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**Lowering Expectations in Iran in Advance of the US Presidential Election**

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**As the US presidential election nears, Iranian interest has risen as to the possible ramifications for the future of the nuclear deal. Recently there have been mounting Iranian calls to lower expectations, contending that there is no substantive difference in the Democratic and Republican positions on Iran, and that the developments since the United States withdrew from the deal might challenge its potential renewal. While these voices can be explained in part as a tactical step designed to improve Tehran's bargaining position ahead of a possible renewal of negotiations with the United States, they also suggest increased recognition in Iran that a Biden victory would not necessarily presage a political breakthrough. This recognition has been buttressed by disappointment in the nuclear deal – which in Iranian eyes has not borne the desired economic fruit – and by President Trump's withdrawal from the deal, which was seen by many in Iran as attesting to US unreliability. This does not necessarily mean that Iran will refrain from returning to the negotiating table after the US election, a decision that depends on a US offer to renew the political process and the various Iranian interests that will be defined by the leadership in Tehran as part of a comprehensive post-election strategic analysis. Still, there is enough substance to the skepticism evinced in the Iranian discourse to bolster the assessment that even a victory by the Democratic candidate would not guarantee renewed negotiations, let alone achievement of a new and improved deal.**

As the US presidential election nears, Iranian interest has risen as to the possible ramifications for the future of the nuclear deal and a renewal of negotiations between Tehran and the West. Given current US opinion polls, assessments in Iran have grown as to the possibility of Joe Biden winning the election. In June, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif suggested during a live Instagram interview that Donald Trump's chances of winning the election had been significantly reduced over recent months, though they were still above 50 percent.

In the minds of many Iranian pundits, a Biden victory could pave the way to renewed negotiations between Iran and the United States and revive the nuclear deal. Some of them saw in the draft Democratic Party Platform, issued before the Democratic National

Convention, cause for cautious optimism. The platform criticizes President Trump's decision to withdraw from the nuclear deal, calls for returning to the deal as the optimal path to prevent Iran from attaining nuclear weapons, and rules out any American push to bring about regime change in Iran. Thus, for example, Dr. Davoud Hermidas-Bavand, a commentator on international affairs, wrote in an op-ed in the reformist newspaper *Arman-e Melli* on July 22, 2020 that were Biden to win the election, it would be possible to return to the nuclear deal and restore the mutual commitments to it.

Yet there are mounting calls to lower expectations regarding the possibility of renewing negotiations and reviving the nuclear deal, even if Biden wins the election. These voices argue that there is no substantive difference between the Democratic and Republican positions on Iran and that developments since the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal challenge its potential revival. On July 27, Foreign Ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi asserted at his weekly press conference that Iran does not place much importance in persons or parties in the United States, but rather, on the manner in which they conduct themselves toward Iran, and that US administrations, both Democratic and Republican, have displayed hostility toward it.

Meanwhile, media affiliated with the Iranian conservative faction have cast as baseless fancy the expectation that US foreign policy on Iran would undergo significant change in the event of a Biden victory. On July 25, after the publication of the draft of the Democratic platform, an editorial in the hardline newspaper *Kayhan* argued there is no difference between Biden and President Trump on conditions for a return to the nuclear deal. The paper further pointed to the platform's support for efforts to expand curbs on the Iranian nuclear program, and the calls for an improved nuclear deal to address Iran's missile project and regional conduct. In a similar vein, the newspaper noted rhetoric by some of Biden's advisers, who have called for continuing to pressure Iran and refraining from sanctions removal until a comprehensive and long term deal is attained.

The argument that there are no substantive differences between the approaches of the two leading US parties to the Islamic Republic has been commonplace in Iran for years, mainly among conservative and radical circles. But in circles identified with the pragmatic camp in Iran, doubts have also been sounded recently as to the prospect of a Biden victory enabling significant political progress. Thus, for example, the pro-reform daily *Shargh* assessed on August 13 that returning to the nuclear deal would be no simple matter, despite Biden's declared intent to do so. The paper outlined several core obstacles on the road to new negotiations and a new deal: first, the need to redefine timelines set out in the original deal, which are no longer relevant; second, the US desire to include the long range missile issue and Iran's regional conduct in a future deal; third, the narrow window of opportunity between the new president's inauguration (January 2021) and the

Iranian presidential election (June 2021), which is liable to result in a conservative government; and fourth, the US Senate's anticipated opposition to any return to the nuclear deal in its current form. "Over the last three and a half years, there were many opportunities to preserve the nuclear deal, and it was even possible to incorporate changes to it...but unfortunately we lost these opportunities," the daily concluded.

Even Ahmad Zeidabadi – journalist, intellectual, and regime critic – voiced doubt regarding chances of returning to the nuclear deal. In an August 3 op-ed published by the Iranian Diplomacy website and titled "The Illusion of Iran Profiting from a Joe Biden Election Victory," Zeidabadi argued that Democratic strategy is not predicated on an unconditional return to the nuclear deal, but rather, hinges on changing the Islamic Republic's domestic and foreign policy. Should the Iranian leadership be interested in finding a way to ease tension with the United States, a Biden victory could provide an opportunity to do so. But not even a Biden victory could help if there is no such interest, because there is no significant difference between Democratic and Republican concerns and demands of Iran. Reformist political commentator Abbas Abdi also raised doubt as to the positive implications of a Biden victory for Iran. In an August 2 interview, Abdi said he was not convinced there was a significant difference between Trump and Biden, and even pointed out that from a certain standpoint, President Trump's Middle East policy is preferable to that of the Democrats, because it does not seek direct military intervention in the region.

It is possible to explain some of the Iranian calls to lower expectations of the US election as a tactical move designed to improve Tehran's bargaining position ahead of a possible renewal of negotiations with the United States. Iran has a clear interest in keeping bargaining chips for future negotiations, and in not casting itself as being in a weak position, as wishing for a Biden victory, and as banking on his election to remove the pressure imposed on it in recent years.

That said, the sober and cautious approach to the upcoming US election evinces increased recognition in Iran, including within pragmatic circles that in the past backed the nuclear deal, that a Biden victory would not necessarily presage a political breakthrough. This assessment is grounded in disappointment in the deal, which in Iranian eyes has not borne the desired economic fruit. Most of all, President Trump's withdrawal from the deal was interpreted by many in Iran as proof of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's longstanding argument that the United States cannot be trusted and that the nuclear program is merely an American pretext to pressure Iran and prepare the groundwork for regime change. In these circumstances, there is a tendency today, even among Iran's pragmatic circles, to adopt a more skeptical and realistic attitude on the future of the nuclear deal – especially

given the tendencies toward radicalization in the Iranian political system over the last two years, which may also impact on Iran's upcoming presidential election.

This does not mean that Iran will refuse to return to the negotiating table after the US election, especially if this would secure it at least some measure of sanctions relief. An Iranian decision on whether to return to the negotiating table would naturally depend on an American offer presented to Tehran after the election, and would also take into consideration Iranian interests, as assessed by the leadership in Tehran within the framework of a comprehensive, post-election strategizing process. Still, there is enough skepticism evinced by the Iranian discourse as the election nears to bolster the assessment that even a Democratic victory would not be enough to guarantee renewed negotiations, let alone the achievement of a new and improved deal.