

# **Appraising the Foreign Policy Legacy of George W. Bush on Iran: The Roots of the Current Crisis**

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## **Abstract**

In this historical analysis of US foreign policy toward Iran during the presidency of George W. Bush, the author aims to decipher the overarching policy approach guiding United States' Iran policy in the context of the main issues arising during this time period. George W. Bush started his presidency with the legacy of past presidents, viewing Iran as a threat to US interests and drawing from the policy tool box that had been developed during the previous four administrations. In this paper, the implementation of these different policy approaches will be discussed in the context of the events of September 11, the Afghanistan and the Iraq wars, and the nuclear issue. Engagement, containment, and covert and overt means of destabilizing the Islamic Republic of Iran will be discussed. The roots of many of the current issues in U.S. -Iran relations as well as the tactics used to tackle them could be traced to the period under study. In the years after the presidency of George W. Bush and despite the different tactics used, this mentality has led presidents as diverse as Obama and Trump to suffer from the same strategic mistake: an instrumental approach to Iran. The failure of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action to withstand the transfer of power in the United States shows how the American practice of the weaponization of all available means to deal with Iran, including diplomacy and economic tools, is jeopardizing any real hope for a different direction in US-Iran relations.

**Keywords:** United States, Iran, Foreign Policy, George W. Bush Administration.

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### Introduction

With the Trump administration's unilateral withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) - a multilateral agreement between the five permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany and Iran - in May of 2018, U.S.-Iran relations entered a new phase of escalation of tensions. The Trump administration is once again using the allegation of Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons and terrorism as grounds for the anti-Iran "maximum pressure campaign" that includes sanctions, threats of military action, and coercive diplomacy. Since the roots of many of the current issues between the United States and Iran, especially the nuclear issue, could be traced to the George W. Bush administration, the present paper aims to examine US-Iran relations during the 2001-to-2009 period.

The paper begins with the premise that a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between the United States and Iran is a necessity, especially at the current juncture. Not

Only is the ever-escalating tense relationship between Iran and the United States complicating the relationship between the U.S. and other world powers including China, but also it is creating instability and uncertainty of unprecedented magnitude in the rules of international relations as a whole. Consequently, it is necessary to arrive at a nuanced appraisal of the root sources of the current crisis.

The main question guiding the present historical analysis is as follows: what is the overarching strategic approach driving United States' Iran policy during the administration of George W. Bush? To address the main question, several minor questions need to be tackled. What were the top issues that shaped the Bush agenda in dealing with Iran? What tactics and tools did the George W. Bush administration use with regard to those issues? Based on an analysis of these issues and the policies and tactics used to address them, what overarching strategic approach is evident? In conclusion, the author addresses any implications the current study has for understanding the current crisis in U.S.-Iran relations and its future.

### 1. Historical Background

Ever since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has steadily progressed toward a position of regional power, despite the many US-backed or US-initiated obstacles including the 8-year Iraqi-imposed war and continuous US economic sanctions. This is while, with its vast oil and gas reserves and its strategic place in the Middle East, Iran has historically been an

important part of US policy in the region. Henry Kissinger's (2001) remarks are reminiscent of the centrality of Iran in US Middle East policy. "There are few nations in the world with which the United States has less reason to quarrel or more compatible interests than Iran" Kissinger said (p. 197).

The 1979 Islamic Revolution shattered the strong patron-client relationship that had developed after the 1953 coup and which was the backbone of US policy in the region (Gasirowski, 1991). The subsequent developments, most importantly the admission of the deposed Shah to the United States and the ensuing student capture of the US embassy in Tehran asking for the return of the Shah, further deteriorated the relationship between the United States and Iran.

The events of the Islamic Revolution crystallized the view among top US officials that the revolution was a threat to US interests in the region. Carter's November 14, 1979, Executive Order 12170, which "declared a national emergency with respect to Iran," became the backbone of United States Iran policy. Every president ever since has extended the executive order by signing it and "continuing for 1 year this national emergency with respect to Iran" (Bush, 2008). In essence, the declaration of the situation in Iran as an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States is the cornerstone of US policy toward Iran. The present article aims to assess United States' relationship with Iran during the two George W. Bush administrations, from 2000 to 2008, looking at the continuity of the perception of Iran as a threat and the dynamism of US policy during the Bush presidency.

During the four previous US administrations serving after the revolution, three basic goals had been set with regard to US policy in Iran: changing Iran's behavior, transforming the Islamic Republic from within, and changing the political system (the so called regime change goal) (Gharayagh Zandi, 2008). To achieve these goals, different policies had been implemented to varying degrees: containment, engagement, and covert and overt means for "regime change." And in all this, the United States has been breaking the only bilateral agreement that had been signed between the two countries post revolution; i.e., the Algiers Accord in which "the United States pledges that it is and from now on will be the policy of the United States not to intervene, directly or indirectly, politically or militarily, in Iran's internal affairs" ("Declaration of the government of the Democratic and Popular Republic of Algeria (General Declaration), 19 January 1981," 1981: 2).

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Thus, George W. Bush started his presidency with the legacy of past presidents, viewing Iran as a threat to US interests and drawing from the policy tool box that had been developed during the previous four administrations. In this paper, the implementation of these different policy approaches will be discussed in the context of the events of September 11, the Afghanistan and the Iraq wars, and the nuclear issue. Engagement, containment, and covert and overt means of destabilizing the Islamic Republic of Iran will be analyzed.

### **2. September 11 and the Changes in the Regional and International Environment**

The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, became a turning point in American foreign policy and United States national security strategy, most importantly as they related to the Middle East. The subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the American occupation of the two countries made Iran and the United States virtual neighbors bringing about episodic rounds of engagement and confrontation between the two adversaries. Iran's constructive role in the overthrow of the Taliban government in Afghanistan and the subsequent reconstruction of the country was followed by United States' designation of Iran as "part of an axis of evil" and ended what George W. Bush National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley has called "perhaps the most significant public engagement with Iran since the 1979 revolution" (Hadley, n.d.).

According to Stanley Renshon (2009), Bush began his presidency with a realist worldview which was only strengthened after the 9/11 attacks. George W. Bush, Renshon tells us, saw the world as a dangerous place populated by self-interested states prone to use military means to advance their interests. September 11 amplified this strategic view of the international environment, bringing to light the possibility of catastrophic terrorism on American soil through the intersection of terror and technology. Second to the threat of catastrophic terrorism, according to Renshon, was said to be "the rise of revisionist states fueled by religious fervor and those fueled by the tyrannical or hegemonic aspirations of their leaders, and in this he squarely zooms on Iran although he also talks about the threat posed by North Korea. According to Renshon, Mr. Bush from the beginning let national security concerns take precedence over international agreements, guarding against 'the false promise of institutions,' another very realist principle" (p. 32). What the 9/11 attacks

showed to George W. Bush was that the world was indeed a dangerous place and that the United States could only remain safe through an offensive national security strategy.

“The Bush Administration’s core insight in the period immediately after the attack was to put together two essential facts. First, there were groups who were capable of launching major terror strikes against the United States and its allies, and intended to do so with nuclear, chemical or biological weapons if possible. This fact added weight to another, that there were dangerous leaders in power who were motivated by grandiose regional aspirations, murderous proclivities and whose drive for power was permeated by sadism, revenge and the wish for domination” (p. 30).

Renshon’s psychological appraisal of George W. Bush implies that Bush’s decision to put Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as parts of an axis of evil was a natural derivative of Bush’s worldview. The 2002 United States National Security Strategy though only makes a passing References to Iran and that too as a victim of Saddam’s terrorism: “At the time of the Gulf War, we acquired irrefutable proof that Iraq’s designs were not limited to the chemical weapons it had used against Iran and its own people, but also extended to the acquisition of nuclear weapons and biological agents” (Bush, 2002, p. 14). The 2006 National Security Strategy, in contrast, focuses squarely on Iran, in which it is articulated that “We may face no greater challenge from a single country than from Iran” (Bush, 2006:20).

### **3. Engagement and Confrontation - Afghanistan and Iraq**

This lack of emphasis on the adversarial relationship between Iran and the United States in September of 2002 may be indicative of the clash of opinions about Iran policy inside the White House. According to Richard Haass, the director of the State Department’s Policy Planning staff from 2001 to 2003 and the current president of the Council on Foreign Relations, there was a strong disagreement in the first Bush cabinet on Iran policy.

These disagreements stemmed from the ideological differences within the Bush foreign policy team. While neo-conservatism did have a clear influence on George W. Bush foreign policy, it was not the sole influence. As a result, the complexity and multiplicity of ideas within the Bush foreign policy team was in itself a source of lack of coherence in G. W. Bush's Iran policy. The team included people like the pragmatist/realist Powell and Haass; the hegemonic Cheney, as well as neo-conservative/liberal interventionist Paul Wolfowitz. This ideological

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incoherence led to differences of opinion regarding the best course of action toward Iran.

The disagreement was mainly between the Secretary of State Colin Powell, on the one hand, and the Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Cheney, on the other.

“I was in one camp, and the Vice-President’s office and the O.S.D. - the Office of the Secretary of Defense - in the other. There were two very different schools of thought. One, that the U.S. ought to "engage" Iran, offer the Iranians as much of a dialogue as they were prepared to have, to extend these concrete and political benefits, but only if we get what we want. The problem is that a lot of people in the government have been wedded to the idea of "regime change." They thought the regime was vulnerable, and engagement would throw the Iranians a lifeline. I believed then and I believe now that they are dead wrong. History shows that the U.S. and Iran can do some business” (As quoted in Bruck, 2006).

That U.S. and Iran can do some business may well refer to the comprehensive cooperation that Iran came forth with during and after the Afghanistan War. “Iran emerged as a major participant in the U.S.-led multilateral coalition that took control of Afghanistan after the overthrow of the government including the international and UN-backed campaign to create a new Afghan government under US occupation” (Bennis, 2009: 50). Despite the U.S.-imposed sanctions that were still in place, Iran played a constructive role in stabilizing Afghanistan. In a November 2007 testimony before the House Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs, James Dobbins, President Bush’s first envoy to Afghanistan after September 11, praised Iran’s role in working toward stabilizing post-Taliban Afghanistan:

“At one point the U.N. had circulated the first draft of the Bonn declaration, which was to serve as Afghanistan’s interim constitution. It was the Iranian envoy, Deputy Foreign Minister Javad Zarif who noted that this document made no mention of democratic elections. Don’t you think that the new Afghan regime should be committed to hold democratic elections”? (Dobbins, 2007: 1). According to Dobbins, the Iranian delegate also pushed for the inclusion of the idea that Afghanistan should cooperate toward fighting international terrorism. Interestingly, Dobbins notes that the Bush administration at the time was not on a "democracy campaign" and had the sole goal of arriving at a settlement with all Afghan groups (Dobbins, 2007: 1). Dobbins also refers to Iran’s generous pledge of \$500 million in assistance to the newly Afghan

government they had helped to bring to power, a pledge that was almost twice as much as the American pledge of \$290 million. What Dobbins finds problematic in the Bush administration that prevents it from capitalizing on Iran's cooperation is a problem of perception that he finds emblematic of the official American psyche in general: "Americans are fond of characterizing the Iranian regime as a fundamentalist theocracy. The truth is more complex. Iran isn't Switzerland, but it is rather more democratic than Egypt and less fundamentalist than Saudi Arabia, two of America's most important allies in the region" (Dobbins, 2007: 8).

According to Dobbins' (2007) account, Iran was ready to continue to cooperate on Afghanistan and to even broaden the scope of negotiations to other issues when President Bush, in his January 2002 State of the Union address, designated Iran as part of an "axis of evil" (Text of President Bush's 2002 State of the Union address, 2002). Clearly, the Camp of the Department of Defense and Vice President Cheney had won the battle over Iran policy. In less than a year, Iran decided to suspend its dialogue with the United States.

The Iraq war became grounds for new American allegations against Iran rather than openings for cooperation. With the removal of Taliban on the East and Saddam on the West, the United States had in effect removed two of Iran's harshest enemies and opened new venues for Iranian influence in the region. The United States continuously charged Iran, mainly the Quds Brigades, of helping the insurgents against American troops. The Bush administration placed the name of the Quds Brigades in the State Department list of terrorist groups and built new military stations near Iraq's border with Iran (Gharayagh Zandi, 2008).

U.S. troops attacked the Iranian consulate in Irbil, detaining five diplomats and confiscating documents and computer data. According to the *Washington Post*, "The two raids [were] part of a new U.S. intelligence and military operation launched" a month before that aimed to "to identify and detain top officials of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' al-Quds Brigade operating in Iraq" (Wright & Trejos, 2007, January 12). In August, US troops arrested seven Iranian civilians, releasing them the next morning with an apology (Bennis, 2009).

As the Iraqi quagmire got worse, Iran and the United States had three rounds of talks on Iraq. US Ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, and Iranian Ambassador to Iraq, Hassan Kazemi Qomi, met in Baghdad on May 28, 2007, July 24, 2007, and August 6, 2007. The new round of engagements on the issue of Iraq security was dropped abruptly and the fourth scheduled meeting between the two ambassadors (scheduled for

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November 20) did not materialize (Bush administration contacts with Iran: Direct and indirect, 2008). The talks had mainly revolved around American allegations of Iranian involvement in Iraqi violence and Iranian rebuttal of the allegations (Farrell & Elsen, July 24, 2007).

### 4. The Nuclear Issue and Sanctions

In addition to the unfounded allegations about Iran's political and military meddling in Iraq, allegations against Iran about the nuclear issue became grounds for a more confrontational approach to Iran. Overall, the Bush administration approached the Iran nuclear issue from a security standpoint, arguing without evidence that Iran was pursuing nuclear weapons, a development that the United States alleged would lead to the spread and strengthening of terrorism worldwide (Sajjadpour, 2010). The Bush administration began its approach to Iran's nuclear issue with a rhetorical war on Iran, refusing to participate in the multi-lateral European talks between the EU-3 and the Islamic Republic. Ironically, this reluctance to engage Iran on the nuclear issue happened during the administration of former President Khatami who had engaged in a year-long voluntary suspension of uranium enrichment and the voluntary implementation of the Additional Protocol.

In March of 2005, though, the administration said that it was ready to support the EU-3 talks (Katzman, 2005). United States' readiness to support the EU-3 talks preceded the election of President Ahmadinejad with just a few months. The tough talk of the Bush administration against the alleged threat of Iran's nuclear capabilities brought back memories of the pre-Iraq war propaganda. Two factors inhibited the escalation of a subsequent attack on Iran: revelations about the Bush administration's lies about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate. In a 2004 editorial about Iran's nuclear issue, *The New York Times* criticized the Bush fear mongering on Iran in the following manner:

“Stop us if you've heard this one before. The Bush administration creates a false sense of urgency about a nuclear menace from a Middle Eastern country. Hard-liners talk about that country's connections to terrorists. They portray European diplomatic efforts to defuse tensions as a feckless attempt to appease a rogue nation whose word can never be trusted anyway. Secretary of State Colin Powell makes ominous-sounding warnings about new intelligence, which turns out to be dubious”. (Groundhog Day, 2004:18)

At this stage, Vice President Cheney and neoconservatives pushed for the military option to destabilize Iran's nuclear infrastructure. The push for military action failed due to the disagreements by Rice, Robert Gates (who had replaced Rumsfeld as secretary of defense), and ultimately President Bush himself (Powaski, 2019:121). And then came the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate which declared, "We judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program" (National Intelligence Council, 2007:5). More significantly, the document asserted the following:

"This NIE *does not assume that Iran intends to acquire nuclear weapons*. Rather, it examines the intelligence to assess Iran's capability and intent (or lack thereof) to acquire nuclear weapons, taking full account of Iran's *dual-use uranium fuel cycle* and those nuclear activities that are at least partly civil in nature" (National Intelligence Council, 2007, emphasis added).

The assertion was significant because the *assumption* that Iran *intends* to acquire nuclear weapons had been at the heart of US and European pressure on Iran to halt uranium enrichment, notwithstanding the fact that such technology has many civilian applications; i.e., it is a dual-use technology. Iran's nuclear issue found renewed life when the Natanz enrichment facility became public knowledge in 2002. Iran declared the existence of the facilities in early 2003 and asserted that the facilities were for peaceful purposes (Sahimi, 2003). Iran was accused of secrecy even though it was not obligated under its original NPT safeguards agreement to declare the site's construction prior to introducing nuclear material there (International Atomic Energy Agency, 1974).

The NIE did not remove the charges against Iran though, as it was Iran's capabilities that were problematic for the United States. Bush said in August of 2007, two months before the NIE's release, "[Iran's] pursuit of technology that could lead to nuclear weapons threatens to put [the Middle East] under the shadow of a nuclear holocaust" (Office of the Press Secretary, 2007). That the Bush administration was providing no evidence for its allegations and that the IAEA had found no diversions in Iran's nuclear activities (Izadi & Saghaye - Biriya, 2007; Jones, 2011) was of no relevance to the propaganda war on Iran.

With years of lobbying the IAEA, Washington successfully pressured the agency to send Iran's case to the UN Security Council exerting four rounds of resolutions against Iran for not giving up uranium enrichment, namely United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1737 (December 23, 2006), 1747 (March 24, 2007), 1803 (March 3, 2008), and 1835

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(September 2008) (Katzman, 2009). Some were not happy with sanctions, though, and were pushing for military strikes and so-called "regime change" policies.

Mearsheimer and Walt (2007) found in their study that the Israeli regime and the lobby constituted "the central forces ... behind all the talk in the Bush administration and on Capitol Hill about using military force to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities" (p. 282).

Neoconservatives, too, were ardent proponents of military action (See for example Podhoretz, 2008). Podhoretz found no efficacy for sanctions and argued that the military option was the only approach that would truly halt the Iranian program:

And indeed, in response to continued Iranian defiance, a round of sanctions was approved by the Security Council in December 2006. When these (watered down to buy the support of the Russians and the Chinese) predictably failed to bite, a tougher round was unanimously authorized three months later, in March 2007. When these in turn failed, the United States, realizing that the Russians and the Chinese would veto stronger medicine, unilaterally imposed a new series of economic sanctions-which fared no better than the multilateral measures that had preceded them. Then, in a trice, everything changed. Even as Bush must surely have been wrestling with the question of whether it would be on his watch that the decision on bombing the Iranian nuclear facilities would have to be made, the world was hit with a different kind of bomb. This took the form of an unclassified summary of a new NIE, published early last December. Entitled Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities, this new document was obviously designed to blow up the near-universal consensus that had flowed from the conclusions reached by the intelligence community in its 2005 NIE.<sup>1</sup> In brief, whereas the NIE of 2005 had assessed with high confidence that Iran currently is determined to develop nuclear weapons, the new NIE of 2007 did not know whether [Iran] currently intends to develop nuclear weapons (Podhoretz, 2008).

While the neoconservatives and other pro-Israel groups and organizations refused to see the significance of the 2007 NIE in undermining the efficacy and legitimacy of US policy toward Iran, critics of Bush's Iran policy began to more forcefully put forth their ideas for engagement. An example is an article by William Luers, Thomas Pickering, and Jim Walsh (2008) titled "A solution for the US-Iran nuclear standoff" in which the authors argued that the best solution to the nuclear issue is "jointly managed and operated" multilateral uranium

enrichment on Iranian soil with added international safeguards (p. 1). Clearly the proposal took into the Iranian view into consideration as it was developed based on "over five years" of meetings between "a group of former American diplomats and regional experts, including the authors of this article ... with a group of Iranian academics and policy advisers" (p. 2). The meetings are said to have been held "directly and privately" (p. 2). "This group, which was organized by the United Nations Association of the USA, has drafted several joint papers for the US and Iranian governments and sought to promote direct government to government discussions on all issues dividing the US and Iran" (p. 15).

The "Track II dialogue with Iran was initiated by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the United Nations Association of the United States" on the direction of RBF's president who "explored [after September 11] how the foundation might contribute to better relations in the Middle East. The conclusion was that Iran was a key to the future of the region" (Spero, 2010: 30). Fourteen "dialogue meetings" were held "between 2002 and 2008, most in Sweden." (p. 30)

"American participants included Stephen Heintz, president of RBF; William Luers, president of the United Nations Association and a former senior State Department official; and other former senior U.S. government officials and arms control experts. Iranian representatives included academics and policy advisors, most representing reformist groups in Iran. The U.S. side met regularly with high level officials at the State Department, National Security Council, and White House, as well as with key members of Congress. Senators and representatives occasionally attended meetings in Sweden. In between meetings, the Americans were in regular touch with Iran's Ambassador to the United Nations, who played a central role launching and managing the dialogue. Prior to the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinijad as President of Iran in 2005, the Iranian side also met with its government representatives, but this contact lapsed after the 2005 change in government. Ekeus served as a communication channel to European governments" (Spero, 2010: 30).

When the Bush administration finally decided to send an envoy as a "one-time deal" to the nuclear talks with Iran in July of 2008 (Kessler, 2008, July 16), it found itself the subject of neoconservative criticism. Michael Rubin of the American Enterprise Institute, for example, said, "Diplomacy is not wrong, but President Bush's reversal is diplomatic malpractice on a Carter-esque level that is breathing new life into a failing regime" (Rubin, 2008, July 21).

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Such harsh criticism attacked an overture that stopped short of providing any benefits to Iran for negotiation. In comparison with the EU-3 2005 package of incentives, the new negotiations offered no security guarantees. “The George W. Bush administration insisted that fuller References to security be removed as a condition for US endorsement” (Leverett and Leverett, 2010: 83). What was perhaps most palatable in the Bush administration’s Iran policy to Israel, its lobby, and neoconservatives was its covert and overt programs for destabilizing the Islamic Republic of Iran. These policies were most ardently followed in the last two years of the Bush presidency with the then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s transformational diplomacy approach to foreign policy.

With the claim of championing the aspirations of the Iranian people, these efforts in essence neglected the fact that according to international polls of Iranians, an overwhelming majority of the Iranian people is supportive of Iran’s nuclear program and is opposing to US foreign policy in the region (Fair & Shellman, 2008).

According to Fair and Shellman, “There is less distance between the sentiment of the [Iranian] public and that of the regime than may be popularly believed. Indeed in some measure the premise of American "regime change" funds presume a degree of difference that is not supported by these data” (p. 533).

### **5. Covert and Overt Programs to Destabilize the Islamic Republic of Iran**

While, according to Dobbins (2007), the Bush Administration was not on a "democracy campaign" in the Afghanistan War, the United States began to justify its adventurism in Iraq in terms of democratization. This change of approach was done in response to the revelation of the Bush administration’s lies about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the rise of U.S. casualties in the war, and dwindling public support for the misadventure. With this pretext, Rice openly asked Congress on February 15, 2006, for \$75 million in funds for Iran "democracy promotion" programs, including for dramatic expansion of United States’ international broadcasting to Iran in the form of the Voice of America TV and Radio Farda. On September 30, 2006, President Bush set the requested "regime change" funding into action with his signature of what came to be known as the “Iran Freedom Support Act” (“Iran Freedom Support Act," 2006). The Act’s official goal was set as follows: “To hold

the current regime in Iran accountable for its threatening behavior and to support the transition to democracy in Iran” (p. 1).

To allow for the transfer of funds to groups and individuals inside Iran, an act that was illegal under the current US sanctions in place, the Treasury Department was instructed to lift the sanctions for these projects (Iran Freedom Support Act, 2006; Rice, 2006). According to Condoleezza Rice’s testimony before Congress, the projects were said to have the following goal: “to develop support networks for Iranian reformers, political dissidents, and human rights activists” (Rice, 2006). The so-called "democracy-promotion" funds were to be administered mainly through the National Endowment for Democracy (Izadi, 2011).

The Bush administration also augmented State Department structures for monitoring Iran and influencing the Iranian public. The State Department established the Office of Iran Affairs in Washington, D.C., and Iran monitoring positions in Dubai, Baku, Istanbul, Frankfurt, and London where there were large Iranian expatriate populations. “With these moves, the Bush administration attempted to restore State Department capabilities of dealing with Iran, resources that have been much limited compared to those available prior to the 1979 severing of Iranian-American diplomatic ties” (Izadi, 2009: 127). Adam Ereli, State Department deputy spokesperson, explained the logic for establishing the new Iran watching posts as follows: “Iran is and is going to continue to be a very important country. We need to develop a cadre of foreign service officers who speak Farsi, who understand the region, not just Iran but the region where Iran has influence and reach” (U.S. Department of State, 2006, March 3). Apart from gathering information about Iran, Iran watchers were directed to develop contacts with Iranian expatriates and Iranian travelers to boost US public diplomacy access and effectiveness for the so-called "regime change" efforts.

With the removal of the Saddam from power, the Bush administration had in effect disturbed the dual containment approach of the Clinton administration. Designating Iran as part of an "axis of evil" along Iraq and North Korea gave the impression that the ultimate goal of the Bush administration Iran policy was changing its system of governance to one that was amenable to the United States and its interests in the region. In fact, the joke in Washington was that everyone wants to go to Baghdad; real men go to Tehran (As quoted in Cumings, Abrahamian, & Ma'oz, 2004: 101).

According to Hersh (2008), apart from the openly declared funding for the destabilization of the Iranian system, the Bush administration also

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got Congressional agreement for \$400 of funding for a major escalation of covert operations against Iran. The major goal of the covert operations, according to the Presidential Finding to which Hersh refers, was “to destabilize the country’s religious leadership” and they involved “support of the minority Ahwazi Arab and Baluchi groups and other dissident organizations” as well as “gathering intelligence” about Iran’s nuclear program (Hersh, 2008).

Despite all the covert and overt operations, United States Iran policy seemed to be in shambles at the end of the Bush administration. “Absent some last-minute fireworks, President Bush will leave office with a kind of double failure on Iran: Administration hard-liners haven't checked Tehran's drive to acquire nuclear-weapons technology, and moderates haven't engaged Iran in negotiation and dialogue, said Washington Post columnist David Ignatius. The strategic balance between the two countries is the opposite of what Bush had hoped to accomplish: Iran is stronger than it was eight years ago, and the United States, fighting costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, is weaker. Iran spurns America's carrots and dismisses its sticks” (Ignatius, 2008).

### **Conclusion**

The failure of the Bush administration Iran policy despite its use and expansion of all available means for dealing with Iran developed during the four administrations preceding him is indicative of an inherent problem in the US approach to Iran. Like his predecessors, the Bush administration failed to deal with Iran as a system. The dynamics of Iran’s foreign policy making was not taken into consideration; rather, the Bush team, with all the difference enumerated above, sought to take advantage of the different Iranian players involved for the realization of US goals in the region. Iran’s national interest was neglected at all times.

According to Bizhan Izadi (2007), the practical priorities for Iran to have relations with other countries are four: “understanding and respecting Iran’s national interests, geopolitical factors, sympathizing with Iran’s international positions and cooperation with Iran in international circles, and lack of a record of abuse of rights, adversarial behavior, and breach of pledges toward Iran” (p. 154).

The present appraisal of the George W. Bush administration Iran policy shows that none of these elements were present in US relations with Iran. Flynt Leverett, the Senior Director for Middle East Affairs on

the National Security Council in the first George W. Bush administration and a current senior fellow at the New America Foundation, and Hillary Mann Leverett, Director for Iran, Afghanistan and Persian Gulf Affairs at the National Security Council during the first George W. Bush administration, find this attitude characteristic of all US administrations since the revolution. “Five presidents have treated Iran as a threat. The next needs to think of it as an opportunity” they write (Leverett & Leverett, 2008: 31):

“In the rhetoric of many American politicians and commentators, the Islamic Republic of Iran is portrayed as an immature, ideologically driven regime that does not think of its foreign policy in terms of national interests. Apocalyptic scenarios have been advanced about a millennially inclined Iranian leadership using nuclear weapons against Israeli targets, with no regard for the consequences, effectively suggesting that the Islamic Republic aspires to become history’s first suicide nation” (Leverett & Leverett, 2008, p. 31).

They find the affirmation of the Algiers Accords’ validity by a new U.S. administration as a gesture of good will that has the potential of paving the way for normal relations between the two countries.

With the continued policies of sanctions, covert operations, and public diplomacy aimed at fostering regime change, every administration, including that of George W. Bush have in effect trampled the Algiers Accords in which the U.S. pledges not to interfere in Iran’s affairs politically, militarily, and economically.

In a November 17, 1979, address to a group of British Muslim journalists just a month after Carter’s unilateral severance of relations with Iran, Imam Khomeini criticized United States’ failure to approach Iran on equal grounds: “If Mr. Carter came down from that throne that he has and sat down on the floor and came to mutual understanding with us floor-sitting people, we will come to understanding with him as well, with the exception that he should compensate the oppressions he has done to us” (Amrika az didghahi Imam, 2005: 151). And in another instance he said, “We have friendly relations with all nations, and with all governments as well if they treat us with respect, we will have respect in return” (p. 150).

Ayatollah Khamenei too articulated the main reason for Iran’s resistance to having negotiations with the United States as follows:

“There are reasons of course, but one evident reason is that negotiation in the shadow of threat and pressure is not negotiation. One side, like a superpower, aim to threaten and inflict pressure and sanction

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and show an iron hand and the other side say okay let us sit and have negotiations. This negotiation is not negotiation. We won't have such negotiations with anyone. In fact, the United States has always stepped toward negotiations with this face" (Nazari magham mo'azzam rahbari, 2010).

Upon United States' unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA and its economic war on Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei has repeatedly reiterated the above line of argument against any negotiations under the threat of force: "Negotiation is an effort to deceive [Iran] into doing what the U.S. desires. It is like you hold a weapon, so the other side does not dare come close; you say 'drop the weapon, so I can do whatever I want to you'. This is what they mean by negotiation" (Khamenei, 2019).

Refusing to accept the legitimacy of Iran's system of governance, the Bush administration sought to both benefit from Iran's cooperation whenever possible and to work toward overthrowing the system. The US government continued to perceive Iran as a "rogue state" and a state-sponsor of terrorism and accused Iran of pursuing weapons of mass destruction and of destabilizing Iraq (Sajjadpour, 2010). As with previous and subsequent administrations, this mentality led to the overarching strategic approach of a containment policy toward Iran during the presidency of George W. Bush. A containment policy, of course, captures any policy that falls along a continuum of options from coercive engagement to military confrontation (Gharayagh Zandi, 2008).

As long as this mentality is in place, no rapprochement seems within reach. In the years after the presidency of George W. Bush and despite the different tactics used, this mentality has led presidents as diverse as Obama and Trump to suffer from the same strategic mistake: an instrumental approach to Iran. The failure of the JCPOA to withstand the transfer of power in the United States shows how the American practice of the weaponization of all available means to deal with Iran, including diplomacy and economic tools, is jeopardizing any real hope for a different direction in US-Iran relations.

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