



JCPOA AND IRAN'S STRUGGLE FOR POWER IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Abstract

This research paper aims to explore the implications of Iran's nuclear deal on the growing influence of Iran in the Middle East. It also tries to investigate the reasons of the US withdrawal from the Iran's nuclear deal and its alliance with the Saudi-Arabia to balance out the increasing dominance of Iran in the region. In 2015, a deal was secured among P5+1 (China, United States, Russia, France, Britain and Germany) and Iran, named as Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) which was endorsed by the UN Security Council Resolution 2231. A 159 pages agreement directed that the commitment of Iran with JCPOA would be verified by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Complying to the requirements that were set forth in the agreement Iran dismantled much of its nuclear activities by giving more excess to IAEA and arm race in the Middle East was expected to slow down. American President Donald J. Trump on May 8th, 2018 announced the withdrawal from its nuclear deal and putting more sanctions on the regime. The nuclear non-proliferation in the Middle East was disrupted.



Key Words: Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Saudi-Iran rivalry, International Atomic Energy Agency, US withdrawal, Middle East

Middle East has been on the chessboard of global powers since the wake of cold war. The residues of cold war shifted within the region and created a tussle for hegemony. The Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of islam views itself as the leader of the Muslim world promoted its own brand of Sunni Wahabi/Salafi islam, whereas the Iran is enriched with Shia population (Khalid, 2012). Decades old rivalry between the Saudi Arabia and Iran has been exacerbated by their religious differences. Saudi Arabia, the sole monarchy, one of the major oil banks, is challenged by the rising influence of Iran in the region, since theocratic revolution in Iran that was seen in 1979. Iran has clear aims to export its revolution beyond its border and influence which subdues the influence and interest of Saudi Arabia.

Revolutionary theocracy in Iran has brought it many fruits, alignment with the Shia leaders and dominating over the interest of middle east. Situation in the middle east has got worst since Saudi Arabia has been unable to contain the influence of Iran. The rivalry between two countries in envisaged through proxy war that has brought entire Middle East in its burns as the world has witnessed in Syria, Yemen and Iraq. Thucydides' trap is clearly seen in the middle east. Political arena of entire middle east, which is drenched in civil war, is becoming more complex through the pursuit of nuclear ambitions by Iran which were perused with more pace after Iranian Revolution in 1979 (Mustafa, 2007). Before that the US helped Iran with Atoms for Peace program in 1957 under President Eisenhower. After the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's in 1989, who previously opposed the enrichment of nuclear capabilities, Ayatollah Ali Khomeini started working on Iran's undeclared nuclear program (Medea, 2018).

Iran's started its nuclear ambitions in 1950s. In Cold War as Iran was the ally of the US under King Shah, when United States supplied 5MWt research reactor commonly known as TRR, added with much enriched uranium (HEU) in 1967. Although the program was initiated in late 1950s, but it did not have a steady pace. King Shah had planned to build a power reactor under Atomic Energy Organization of Iran 1973. After the Iranian revolution 1979, nuclear program was shrugged as the western technology by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. In 1984, the work on Shah's secret nuclear program started as the Iran had to deal with chemical attacks after the Iraq-Iran war in 1980s, even Saudi Arabia sided with Iraq to further weaken Iran (Mahdieh, 2013).

A Shia stronghold, countered by many terrorist outfits which are mostly working under the brand of Sunni Salafi/Wahhabism, from AL Qaeda to ISIS. Iran believes that this particular type of faith, which is rigid and based on strict laws, is projected through the Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, the policies of Iran after 1979 has put Arab world in deterrence factor. The revolution in Iran, as thought by the Iranian regime, is to expand throughout the Middle East, beyond its borders, expanding on the expense of Sunni Islam. Religious differences along with oil market have fueled the differences between the Saudi Arabia, but Iran has not been in good terms with Israel. Saddam's



Iraq has fought a bloody war with Iran, attacking with chemical weapons (Medea, 2018).

In July 2015, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), 159 paged agreement, signed in Vienna, has prompted other countries in the Arabian Gulf to get much all those right and relaxations that Iran has got in the agreement. The UAE and the Saudi Arabia were the two major partners who resisted Iran of getting its nuclear rights, as both states also want to go down the same road. Safeguard Agreement has been signed between Saudi Arabia and IAEA, but along with it, with the help of US, it also signed Small Quantity Protocol (Benedetta, 2014). No matter the US has imposed strict policies on Iran to contain its Uranium enrichment, but the regime has felt a serious blow domestically after the deal. Low revenues and trade halt coupled with regional instability and ISIS factor has pushed Iran to the corner (Eliot, 2016).

The Iran nuclear deal has affected the relations between the Middle East and the West. There were already many challenges that were faced by the middle eastern political landscape such as the Shia-Sunni rift, intra Sunni battle for legitimacy and purity, Islamic and secular forces and interstate rivalries. Policy challenges that were faced by Iran and the west were the collapse of state authority in Iraq, the robust proliferation of terrorist groups, and interstate rivalries played on the chessboard of global powers. After the deal there have been many efforts to engage Iran in the politics of coalition, bent consensual mistrust among the signatories have further parted (Victoriano, 2023). Strict introspection has been occurring from the western powers on the Iran nuclear program and enrichment and new politics has been swayed by the US and the regime itself, but with mistrust and the internal disputes of Iran, making the political landscape and the deal more and more complex (Ali, 2019).

The political arena once again changed when Obama left the office and was replaced by President Donald J Trump. Before taking over the presidential office, he clearly stated that he had certain mistrust on Iran's uranium enrichment program and would surely pull out of the deal if needed. Moreover, there were concern growing by the US and its allies in the region about the growing stature and influence of Iran in the region. Iran's alignment with Russia, growth in cruise, ballistic and long-range anti-ship missiles and other weapons grew more concerns. Iran had also built naval missile air force which was to threaten shipping petroleum and other naval traffic that passes through Gulf waters. Its growing influence in Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon also had some major opposition in the region (Anthony, 2018). European powers and Russia who were the members of the deal were reluctant to follow on the footsteps of the US as their vested interests that were present in Iran were halted. The US on the other hand, the sole strong ally of the Saudi Arabia was also securing the interest on its allies in the region, Hezbollah factor also prompted US towards deliberate withdrawal from the deal (Sima, 2018).

In these changing political circumstances Maximilian predicted three scenarios if the US withdraws from the nuclear deal. Iran would also withdraw from the deal, along with NPT and will work on its own nuclear program. Secondly, Iran quits from JCPOA while adhering NPT, but still a nuclear



threshold would remain. Thirdly, the European powers along with Russia would persuade Iran that it would be in its best possible interest to abide by the deal (Maximilian, 2018). President Obama clearly declared that quitting the Iran nuclear deal was a clear-cut mistake, rather a blunder, as he gave certain reasons. It was not an agreement between one administration and other. Not only JCPOA led Iran to roll back its nuclear program, moreover, the deal was not solely based on trust, aggressive introspection was there. Iran was still complying with the agreement according to the intelligence provided by the CIA. The JCPOA was never intended to solve all the problem of US with Iran and apart from JCPOA restrictions are still valid on the uranium enrichment in Iran.

JCPOA: From Coalition to Delusion

A deal signed in 2015, which was put into effect in January of the following year, mainly imposing restrictions on nuclear enrichment program. Moreover, certain waiver of sanctions which were previously imposed on Iran, as the regime was complying with the major powers, P5+1 and UN watchdog IAEA to set back its nuclear ambitions of having a nuclear weapon. Obama's government negotiated for nearly two years and after that a deal was able to get signed (Maximilian, 2018). As Iran is a party to NPT, it never persuaded in the making of nuclear weapons rather the production and enrichment of uranium for medical and industrial purposes were the main motives of the regime. Production of enough fissile material is required for making or designing a warhead along with certain technological advancement. Thus, an indicator known as break out time which primarily suggest the time that is needed to produce reasonable weapon grade uranium for making of one weapon. U235 isotope is required for the fissile material besides 90 percent enrichment.

For prolonging the breakout time, the agreement stated that the uranium enrichment at Fordow and Natanz must be restricted along with it a heavy-water reactor, at Arak, have its core rendered inoperable; its plutonium byproduct, the P5+1 states feared, could have been reprocessed into weapons-grade material. 10 to 20 percent enrichment was allowed in the agreement which was commonly used for more medical and industrial needs. Along with it the severe surveillance of IAEA, the agreement also controls the centrifuges controlled by Iran. The clauses in the agreement also suggest that nuclear program needs to be monitored and no certain sites could operate under the regime secretly. The clauses in the agreement were not binding forever. Some were limited for certain time period as the restrictions on centrifuges would be lifted after ten years. Restriction on the imposition of minimum enrichment would be waived after fifteen years. Still there were many restrictions that were binding, and the regime was to comply them until no expiry date.

Certain provisions regarding verification and monitoring were left open ended with no end date. The regime was bound through the agreement to later ratify the additional clauses that were to protect its agreement with IAEA. As the UN watchdog and according to the deal IAEA has open access to the nuclear programs operating in the state. The IAEA is also said as one of the most robust nuclear verification regimes, by the ex-director general Yukiya



Amano. The agency also reports quarterly to the Security council on the regime and its implementation on the deal. A new body that is formed by the signatory parties to monitor the implementation of the agreement by the regime which is known as Joint Commission. This body can also assist the IAEA in checking of those sites which are not yet declared as the its also looks upon the transfer, imports and exports of the material. The US, European Union and United Nations helped the regime while lifting certain sanctions that were already hindering the growth of the regime. The parties also proposed that the sanctions would be uplifted provided that the nuclear program of Iran remain peaceful abiding the nuclear deal. Even though there were certain sanctions that were imposed by remain effective even after the deal. They were basically imposed for the abuse of human rights, proliferation of ballistic missiles and coalition of regime with the designated terrorist groups. The sanctions that were lifted mostly were regarding trade within the international market on oil export but still some sanctions that were upheld for the free trade were remaining intact. US also barred much of the corporate sector to not to trade with Iran as that sector would also face certain sanctions.

Now the question arises that how the situation become so deteriorated that that the US decided the withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal that was solely benefitting the peace of the region (Maximilian, 2018). As the IAEA also certified back in 2016 that Iran was complying to the agreement clauses limiting the enrichment of uranium (Eran, 2016). The day Iran nuclear deal was ratified or certified, the United Nations, the US and the European Union somehow repealed most of the sanctions that were imposed on Iran. Most of the sanctions were suspended. This was given a more go ahead since the IAEA justified that that Iranian regime was complying and abiding by the clauses that were stated in the agreement. The secondary sanctions that were imposed by US to further limit the oil trade of Iran were repealed allowing Iran to export its oil. US had also seized some funds that were later given back.

US withdrawal from the Deal and Europe's Reaction to US Withdrawal

Times were changed when from the conservative or republican side, Donald Trump came into the race of presidency. He had already criticizing Iran for not complying to the clauses of the agreement and has also stated that as soon the republican would hold the office. US withdrawal from the deal is for sure. The Iran nuclear deal has benefited Iran as well as the annual trade between Iran and the European Union was around twenty-one billion euros. Fearing from the US sanctions many firms of the EU started leaving Iranian markets. The advancement and the anti-Iran role of the US grew more speculations regarding the deal, and it was criticized by the Iranian government that the US was acting in bad faith. Affirmation from the IAEA and other international nuclear organizations verified explicitly that Iran was complying to the deal, but the global policeman attitude of US was persistent.

The regime lambasted on US for moving in bad faith and persisted that US was bullying the global corporate sector hindering the investments in Iran. Foreign minister of Iran Javad Zarif noted that US had hindered the sale of aircraft spare parts to Iran. The time came when the



Trump administration announced its withdrawal from the deal in May 2018. The US administration later evoked all the sanctions that were uplifted at the time of the deal which mainly include oil export and certain bank related sanctions. The administration clearly stated that the firm trading with Iran would not be allowed to trade with the US. The global market had to comply to the demands of US as it had the major share hold in international market. The focus of US was that Iran was proliferating its ballistic missiles and the coalition with the terrorist outfits which were operating in the middle east. The regime lambasted on the US that the US was not putting onto the deal which was ratified by the government and that withdrawal might be a menace to the peace of the region. It is interesting to note that the focus US to withdrawal was because the deal had major impact on the growth of Iranian influence and balance of power in the middle east as the regime was challenging the hegemony of Saudi Arabia. The regime also accused that the Europe was submitting to the unilateralism and totalitarianism of US.

The UK, France and Germany tried to keep the deal alive while initiating a barter system (Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanged). This was a special system introduced by the European powers which were mainly assisting the regime to trade without relying on the American banking system. Even after a year the US allies were buying Iranian oil to boost their trade, but after a year, things were primarily changed as US wanted to bring Iranian oil trade to zero (Kali, 2017). Iran came on the forefront and started violating the deal which the European countries were trying to remain intact. As the US withdrawal and sanctions were reimpose, the regime started enriching its stockpile. The enrichment was much less than ninety percent as it is minimum requirement for making a weapon. The regime also started working on new centrifuges and initiated the plant at Arak facility which speeded the uranium enrichment.

US Withdrawal from the Deal and its Impacts on Iran

The Iran nuclear deal after its ratification brought many fruits to the economy of the regime as the sanctions were suspended and Iran had the liberty to export its oil. Soon after the US withdrawal the sanctions were imposed again, and the economy of Iran is deteriorating since then. As large amount of national revenue was being generated through oil export which was around 2.1 million barrels a day during the time oil sanctions were suspended and repealed. As the sanctions were imposed and the US withdrew from the deal, oil export of Iran dropped back to the place where it was before and it is three hundred thousand barrels per day. IMF predicted that the Iranian GDP would drop by at least 9.5 percent in 2020 while the contractions that Iran faced in 2019 were beyond 4.5 percent. Such drastic decline in the oil export started hurting the already struggling economy. Moreover, coalition of Iranian regime with designated terrorist outfits proved for the investors a dead investment as the future of deal was still diminished. With the help IRGC (International Revolutionary Guard Corps) black market in Iran started pouring in. Smuggling not only of goods, but of oil started enriching IRGC (ISPI, February 2019).

Sanctions are not only thing which would be blamed for poor economy. Many violations of Human Rights and abduction stories circulated throughout the internet which made investors a bit worrisome. Incompetency of the government must be given its due share as the incompetency paved the way of corruption sue to which inequality within the state surged exacerbating the situation for the indigenous. The rising inequality coupled with economic stagnation produced certain insecurities among the people of Iran which later grew into people protesting against the regime. The worn-out infrastructure did not help Iran to pave its way for industrialization keeping the state stagnant. According to the US, they have applied “maximum pressure” in order to comply Iran with the detailed demands of US. The regime is also stiff and hence the natives are caught between the malfeasance of the regime and tough measures of US. As the chart shows the currency of Iran throughout the period (BBC, May 2019).

Iran's currency has hit record lows recently

Number of Iranian rials to one US dollar at unofficial market rate



Source: Bonbast.com

BBC

As the inflation grew, cost of living also surged as the statistical data shows that the price of beverage and food has risen by sixty percent and the price of tobacco raise by eighty percent. These sanctions that were imposed globally had to bear the burden by the natives as since 1984 and 2019 was marked as the worst year for Iran. The IMF and the World Bank had



already predicted that growth of Iran in the coming year would be 0 percent to 0.5 percent given the sanctions remain the same. This means more unemployment for the natives, more challenges for the government and more exposure to internal and external threats. Iran would face more challenges in the region as regional competitors-cum-rivals such as the Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel are growing at a certain pace and it poses a threat to the regional struggle for power of Iran. Reliance on the black market and smuggling of oil in the region would not help in the growth of economy rather it digs down the stature of growth of Iran.

Iran's Nuclear Deal and the Middle East

The US withdrawal and sanctions that were imposed by international community, mainly by the US were unable to limit the role of Iran in the Middle East as key player. Nefarious was the term used by Washington which characterizes the behavior of the regime (Colum, May 2020). Moreover, think tanks in Washington argue that the alignment of the regime with designated terrorist outfits and other hardline religious parties has put Iran on the fore fronts of global arena. It is observed that without the regime change or certain changes in the behavior of their foreign policy, it would be difficult to predict a change in the behavior of the regime. As Washington's maximum pressure policy would cut the money flow in and out of the country. This pressure will exhibit and force Iran to comply with International community.

Arab allies of the US, who were the critics of Iran nuclear deal have been acting as a US key player. Arab allies see Iran as a threat to their regional hegemony and hence, the Saudi Arabia and the UAE held no opportunity to limit the influence of Iran. The flow of Tehran's money to Baghdad has been challenged by the Saudi Arabia as the deep digs in the Iran's economy made them unable to support their influence outside the borders. The UAE has been meddling in the politics, mending its ties with Assad regime to counter the influence of Iran in Syria. Lebanon and Baghdad have been importing gas from Iran without payments. The installation of Revolutionary guards in various country and the role of Iran in fighting the ISIS increased the spectrum of the influence of Iran (Eliot, 2016). The Revolutionary Guards Corps providing arm support and financial help to Hamas, Hezbollah and Asaib ahl al-haq has increased the sphere of influence of the regime. The attacks on the religious shrines by rebels prompted Iran to help Assad regime protecting their religious interests. The reliance of Assad regime on Syria is increasing day by day. Even before that Hafez Al Assad had seek help from Iran to counter the balance of Egypt and tyrant Saddam regime.

Arab countries which had grown hostile attitudes towards Israel, started backing the efforts of Iran in countering the influence of Iran. The geopolitical and strategic loneliness have prompted the Assad regime to move towards Iran's corner. Installation of Quds forces in various allied states which directly respond to the supreme leader of Iran brought Iran on the front foots. It is also stated that the pillar through which Iran envisage its regional foreign policy is through Quds forces. As US invasion of Iraq has brought both Iran and Iraq closer



in ties. Regional rivals that solely rely on the alliance of US do not want US to leave the region, as it would increase the Iranian influence in the region. The influence of Iran in the region has been growing gradually, statistical data shows that the war in Yemen has the Saudi Arabia billions of dollars. Still the use of long-range ballistic missiles by the rebels, which were provided through Iran, enables a severe attack on Saudis major oil fields and refineries.

Iran in the Broader Spectrum

The nexus that Iran has built with Russia counter the Saudi-US alliance has grown the influence of Iran in the region (Eric, 2013). The trade of S-400 missiles with Russia irks the Saudis and as well as Americans regarding the growing military capability of Iran, whether it is in Syria or in Iraq. Iran has been carrying its strategy with the help of Turkey and Iran and it had made Iran a stronger force than before. Iran through the help of Quds forces has been on the fore fronts while fighting against ISIS.

Now comes the point that despite the strategic and geopolitical loneliness, Iran is still the key player in the Middle East. This can be categorized in various ways. More the US would squeeze Iran by imposing sanctions and embargo; more would be the chances that the Iranian regime would lash out and envisage a strict foreign policy. As Iran blocked the Strait of Hormuz, the strategic passage from where most of the oil trade is done in the region. In these conflicts, elements of regional and ethnicity are also there vis-à-vis the Saudi Arabia. The regime faces several challenges internally which are on the rise with every passing day as the protests have erupted in recent years throughout the region. No matter, how much the regime iron clads their internal challenges and hurdles, one day or other, they would implode, and situation might become more exacerbated.

The sectarian and ideological differences have helped Iran in one way or other. Being the only Shia strong hold in the region and the emotional attachment of the religious inclined people made Iran a stake holder. Religious persecution of Shia Muslims in the region along with brute behavior of other oligarchs made people sympathetic towards Iran (Shireen, 2020). The time when Israel tried to invade Lebanon, since then the strong hold of Iran was built there in the shape of Hezbollah. Same is the case with Iraq, where the parenthood of many people ranges from Iranian background, hence the ethnic ties that were forged are strong enough to increase the influence. The Middle East usually has an anti-US attitude. The indigenous thought that every move of US is to in the pursuit of its on national interests. So, the regime carries subtle sympathies.

By analyzing the situation in the Middle East, it is easy to access that the true picture can be depicted through realists who argue about the anarchic nature that primarily exists in the region. Alliance system that works throughout the region has engulfed the Iran to balance its own power. As there is no central agency enforcing order in international affairs, states are exposed to a security dilemma. Driven by concerns about their autonomy vis-à-vis other states,



states aim to acquire military power, which in turn provokes other states to counter this power. When applying this dynamic mechanism to the present case, it would appear to be normal behavior if Iran were to attempt to acquire nuclear weapons: Although Israel refrained from officially declaring itself a nuclear power, it is a widely accepted fact that it became one in the late 1960s (Martin, 2013). As Iran has left with no options except to secure its national interest while coming on offensives. The US withdrawal from the deal clearly shows the its alignment with rivals block of Iran while the other signatories ware in the true essence trying to protect the deal. The Iranian increase in stockpile of uranium has shown that the Iran has grown from defensive realism to offensive realism. It is arguably shown that Iran's nuclear ambitions are not halted until and unless the regional rivals are maintaining their stature.

Conclusion

The future of Iran nuclear deal is unclear as no efforts have been made in securing the deal. The deal demands certain Confidence Building Measures from each side as the peace in the region is disrupted. The US withdrawal from the deal has been widely criticized and referred as an obscene act in order to bring peace in the region. The deal that was ratified at the time of Obama administration is no more than a post-dated cheque on a failing bank. Even Obama administration has criticized the US withdrawal endangering the confidence that was built in the previous administration. It is unpredictable that Iran would change its attitude until the Trump government is present in the US. As it is obvious that Tehran would leave no stone unturned that increase its third-party capability. The harsh response of Tehran would grow as Tehran is being strangled through US sanctions and the native population have to bear the brunt of these sanction. Though the sphere of influence of Iran has increased by increasing its arms strength and alliance system. The main factor that Iran is still the key player in the middle east is due to its robust increase in its arms and alliance that the Saudi Arabia and Israel which are the alliance of the US are facing challenges in the region. Hence, the withdrawal results in the offensive policy of Iran struggling for power in the region. As it is clear that Iran is now far stronger than it would ever appear.



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