The Impossible Bargain: Iranian-American Relations in the Extended Framework of Putnam's Two-Level Game Theory

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Abstract

Both in the U.S. and in Iran, foreign policy making is the result of a complex negotiation process between the different bodies of the government. In both countries, anti-Iranian and anti-American sentiments became the hallmark of the conservative elites' thinking, which has been effectively blocking a political détente between the parties. The argument of this analysis departs from the dogmatism of the elites and states that the failure of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement was not only the result of the tight constraint of domestic actors on each country's win-sets, but also due to the fact that both countries denied the addition of Level 3 to Putnam's Two-Level Game Theory, that is, negotiation with the alliance blocs of the respective parties. Both negotiators failed to recognize the importance of the regional players and their threat perceptions that had not been limited to Iran's nuclear capability, but at the same time involved Iran's military ambitions. The analysis argues that widening the scope of the nuclear negotiations to three levels would prove the unfeasibility of a nuclear agreement concluded in the current geopolitical context. Only the deconstruction of the Western double standard – that American military presence in the Persian Gulf is normal while Iranian military presence is unacceptable aggressiveness – could lead to the possibility of a strong and widely accepted deal on the Iranian nuclear activities. The author of the analysis thus suggests the necessity of limiting the military expansion of both the U.S. and Iran as a precondition for a successful three-level negotiation process.

Keywords: Domestic and international politics, Iranian-American relations, Nuclear agreement, Putnam's two-level game, US foreign policy

1. Introduction

Iran's constitution has established a hybrid system of government, in which the executive, legislative and judiciary powers are overseen by several political bodies dominated by the clergy and controlled by Iran's supreme leader. As latter reigns with near absolute veto power over the elected and appointed political bodies of the state, the supreme leader might be considered the head of the state who delegates some functions to the government (Buchta, 2000). Besides this structure, we witness the involvement of " myriad and overlapping centers of power" in policymaking – according to Buchta (2000). Formal institutions are supported by an informal power structure, which consists of religious foundations, military revolutionary institutions and massive state media. This hybrid system is the reason for many confusions and misunderstanding regarding Iran's politics. While the presence of mature electoral politics and the advancement of progressive players in politics are widely understood as a shift from the revolutionary system to a liberal democracy, the reality is the opposite: the coexistence of changeable and unchangeable structures is a constant feature of the Iranian political system. In foreign policy, as in any other field, Iran's supreme leader defines the red lines (Tabatabai, 2019) that must be respected by the country's elected executives. Since Mohammad Khatami's electoral victory in 1997, with the exception of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iranian presidents have recognized the (mainly economic) benefits of opening up both towards the East and West (Alam, 2008).

The federal government of the U.S. is also operated by different power centers that ensure the separation of power and the democratic functioning of the state. The executive branch is headed by the president, whose responsibilities include serving as

commander in chief of the armed forces, negotiating treaties, and formulating foreign policy, amongst others. Treaties negotiated by the president with other governments must be ratified by a two-thirds vote of the Senate, which is part of the U.S. Congress (U.S. Senate, 2020). There is a constant institutional bargain between the President and the Congress regarding international agreements, amongst others. Therefore, U.S. presidents are supposed to establish strong backing in the U.S. Congress before signing international agreements. The fact is, however, that less than six percent of the international agreements signed by the U.S. between 1946 and 1999 were formally ratified by the Congress, the remaining agreements are executive agreements or legally non-binding documents (Krutz & Peake, 2009). While it is true that agreements with less procedural requirements are more adaptable to our age of fast political actions, and that they tend to provide the president of the U.S. with relatively more power vis-à-vis the legislative branches, they also became more easily the subjects of nullification by the legislative or by the executive power of the state.

In 1988, Robert David Putnam introduced his two-level Game Theory of domestic-international interactions. He made the argument that "at the national level, domestic groups pursue their interests by pressuring the government to adopt favourable policies, and politicians seek power by constructing coalitions among those groups. At the international level, national governments seek to maximize their own ability to satisfy domestic pressures, while minimizing the adverse consequences of foreign developments" (Putnam, 1988). One thus cannot separate the international (Level 1) and domestic (Level 2) politics, the components of the two-level game. The interaction between the two levels is important to the point that a leader who ignores domestic pressures or favours

domestic politics above international issues might be unable to successfully ratify or negotiate a treaty (Bjola & Manor, 2018). Putnam has described this political game as a very complex one. However, today with the advent of digital diplomacy, cyber warfare, massive public relation campaigns conducted by foreign governments, and other tools, the complexity of the negotiating process is multiplied. Foreign governments, agencies and individuals are involved both in the Level 1 and Level 2 negotiations as well as in the preliminary, the negotiation, the ratification and the execution phases of an agreement. Moreover, while the two-level negotiations were used in the past to result in legally binding international treaties, nowadays executive orders and nonbinding agreements have replaced the treaties, avoiding the long and exhausting way to a congressional approval in the U.S. Thus, the way towards reaching an international agreement has become bumpy and the result might not bring the expected satisfaction. U.S.-Iranian relations deserve a central position in the academic research of international relations as direct diplomatic relations between the two states have been officially cut for forty years, which is an anomaly in diplomacy. The only precedents are the Indian-Pakistani and U.S-North Korean relations, but the heads of the latter states had direct negotiations while the U.S. and Iran only involved one another in lower levels. U.S. pressure and measures taken against Iran are serious hindrances for the Iranian state who cannot enjoy all the benefits of the membership in the international community.

Although the nuclear negotiation process between the UNSC's P5+1 (Germany) and Iran has been the subject of scholarly articles that have applied Putnam's two-level game theory (e.g. Hurst, 2016 or Bjola & Manor, 2018), it was not squarely stated by any analyst that limiting the analysis to two levels might lead to false

conclusions, or that alliances might play crucial roles in the U.S.-Iranian relations. According to Knopf (1993), Putnam had elaborated his thesis using the example of states that had friendly trade relations at the time; moreover, international alliances should had been considered as the third level of negotiations. These two important caveats warrant the extended application of the theory. Hurst (2016: 559) has referred to Knopf and maintained the need for a better understanding of the role of alliances and their geopolitical strategies, as alliances might create geopolitical paradigms. The most important paradigm in the MENA region has been the American military establishment in the region through the permanent military bases that have been supported (and demanded) by the Sunni Arab partners of the U.S. This paradigm was reinforced since 2001 through the U.S. military expansion in Afghanistan and Iraq and in the war against President Bashar al-Assad and against the Islamic State terrorist organization. While the U.S. military expansion and assertiveness have gained much support in the West, Iran's rightful military defence strategy has been framed as aggressive behaviour, thus creating a double standard on the U.S. and Iran (Ajili & Rouhi, 2019).

In this article,, I will therefore elaborate on the Level 1 and Level 2 negotiations that led to the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, including the spoiling activities of third-level actors. I will argue that the presence of conservative political elites alone in domestic politics is not the hindrance of a negotiated deal. However, I will continue with the Level 3 analysis of the American and Iranian alliances. Based on these, I argue that in the current geopolitical settings, the renegotiation of the nuclear agreement is impossible without the deconstruction of the paradigms on which the respective alliances base their position.

2. U.S.-Iranian Relations before the JCPOA Agreement

By the time the JCPOA agreement was signed, the U.S. domestic political debate on the U.S.-Iranian relations was highly polarized, with the U.S.'s major regional allies, Israel and Saudi Arabia, refusing the agreement with Iran (al-Marzouki, 2015). U.S. President Barack Obama became the leader of his country in a very unfavourable political environment concerning U.S.-Iranian relations and Arab-Iranian relations, in which there was only a thin overlap between the win-sets of the respective governments while regional allies had conducted strong anti-Iran lobby activity. The "Iran hawks" in the U.S. and in Israel had been alarmed by Iran's evolving nuclear program and military expansion in the Middle East and tried to achieve a much stronger position than what Obama had delivered (Bergman & Mazzetti, 2019). As the negotiations were approaching the JCPOA deal, these actors, as well as the anti-Iran lobby pointed out the weaknesses of the Obama administration's argument on the necessary conditions of the nuclear deal. President Obama simplified the debate by saying that it is either an all-out war with Iran or the best deal the U.S. could ever reach (Jaffe, 2015). The debate reached its maximum polarization by the time the JCPOA agreement was signed. The deal's nullification by President Trump in fact satisfied the majority's win-set. Around the issue of a détente or a grand bargain with Iran, the conservative win-set had continuously shrunken during the post-2001 Middle Eastern geopolitical changes that did not warrant a Congressional support for Obama's JCPOA deal. In other words, a majority of the U.S. political elite fell outside of Obama's win-set, which provided a negative precursor for signing a deal.

A similarity between the U.S. and Iran is that both nations tend to make value-based decisions in their foreign policies, even if their

military strategies follow realist assumptions. Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. has demonstrated in its every decision that it considers itself a world leader. The neoconservatives in the 1990s claimed that U.S. dominance is supported by two fundamental pillars: "military supremacy" and "moral confidence" (Onea, 2013). As Onea (2013: 166) argued, "[t]he invasion of Iraq was conceived as a showcase of U.S. leadership, made necessary by September 11. The Bush administration, in particular Rumsfeld and Cheney, and its neoconservative supporters wanted to send a message to the effect that the United States could not be provoked with impunity and that it was the rightful world leader, not only because of its power, but also because of its will in making use of it".

The events of September 11 have forecasted a larger conflict between fundamentalist Islam and the United States, which provided an opportunity for the neoconservative pundits. All of them knew that a confrontation with Saddam Hussein was inevitable; Iran was also an equally menacing adversary, but Iraq was easier to address. Nevertheless, based on information originated from the power bases of George W. Bush, neoconservatives were preparing for a "two-generation war" which started with Iraq and would have proceeded with Iran. This adverse framing of Iran was only the continuation of the clash of civilizations framework that became popular after the end of the Cold War and the beginning of U.S. unipolarism. As Iran maintained its uncompromising stance vis-à-vis the regional status quo, it was labelled as the first 'rogue' state in the new system. The U.S. administrations therefore employed ceaseless efforts to punish Iran in order to prove its undeniable supremacy to the international community, through consolidating and stabilizing the newly institutionalized system that it had created (Mohammadi, 2012). In

the 1990s, this strategy contained the sanctions regime and the expansion of permanent military bases in the Persian Gulf. Indirectly, not deposing Saddam Hussein during the Kuwait war was also part of this strategy, as Saddam was the natural opponent of the Iranian state.

The period between the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq provided a rare opportunity for a détente between the U.S. and Iran. The reformist government of Iran reportedly tried to find ways to the U.S. leadership (Gordon, 2016). However, a proof for the neoconservatives' reluctance to deal with Iran came very soon. Classified documents show that from 2001 to 2003, the reformist Iranian president Mohammad Khatami's team tried to find backchannels to the Bush administration in order to cooperate in Afghanistan and Iraq. The interesting part is that these documents explicitly mention the possibility of a grand bargain between the U.S. and Iran, which was not confirmed by U.S. officials. Eventually, the neo-conservatives killed the process of negotiation, which was led by then Ambassador Javad Zarif, partly on the basis that Iran had been uncooperative in the war against terrorism (Kristof, 2007). As Iran did not seem to fulfil the American requests about Hezbollah, Hamas and Al Qaeda, U.S. President George W. Bush deemed this proof enough for placing Iran in the "axis of evil" framework. The negative framing of the Iranian state has boosted the success of principalists at the Iranian national elections and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected as president. This can be considered as the first point when an overlap between the U.S.' and Iran's win-sets became impossible.

After 2003, although the political changes in Afghanistan and Iraq favoured the Iranians, their perception of the growing military threat posed by the U.S. encirclement had boosted their defensive military expansion in the region. The evolving Iranian influence in

Iraq and the Shia resistance movement turned the U.S. public debate irreversibly against Iran. The neoconservatives blindly followed their principles instead of realpolitik even though the Sunni public in the Middle East viewed the existential threat posed by Iran differently from the way it was viewed by U.S. policy makers. In 2006, according to poll results published by *the Guardian* newspaper, "George Bush's six years in office have so damaged the image of the U.S. that people worldwide see Washington as a bigger threat to world peace than Tehran" (MacAskill, 2006). According to the poll results: "Despite growing concern over Iran's nuclear ambitions, the U.S. presence in Iraq is cited at least as often as Iran – and in many countries much more often – as a danger to world peace." It is notable that throughout the period the poll was conducted, the crisis over Iran's nuclear programme and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's hard-line comments was regularly in the news.

In the period from 2002 to 2007, an international dispute over Iran's nuclear program was unfolding simultaneously with the changing geopolitical situation on the ground. In 2002, an Iranian exile opposition group (a terrorist group according to Iran), the National Council of Resistance of Iran, accused Tehran of hiding a uranium-enrichment facility at Natanz and a heavy-water plant at Arak (Iran Watch, 2002). While Tehran maintained that its program was entirely peaceful, the U.S. accused Iran of secretly attempting to develop nuclear weapons, and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said Tehran had failed to prove that its program was purely non-military. In 2007, Iran declared that its uranium-enrichment program is a fait accompli and that the world powers needed to accept the "new reality" of the Islamic republic's nuclear program (Fathi, 2007). This was the collision of two parallel discourses.

During Obama's first and second terms, the "enrichment debate" was in the middle of the political clashes between the U.S. democrats and its domestic and foreign opponents, including Israel. While critics tend to frame Obama as the enrichment enabler who was content with a nuclear Iran, it was mentioned more than once that Obama was not the first president who was dropping the zero enrichment precondition (Rodgers, 2015). Despite the facts, the public debate favoured the framing of Obama as a weak negotiator. Although many applauded his deal concluded in 2015 to be of historic proportion, his critics at home and abroad soon outweighed the positive voices that led to the slow erosion of the very thin win-sets.

3. The Failed Implementation of the JCPOA

After the signing of the JCPOA deal, a complex and demanding domestic negotiation process started to unfold in the U.S. The White House initiated a public relations campaign that was supposed to generate a debate on the future of U.S.-Iran relations. The President wanted to prove that the deal was a precursor to a safer world. The main platform for this public relations campaign was a Twitter feed with the handle @TheIranDeal. In practical terms, this channel was dedicated to delivering the facts and answering questions about how the deal enhances the American national security. Responses from the media immediately discerned the weak points argued at the twitter feed. The main questions were related to Iran's real intentions and why the deal did not aim to change the geopolitics in the Middle East or Iran's behaviour regarding alleged human rights violations. Some commenters even ridiculed the new channel: "The White House believes it can sell the Iran deal in the manner that one might sell a hot fashion

designer-putting Obama on "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart," plastering social media platforms, and creating a general zeitgeist that anyone who opposes this deal is not only nuts, but probably someone who voted for George W. Bush (Cohen, 2015). Even though the @TheIranDeal channel held several online conversations, the White House was unable to give constructive responses to the followers' criticism. As such, the Obama White House arguably failed to use social media to build bridges with critics of the agreement leading to a possible narrowing of the win-sets between the public and the administration (Bjola & Manor, 2018).

On the Iranian side, President Rouhani's government did not face much difficulty in defending the deal. Although the conservative figures in Iran's power bases, most notably the IRGC and its allies, criticized the accord as an invasive affront to the country's sovereignty and a capitulation to foreign adversaries, particularly the U.S. (Erdbrink & Gladstone, 2015), the majority of the conservative figures in the Iranian politics have been supportive of Rouhani's deal (which was necessarily approved by Ayatollah Khamenei) (Sabet, 2015). Rouhani's argument that Iran's economy was faltering due to the heavy economic sanctions, and the claim that with the JCPOA, a new age was to begin, were finally rewarded in 2017, when he secured a second term on the presidential elections.

In the U.S., legislative blocking was the more serious follow-up to the JCPOA agreement. Every republican in the Congress who voted on the agreement, opposed its ratification or its implementation. One year after the deal was signed, the battle between the executive and legislative powers continued. As the JCPOA was only a political commitment that offered the removal

of sanctions, it lacked the Congress's support and did not bind the next president (Ramsey, 2015). In 2016, during the implementation process of the deal, the House of Representatives passed, overwhelmingly, an amendment to block a $17.6 billion deal for Boeing to sell aircraft to Iran Air. Congress also threatened to block Iran's access to the American financial system, a way of neutralizing the sanctions relief. Opponents have also objected to the Energy Department's decision to purchase heavy water — used in plutonium production — from Iran to remove it from the country (Sanger, 2016).

Another controversial issue related to the legislature and the U.S. Treasury was a planned giveaway of frozen Iranian assets for $150 billion (USD 50 billion according to the Treasury). However, only a fraction of that amount had actually been returned. A poll conducted on the Iranian responses to the implementation of the deal questioned slightly more than 1,000 Iranians, a small sample, and demonstrated that the majority of the respondents had little confidence that the U.S. would have lived up to its side of the bargain (Sanger, 2016). That seemed to reflect anecdotal evidence in Tehran's markets regarding the failure of the agreement because investors had not flocked back to the country and banks had been reluctant to resume normal activities. A *New York Times* analysis stated that Republican opposition to the agreement "seems born of genuine distaste for the deal's details, inherent distrust of President Obama, intense loyalty to Israel and an expansive view of the role that sanctions have played beyond preventing Iran's nuclear abilities" (Steinhauer, 2015). Thus, Obama's opposition regularly referred to the short-sightedness of the deal, as it did not consider broader geopolitical issues or the interests of the U.S.' traditional allies. As believed by many, Obama was eager to please the Iranian government and Iranian Americans (Gharib, 2015) to the point that he disregarded his allies.

In 2015, many in the administration, amongst them U.S. senators, persuaded the president to ask the Senate to ratify the JCPOA for it to become a treaty, a legally binding document recognized by the international law. Since he did not do this, knowing for sure that the public is not ready for a nuclear deal at that time, opponents of the deal continue to blame President Obama for the failure of the JCPOA, instead of President Trump who only pulled out of President Obama's "personal commitment" (Rudalevige, 2018). Obama's decision could be partially blamed for Trump's victory in the sense that he was deaf for the conservatives' fears and demands, but most importantly, he might be blamed for the current administration's war rhetoric and that today only warmongering interest groups are behind the U.S. government. Reportedly, a power base was gathering around President Trump, which was composed of interest groups with a backing of Mujahidin-e-Khalq (MEK), Israel and the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf with an agenda that aimed at the sectarianizing of the conflicts in the Middle East (Sahimi, 2019).

Thus, the debate that followed the signing of the JCPOA and its implementation and the future of the U.S.-Iranian relations revealed the weaknesses of President Obama's deal; it highlighted the importance of the U.S.' traditional partners in the Middle East and their perception of growing Iranian military threat despite the conclusion of the agreement. This debate proved that throughout the negotiation process that led to the nuclear deal, the Obama administration had the false assumption that his government and President Rouhani's government represented the win-sets of the U.S. and Iranian elites and the public. Although this assumption was partially confirmed by the public debate in the U.S. and supreme leader Khamenei's acquiescence to the negotiations, the

strong voices in the background suggested that this deal was not designed for being durable.

4. The Alliances of the Middle East

In the post-2001 period, the number of direct and indirect political and military frictions between the U.S. and Iran was multiplied. Besides the negotiations on Iran's nuclear enrichment, Iran was also heavily involved in Iraq's domestic politics, and Hezbollah, Iran's proxy, was confronted by Israel in the 2006 Lebanon war. In addition, Iran became militarily involved in the Syrian civil war, directly threatening Israeli territories (which resulted in preventive Israeli strikes against Iranian targets in Syria since the Iranian state entered the territory) (Kershner, 2019). Iranian Quds forces fought against the ISIS terrorist organization in Syria and Iraq; and finally, Iranian proxies are currently fighting Arab militaries in Yemen, while the Houthis (who are associated with Iran according to Western governments) have attacked and seriously damaged Saudi Arabia's oil infrastructure in the heart of the kingdom (U.S. Department of State, 2020).

Although President Obama withdrew most of the U.S. forces from Iraq and Afghanistan, by the time of Donald Trump's inauguration, the U.S. military became entangled in these regional conflicts and instead of the planned U.S. demilitarization and the pivot to Asia, the U.S. remained militarily committed to the Middle East. For Iran, the U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf region and especially in Iraq has posed a security threat. As Major General Qassem Soleimani of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) pointed out, the U.S. forces in Iraq physically cut Iran from its allies in the Levant; this separation emboldened Israel for its war on the Lebanese Hezbollah in 2006 (Khamenei.ir, 2019). Thus, we

can see the growing sentiment of the mutual threat perception in the U.S. and Iranian politics since the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, which removed an adversary but resulted in the protracted military presence of the "Great Satan" on Iran's eastern borders.

For years, the Iranian conservatives refused direct talks with the U.S. while backchannel diplomatic moves failed to gain results for the pragmatist governments (Éva, 2019). Although in 2006, Ayatollah Khamenei approved direct talks with the U.S. regarding the Iraqi domestic politics, he made it clear that any dialogue should consider the American military withdrawal from the country as a prerequisite for cooperation (Esfandiari, 2006). As this would have been unimaginable at that time and Iran was involved according to the US in the armed insurgency in Iraq against the U.S., a direct dialogue was not feasible. By 2011, after the U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq was completed, the Iranian foreign policy elite had reached a consensus that a certain amount of relationship with the United States served Iran's national interest without defining the nature of the relationship. After Ayatollah Khamenei permitted direct nuclear negotiations, the debate regarding whether dialogue with the United States could extend to regional conflicts was finished. Ayatollah Khamenei insisted that the nuclear diplomacy should be limited to the nuclear issue without its extension to the geopolitics of the Middle East. If the nuclear deal yielded positive results, then diplomacy could be extended to other issues, despite the likely opposition from Ayatollah Khamenei's power bases. However, a relationship offer was indefinitely postponed until a nuclear deal was successfully implemented (Parsi, 2017a).

From the Obama administration's perspective, the nuclear deal prevented war with Iran, while it held a promise of improved

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relations. At the same time, it provided room for the re-examination of the U.S.'s relationship with Israel and Saudi Arabia, its traditional allies in the Middle East. Certain U.S. armymen adopted the position that the Americans should re-examine all their traditional relationships in the region, primarily with Sunni-dominated nations. A détente with Iran was considered a good option in the direction of creating a post-U.S.-dominated Middle Eastern balance of power. As Trita Parsi aptly argues "[t]he United States was frozen in a pattern of relations that were no longer productive and could force it into unnecessary wars. To pivot to Asia, these patterns needed to be broken, starting with a new relationship with Iran. Conversely, to prevent the United States' reorienting itself, the nuclear deal needed to be killed—hence Saudi Arabia and Israel's staunch opposition to it. The lesson from concluding a weak deal like the JCPOA was that neither the United States nor Iran has the capacity to compartmentalize the nuclear deal so that it can remain unaffected by continued and escalating tensions in other aspects of their relationship. The enmity between the United States and Iran runs deeper than just the nuclear issue and involves the geopolitical order in the region and Iran's position therein" (Parsi, 2017a: 373).

Besides domestic criticism and a legislative battle against the implementation of the JCPOA, the U.S.'s traditional allies recognized that they needed to make steps to prevent a regional order in which they would remain alone without U.S. support in a fair competition with Iran who, based on its size, population and resources, would become soon a middle power. "While U.S. and Saudi interests were diverging, Riyadh found itself viewing the region in an increasingly similar light as the Israelis. Once clearly taboo, collaboration with Israel was increasingly discussed in Saudi Arabia. For both countries, Obama's deal largely resolved the immediate matter of the nuclear question. However, it did so by

undermining their mutual core interest in excluding Iran from the regional order. The JCPOA addressed the pretext for Israel and Saudi Arabia's tensions with Iran, but not the roots of their conflict" (Parsi, 2017b).

The JCPOA was most likely the best outcome the two states could have reached under the current state of affairs. This is partly because Iran's military doctrine, which is represented and executed solely by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei's power base, is value-based in its roots. "Generally, hardliners and conservatives view the United States more negatively and as a source of insecurity and instability in the region. They also do not see negotiations with the United States as a viable way of easing tensions and settling disputes. For this group, the United States cannot be trusted. It seeks to foment uprising in Iran regardless of who is in the office" (Tabatabai, 2019, p. 12). Therefore, the Iranian hardliners are always rather sceptical regarding the U.S. military presence in their close neighbourhood. The US maintains its heavy presence in the Persian Gulf through military bases, and as tensions are growing between the Gulf States and Iran, it is highly unlikely that the U.S. would withdraw its forces on a massive scale in the near future.

The nullification of the JCPOA agreement by President Trump provoked a growing attention towards Iran's geopolitical interests in the Middle East. While President Obama neglected Iran's arm movements and armament development through the JCPOA negotiations, the U.S.' partners in the Middle East were well aware of the fact that Iran would not cease its ballistic missiles-related activities and its arms supplies to its proxies. While during President Obama's presidency, the signing of the JCPOA was considered a precondition for a détente between the U.S. and Iran, the reconciliation of regional conflicts and Iran's abandonment of

its missiles program and its proxies became the precondition for President Trump's government for renegotiating a JCPOA-like deal. However, as Iran has returned to the path of developing its nuclear program (Wolgelenter & Sanger, 2019), negotiations seem to be a complex process. Thus, ignoring Iran's threat perceptions and disregarding the geopolitics of the Middle East during the JCPOA debate led to the conclusion of a weak deal whose nullification created disastrous conditions in the region.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I focused on the evolution of U.S.-Iranian relations in the context of the nuclear negotiations as well as the implementation process of the JCPOA in the Middle Eastern geopolitical context. I argued that in the post-Cold War international order, conservatives became dominant in the U.S. and Iranian foreign policy-making and they have been emboldened by their own and their Middle Eastern partners' mutual threat perceptions. This created an environment in which a grand bargain or a détente between the U.S. and Iran was impossible. President Obama needed to find overlaps in the win-sets of the two countries that he narrowly identified between his administration and President Hassan Rouhani's government. He did not realize that his support base is insufficient for preserving the nuclear deal with Iran, not to mention a détente or a grand bargain. As expected, the JCPOA was slowly blocked and dismantled during the implementation process. President Trump made a political decision, which might be unfavourable for the global order; yet, his decision is in line with the win-sets of the American and Iranian elites and their domestic and foreign supporters. President Obama's weak deal did not prevent the escalation of military conflicts in the Middle East and as the result of the nullification of the nuclear

deal, the militarized geopolitics in the Middle East are now hindering the reopening of the nuclear-related negotiations. A détente or a grand bargain between the two nations is farther than anytime earlier. Putnam's two-level game theory has provided a basic but useful tool for highlighting the structural bases of the difficulty of reaching a political deal on the Iranian nuclear program. However, a sole Level 1 and Level 2 analysis has proved that a deal was reachable. The Level 3 analysis, on the other hand, has highlighted the week points of a classic two-level game approach and highlighted the importance of alliances in the equation. The U.S. military encirclement of Iran in the Middle East and the growing military assertiveness of the Persian state are the main hindrances that make a nuclear deal with Iran untenable at the moment. As Iran understands the U.S. presence as an existential threat, and Iran's military entanglement in the regional conflicts is only increasing the members of the anti-Iran alliance, only through the mutual deconstruction of "military presence" is it possible to reach a tenable deal on all three levels.

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