

# Post-Maximum Pressure Campaign Rapprochement with Iran

Author: Lt Col Farhan Ali, Pakistan Army, CSAG CCJ5

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## Key Points

- Despite extreme financial pressure, Iran has yet to default or file bankruptcy, and Iranian malign behavior continues unabated.
- The maximum pressure campaign failed to force a behavioral change in Iran largely due to the US' isolationist approach, and the Iranian regime's resiliency, domestic food and energy resources, and exploitation of loopholes and black markets to avoid financial sanctions.
- The US' plan to use snapback sanctions to isolate Iran from the world failed.
- The Abraham Accords and follow up high-tech weapons sales to Iran's archrivals threaten Iranian national security and may cause the regime to take security measures that undermine regional stability.
- Iran continues to violate rules-based order as the international community increasingly phases Iran out of the systems and structures that comprise that order.
- A balanced and uniform diplomatic and military Middle East policy, broadly implemented without exception, may help stabilize the region.
- To best ensure long-term Middle East stability, global and regional stakeholders must build trust, improve communications, properly oversee agreement implementation, effectively redress grievances, and protect the process against spoilers' actions.

## Introduction

The Trump Administration criticized President Obama's Iran policy, particularly the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). President Trump described the JCPOA as a poorly conceived and one-sided agreement that disproportionately benefitted Iran and allowed it to continue its malign behavior in the region. In order to address this stated imbalance, President Trump withdrew the US from the JCPOA and subsequently, initiated a new policy to influence Iran's behavior and force a new deal. At the center of this new US policy was the maximum pressure campaign (MPC). This paper will discuss MPC effectiveness to influence Iranian behavior and possible pathways for negotiations.

## The Maximum Pressure Campaign Effectiveness (or lack thereof)

The MPC against Iran included sanctions in the economic, military, political and diplomatic domains.<sup>1</sup> The MPC's primary component was to target financial institutions to limit Iranian support to Middle East proxies and exert

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<sup>1</sup> The US Department of State, Economic sanction policy and implementation on Iran, <https://www.state.gov/iransanctions/> (accessed on Nov 3, 2020).

pressure on Iran's domestic political and social landscape.<sup>2</sup> Though Iran remains under immense economic pressure,<sup>3</sup> it has not filed for bankruptcy and the domestic impacts have not appeared to initiate any movement towards Iranian regime change.<sup>4</sup> Militarily, the MPC included power projection,<sup>5</sup> limited actions like killing Iranian Quds Force leader Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani,<sup>6</sup> and cyber-attacks Iran's nuclear program and infrastructure.<sup>7</sup> The US and Iran are maintaining contested deterrence, hence the neither have not established clear political, diplomatic or military superiority. These factors call into question MPC's ability to change Iran's behavior or force a new agreement.

### Understanding the Limits of MPC

For future engagement with Iran, the US must understand MPC's limited capacity to change Iranian behavior. Iran's attachment to its Persian Empire legacy forms the core of its regional agenda and resilience. That legacy, plus Iran's domestic energy and food resources, enable its resilience and resistance to any attempt to bring behavioral change. Further, Iran's desire to be a regional power, or at least exert meaningful regional influence, drives the regime's ambitions. Economically, the country has endured US sanctions largely due to loopholes in the international sanction enforcement mechanism.<sup>7</sup> Diplomatically, the US abandoning the multilateral agreements made it difficult for the US to diplomatically isolate Iran. Militarily, the inability to deter Iran against its malign activity<sup>8</sup> can be attributed to Iranian resilience, natural endowments, and domestic military technological advancement.<sup>9</sup>

The US State Department reports that under MPC, the US has conducted the following: imposed 26 rounds of sanctions targeting over 970 individuals and entities, and over 70 Iran-linked financial institutions; denied over 75 tankers clearance to sail; kept 1.5 Mn barrels of Iranian oil off the market; denied 10 Bn USD revenue to the

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<sup>2</sup> Mohammad Sadat Khansari, Officials Warn of Further Iran Protests Due to Economic and Social Crises, September 21, 2020, [Officials Warn of Further Iran Protests Due to Economic and Social Crises - NCRI \(ncr-iran.org\)](https://www.ncr-iran.org/) (accessed on Feb 4, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Wsj.com, "U.S. to Block Iran's Request to IMF for \$5 Billion Loan to Fight Coronavirus," Apr 7, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-to-block-irans-request-to-imf-for-5-billion-loan-to-fight-coronavirus-11586301732> (accessed on Nov 3, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Murat Sofuoglu, Was Trump's maximum pressure campaign against Iran successful?, December 4, 2020, [Was Trump's maximum pressure campaign against Iran successful? \(trtworld.com\)](https://www.trtworld.com/news/iran/was-trump-s-maximum-pressure-campaign-against-iran-successful-11586301732) (accessed on Jan 5, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Transcript Gen. McKenzie SASC Testimony, US Central Command, Mar 13, 2020, [TRANSCRIPT GEN. MCKENZIE SASC TESTIMONY > U.S. Central Command > Transcripts \(centcom.mil\)](https://www.centcom.mil/Transcripts/TRANSCRIPT_GEN_MCKENZIE_SASC_TESTIMONY) (accessed on Jan 4, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Kroeing, Soleimani's death takes America's 'maximum pressure' campaign to next level, May 20, 2020, [Soleimani's death takes America's 'maximum pressure' campaign to next level \(alarabiya.net\)](https://www.alarabiya.net/en/iraq/2020/05/20/soleimani-death-takes-americas-maximum-pressure-campaign-to-next-level) (accessed on Jan 3, 2020) <sup>7</sup> Andrew Hanna, The Invisible U.S.-Iran Cyber War, November 5, 2020, [The Invisible U.S.-Iran Cyber War | The Iran Primer \(usip.org\)](https://www.usip.org/publications/the-invisible-u-s-iran-cyber-war) (accessed on Jan 4, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Cnbc.com, Sanctions have denied Iran more than \$10 billion in oil revenue, US official says, Apr 24, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/25/oil-sanctions-have-denied-iran-more-than-10-billion-us-official-says.html> (accessed on Nov 3, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Arsalan, Shahla, Bloomberg.com, Iran Has Spent as Much as \$30 Billion in Syria, Lawmaker Says, May 20, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-20/iran-has-spent-as-much-as-30-billion-in-syria-lawmaker-says> (accessed on Nov 4, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Voanews.com, Iran Threatens Retaliation after what it Calls Possible Cyberattack on Nuclear Site, Jul 3, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/voa-news-iran/iran-threatens-retaliation-after-what-it-calls-possible-cyberattack> (accessed on Nov 4, 2020).

regime; reduced Iranian oil exports to 20 countries to zero; and forced the exit of more 100 corporations from Iranian markets.<sup>10</sup> Though State Department has not published data since April 2019, MPC escalation during 2020 was likely to have greater impact. While these severe economic measures appear to affect Iran's domestic social landscape, the degree of impact did not foster behavioral change.

The US killing Maj Gen Soleimani, military posturing/positioning, and economic sanctions' financial impact have significantly reduced Iranian regional proxy operations. Diplomatic and economic pressure has yielded some degree of Iranian isolation from its traditional partners.<sup>11,12</sup> However, in terms of Great Power Competition, this isolation has helped China increase its access and influence over Iran.<sup>13</sup>

### The Current Environment

The construct of the current environment is shaped that it precludes moving forward without causing fallout either in the military or diplomatic domains. Either due to being an originator of JCPOA or through the lessons learned from the MPC's ineffectiveness, the Biden administration has repeatedly signaled its intent to rejoin the JCPOA. Regardless of the motivation, the environment has become more complex. This complexity is due the current US political climate, the killing of an Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrazadeh, and recent sanctions. Iran has used the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, the international community's failure to ensure US compliance, and the killing of one of its scientists as its justification for stepping up uranium enrichment.<sup>14</sup> European allies are watching this surge in Iranian nuclear activities with great concern,<sup>15</sup> and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) believes that time to revive the Iran deal is running out fast.<sup>16</sup> The upcoming Iranian elections adds complexity to the situation. Any strengthening of Iranian hardliners' political power is the likelihood make a future settlement difficult.

On top of the above mentioned issues, the Abraham Accords further complicate the environment. The effects of Abraham Accords brings Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Israel together against Iran. Any strategic shift in favor of GCC-Israel nexus can infuse a feeling of military superiority against Iran and conversely escalate a perception threat to Iranian security. Strategic imbalance can create a sense of superiority or fear of an existential threat, both leading to instability. The Abraham Accords have resulted in exponential GCC country military and

<sup>10</sup> The US Department of State, Maximum Pressure Campaign on the Regime in Iran, <https://www.state.gov/maximumpressure-campaign-on-the-regime-in-iran/> (accessed on Nov 3, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Tara Kartha, Iran ending Indian role in Chabahar rail project isn't death knell, but wake-up call for New Delhi, July 15,

<sup>12</sup> , [Iran ending Indian role in Chabahar rail project isn't death knell, but wake-up call for New Delhi - India News , Firstpost](#) (accessed on Jan 8, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Ariel Cohen, China And Iran Approach Massive \$400 Billion Deal, July 17, 2020, [China And Iran Approach Massive \\$400 Billion Deal \(forbes.com\)](#) (accessed on Feb 15, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Javad Zarif, [\(20\) Javad Zarif on Twitter: "Biden administration officials keep talking about Iran's compliance with JCPOA In what capacity? U.S. ceased participation in May 2018, violated JCPOA & punished those complying with UN resolution. As of today, US remains in EXACTLY same position. Before spouting off, COMPLY." / Twitter](#), Feb 11, 2021 (accessed on Feb 11, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Rt.com, "UK, France and Germany urge Iran to stop uranium enrichment program 'without delay' as Tehran ups the stakes," January 6, 2021, [UK, France and Germany urge Iran to stop uranium enrichment program 'without delay' as Tehran ups the stakes — RT World News](#) (accessed on Jan 21, 2021).

<sup>16</sup> Douglass-Williams, Christine, "International Atomic Energy Agency chief warns time is running out to revive Iran nuclear deal, Jihad Watch," January 13, 2021, [International Atomic Energy Agency chief warns time is running out to revive Iran nuclear deal \(jihadwatch.org\)](#) (accessed on Jan 21, 2020).

diplomatic capacity building,<sup>17</sup> which will significantly alter the region's strategic balance. On the other hand, through normalization of the ties between Israel and GCC, the US has passed the baton to new regional coalition to manage the regional conflict through regional forces. This by no means that US forces are leaving the region, but it does indicate a shift of the US to more advisory and guidance roles. The GCC-Israel nexus effects of Abraham Accords will make it more difficult for the Biden administration to begin rapprochement with Iran. Withdrawing support from the Accords risks a diplomatic confrontation with KSA, UAE, and Israel.

### Challenges for Revival of JCPOA

The international community can only ensure rules-based order on other parties within that order. Regardless of the arguments about the effectiveness of JCPOA, the US withdrawal from the agreement counters attempts to enforce a rules-based order on Iran. The unwillingness of the US to stay in the deal and the inability of the international community to influence the situation has resulted in a trust deficit between Iran and the West. Iran publicly voiced a feeling of betrayal due to imbalanced expectations. An example of this was concerns expressed by France, Germany, and the UK over the Iran's uranium enrichment surge.<sup>18</sup> The US and Iran both have openly stated interest in "compliance for compliance,"<sup>19</sup> however, the question as to 'how' to comply remains.

In 2015, when the US briefed its allies on the Iran deal, there was a mixed response. Israel was against the deal's framework as they sought to expose the agreement's flaws.<sup>20</sup> JCPOA critics often contend that agreement did not diminish the nuclear threat from Iran but amplified it.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, JCPOA parties regularly ignores that Iran is progressing toward developing a nuclear weapon. As the Biden Administration joins other JCPOA proponents, critics will continue to debate on the effectiveness of the original deal and its future form.

Another challenge to JCPOA reproach is divergent interests. The US key interests are defending Israel and other US allies, preventing Iran and other autocracies' acquisition of nuclear capability, maintaining open energy and maritime access, and most importantly, check increasing Chinese influence in the Middle East.<sup>22</sup> Israeli interests are to deny its encirclement by Iranian proxies, prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons, and check its missile program.<sup>23</sup> GCC countries, especially KSA and UAE, are concerned about the growing influence of Iran's Shia regime through interventions and terrorism, the threat of Iranian missile systems, and Iran's acquisition of nuclear

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<sup>17</sup> The Jerusalem Post, "US-UAE arms deal signed an hour before Biden takes office," January 20, 2021, [US-UAE arms deal signed an hour before Biden takes office - The Jerusalem Post \(jpost.com\)](https://www.jpost.com/US-UAE-arms-deal-signed-an-hour-before-Biden-takes-office) (accessed on Jan 21, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> Tehran Times, "E3 complicit in violating JCPOA, Iran says," January 11, 2021, [E3 complicit in violating JCPOA, Iran says \(msn.com\)](https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/E3-complicit-in-violating-JCPOA-Iran-says) (accessed on Jan 21, 2021).

<sup>19</sup> Mohammad Mazhari, 'Compliance-for-compliance' approach needed to reinstate JCPOA: Harvard researcher, January 18, 2021, ['Compliance-for-compliance' approach needed to reinstate JCPOA: Harvard researcher - Tehran Times](https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/132443/Compliance-for-compliance-approach-needed-to-reinstate-JCPOA-Harvard-researcher) (accessed on Jan 19, 2021).

<sup>20</sup> Lake, Eli, "Biden's nominee for CIA director is all about Iran," Bloomberg, January 20, 2021, [Biden's Nominee for CIA Director Is All About Iran - Bloomberg](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-20/biden-s-nominee-for-cia-director-is-all-about-iran) (accessed on Jan 21, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> Yossi Klein Halevi and Michael Oren, "The Case Against the Iran Deal," The Atlantic, January 21, 2021, [The Case Against the Iran Deal - The Atlantic](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2021/01/the-case-against-the-iran-deal/) (accessed on Jan 22, 2021).

<sup>22</sup> Kaplan, Robert D., "Beijing fills the Mideast vacuum," Wall Street Journal, January 20, 2021 [Beijing Fills the Mideast Vacuum - WSJ](https://www.wsj.com/articles/beijing-fills-the-mideast-vacuum-11611188000) (accessed on Jan 22, 2021).

<sup>23</sup> Eldad Shavit and Ari Heistein, Foreignpolicy.com, "How Israel Should Prepare for Biden's New Approach to Iran," November 25, 2020, [What Israel Wants From Biden on Iran \(foreignpolicy.com\)](https://foreignpolicy.com/article/how-israel-should-prepare-for-biden-s-new-approach-to-iran/) (accessed on January 22, 2021).

capability.<sup>24</sup> Iran's interests include: deterring adversarial efforts for change of regime; overturning power structure in the Middle East; and "...restore a sense of "greatness" reminiscent of ancient Persian empires."<sup>25</sup>

Russia and China are both exploiting these mixed signals and divergent interests. They have utilized the ongoing regional crisis, economic enter points, perceptions of declining US engagement, and opportunities created by COVID-19 to advance their objectives across the Middle East and central and southern Asia.<sup>26</sup> Iran likely sees an opportunity in Russian and Chinese regional ambitions to be a counterweight to the US and its Middle Eastern allies.

### **Route to Rapprochement**

The US should resume negotiations with small steps while attaching no pre-conditions. This approach serves to lower adversarial tensions, set conditions for building trust, and provide opportunities to gradually address concerns. Any future approach must consider Iran's Persian Empire legacy and natural resources. Though Iran is under immense stress, the regime has proven that it will not succumb to coercion in the form of MPC. The US must leverage Iran's previous willingness to negotiate and consider the JCPOA as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. The US cannot expect Iran to adhere to international norms until Iran is part of the system. Thus, all parties will likely benefit when the US and allies gradually incorporate Iran back into international institutions through multilateral agreements with strong enforcement and dispute resolution mechanisms.

The US could gain ground by optimally leveraging the MPC-shaped environment to bring Iran back into the global order. First, since some allies' interests are not aligned, the US must emphasize common ground. Developing consensus between Middle East allies, other JCPOA signatories, and Iran will be the most difficult task. Therefore, the US should first focus on conflict management and building trust, rather than the desire to reach immediate conflict resolution.

Asymmetric military and political imbalance between Iran and GCC countries will likely instill the regime with a sense of insecurity. Thus, Iran abandoning its primary deterrent, the missile program, is highly unlikely. Therefore, any pre-condition to engagement requiring Iran to end its missile program is likely a non-starter. A more pragmatic approach is to seek strategic balance in the region and ensure stability through engagement with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and regional partners. China and Russia can also leverage GCC countries to soften their stances and pursue rapprochement rather than confrontation. Further, any new agreement must provide uniform and balanced military and diplomatic policies for both allies and adversaries. These provisions must be implemented regionally without exception.

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<sup>24</sup> The Frontier Post, "Saudi FM accuses Iran of spreading havoc in Middle East," January 15, 2021, [Saudi FM accuses Iran of spreading havoc in Middle East - The Frontier Post](#) (accessed on January 22, 2021).

<sup>25</sup> Katzman, Kenneth. Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies. January 11, 2021. Congressional Research Service. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44017.pdf> (accessed on February 19, 2021).

<sup>26</sup> Sarah Zheng, Crises allowed China and Russia to pursue Middle East power and influence, warns US general, February 10, 2021, [Crises allowed China and Russia to pursue Middle East power and influence, warns US general | South China Morning Post \(scmp.com\)](#) (accessed Feb 11, 2021).

## **Conclusion**

The MPC sought to influence the behavior of the Iranian regime, but it did not significantly alter Iranian behavior in either the military, diplomatic, political, or economic domains. One can reasonably conclude the MPC has failed to achieve policy objectives and has strengthened Iranian resolve. To persuade Iran, the US must first analyze Iran's strategy and objectives to negotiate an agreement that ensures long-term stability in the region. The US can only expect compliance with the rules-based order by parties within that order. Rules-based order thus needs to be implemented across the board to achieve inclusivity rather than exclusivity.

## **Recommendations for the US / USCENTCOM**

- Relax sanctions to enable Iran to fight against COVID-19, to build trust, and create conditions for diplomatic engagement.
- Work to gradually increase Iranian involvement in global obligations and systems by bringing them to the negotiation table first, then broaden the scope to address its nuclear ambitions and malign behavior.
- Use MIL-to-MIL engagement to seek assistance from regional partners to act as a bridge between GCC and Iran for trust building and gradually moving towards broader agreement.
- Prepare to respond to actions by spoilers from either Middle East allies or Iranian hardliners.
- Develop a joint military communication system for all parties to maintain trust and reduce communication gaps.
- Develop multilateral mechanism to ensure the compliance of all parties and enable redress of grievances to provide credibility to any future agreement.
- Ensure strategic balance in the region through proactive diplomatic and military oversight, and ensure that regional allies calibrate their objectives to support the agreement.
- Maintain potent regional forces to continue deterrence through increased partner capacity/capability and strongly demonstrated resolve.