

“Maximum Pressure:” The Trump Administration and Iran

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While campaigning for President in 2015 and 2016, Donald Trump never missed an opportunity to attack the major foreign policy achievement of President Barack Obama: the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), an agreement reached between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States, European Union, China, and Russia in June 2015 that halted Iran’s development of nuclear weapons in exchange for relief from economic sanctions. Criticizing the deal had been popular among Obama’s detractors, but Trump’s denunciations were particularly vociferous. “My number one priority,” he declared, “is to dismantle the disastrous deal with Iran.”¹ He called it a “terrible” deal, one negotiated “in desperation,” which he vowed to rip up as soon as he took office.² Iran came up, again and again, as yet another area where the Obama Administration had surrendered U.S. interests and initiative.

During its first two years in office, the Trump Administration pursued a policy towards Iran defined by pain and pressure. From abandoning the JCPOA, to adopting a hard-line against Iran through sanctions and rhetoric, the Trump Administration pivoted away from the diplomatic gestures of the Obama Administration, in a determined effort to apply “maximum pressure” and even, some believe, to bring about the collapse of the Islamic Republic itself.³ It is undeniable that this new U.S. campaign has made life more difficult for the Iranian government. But there is little evidence that sanctions alone will compel Iran to negotiate, or that such pressure will bring about the collapse of the regime. The campaign, led by ardent “Iran hawks” like John Bolton and Michael Pompeo, represents a fixation with Iran as the root of all evil plaguing the Middle East, and yet it lacks coherence or purpose, beyond the naked desire to inflict pain on Iran

¹ Sarah Begley, “Read Donald Trump’s Speech to AIPAC,” *Time*, 21 March 2016.

² Katy Tur, “Donald Trump Weighs in on Iran Deal,” *NBC News*, 14 July 2015, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/donald-trump-weighs-iran-deal-n391926>.

³ Vali Nasr, “The Iran Regime-Change Crew is Back,” *The Atlantic*, 25 April 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/iran-nuclear-deal-bolton-trump-regime-change/558785/>.

whenever and however possible. Within the embattled, chaotic Trump Administration, Iran competes with other, arguably more pressing foreign and domestic issues. The ultimate outcome of the U.S. turn towards “maximum pressure” will be hard to assess, apart from the pain it has inflicted, and will continue to inflict, on Iran’s population.

The United States and Iran: Let’s Make a Deal

Why the United States should be so concerned with Iran is not, on the face of it, a confusing notion. Iran is resource-rich, possessing the world’s fourth largest oil reserves and second largest gas reserves, though its domestic economy is diverse compared to those of other oil-producing Middle Eastern states. Straddling the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, South Asia, and the Caucasus, in geographic terms it is one of the most strategically important countries on earth. The Iranian population is well-educated, and while it is ethnically diverse it is held together by a strong sense of national identity forged by thousands of years of history, literary tradition, and common culture. Unlike other Middle Eastern states, including Syria, Egypt and Iraq, Iran was never formerly colonized, and its borders are the result of centuries of geopolitical shifts rather than the casual whims of European imperialists.

Before the Islamic Revolution of 1978-1979, Iran was the most important American ally in the Middle East. Iran’s ruler, the Shah, owed his position to U.S. support. In August 1953, a CIA-assisted *coup d’état* removed the democratic constitutionalist Mohammed Mossadegh from power and replaced him with a military regime led by the Shah, who harnessed U.S. aid and oil revenues to build up Iran economically while utilizing his secret police to crush dissent. The monarchy lost its credibility as the Shah’s modernization alienated large swathes of the population, rewarding a small urban elite with disproportionate wealth while most Iranians lived in abject poverty.⁴

Opposition to the Shah grew as income inequality and inflation ate away at Iran’s economy. Amidst a national crisis in the late 1970s, the Shah, who was dying of cancer, fled the country, paving the way for a new government led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Denunciations of the U.S. as the “Great Satan” responsible for the Shah’s tyranny, as well as the November 1979 storming of the American embassy and the ensuing hostage crisis, led to a rapid deterioration in U.S.-Iranian relations. The United States acted to contain Iran, first by backing Iraqi President Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and later by supporting Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and the other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which view Iran as a major threat.

Although there have been repeated efforts to establish a *modus vivendi* between Washington and Tehran, most notably in the late 1990s during the administration of reformist President Mohammed Khatami, the

⁴ The best survey of the U.S.-Iranian relationships remains James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); see also Richard Cottam, *Iran and the United States: A Cold War Case Study* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989); Barry Rubin, *Paved with Good Intentions: The American Experience and Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); James F. Goode, *The United States and Iran, 1946-51: the Diplomacy of Neglect* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), and *The United States and Iran: in the Shadow of Mosaddeq* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), Mark J. Gasiorowski, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Shah: Building a Client State in Iran* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

relationship between the U.S. and Iran has been characterized by suspicion and antagonism.⁵ Iran's government is repressive and authoritarian, controlled by a small clique of clerics and politicians who enforce a restrictive social order while jailing or silencing dissidents. In the twenty-first century the Islamic Republic has widened its involvement in regional struggles, taking advantage of the mayhem which ensued from the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the outbreak of civil war in Syria in 2011 to expand its profile through proxy groups, including Hezbollah in Lebanon and Shi'a militias in Syria and Iraq. The regime's pursuit of nuclear technology reached an advanced stage in the early 2000s, drawing condemnation from the international community and a fresh round of international sanctions.

Such adventurism has little popular basis for support within Iran, where power is held primarily by the clerical establishment. Though difficult to measure accurately, it appears that most Iranians hold positive views of the United States and of Americans in general, particularly among the younger generation who grew up in the shadow of the Islamic Revolution.⁶ Frustrated from years of mismanagement and repression, Iran's educated middle-class came out in their thousands during the 2009 Green Revolution, demanding greater freedoms and economic opportunities. The regime retained control of the country, but its legitimacy was shaken, and the need to deliver greater opportunities to average Iranians grew more immediate.⁷

The Obama Administration, wary of further entangling the United States in Middle East conflicts, adopted a policy that prioritized economic pressure as a way to force Iran to the negotiating table. The policy did not represent a major departure from previous approaches to Iran under President Bill Clinton or George W. Bush.⁸ Rather, it was notable for its transactional character, as well as the apparent friendly rapport struck at the negotiating table by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif.

After prolonged talks, the relatively moderate Iranian administration of President Hasan Rouhani agreed to limit Iran's capacity to enrich uranium and open nuclear facilities to international inspection. In exchange, Rouhani won relief from economic sanctions, which he used to justify the agreement to the Iranian people and conservatives within the Iranian government. The news was rapturously received by young Iranians, who paraded through the streets flashing peace signs, celebrating what many felt to be the dawn of a new age, the moment when Iran would be allowed to rejoin the international community after decades of isolation.⁹

⁵ Barbara Slavin, *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, the U.S., and the Twisted Path of Confrontation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007): 103-120, 175-192.

⁶ "How Young Iranians View America," *New York Times*, 13 December 2013, <https://takingnote.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/12/13/how-young-iranians-view-america/>.

⁷ Abbas Milani, "The Green Movement," *The Iran Primer*, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/green-movement>.

⁸ Suzanne Maloney, "Progress of the Obama Administration's Policy Toward Iran," Brookings Institute, 15 November 2011, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/progress-of-the-obama-administrations-policy-toward-iran/>.

⁹ Saeed Kamali Dehghan and Ian Black, "Thousands Take to Iran Streets to Celebrate the Historic Nuclear Deal," *The Guardian*, 14 July 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/14/joy-in-tehran-at-end-to-isolation-but-hardliner-reaction-to-nuclear-deal-feared>.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed in July 2015 was the most significant foreign policy achievement of the Obama Administration and a major milestone in U.S.-Iranian relations.¹⁰ It was an imperfect arrangement, and did not signify a more general rapprochement. The U.S. did not reopen its embassy in Tehran, and sanctions, which lay outside the scope of the JCPOA, remained in place. Official U.S. policy towards Iran remained one of confrontation, and Obama officials were quick to denounce Iran's ballistic missile tests in early 2016 even as it successfully negotiated the release of detained *Washington Post* journalist Jason Rezaian and allowed Iran to gain access to funds frozen in the U.S. since 1979.¹¹

Nevertheless, the agreement bore symbolic importance, signaling to foreign investors that Iran was now open for business. European firms, including major oil companies like Total and Shell, prepared plans to exploit Iran's vast under-utilized oil and gas fields.¹² Boeing became the first major American company to announce a deal with the Iranian government, a \$16 billion contract to supply commercial aircraft to Iran's national airline.¹³

While Obama's supporters hailed the JCPOA as a crucial first step in the thawing of tensions between Washington and Tehran, the deal's detractors denounced it as a cop-out, one that merely delayed Iran's nuclear plans and granted it access to billions in offshore accounts and oil revenues. Among the most vociferous opponents to the JCPOA were Beltway pundits like Mark Dubowitz of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies (FDD),¹⁴ former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton,¹⁵ and Republican presidential candidate President Donald Trump, who called it the "dumbest" deal in U.S. history.¹⁶ Trump's opponent and the presumptive favorite in the 2016 presidential election, Hillary Clinton,

¹⁰ "2015 Final Nuclear Deal," *The Iran Primer*, Published 15 July 2018, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/2015-final-nuclear-deal>.

¹¹ Joel Schectman, "U.S. Imposes Ballistic Missile Sanctions on Iran After Prisoner Release," *Reuters World News*, 17 January 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-sanctions-idUSKCN0UV0P5>.

¹² Stanley Reed, "Total Signs Deal with Iran, Exposing It to Big Risks and Rewards," *New York Times*, 3 July 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/03/business/energy-environment/iran-total-france-gas-energy.html>; Jackie Northam, "Energy Giant Shell Inks Oil Deal with Iran," *NPR*, 7 December 2016, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/12/07/504729570/energy-giant-shell-inks-oil-deal-with-iran>.

¹³ Thomas Erdbrink, "Iran and Boeing Sign \$16.6 Billion Deal on Sale of 80 Aircraft," *New York Times*, 11 December 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/11/world/middleeast/iran-boeing-airplane-deal.html>.

¹⁴ Michael Singh, "How to Get a Better Deal with Iran," *Foreign Policy*, 17 August 2015 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/17/how-to-get-a-better-deal-with-iran-congress-reject-nuclear-treaty/>.

¹⁵ John Bolton, "To Stop Iran's Bomb, Bomb Iran," *The New York Times*, 26 March 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/26/opinion/to-stop-irans-bomb-bomb-iran.html>.

¹⁶ "Trump Calls Iran Nuclear Deal 'Dumbest' He's Ever Seen," *Washington Post*, 6 September 2016, http://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/trump-talks-iran-iraq-russia-and-china/2016/09/06/01921092-746d-11e6-9781-49e591781754_video.html.

claimed she would uphold the agreement.¹⁷ But Clinton lost the election, and Trump swept into office promising to withdraw from the JCPOA, without offering a substantive argument of what should come in its place.

“The Worst Deal in History”

At first, the new administration moved slowly. The JCPOA was, after all, a standing agreement, one which the U.S. had negotiated with a coalition of international partners. Key voices within the administration, including Secretary of Defense James Mattis, National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, advised Trump to adhere to the JCPOA: they warned that pulling out would free Iran from its restrictions and weaken U.S. credibility.¹⁸ Mattis himself testified to Congress in October 2017 that the deal was in the national interest, citing evidence that Iran was in full compliance with its provisions.¹⁹

Rather than scrap the deal, Trump vowed to enforce it as vigorously as possible, warning that sanctions would “snap-back” in response to any perceived violation. The Republican Party had criticized Obama’s apparent unwillingness to confront Iran more aggressively, and supported the new president’s decision to put Iran “on notice” early in 2017.²⁰ Commentators hostile to the deal remained wary of tearing it up, suggesting Trump could continue to abide by its measures while bringing new diplomatic and economic pressure to bear on Tehran.²¹ Dubowitz of the FDD suggested that the U.S. approach Iran as President Ronald Reagan had approached the Soviet Union, deploying “covert and overt economic, financial, political, diplomatic, cyber and military power” to undermine Tehran and “roll back the Iranian threat.” Dubowitz scoffed at Trump’s idea that the deal could be “rigorously enforced,” and strongly implied that it would be best to dump it completely.²²

Pressure to terminate the deal continued to mount, for a variety of reasons. Trump clearly hated the JCPOA, a monument to his predecessor and one that he had repeatedly vowed to smash. Resistance from advisors

¹⁷ Mark Landler, “For Hillary Clinton and John Kerry, Divergent Paths to Iran Nuclear Talks,” *The New York Times*, 2 May 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/03/us/politics/for-hillary-clinton-and-john-kerry-divergent-paths-to-iran-nuclear-talks.html>.

¹⁸ Elaina Johnson, “Trump Prepares to Wound Iran Deal—and Then Save It,” *Politico*, 3 October 2017 <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/10/03/trump-iran-nuclear-deal-243427>.

¹⁹ Zeeshan Aleem, “Trump’s Defense Secretary Says It’s In the US’s Interest to Stay in the Iran Deal,” *Vox*, 3 October 2017, <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/10/3/16411002/trump-mattis-iran-deal-comply>.

²⁰ Karen DeYoung, “Trump Administration Says It’s Putting Iran ‘On Notice’ Following Missile Test,” *Washington Post*, 1 February 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/2017/02/01/fc5ce3d2-e8b0-11e6-80c2-30e57e57e05d_story.html.

²¹ Eric B. Lorber, “President Trump and the Iran Nuclear Deal,” *Foreign Policy*, 16 November 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/11/16/president-trump-and-the-iran-nuclear-deal/>.

²² “The Delusion of the Iran Nuclear Deal,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 March 2017, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2017/03/23/the-delusion-of-the-iran-nuclear-deal/>.

diminished over time. On October 13, 2017, Trump made a speech from the White House in which he denounced the “murderous” Iranian regime, called the JCPOA “one of the worst and most one-sided transactions the United States has ever entered into,” and vowed to hold back on re-certification until the agreement had been amended.²³ The speech did not include any plans to scrap the JCPOA. Trump repeated his assertion that the deal would be abandoned in January 2018, though he did not formerly announce the U.S. withdrawal.²⁴

In March 2018, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson exited the Trump Administration. He was replaced by CIA Director and former congressman Michael Pompeo. Shortly thereafter, H.R. McMaster resigned as National Security Advisor, replaced by John Bolton, a noted “Iran hawk” who had urged military action against Iran’s nuclear program in 2015.²⁵ The personnel change marked a crucial shift in the administration’s approach to the Iran question. Both Pompeo and Bolton had histories of vociferous opposition to the regime in Tehran. Pompeo has consistently labeled Iran as the world’s greatest sponsor of terrorism and the source of regional instability. Bolton, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations and ardent proponent of U.S. unilateralism, spent his time in the political wilderness delivering speeches at meetings of the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK), an Iranian dissident group, where he called for regime change in Tehran.²⁶ He has also denounced the JCPOA as “the worst act of appeasement in American history.”²⁷

With Bolton and Pompeo at Trump’s side, any reservations about terminating U.S. adherence to the agreement quickly vanished. On May 8, President Trump announced that the United States would no longer certify the JCPOA, but would instead abandon the deal, which Trump argued Iran had concluded in bad faith. “The Iran deal is defective at its core...In just a short period of time, the world’s leading state sponsor of terror will be on the cusp of acquiring the world’s most dangerous weapons.” Iran, according to Trump, was in fact still working on a nuclear weapons program, and intended to develop them in secret even as it appeared to abide by the 2015 agreement.²⁸ Secretary of State Pompeo announced before the Heritage Foundation that the United States would be imposing new sanctions on Iran, including measures designed to

²³ “Remarks by President Trump on Iran Strategy,” The White House, 13 October 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-iran-strategy/>.

²⁴ “Statement by the President on the Iran Nuclear Deal,” The White House, 12 January 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-iran-nuclear-deal/>.

²⁵ “To Stop Iran’s Bomb, Bomb Iran,” *The New York Times*, 26 March 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/26/opinion/to-stop-irans-bomb-bomb-iran.html>.

²⁶ Bolton has received approximately \$180,000 from the MEK for his speeches, according to *The Guardian*. See Saeed Kamali Dehghan, “Who Is the Iranian Group Targeted by Bombers and Beloved of Trump Allies?” *The Guardian*, 2 July 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/02/iran-mek-cult-terrorist-trump-allies-john-bolton-rudy-giuliani>.

²⁷ Amb. John Bolton Addressing the AFA 2016 Conference, Published 25 August 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVG0TlxfJK4>.

²⁸ “Remarks by President Trump on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action,” The White House, 8 May 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-joint-comprehensive-plan-action/>.

reduce Iran's oil exports to "zero," unless it acceded to a list of demands that included shutting down its ballistic missile program and ending its support for Hezbollah and other regional proxies.²⁹ The demands were extreme, more akin to terms delivered to a defeated nation at the end of a long and bitter war, and offer virtually no chance of renewed negotiations with Tehran, which denounced Pompeo's speech and vowed to remain in the JCPOA.

Unfettered by the JCPOA, the United States was ready to "crush" Iran with economic and even military pressure, a policy that Suzanne Maloney of the Brookings Institution has called an implicit call for regime change in Tehran.³⁰ The goal, wrote Richard Goldberg of FDD, was for the U.S. to bring the Iranian economy "to its knees."³¹ "We will not be duped, cheated or intimidated," Bolton warned. "The days of impunity for Tehran and its enablers are over... We are watching, and we will come after you."³² The gloves were coming off.

"Maximum Pressure" and Regime Change in Tehran

The Rouhani government denounced the demands and indicated that Iran would remain in the agreement despite the U.S. withdrawal. The other adherents, including the European Union, China and Russia, all signaled their intention to remain in the JCPOA. Among advocates of the deal, the news of the U.S. withdrawal was met with alarm.³³ Even Mark Dubowitz of the FDD, perhaps the most vocal critic of the deal, claimed he was disappointed and had hoped for a revision of the JCPOA terms, rather than an outright cancellation.³⁴ As of early 2019, there is no evidence to suggest that Iran has not complied with the terms of the JCPOA, or that it is once again contemplating a nuclear weapons program. But for supporters of the new policy, these concerns were secondary. Without the JCPOA to hold them back, Pompeo, Bolton, and other "Iran hawks" have leapt at the chance to exert "maximum pressure," in the hopes that it will lead to a deterioration of conditions inside Iran and, perhaps, facilitate the collapse of the Islamic Republic itself.

²⁹ "After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy," US Department of State, 21 May 2018, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/05/282301.htm>.

³⁰ Nicole Gaouette and Lara Koran, "Pompeo Threatens US Will 'Crush' Iran Through Sanctions and Pressure Campaign," *CNN Politics*, 21 May 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/21/politics/pompeo-iran-speech/index.html>.

³¹ "Trump Now Needs to Bring Iran's Economy To Its Knees," *New York Post*, 8 May 2018, <https://nypost.com/2018/05/08/trump-now-needs-to-bring-irans-economy-to-its-knees/>.

³² Ed Kilgore, "Bolton Drops Verbal Bombs on Iran," *New York Magazine*, 25 September 2018, <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/09/bolton-threatens-iran.html>.

³³ Wendy Sherman, "How We Got the Iran Deal, and Why We'll Miss It," *Foreign Affairs*, Accessed 4 January 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-08-13/how-we-got-iran-deal>.

³⁴ Gardiner Harris, "He Was a Tireless Critic of the Iran Deal. Now He Insists He Wanted To Save It," *The New York Times*, 13 May 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/13/us/politics/mark-dubowitz-iran-deal.html>.

President Rouhani used the JCPOA to win re-election in 2017, promising a new era of prosperity for Iranians after years of sanctions.³⁵ Instead, Iran's economy has stalled, inflation has skyrocketed, and foreign firms have cancelled deals in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA. Public protests, long a staple of Iranian politics, exploded in size and emotional power in 2017, as thousands of Iranians took to the streets to call attention to the stagnant economy, declining standards of living and rampant corruption. Women were seen protesting rules mandating the *hijab*, while crowds chanted anti-clerical messages, including a call from the Green Revolution: "marg bar dictator," death to the dictator, referring to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.³⁶

Pompeo's State Department has latched on to these protests, arguing that they are characteristic of a regime on its last legs. But the policy, when broken down, makes little sense. The U.S. claims to support the people of Iran, yet argues that new economic sanctions, which are sure to make life harder for millions of ordinary Iranians, are necessary to punish the regime for its regional adventurism and authoritarian practices at home. The ultimate goal of sanctions, Pompeo says, is to create an outcome "where the Iranian people could have better lives than they have today under this tyrannical regime."³⁷

Apart from rhetorical support and economic sanctions, the U.S. approach has been to exert pressure and see what happens next. The most comprehensive studies indicate that armed conflict with Iran would be costly and potentially pointless, as the clerical establishment could use the foreign threat as a way to mobilize popular support and crush dissent.³⁸ In September 2018, Bolton investigated a possible air strike against Iran, in retaliation for an attack by Iran-backed militias on the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. The option was rejected by then-Secretary of Defense Mattis, who feared an escalation with Tehran.³⁹ Instead, the Trump Administration is attempting to engineer regime change "on the cheap," chiefly by tightening economic pressures around Iran and exacerbating the country's domestic problems. The belief appears to be that the Iranian people, who have been oppressed for decades by an unpopular and autocratic clerical establishment, will in time throw off the regime and choose a new government, though it is not clear what kind of government that will be.

Some potential replacements include the MEK, which has cultivated ties with a number of Trump officials including Bolton and Rudolf Giuliani, President Trump's attorney. The MEK, founded as an Islamic-Marxist terrorist organization, allied itself with Saddam Hussein's Iraq during the 1980s, and has since morphed into

³⁵ Thomas Erdbrink, "Rouhani Wins Re-Election in Iran by a Wide Margin," *New York Times*, 20 May 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/20/world/middleeast/iran-election-hassan-rouhani.html>.

³⁶ Asef Bayat, "The Fire That Fueled the Iran Protests," *The Atlantic*, 27 January 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/iran-protest-mashaad-green-class-labor-economy/551690/>.

³⁷ "Pompeo Says 'Ultimate Goal' of Sanctions Is Better Life For Iranians," *Radio Farda*, 4 January 2019, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/pompeo-says-ultimate-goal-of-sanctions-is-better-life-for-iranians/29691244.html>.

³⁸ Anthony H. Cordesman, "Iran and the Gulf Military Balance," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 4 October 2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/iran-and-gulf-military-balance-1>.

³⁹ Eric Schmitt and Mark Landler, "Pentagon Officials Fear Bolton's Actions Increase Risk of Clash with Iran," *New York Times*, 13 January 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/13/us/politics/bolton-iran-pentagon.html>.

an advocacy group for regime change in Iran. Dismissed as “nothing more than a cult” as late as 2011,⁴⁰ the MEK receives an undetermined amount of funding from Gulf states like Saudi Arabia and the UEA, and its popularity within Iran is negligible.

There is also the possibility of returning Iran to monarchical rule. Soon after coming to power, the Trump Administration considered shooting a video of President Trump standing alongside Reza Pahlavi, the son the deposed Shah. In 2018, the Pahlavi heir increased his media exposure, calling for a return to “secular democracy” in Iran.⁴¹ A new group, Iran Revival (also known by its Persian name, *Farashgard*) has formed around Pahlavi and is committed to overthrowing the Islamic Republic through peaceful civil disobedience.⁴² Pahlavi’s political skills are largely untested as he has never held office, and the degree of support for a return to monarchy within Iran is unknown, though protestors have used pro-monarchy slogans, and nostalgia for the monarchy is growing, thanks in part to a media campaign to revitalize the Shah’s reputation funded by Iran’s U.S.-based diaspora.⁴³

The current regime in Iran is not popular, and faces a rising tide of popular discontent. The administration of Hasan Rouhani has failed in its promise to deliver new economic opportunities to Iran’s middle-classes, and the government’s new budget promises greater austerity.⁴⁴ But it strains credulity to imagine a new government led by either the Pahlavi heir or the MEK sweeping peacefully into power in Iran.

Since 1979, opposition groups in Iran have been repressed. The Green Revolution was put down with state violence, its leaders jailed or suppressed, and no political figure has emerged to carry on its mantle of reform. The distinction between “conservative” and “moderate” politicians is largely an arbitrary one, as true reformers face immense challenges, including a constitution that leaves most executive power in the hands of the Supreme Leader. Institutions such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) are committed to upholding the *status quo*. Economic sanctions, while punishing average Iranians, are likely to bolster such groups, which can navigate black market channels and use economic hardship to cement their positions of

⁴⁰ “MEK Rally Planned for Friday at State Department,” *Foreign Policy*, 25 August 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/08/25/mek-rally-planned-for-friday-at-state-department/>.

⁴¹ Nahal Toosi, “Son of Deposed Iranian Shah Calls for U.S.-Backed Regime Change,” *Politico*, 13 December 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/12/13/trumps-anti-iran-push-boosts-a-royal-outcast-1063441>.

⁴² Iran Revival—فرشگرد, <https://iranrevival.com>.

⁴³ “Producing Nostalgia: Iranian Diaspora TV’s Rebranding of the Shah,” *Al Jazeera*, 10 June 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/listeningpost/2018/06/producing-nostalgia-iranian-diaspora-tv-rebranding-shah-180609105115161.html>.

⁴⁴ “Iran Presents Budget to Counter ‘Cruel’ US Sanctions,” *Bourse & Bazaar*, 25 December 2018, <https://www.bourseandbazaar.com/news-1/2018/12/25/iran-presents-budget-to-counter-cruel-us-sanctions>.

preference within such sectors as the oil industry.⁴⁵ The American hope for regime change in Iran is a “pipe dream,”⁴⁶ a “fantasy,”⁴⁷ “delusional”⁴⁸ and a “recipe for chaos.”⁴⁹

Nevertheless, the Trump Administration has kept up the pressure. The U.S. vowed to impose secondary sanctions on any company or government that trades with Iran. In August 2018 the State Department announced the creation of a new Iran Action Group; the fact that the announcement coincided almost perfectly with the anniversary of the 1953 CIA *coup d'état* was, according to the Department of State's spokespeople, entirely coincidental. The group released a report in 2018, detailing Iran's crimes and insisting that it was to blame for most of the Middle East's chronic problems.⁵⁰ In January 2019, the National Security Council appointed Richard Goldberg of FDD to the newly-created post of Director for Countering Iranian Weapons of Mass Destruction, while Secretary Pompeo insisted that the U.S. was “redoubling” its efforts to challenge Iran through diplomatic and commercial pressure.⁵¹

Secretary Pompeo toured the Middle East in January 2018, delivering a speech in Cairo that rebuked the legacy of Barack Obama, celebrated the achievements of U.S. allies like Saudi Arabia and Egypt's authoritarian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, and condemned Iran and its “wave of regional destruction.” The United States, declared Pompeo, in a breath-taking display of selective memory, “has always been, and always will be, a liberating force... We've never dreamed of domination in the Middle East. Can you say the same about Iran?”⁵²

⁴⁵ Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj, “Tougher U.S. Sanctions Will Enrich Iran's Revolutionary Guards,” *Foreign Policy*, 4 October 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/10/04/irans-revolutionary-guard-corps-wont-suffer-from-stronger-u-s-sanctions-theyll-benefit-irgc-trump-sanctions/>.

⁴⁶ Jon Wolfsthal and Julie Smith, “Pompeo's Iran Plan is a Pipe Dream,” *Foreign Policy*, 21 May 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/21/pompeos-iran-nuclear-plan-is-a-pip-dream-trump/>.

⁴⁷ Doug Bandow, “Trump's Iran Regime Change Fantasies,” *The American Conservative*, 26 July 2018, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/trumps-iran-regime-change-fantasies/>.

⁴⁸ Hamid Dabashi, “The Idea of Regime Change in Iran is Delusional,” *Al Jazeera*, 6 June 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/idea-regime-change-iran-delusional-180604165615762.html>.

⁴⁹ Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj, “Why Iran Needs Reform Before a Revolution,” *Bloomberg Opinion*, 18 July 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/idea-regime-change-iran-delusional-180604165615762.html>.

⁵⁰ “Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran's Destructive Activities,” Iran Action Group, U.S. Department of State <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/286410.pdf>.

⁵¹ Eli Lake, “America Isn't Abandoning the Fight Against Iran,” *Bloomberg Opinion*, 7 January 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2019-01-07/pompeo-u-s-isn-t-abandoning-its-fight-against-iran>.

⁵² “FULL TEXT: Mike Pompeo's Cairo Speech on Mideast Policy and Obama,” *Haaretz*, 11 January 2019, <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/full-text-secretary-of-state-pompeo-s-speech-at-the-american-university-in-cairo-1.6829117>.

But the “maximum pressure” campaign orchestrated by Pompeo’s State Department hit a few snags. The resumption of sanctions on Iran’s oil industry on November 5, 2018 was overshadowed by the administration’s decision to offer waivers to eight of Iran’s major customers. President Trump himself insisted that the waivers were necessary to protect low gasoline prices inside the United States, something he considered to be a major priority.⁵³ As a result, Iran’s oil exports fell from 2.5 million barrels per day (bpd) to 1.5 million bpd. The waivers are due to be reviewed in March 2019.

The European Union, which has vowed to remain within the JCPOA, has worked to construct a “special purpose vehicle” (SPV) that would allow European companies to do business with Iran while avoiding secondary sanctions from America.⁵⁴ It is unclear how successful the SPV will be in shoring up economic ties between Iran and Europe, where demand for Iranian oil and gas remains high, but in the long-term it may undermine the effectiveness of American sanctions, and possibly weaken U.S. centrality in global finance.⁵⁵

Then, there is Syria. President Trump astonished the world, and apparently many within his own administration, when he announced his decision to withdraw all U.S. troops from Syria on December 19, 2018.⁵⁶ During a meeting of his Cabinet the President went even further, saying that Iran could “do what it wants” in Syria after the U.S. withdrawal.⁵⁷ No timetable for withdrawal has been proposed, but the announcement came weeks after Bolton said that no U.S. troops would leave Syria until Iran had scaled back its involvement.⁵⁸ The decision to retreat from Syria has even split Bolton and Pompeo: while the former

⁵³ Gregory Brew, “Trump’s New Iranian Oil Sanctions May Inflict Pain at Home Without Serving Strategic Objectives,” *The Conversation*, 13 November 2018, <https://theconversation.com/trumps-new-iranian-oil-sanctions-may-inflict-pain-at-home-without-serving-strategic-objectives-106419>.

⁵⁴ “Iran Says Special Channel for Trade With Europe Almost Set Up,” *Al-Monitor*, 6 December 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/12/iran-spv-special-purpose-vehicle-salehi-zarif-europe-trade.html>.

⁵⁵ Jarrett Blanc, “Trump’s Risking Financial Disaster for America,” *Politico*, 13 January 2019, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/01/13/trump-iran-foreign-policy-financial-disaster-223971>.

⁵⁶ Mark Landler, et al., “Trump Withdraws U.S. Forces From Syria, Declaring ‘We Have Won Against ISIS,’” *New York Times*, 19 December 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/19/us/politics/trump-syria-turkey-troop-withdrawal.html>.

⁵⁷ “‘They Can Do What They Want:’ Trump’s Iran Comments Defy the Position of His Top Aides,” *Washington Post*, 3 January 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/they-can-do-what-they-want-trumps-iran-comments-defy-the-position-of-his-top-aides/2019/01/03/86a69d56-0f71-11e9-84fc-d58c33d6c8c7_story.html.

⁵⁸ Missy Ryan, et al., “In Syria, Trump Administration Takes on New Goal: Iranian Retreat,” *Washington Post*, 30 September 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-syria-us-takes-on-new-goal-iranian-retreat/2018/09/30/625c182a-c27f-11e8-97a5-ab1e46bb3bc7_story.html.

argued that U.S. forces would withdraw once certain conditions were met, the latter upheld the President's decision, indicating that troops would leave immediately.⁵⁹

A U.S. withdrawal from Syria leaves an opening for Iran, contradicting American commitment to "maximum pressure."⁶⁰ Whether this contradiction is ever resolved depends largely on the man in the White House, but as legal troubles mount, domestic pressures grow, and a divided Congress offers growing opposition to his agenda, it is unclear whether President Trump will have the nerve, the stomach, or the patience to carry out his advisors' wishes.

Conclusion

There is a tug-of-war going on inside the Trump White House. For the President, Iran is just one of many potential flash-points, foreign and domestic, that regularly compete for his attentions. A government shutdown over the issue of immigration and an on-going showdown with China over trade and tariffs that threatens the state of the global economy are just two of many potential issues that could draw energy away from Iran and "maximum pressure."

Consigning the signature foreign policy achievement of his predecessor to the dustbin of history was certainly a priority for Donald Trump, consistent with his personalized style of policy-making. But the evidence that he shares his advisors' commitment to toppling the regime in Tehran is less compelling. Punishing Iran has taken a back-seat to keeping oil prices low, while the off-the-cuff decision to withdraw from Syria was made without any apparent thought to how it might embolden Iran, an active supporter of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad that is sure to benefit from a U.S. departure. Bolton, who explored the possibility of striking Iran in September 2018, has frequently called for military action. Secretary Pompeo takes every opportunity he can to cast Iran as a major threat to the United States. Yet it is ultimately President Trump who will have to decide whether to take the campaign of "maximum pressure" a step further.

It is unlikely that the U.S. campaign will lead to the collapse of the Islamic Republic, or that such pressure will compel the Iranian government to return to the negotiating table. Those held in prison by the Islamic Republic, such as Princeton graduate student Xiyue Wang, will continue to languish in the absence of concrete action by the United States. The atmosphere of confrontation will continue, kept in place by the bellicose rhetoric of Bolton, Pompeo, and the clerics in Tehran. The chance of a U.S.-Iranian rapprochement that appeared, however fleetingly, in the aftermath of the 2015 nuclear deal, seems dead, at least until the end of the Trump Administration or the death of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who is seventy-nine, in poor health and without a clear successor.

One thing is certain, however. With sanctions back in place and no sign of a renewed interest in diplomacy from either the United States or Iran, the punishment meted out on the Iranian people will grow worse,

⁵⁹ Laura Rozen, "Rival Fiefdoms Emerge in Scramble Over Trump's Syria Withdrawal," *Al-Monitor*, 7 January 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/01/rival-emerge-scramble-trump-syria-withdrawal.html>.

⁶⁰ Colin P. Clarke and Ariane M. Tabatabai, "Withdrawing from Syria Leaves a Vacuum That Iran Will Fill," *Foreign Affairs*, 8 January 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2019-01-08/withdrawing-syria-leaves-vacuum-iran-will-fill?cid=int-flb&pgtype=hpg>.

despite the claims of Pompeo and others that average Iranians will be spared.⁶¹ “Maximum pressure” is certain to make life significantly worse for millions of Iranians, as the middle-class is squeezed, the currency crashes, and the promises of the Rouhani era vanish amidst a new era of confrontation between the United States and Iran.⁶²

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⁶¹ Ed Pilkington, “Mike Pompeo Insists US Sanctions Will Not Hurt Iranian People,” *The Guardian*, 4 November 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/04/pompeo-trump-us-sanctions-oil-iran-iranian-people>.

⁶² Thomas Erdbrink, “Iran’s Economic Crisis Drags Down the Middle Class Almost Overnight,” *New York Times*, 26 December 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/26/world/middleeast/iran-middle-class-currency-inflation.html>.