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September 2020  
No. 137

# Middle East Brief

## U.S.-Iran Relations under Maximum Pressure: A Narrow Path to Negotiations

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Relations between the United States and Iran appeared to begin a new chapter with the election of U.S. President Donald J. Trump three and a half years ago. The Trump administration unilaterally withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, popularly known as “the Iran nuclear deal”) in 2018, promising to revise the status quo put in place by its predecessor’s most notable foreign policy achievement. Many observers expected this decision to increase regional instability. The subsequent onset of a global pandemic that wrought dramatic changes to world trade, travel, and lifestyle only heightened expectations. Yet, amidst these developments, one aspect of international affairs has proceeded as usual: The United States and Iran have maintained their familiar standoff and stalemate.

Though many policies fundamentally changed in response to the coronavirus pandemic, the United States continued sanctions against Iran. First implemented in 2018, the Trump administration’s maximum pressure campaign re-imposed and increased sanctions on Iran’s financial, shipping, and energy sectors in order to compel the Islamic Republic to “change its destructive behavior” and comply with U.S. efforts to renegotiate the JCPOA.<sup>1</sup> This policy might initially appear to be sound negotiating strategy, setting the stage for a new agreement (albeit one inflicting considerable collateral damage on Iranian civil society). Thus far, however, negotiations have not come to pass. Analyses of the campaign have disproportionately focused on sanctions, instead, as a tool to compel changes in *governance*—often describing the campaign, in fact, as “an implicit regime change policy.”<sup>2</sup>

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This Brief argues that despite what might appear to be an incoherent foreign policy vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic as well as a repudiation of the approach taken during the Obama presidency, the Trump administration's use of sanctions to compel negotiations continues a longstanding pattern in U.S.-Iran relations. As such, this Brief contends, the maximum pressure campaign retains a measure of (perhaps unintended) coherence as a strategy to compel Iran to reengage in negotiations. It only appears to be a regime change policy because the narrow path the current administration allows for negotiations cannot be pursued under existing conditions. This implies that a different state of affairs might facilitate negotiations. The Brief concludes by outlining the circumstances needed for maximum pressure negotiations to occur.

## Maximum Pressure as a Negotiating Strategy

The JCPOA is the highest-profile example to date of successful negotiations between the U.S., other major world powers, and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Negotiations began during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency; they were given a renewed push after the 2013 presidential election of Hassan Rouhani, a centrist candidate whose credentials bridged the gap between reformist and conservative factions in the wake of an intensely disputed presidential vote in 2009.<sup>3</sup> Responding to overtures by the Obama administration and the most intense sanctions ever imposed on Iran, Rouhani's campaign emphasized improved relations with the U.S.

Developments occurred rapidly after Rouhani's landslide electoral victory in June 2013. During a meeting with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in September, the Islamic Republic's leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, expressed a willingness to engage in diplomacy, famously using the phrase "heroic flexibility." His statement captured headlines just before Iran's newly inaugurated presidential administration attended a meeting of the United Nations General Assembly. By November, Iran and the P5+1 countries (the UN Security Council's five permanent members—China, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States—plus Germany) had signed an interim accord. Nearly two years later, the same parties reached an agreement to constrain Iranian nuclear production while providing economic relief by removing newly imposed international sanctions. The U.S. maintained sanctions unrelated to Iran's nuclear program, which had been in place since 1979.

The resulting agreement proved divisive in American politics. Writing six months after the JCPOA was implemented, then Congressman Mike Pompeo from Kansas declared, "Congress must act to change Iranian behavior, and, ultimately, the Iranian regime."<sup>4</sup> Two years later, after his appointment as secretary of state, Pompeo spearheaded the Trump administration's unilateral withdrawal from the agreement. He held photo ops with controversial Iranian opposition leaders from the diaspora and announced the formation of the Iran Action Group to steer future American foreign policy, the centerpiece of which was the maximum pressure campaign.

The Trump administration objects to Iran's nuclear ambitions, its "malign activity" in the region, and its violations of Iranians' democratic rights. By imposing "tougher sanctions on Iran than ever before," the maximum pressure campaign seeks to change the Islamic Republic's "destructive behavior" and force the state to "return to the negotiating table," where a new deal—one more advantageous

to the United States—can emerge.<sup>5</sup> Critics have honed in on the Trump administration’s rhetoric, asserting that its symbolic gestures reveal the campaign’s true intentions: that is, a renewed commitment to the George W. Bush administration’s policy of regime change.<sup>6</sup> The appointment of John Bolton as National Security Advisor in early 2018 fueled these suspicions. Bolton previously served in the Bush administration and has been a vocal advocate of regime change in “rogue states,” including Iran.

Proponents of regime change claim that the establishment of democratic governance in adversaries, through military force if need be, would both ensure U.S. national security and advance universal ideals like human rights. The Bush administration forthrightly expressed its intentions when it introduced the policy—most notably in the first State of the Union address following the 9/11 attacks, when then President Bush identified the Islamic Republic as one branch of the “Axis of Evil,” alongside North Korea and Iraq. Pompeo’s opposition to the JCPOA in 2016 echoed the Bush administration’s rhetoric, conveying an express desire to topple Iran’s post-revolutionary government. Since becoming secretary of state, however, Pompeo has abandoned overt statements to this effect. His pronouncements, as well as those made by the Iran Action Group, eschew overt hostility and instead only *insinuate* a desire for regime change.

Critics of the current maximum pressure campaign urge that we read between the lines. What matters, some claim, are not the words Pompeo and the Iran Action Group say but the implicit signaling embedded in how they say them— including, for instance, the dates chosen for public announcements and policy implementation.<sup>7</sup> Such signaling, they suggest, conveys hostility to Iran and investment in the pursuit of regime change.

Some policymakers see the campaign as a cover for regime change because the demands made in return for lifting sanctions are, in their estimation, obviously unacceptable to Iran. More forthright advocates of regime change confirm these suspicions. Disabused of any hopes for negotiation, Eric Edelman and Ray Takeyh suggest that “to maintain international pressure and congressional support for an aggressive policy, the United States should remain open to negotiations even after it embraces regime change as a goal. For their part, the Iranians might see virtue in engaging in talks with a hawkish administration in the hope that doing so might persuade the administration to abandon regime change as a specific objective.”<sup>8</sup> Critics who take a longer historical vantage could point to the previous experience of U.S.

regime change in Iraq and suggest that current sanctions are designed to weaken Iranian public infrastructure to such a degree as to undermine the state’s capabilities for defense in the event of future conflict.<sup>9</sup>

The presumption that current U.S. policy reflects ulterior motives suggests that the Trump administration maintains a consistent policy—when, in fact, one of the administration’s most enduring features has been its malleability. Over the course of the presidential campaign and throughout his first term in office, Trump and his team have adopted shifting policy prescriptions catered to maintain sufficient popular support for his electoral prospects. During the 2016 presidential campaign, then candidate Donald J. Trump regularly expressed conflicting positions on foreign policy issues, in one breath advocating military intervention in the Middle East only to later denounce “lengthy foreign engagements.” A similar pattern of behavior has been evident in his handling of a range of issues, from DACA to the coronavirus.<sup>10</sup> It would be fair to assume that an equally malleable approach would inform the administration’s policies toward Iran.<sup>11</sup>

From this perspective, claims that the maximum pressure campaign constitutes regime change in disguise elide too quickly over the policy’s stated aspirations with respect to negotiation. On paper, at least, the Trump administration proposes more sober assessments and objectives than its media spectacles suggest. Without naively ignoring the theatrics that signal an abiding investment in regime change, prudent analysis would expect the Trump administration to keep all options on the table at all times.

Ironically, the Trump administration’s malleable stance in this instance maintains a significant degree of continuity with previous U.S. policy. Official Trump administration documents describing the maximum pressure campaign decry the JCPOA as a “one-sided deal” and even the “worst deal ever negotiated.”<sup>12</sup> These descriptors suggest a path, however narrow, for those invested in negotiations. Success, it is implied, need not involve military invasion or fomenting a color revolution, a political uprising for democratic reform. Rather, a newly negotiated agreement could suffice so long as it secures terms more favorable to the U.S. than those in the JCPOA. From this perspective, purported differences between the Trump administration and its immediate predecessor are not as pronounced as they might seem. The Obama administration laid the groundwork for talks that culminated in the JCPOA by imposing what were then the harshest sanctions to date against the Islamic Republic. Re-imposing even harsher sanctions while

calling for a new round of negotiations merely extends the logic underlying earlier policies—only now in a more intense form.<sup>13</sup>

## Critiques of the Negotiating Strategy

The parties who stewarded the JCPOA and commentators who support the deal as sound foreign policy claim that the maximum pressure campaign is not a realistic negotiating strategy. Some argue that it imposes conditions the Islamic Republic will never entertain—including, for example, the elimination of Iran's nuclear program in perpetuity and the end of Iran's support for regional forces like Hezbollah. Others claim unilateral withdrawal from the deal has weakened the only factions within the Iranian state willing to negotiate with the United States: moderates and centrists, commonly known as reformists and pragmatists. Their counterparts, the principalists, have long argued that the U.S. is not a trustworthy partner and take every opportunity to denounce reformists as naïve. Hawkish U.S. policies, detractors insist, strengthen the principalists' hand by undermining the reformists' already tenuous hold on Iranian institutions. Therefore, critics maintain, the maximum pressure campaign, notwithstanding its purported goal, disempowers the one party amenable to negotiations.

This critique hinges on a particular understanding of domestic power struggles in Iran. The Obama administration was realistic about what it would take for Iranian representatives to sit at a negotiating table, but was perhaps unrealistic about which Iranian representatives the U.S. should negotiate *with*. The belief that reformists and pragmatists are the only viable parties to negotiations can amount to a misunderstanding of how Iranian politics operate. These factions tend to occupy positions of power through popular elections, a process that limits the scope of their authority;<sup>14</sup> political institutions in Iran have never sufficiently empowered popularly elected officials to broker lasting deals on their own. The unelected, or indirectly elected, players in Iranian politics ultimately hold the reins over national security policy.<sup>15</sup> The maximum pressure campaign reflects an awareness that principalists can, at any point, undermine negotiated settlements brokered by others.

Where does this assessment leave us? The analytic perspective advanced in this Brief focuses on what the policy may accomplish regardless of its authors' intentions. While there is considerable evidence to doubt the campaign's stated objective of enabling negotiations,

the policy may—perhaps unintentionally—facilitate that objective in practice. That is, even if we grant the machinations of certain Trump administration officials seeking to use an outward call for negotiations as a ploy to obscure designs for regime change, the maximum pressure campaign's implementation has furthered the objective of holding negotiations over and against any of its unstated aims.

One can discern a distinct operative negotiating strategy here. The presumption that Iran's reformists and pragmatists were the only viable negotiating partner held previous negotiations hostage: Iranian negotiators could gain leverage by claiming that an overriding power (the principalists) imposed conditions they themselves could not control. The threat that principalists might unilaterally withdraw from any international agreement signed by their counterparts set the tone for the dialogue, forcing the United States' hand. Congressman Pompeo concluded that:

*the Obama administration is giving in to the Iranians' bizarre tantrums and illogical arguments. The Iranian regime is continuously threatening to walk away from the deal. They have thus co-opted the U.S. Secretary of State [John Kerry] into acting as Iran's Minister of Economic Development.*<sup>16</sup>

Far from damaging the prospects for negotiations, then, when the United States undermines the reformists and pragmatists, it preempts the principalists from undermining them instead. The maximum pressure campaign eliminates a middleman that stands in the way of what the U.S. claims would be a reasonable settlement, thereby clearing a path for direct negotiations with the Islamic Republic's true power brokers.<sup>17</sup> In other words, by unilaterally withdrawing from an international agreement, the Trump administration stole the initiative from the one party in Iranian domestic politics capable of unilateral withdrawal. This sequence of events reveals an added paradox: The conditions that would lead to negotiations under maximum pressure—that is, the direct and further empowerment of principalists—undermine the purported implicit motivation for *applying* maximum pressure (democratization, through regime change if need be).

The history of the Islamic Republic suggests that this negotiating strategy is not a hopeless endeavor. In post-revolutionary Iranian politics, expediency has repeatedly taken precedence over ideology.<sup>18</sup> When the most prominent champion of principalism in Iran, Khamenei, endorsed “heroic flexibility,” it came as a surprise to analysts who interpret Iranian politics along ideological lines.<sup>19</sup> The maximum pressure campaign arguably takes

note of this pattern, inching toward a pragmatic barter in conversation with principalists. More profoundly still, in failing to cater to reformists, the maximum pressure campaign recognizes what has become a fact of political life in Iran—that the distinction between reformists and principalists, palpably salient during Mohammad Khatami’s two terms as president (1997–2005), has fallen into disrepute.<sup>20</sup> Reformists no longer curry widespread support as vessels of social change, partly because they failed to resist principalist incursions in contested battles for state power. Meanwhile, as they have assumed hegemonic control, principalists have proven to be less of a monolith, engaging in pitched critiques of one another in public. The election of Rouhani, a centrist and pragmatist, in 2013 and 2017 confirms the fading salience of the previous divide. In this context, the maximum pressure campaign creates conditions for direct negotiations with the Islamic Republic’s true power brokers, whoever they may be.

## A Narrow Path

For the maximum pressure campaign’s negotiating strategy to work, Iran’s true power holders would need to sit with the Trump administration and engage in direct talks. Critics of the plan argue that the conditions under which those talks could occur are essentially non-existent. This Brief suggests that the conditions required for negotiations exist, but they must traverse a narrow path. Only because the circumstances required for negotiations to come to fruition are impossible to reach under current conditions has the campaign become a de facto regime change policy. The subsequent impasse, not to mention affinities between the campaign and so-called soft war initiatives (see below), gives the appearance of old wine in a new bottle: an implicit regime change policy disguised as a campaign for negotiations. But that the policy is implicit means that a theoretical window of opportunity for negotiations nevertheless exists.

The maximum pressure campaign’s negotiating strategy wagers that Iran’s power brokers will continue to demonstrate a pragmatic streak despite ideological pretensions to the contrary. But repeated pronouncements in opposition to negotiating with the United States suggest that Iran’s power brokers will come to the table only if they think that the Islamic Republic is at risk of being overthrown. It follows that the campaign must destabilize the Iranian state until the most steadfast opponents of negotiations with the U.S. are willing to engage in talks. That is, the maximum pressure campaign must pose a sufficiently credible

threat to the Islamic Republic that its staunchest supporters agree to negotiations.

At the same time, however, the Islamic Republic must credibly conclude that the U.S. would not follow through with an implied threat of regime change if and when the opportunity arose. Otherwise, the United States would not be able to compel Iran’s power brokers to engage. If they believe that the U.S. will pursue regime change after they agree to engage in negotiations, Iran’s power brokers will not sit at the table to begin with—and Iran’s leaders would instead continue to regard the U.S. as an adversary harboring ulterior motives and distrust it as a genuine negotiating partner. According to its own stated aims—fostering favorable terms for negotiations—the maximum pressure campaign would be a failure.

At this point, then, the path to negotiations narrows. How can the United States simultaneously pose a credible threat so as to compel Iran’s true power brokers to engage in talks, while signaling that it will not pursue regime change when given the chance?

The impasse is compounded by variable definitions of regime change. The invasion and occupation of Iraq set a precedent for associating regime change with military action. But the concept extends beyond proverbial boots on the ground to include more ambiguous “soft war” initiatives and subversion—including the manipulation of media, the imposition of economic sanctions, and other non-combat tactics intended to foster domestic upheaval in an adversary, resulting, it is hoped, in more democratic governing structures. Unlike military combat, soft war initiatives are difficult to detect and identify. This is the case by design: Subversion is most effective when it cannot be traced with certainty to foreign adversaries and when it implicates domestic actors in some capacity, thereby garnering a measure of legitimacy.

These definitional questions are of significance in Iran, where insinuations of subversion often appear in the public sphere. Khamenei has repeatedly made public accusations against foreign foundations he claims provide material support for soft power movements designed to disrupt Iran’s domestic order.<sup>21</sup> Regardless of whether covert steps have indeed been taken to support dissidents in the interests of fomenting a revolution, Khamenei’s statements demonstrate ongoing perceptions of a threat.<sup>22</sup> And those perceptions matter in terms of the prospects of negotiation under maximum pressure.

Some policy analysts confirm Khamenei’s fears. Edelman and Takeyh explicitly call for “covert assistance to dissidents” as part of “a campaign of external pressure

and internal resistance” in which Washington would “help the Iranian people achieve [regime change].”<sup>23</sup> This position presumes that, as increasingly harsh sanctions create economic strain, everyday Iranians who experience its effects will direct their anger against the Islamic Republic and embark upon “the next Iranian revolution.”

Trump administration officials may harbor similar designs but have taken a less openly confrontational route in public, perhaps to woo European allies opposed to the idea of regime change. They maintain that maximum-pressure sanctions are not meant to hurt everyday Iranians but only to pressure power brokers and thereby compel changes in the behavior of state officials. Whether bread riots are intended to be part of that pressure is unclear. We might imagine the architects of maximum pressure hedging their bets. If economic strain does not end up inciting a popular revolution (or regime change from below), the threat of widespread and broad-based political mobilization may compel Iran’s power brokers to take a seat at the negotiating table. If they “change their behavior” along the way, the campaign would have brought about a different kind of change from above.

## The Prospects for Maximum Pressure Negotiations

Changing circumstances that transcend domestic politics in both the U.S. and the Islamic Republic could reignite the possibility of maximum pressure negotiations. All bilateral relations take place in broader contexts, and unprecedented changes in global social and political life can radically alter their terms and tenor. The question remains: Which changes would sufficiently open the exceedingly narrow path for negotiations under maximum pressure?

At least two sets of developments must transpire for negotiations to occur, given the impasse described above. First, the Islamic Republic must experience a threat to its survival aside from the financial constraints imposed by the maximum pressure campaign, and it must deem that threat graver than the one posed by economic sanctions. If the Islamic Republic’s true power brokers are most invested in regime survival, they would be willing to practice “heroic flexibility” when faced with an existential threat greater than the one posed by the United States. That is, the Islamic Republic might negotiate with the Trump administration to relieve the pressure of sanctions in order to address an unexpected threat to its survival.

What would constitute such a threat? The coronavirus pandemic has caused considerable disruptions in Iran.

Initial attempts to cover up and deny the spreading epidemic have since given way to emergency efforts.<sup>24</sup> These efforts stymied the spread of the virus for a time, but Iran resorted to a back-to-work approach in early April—a decision due, in part, to the economic effects of sanctions. And the government has failed to implement the testing needed to sustain economic normalcy.<sup>25</sup> The pandemic could pose a major threat to regime survival exogenous to U.S.-Iran relations. Subsequent reductions in economic activity combined with perceptions of state mismanagement could, if sufficiently widespread, foster bread riots. If maximum pressure sanctions are meant to take Iranian society to the brink of chaos, the coronavirus pandemic might push it over the edge.

Alternatively, if a disaster were to occur in Iran of similar magnitude to the recent explosion at the port of Beirut in Lebanon,<sup>26</sup> and if the citizenry were to conclude that unnecessary death and destruction resulted from state mismanagement, it could spark a broad-based social movement. If that movement were to pose a threat of upheaval sufficient to destabilize domestic order, the Islamic Republic’s power brokers might regard negotiations under maximum pressure as the lesser of two evils. Iran experienced a national tragedy in January 2020 when the downing of Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 led to protests.<sup>27</sup> But this event did not produce the kind of regime instability needed to compel negotiations, in part because it occurred at a moment of heightened military tensions with the U.S., which discouraged protests that could be deemed treasonous.

A second condition for maximum pressure negotiations to occur is that the United States’ capacity to threaten the Islamic Republic with regime change (beyond the retention of existing economic sanctions) must be mitigated. This involves significant limitations on potential and perceived threats to compel regime change through soft war tactics as well as military combat. If the U.S. appears to hold an added lever with which to apply pressure and compel regime change once some other circumstance puts the Islamic Republic in a precarious position, the state’s power brokers may conclude that negotiations with the U.S. remain too risky. They could instead pursue other bilateral agreements to ensure their survival.

That prospect was highlighted in July 2020 when a document was leaked outlining a twenty-five-year comprehensive, long-term partnership between Iran and China. The proposed partnership would turn China into “Iran’s privileged partner in the development of various strategic projects ranging from energy infrastructure, to telecommunications, software development, banking,

railroads, and ports.” In return, Iran would “regularly supply Beijing with its oil for the next 25 years.”<sup>28</sup>

Just as importantly, the forthcoming U.S. presidential election in November will occur in the context of economic fallout from the pandemic. The circumstances may inspire the Trump administration to ease its demands and take a softer stance toward Iran, favoring negotiations in lieu of subversion in pursuit of a foreign policy achievement that might improve its chances of reelection. Rumors of back-channel talks might explain an increase in U.S.-Iran skirmishes across the region, as each side seeks to improve its relative standing with respect to a prospective accord.<sup>29</sup> If the Trump administration appears less invested in fomenting regime change, the Islamic Republic senses an exogenous threat to its survival, *and* a China-Iran accord does not materialize, U.S.-Iran talks might become a reality. In the unlikely event that something akin to these developments were to occur in the near future—meaning the United States and the Islamic Republic were to traverse a narrow path toward negotiations under maximum pressure—the Trump administration will have secured an October surprise that could impact the election.

Regardless of who wins in November, however, the internal logic of the maximum pressure campaign will matter in the years ahead. Public statements by Iran have indicated a refusal to negotiate before the U.S. Election Day of November 3. If the Trump administration were to win reelection without striking a new Iran deal and if, in a second term, it were to abandon the unacceptable demands attached to the campaign, maximum pressure could turn into negotiations without the intervention of some calamity in Iran. Conversely, if Iran believes that Trump will lose the November election, it would be prudent for it to wait until the Democratic Party nominee, Joe Biden, assumes office. Biden has promised to end the maximum pressure campaign and has offered to restore sanctions relief in exchange for resurrecting the JCPOA. By waiting, Iran could demand compensation for simply returning to the deal that it previously found acceptable.

But a Biden administration might face considerable obstacles to reversing course regardless of its intentions.<sup>30</sup> Even if a future President Biden could successfully turn back the clock and restore the JCPOA, the internal logic of the maximum pressure campaign outlined in this Brief remains relevant. Just as the Obama administration’s use of harsh sanctions as a precursor for negotiations set a precedent for the maximum pressure campaign, we should anticipate the logic underlying that campaign will endure with or without the Trump administration. This is in no small part because the campaign merely

reenacts the core principles of U.S. policy toward Iran in intensified form. When it comes to U.S.-Iran relations, it would seem, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

## Endnotes

- 1 See [The White House, “President Donald J. Trump Is Cutting Off Funds the Iranian Regime Uses to Support Its Destructive Activities around the World,” Fact Sheets \(May 8, 2019\).](#)
- 2 See Suzanne Maloney’s remarks in [Nicole Gaouette and Laura Koran, “Pompeo Threatens US Will ‘Crush’ Iran through Sanctions and Pressure Campaign,” CNN Politics, May 21, 2018.](#)
- 3 The vote resulted in a resounding victory for the then incumbent, Ahmadinejad. Supporters of Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karrubi, the two prominent reformist candidates, flooded the streets in months-long protests challenging the validity of the results and demanding a recount. Initially tolerated, these protests were later violently suppressed. Rouhani’s election was seen by many as signifying the resurgence of a reformist voting bloc intent on reclaiming the presidency by working within permitted political bounds. It turned out, however, to be one of the reformist movement’s final salvos.
- 4 [Mike Pompeo, “One Year Later, Obama’s Iran Nuclear Deal Puts Us at Increased Risk,” Fox News, July 14, 2016.](#)
- 5 [The White House, “President Donald J. Trump Is Cutting Off Funds the Iranian Regime Uses to Support Its Destructive Activities around the World.”](#) The desired changes in Iranian behavior notably relate to international rather than domestic affairs: “to stifle Iran’s missile programme, curb its support for proxy groups in the region, and ultimately change its regional policy.” See [Saeid Golkar, “There Is No Hope for Political Reform Led by Iranian Moderates,” Al Jazeera, September 5, 2019.](#)
- 6 For an example of analysis that interprets the maximum pressure campaign as a ploy to secure regime change, see [Valentina Pegolo, “Trump’s ‘Maximum Pressure’ on Iran Is Making COVID-19 Worse,” Jacobin, April 22, 2020.](#)
- 7 The announcement of the Iran Action Group’s formation came days before the 65-year anniversary of the U.S.-sponsored coup d’etat that deposed nationalist premier Mohammad Mossadegh. During the press briefing, Brian Hook, the Trump administration’s newly minted “Special Representative for Iran,” stated that “our goal is to reduce every country’s import of Iranian oil to zero by November 4th, and we are prepared to work with countries that are reducing their imports on a case-by-case basis. As you know, those sanctions will come into effect on November 5th.” November 4 marks the anniversary of the U.S. embassy seizure by university student activists in Tehran, precipitating a 444-day-long hostage crisis. Pompeo and Hook minimized these overlaps as nothing but mere coincidence. See [U.S. Department of State, “Briefing on the Creation of the Iran Action Group,” Special Briefing, August 16, 2018.](#)

- 8 Eric Edelman and Ray Takeyh, "The Next Iranian Revolution: Why Washington Should Seek Regime Change in Tehran," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2020, p.142.
- 9 See, for example, Omar Dewachi, "Iraqibacter and the Pathologies of Intervention," in MERIP: Middle East Research and Information Project, *Middle East Report* 290 (Spring 2019).
- 10 Consider, for instance, the Trump administration's initial opposition to face mask coverings before it reversed course. See David R. Baker and Margaret Newkirk, "Trump Backtracks on Masks, Calling Them 'Patriotic' after Allies Split," *Bloomberg*, July 20, 2020.
- 11 Former National Security Advisor John Bolton's memoir confirms this. See *The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), chapter 12.
- 12 See The White House, "President Donald J. Trump Is Cutting Off Funds the Iranian Regime Uses to Support Its Destructive Activities around the World," Fact Sheets, (May 8, 2019).
- 13 As Edelman and Takeyh note: "But for all this surface antagonism, the internal logic of the Trump administration's approach resembles that of its predecessors: inflict pain on Iran in order to gain leverage in prospective negotiations. Trump still wants to make a deal—and in fact, he is the first U.S. president to propose meeting with Iranian leaders." See "The Next Iranian Revolution," p.132.
- 14 The major exception to this pattern is the Expediency Council, formed with the revision of the constitution in 1989. For an account of its creation and changes to the IRI's constitution, see Asghar Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran: Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic*, trans. John O'Kane (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998).
- 15 This argument is not meant to suggest that all forms of democratic politicking are foreclosed in the Islamic Republic. Foreign commentary often presents Iran's dual power structure as a split between elected and unelected officials, whereas in fact, the division between these two poles does not in itself determine the course of Iranian politics. For instance, the Office of the Leader is subject to appointment through the Assembly of Experts, a seventy-three-person body comprised of elected officials—though candidates for that body can run only upon approval from the Guardian Council, or judiciary. The Guardian Council is in turn comprised of twelve jurists: Six of those jurists are elected, while the other six are selected by the Office of the Leader. Opportunities for democratic activity persist even after the 1989 constitutional reforms that instituted a Supreme Guardian Jurist (*velāyat-e motlaq-e faqih*). For an account of post-revolutionary Iran's hybrid power structure, see Arang Keshavarzian, "Iran" in *Politics and Society in the Contemporary Middle East*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, ed. Michelle Penner Angrist (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2019), pp.265-269.
- 16 Pompeo, "One Year Later."
- 17 Golkar, "There Is No Hope."
- 18 See, e.g., Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp.50-76; Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam and Dissent in Postrevolutionary Iran: Abdolkarim Soroush, Religious Politics and Democratic Reform* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), pp.36-88; Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, "The Divine, the People, and the *Faqih*: On Khomeini's Theory of Sovereignty," in *A Critical Introduction to Khomeini*, ed. Arshin Adib-Moghaddam (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp.231-38; and Maryam Alemzadeh, "Ordinary Brother, Exceptional General: What Major General Soleimani's Killing Means for the IRGC," *Foreign Affairs*, January 15, 2020.
- 19 Seyedamir Hossein Mahdavi, "A Comprehensive Nuclear Deal with Iran: Not Mission Impossible," *Middle East Brief*, no. 85 (Brandeis University, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, October 2014).
- 20 Milad Odabaei, "The Descent into Violence: Critique and Crisis in Contemporary Iran," *Jadaliyya*, December 16, 2019.
- 21 For instance, in anticipation of presidential elections in 2017, Khamenei singled out George Soros and the Open Society Foundation (OSF) for meddling. See Arash Karami, "Khamenei Warns against Election Unrest, George Soros," *Al-Monitor*, May 11, 2017.
- 22 For a discussion of the "paranoid style of Iranian politics" and its roots in British and American interference in Iranian domestic affairs (as evidenced, most prominently, in the 1953 coup), see Ervand Abrahamian, "The Paranoid Style of Iranian Politics," *PBS Frontline*, August 27, 2009.
- 23 Edelman and Takeyh, "The Next Iranian Revolution," pp.131-32, 138-41.
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