sup>46</sup>Donette Murray, *US Foreign Policy and Iran: American-Iranian Relationship since the Islamic Revolution* (London: Routledge, 2010).

approach to deal with Iran, although there was a legacy of confrontation and strong opposition that Obama faced from the Congress.

Therefore, key individuals, institutions and organizations at the domestic level in both states, are big hurdles to the normalization of relations between Iran and the US. It is obvious that the parliaments in both states want to have greater stakes in the final nuclear deal that can undermine the diplomatic efforts and political boldness from both sides.

## Prospects

Despite many issues and challenges faced by the two states obstructing the normalization of their relations, hopes and prospects have always been there. It has been pointed out earlier that though both countries have continued animosity and conflictual relationship, there have been sporadic factors that compelled them to liaise for their respective national security interests. In addition, the positive overtures made from both sides from time to time also depict their desire for normalization. The geopolitics of Iran, its growing regional influence and changing regional dynamics have compelled the US to look at Iran as a state to be reckoned. Likewise, the unipolar global structure, the US military and

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economic strength, continued sanctions crippling the Iranian economy and the US regional interests are the reasons for Iran to forsake rhetoric and move forward to negotiations.<sup>47</sup> Iranian leaders acknowledge that without foreign policy reforms and improved relations with the US, they will face growing domestic upheaval that could be violent on the face of weakening economy. Moreover, the US corporate

sector finds itself as an immediate beneficiary of Iran-US reconciliation. Deteriorated Iranian industrial infrastructure and aviation, obsolete pharmaceutical and other local industries are some of the lucrative ventures for the US corporations,<sup>48</sup> which have suffered due to their Chinese, Russian and European counterparts.

The US and Iran have been complimenting each other over Iraq and Afghanistan. The changing regional dynamics creating chaos and anarchy gave rise to the 'Islamic State' (IS) and have forced both countries to cooperate. There is a threat to not only both countries but also to regional peace and stability. Therefore, the US has been providing

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<sup>47</sup>Dossier on 'Iran-US Rapprochement Iran's Future Role' Doha, Aljazeera Center for Studies, April 2014.

<sup>48</sup>Stephen Kinzer, 'US-Iran Détente will be biggest Geopolitical Story of 2014' *Aljazeera*, January 6, 2014.

logistical and material support to the Kurds and Iraqi forces in their fight against the IS while. Iran has sent its commander to guide the Iraqi war efforts and its strong regional proxy, Hezbollah, is also fighting against the IS. The US has lauded the Iranian military efforts against the IS.<sup>49</sup> This confluence of interest to fight against the IS and to bring peace and stability in the region, has brightened the prospects of mutual understanding between Iran and the US.

### **The Nuclear Deal**

On April 2, 2015, after marathon negotiations spreading over several months, Iran and the P-5+1 agreed to lay the framework of a historic comprehensive nuclear deal by June 30, 2015. The agreed framework announced by the EU foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini and Iranian foreign minister, Javad Zarif in a joint statement stipulates;<sup>50</sup>

- Iran will reduce the number of centrifuges from 19,000 to 6,104;
- It will cut down its stockpile of enriched uranium from 10 tonnes to 300kg;
- No enrichment will take place at Fordow facility for 15 years
- Iran will redesign its nearly built reactor at Arak
- US and EU sanctions will be suspended if Iran sticks to its commitments;
- US sanctions on Iran related to security and human rights abuses would remain in place.

It actually means that the framework puts cap on Iranian nuclear enrichment for 15 years, puts Iranian nuclear facilities, including Arak and Fordow, under the IAEA inspections, and cautions that sanctions will be re-imposed if Iran breaches the agreement. The agreed framework seems a win-win position for both sides as they have come out of their fixated positions to give diplomacy a chance for bringing an end to the nuclear controversy since 2002.

The comprehensive framework is hailed by Obama terming it a 'good deal that would address concerns about Iran's nuclear ambitions. We have reached a historic understanding with Iran.'<sup>51</sup> However, President Obama phoned his regional ally King Salman of KSA and invited him to the Camp David to discuss Iran and the turmoil in the region. He also called Benjamin Netanyahu assuring him that the deal has significantly reduced Iranian pathway to a bomb.<sup>52</sup> Interestingly, President Obama's reaction to the comprehensive framework was broadcast live on Iran TV, an unprecedented move in Iran, and surprisingly, there were jubilations in Iran and people came out on

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<sup>49</sup>Roger Cohen, 'Iran Matters Most' *New York Times*, March 30, 2015.

<sup>50</sup>Iran and world powers strike initial nuclear deal' *Aljazeera*, April 3, 2015.

<sup>51</sup>Michael Gordon and David Sanger, 'Iran Agreed to Detailed Nuclear Outline, First step Toward a Wider Deal' *New York Times*, April 2, 2015.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

streets after the announcement in Lausanne-Switzerland.<sup>53</sup> Iranian foreign minister termed the deal as a 'win-win outcome' and said that 'we will not allow excuses that will allow a return to the old system.'<sup>54</sup> He stated that the two countries would find a way to overcome distrust; however he added that 'Iran-US relations have nothing to do with this...we have serious differences with the United States.'<sup>55</sup>

Though the agreed framework and subsequently the Final Deal would be subject to tough scrutiny by the US Congress and Iranian Majlis, it has reduced the trust deficit between the US and Iran considerably. The direct negotiations between John Kerry and Javad Zarif have laid the ground for mutual understanding between the two countries after 35 years of hostility, animosity and conflictual approaches towards each other for a possible new beginning in US-Iran relations.

### **Conclusion**

During the last 35 years of US-Iran relations, both states have been on a conflicting path with each other, on issues like Iran-Iraq War, Terrorism, Syria and Israel, as well as complementing each other such as Afghanistan, Iraq and now the IS. The regional and global webs of security complexes interlink both countries in various political, economic and military issues.

From initial rhetoric to pragmatism and hardline to flexibility, Iran has come to realize that its ideologically driven foreign policy approach may win internal benefits but would put Iran in international isolation. From Ayatollah Khomeini to Ahmadinejad and from Rafsanjani-Khatami to Rouhani, Iran-US relations have seen contrasting approaches, and ultimately putting forth their national security objectives as a regional power. Likewise, from hostility to amity and containment to engagement, the US has also realized that its regional security objectives are interwoven with Iranian regional actions. From Carter to Reagan and Bush to Obama, policies of containment to dialogue and hostility to negotiations, the US has come forth to the power politics in its relations with Iran. Therefore, in the regional security complex of Middle East both need each other.

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<sup>53</sup>Iran nuclear talks: Obama hails 'Historic' agreement' *BBC News*, April 3, 2015.

<sup>54</sup>Iran and world powers strike initial nuclear deal' *Aljazeera*, April 3, 2015.

<sup>55</sup>Michael Gordon and David Sanger, 'Iran Agreed to Detailed Nuclear Outline, First step Toward a Wider Deal' *New York Times*, April 2, 2015.



Despite many issues and challenges, both sides have shown willingness to cooperate and normalize their relations being circumvented by third parties and dynamic regional security environment. The initiation of direct negotiations over Iranian nuclear controversy in September 2013 was a test of their political acumen and diplomacy. The intense negotiations and extensions of deadline beyond March 31, for reaching an agreed framework of understating for an eventual final deal by June 2015, is the manifestation of new realities and new beginnings. Despite tremendous opposition from domestic institutions and key decision-makers, the leadership of Iran and the US have shown that the road to normalization lies in dialogue, debate and diplomacy. Critically, how long a super power can avoid a regional power and the vice versa in the changing security environment for peace and stability in the region and world at large. However, the new beginning in the US-Iran relations has to withstand the baggage of conflictual history, hardline parliaments, dissatisfied allies and changing regional security environment.

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**The new beginning in the US-Iran relations has to withstand the baggage of conflictual history, hardline parliaments, dissatisfied allies and changing regional security environment.**

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