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The United States vs. Iran in Advance of the US Presidential Elections

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The announcement by the United States that notwithstanding the opposition by the international community it was renewing the UN Security Council sanctions canceled following the nuclear agreement has brought the administration's policy of maximum pressure on Iran to a new height. Barring a development that alters the dynamic between the United States and Iran – an "October surprise" – the parties are now awaiting the outcome of the US presidential elections. Meanwhile, Iran continues to push ahead with its nuclear program: it possesses enough fissile material for at least two nuclear devices; the time it will take Iran to break out to nuclear weapons, should it decide to do so, has been greatly reduced; and Iran continues its development of ballistic missiles and its consolidation in the Middle East. Both US presidential candidates are interested in negotiations with Iran, although on different terms, and a Democratic administration will also have to leverage the maximum pressures in order to obtain a better agreement (particularly concerning the duration of the agreement, the amount of time needed for a breakout to nuclear weapons, and nuclear inspection). For its part, despite the burdensome sanctions imposed on it, Iran is not expected to return to negotiations without significant compensation, and in any case, not before the Iranian presidential elections in June 2021. For Israel, a clear statement by whichever administration is elected that the military option is on the table if Iran shows rapid progress toward nuclear weapons is important.

On September 19, 2020, the United States [announced](#) that effective immediately, 30 days after it initiated the snapback process in the UN Security Council, nearly all of the sanctions previously imposed on Iran by the Security Council were reinstated. These sanctions, which concern Iranian arms sales, uranium enrichment, and missile development, were canceled after the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was reached with Iran. The US is demanding that the international community comply with the reinstated sanctions, but 13 Security Council members oppose the snapback, stating that it exceeds Washington's authority. In order to enforce its demands once the weapons embargo against Iran expires on October 18, President Trump [signed](#) a series of executive orders levying direct and secondary sanctions against any entities "who contribute to the supply, sale, or transfer of conventional arms to or from Iran, as well as those who

provide technical training, financial support and services, and other assistance related to these arms."

The coming weeks will highlight the dispute between the administration and the relevant international parties, headed by the European countries that are parties to the JCPOA – the UK, Germany, and France (the E3) – who have already [announced](#) that they do not accept the renewal of sanctions, and are adhering to the JCPOA. At the same time, Iran has no intention of halting its uranium enrichment and other activities pertaining to its nuclear program in breach of the agreement, and is already holding talks with Russia on arms purchases. The US administration will try to prevent this arms sale from going through, but the poor relations between Washington on the one hand and Moscow and Beijing on the other may encourage Russia and China to try to embarrass President Trump before the presidential elections.

Barring an "October surprise" that alters the dynamic between Washington and Tehran, all of the parties are now awaiting the outcome of the US presidential elections. The Iranian regime is acting cautiously and refraining from steps liable to detract from the United States' isolation from the international community, and in order to avoid giving President Trump grounds for attacking Iran (citing intelligence information, the *New York Times* [reported](#) that Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei had halted plans for direct action against the United States, except for cyberattacks). At the same time, however, Iran is [pushing ahead](#) with its nuclear program. It possesses enough fissile material for at least two nuclear devices. The time it will take Iran to break out to nuclear weapons, should it decide to do so, has been greatly reduced. Research and development on centrifuges is progressing rapidly, even if it was delayed to some extent by the explosion at the Iranian centrifuges facility in July 2020. At the same time, Iran is continuing its development of ballistic missiles and its consolidation in the Middle East.

Following the United States elections, any administration will have to devise a policy regarding the challenge posed by Iran in the nuclear and missiles realms and its belligerence in the region. Both presidential candidates have stated during the campaign that they would not allow Iran to obtain nuclear weapons, and that their aim was to negotiate a better agreement than the JCPOA. President Trump promised that if reelected, "we will have a deal within four weeks." He likely assumes that Iran cannot afford another four years of sanctions in its difficult economic situation. In an [article](#) published on the CNN website, former Vice President and Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden wrote, "I will offer Tehran a credible path back to diplomacy." He stated that if Iran returns to the agreement, the United States would also do so, but added the starting point for negotiations would be an extension of the restrictions in the JCPOA, an aim shared by the European JCPOA signatories, and that regional tension in the Middle East

would also be addressed. Both candidates are vague regarding the Iranian demand, presented as a precondition for negotiations, for a removal of all sanctions and compensation for the effects of American sanctions since they were re-imposed.

Any American administration will face an Iran that is in a state of severe economic distress, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the sanctions. Iran, however, has learned to cope with the situation, and feels that it has been cheated and its honor offended. Khamenei has repeatedly stated that the United States cannot be trusted, and this is the sentiment in Iran as its presidential elections, scheduled for June 2021, approach. The conservatives, who have already gained control of the Iranian parliament, hope to nominate a candidate for president, while taking advantage of the crisis with the United States to attack more moderate political voices. Furthermore, even if Iran wants to negotiate the lifting of sanctions, it will demand strong guarantees to ensure that a future US administration will find it more difficult to disavow the understandings achieved – Congressional approval, for example. Beyond the nuclear issue, Iran has no intention of conceding its assets in the Middle East, and inter alia, persists in its efforts to bring about the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq.

Despite the differences between the positions of the two US presidential candidates, it appears that both a Trump administration and Biden and his advisors (most of whom were part of the Obama administration that previously negotiated with Iran) realize that a breakthrough will be possible only through negotiations. However, Iran is unlikely to concede, and will not return to negotiations without compensation. It is clear to Iran that after the US elections, it will have to decide between negotiations and a major escalation in its confrontation with the United States, which is liable to prove costly. Tehran apparently presumes that it will be easier to reach understandings with a Biden administration on what it regards as a reasonable mechanism for resuming negotiation.

In any case, both the United States and Israel must prepare for all possible scenarios: negotiations, or alternatively, further escalation in the conflict with Iran, and especially the possibility that Iran will step up its measures to push ahead with its nuclear program. It is also possible that if Biden is elected, Iran will seek to take advantage of the two months before he is sworn in to proceed with extreme measures (possibly including an announcement of Iranian withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty) in order to bolster its bargaining position, and this contingency must be prepared for.

After the United States elections, US and Israeli policy must consider the following assumptions:

- a. Despite the maximum pressure policy, Iran is making progress in its nuclear program, with steps that shorten the time required for a breakout to nuclear weapons.
- b. The severe economic crisis is not enough in itself to bring Iran to the negotiating table without compensation for doing so. Those who hoped that the economic crisis would spark processes culminating in regime change have been disillusioned. Preparations should therefore be made for the possibility that Iran, with help from China and Russia, will persist in its current policy.
- c. Both the determination and the ability of the United States to enforce economic sanctions effectively, even without international support, were demonstrated under the Trump administration. This is an important bargaining chip that any elected administration can take advantage of, as long as Iran is unwilling to engage in negotiations leading to a better long-term agreement.
- d. On the other hand, in order to make progress toward negotiations, it is desirable to find ways of facilitating talks without losing the sanctions lever. It is possible that by proffering such help, a way to enable the Iranian leadership that prefers a diplomatic solution to save face can be found. It is also possible that this will make it easier for the United States to obtain the cooperation of its European partners.
- e. In any case, the next administration, whether Republican or Democratic, will have to underscore to Iran that the United States is willing to use its military capabilities if and when Iran makes significant progress toward nuclear capability.

Analysis of the US and Iranian considerations shows that the two sides prefer a dialogue. At the current time, however, their starting positions are far removed from one another, and in particular reflect mutual distrust. This is of critical importance for Iran, following the US withdrawal from the JCPOA. If elected, a Democratic administration will have to avoid the likely temptation to try and prove that it is more successful than its predecessor. Any administration will therefore have to use the existing leverage in order to achieve as significant an improvement as possible in the JCPOA, especially the duration of the agreement, the length of time needed for a breakout to nuclear weapons, and nuclear inspection. At present, the alternative to a renewal of negotiations is continued progress by Iran in its nuclear program, particularly as long as Washington, irrespective of who is in the White House, is wary of using force.