



Spectacle of Iran’s Nuclear Deal: From Settlement to Withdrawal to Re-negotiation

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ABSTRACT

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Iran’s nuclear program has been a constant priority agenda of international non-proliferation community for decade’s now. The Comprehensive Framework for Joint Plan of Action (JCOP) concluded as a result of intensive negotiations among negotiating parties on April 2, 2015. This deal was considered as a diplomatic breakthrough with regard to Iran’s nuclear program. President Trump withdrew from the deal unilaterally in 2018 on the pretext of being ineffective in curtailing Iran’s missile program and offensive proliferation designs. Iran also declared not to comply the provisions of deal as retaliation of US unexpected exit. After President Biden’s ascending to power prospects of renegotiations brightened. However, despite few attempts, no tangible step of concrete negotiations has taken so far. This paper endeavors to narrate the course of Iran’s nuclear deal with exclusive focus on post US withdrawal events. The paper endeavored to analyze responses of different US administrations towards the deal. For instance, nuclear deal concluded and came into force under Obama’s administration; US unilaterally withdrew from the deal under Trump administration, and Biden’s administration struggling to renegotiate the deal. A holistic review of the deal including major events, would help to understand US threat perceptions vis-à-vis a nuclear Iran and the handling of this threat perception under different administrations, reveling the fault-lines between democrats and republicans on Iranian nuclear deal issue at one hand and US and other negotiating partners at other hand. However, despite the divergent opinions to handle nuclear Iran, all parties seem to converge on one point, to avoid military confrontation in Middle East.

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1.0 Introduction

Islamic republic of Iran is considered as a key regional player in Middle East, owing to obvious geo-strategic and political considerations, beside rich Arab monarchies. Yet for many of its Arab neighbors and their major foreign ally US, Iran seemed to be an adversary as a major non-Arab power due to competing interests. With Islamic revolution of 1979 the existing ideological and political rivalries became more acute. Most of the Arab states feared domination by the Islamic Republic with its revolutionary aim of exporting its brand of Islamic ideology. For Arab states, Iran has remained a constant threat due to its demographic edge, superior defense capabilities and strategic depth. This security threat explains why Arab states became part of anti-Iran alliances with regard to most political and security issues.

The Gulf States' perception of an Iranian threat increased further over the last decade with the revelation of Iran's presumed nuclear program. For Arab states, a nuclear armed Iran would greatly disturb the regional balance of power. Led by the United States, the West feared that Iran's nuclear program would spark a nuclear arm race in the region. It was assumed that the Iranian program could be highly detrimental for regional security, and that it might generate a nuclear arms race within the Middle East. It was feared that Iran's program could become a potential source of 'nuclear terrorism' as well. It was considered that the Iran's nuclear issue could not be treated in isolation, but one akin to a Pandora's box that when opened, could raise numerous other geo-strategic issues if would not contain in a proper and timely manner.

Iran's nuclear program has been a constant priority agenda of international non-proliferation community for decades now. Iran's clandestine nuclear program became public in 2002, when the leader of an Iranian dissident political party disclosed Iranian covert nuclear activities including an enrichment facility at Nantaz and a heavy water production in Arak (wright,2010). Once Iran's non-compliance with IAEA was established and Iran rejected the Council's demand to suspend its enrichment program, the first round of sanctions by United Nations Security Council (UNSC) was imposed in June 2006. From that date, multiple rounds of sanctions have been imposed on Iran. Apart from UNSC imposed sanctions, the US and EU also imposed multiple unilateral sanctions against Iran aiming to contain Iran's nuclear activities. Along with sanctions, negotiations continued but mostly unsuccessful. Since the revelation of Iran's undeclared nuclear activities in 2002, European powers remained directly engaged in negotiations with Iran. The US refused to become part of these negotiations. The US insisted the permanent suspension of uranium enrichment by Iran, as a precondition of talks. Iran refused to accept any pre-condition for talks. When Obama assumed power in the US, the US position on Iran softened and it agreed to become part of nuclear talks without any pre-conditions. In 2009, the US joined EU3 negotiations with Iran. Sanction and negotiations continued parallel. These sanctions hit Iran's energy hard. Iran's oil exports sharply dropped, particularly to Europe with significant fall in Iranian Riyal, virtually crippling the Iran's financial system. After multiple round of sanction by UNSC, negotiations resumed (after long dead lock occurred with failure of 2009 Geneva Talks), between group of six countries including five permanent member of UNSC plus Germany (together called P5+1) and Iran, in Turkey in April 2012. Western powers major demand

remained same that Iran suspend 20 percent enrichment (or stop enrichment over 5 percent) along with sending out its 20% stockpile of enriched uranium, enhanced cooperation with IAEA (Tabatabai & Pease, 2019). In return, Iran would get a relief in sanctions particularly from the US and EU. While negotiation on Iran's nuclear issue were on their way, a shift occurred in Iran's political landscape. Hassan Rouhani won the Iran's presidential election of June 2013, considered as a moderate on foreign policy issues, including nuclear program. On 20th November 2013, negotiations restarted in Geneva with the aim to reach an agreed framework. The negotiations culminated on 24th November in the form of 'Geneva Accord'. The accord was officially called as 'Joint Plan of Action' (Kello, 2013). This interim agreement valid for of six months initially, was officially signed between Iran and P-5 plus Germany. The main stipulation of the interim Geneva deal included a short-term freeze of the key parts of the Iranian nuclear program. In return, sanctions on Iran would be relaxed.

After expiration of Geneva Agreement, on 24th November 2014, all parties met again and agreed to extend their negotiations. Many marathons round of talks occurred yet inconclusive. Though a comprehensive nuclear deal still unable to achieve, negotiating parties including US secretary of State, John Kerry, agreed to give a second extension to the Joint Plan of Action (JPA), with a new deadline to cut a comprehensive nuclear deal set to 1st July, 2015. The Comprehensive Framework for Joint Plan of Action (JCOP) concluded as a result of intensive negotiations among negotiating parties. Most difficult part was drafting of an agreement acceptable by each party. On part of Iran, lifting of sanctions was considered as the most glaring outcome. As per the agreement, EU would lift its sanctions related to energy and banking sectors and the US would remove its unilateral sanctions, particularly related to business related entities in Iran. According to the agreement, not only EU and the US would lift its sanctions, but all UN imposed sanctions would also be annulled (*Joint Statement by EU High Representative Federica Mogherini and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, Switzerland, n.d.*). The Comprehensive Framework for Joint Plan of Action (JCOP) was signed on April 2, 2015. President Trump withdrew from the deal unilaterally in 2018 on the pretext of being ineffective in curtailing Iran's missile program and offensive proliferation designs. Iran also declared not to comply the provisions of deal as retaliation of US unexpected exit. After President Biden's ascending to power prospects of renegotiations brightened. However, despite few attempts, no tangible step of concrete negotiations has taken so far.

Despite of expiration of few provisions of the nuclear in end 2023, a deadlock still exists on the nuclear deal since US withdraw from the deal. Chances of negotiations further faded with advent of Russia-Ukraine war and subsequent Hamas's attack on Israel, political landscape got further complicated. This study endeavors to highlight the extra-ordinary diplomatic efforts made by all stakeholders to reach to an agreed document of nuclear agreement including Iran. The paper also tried to analyze the diverging opinions between US and rest of European powers on the issue of compliance with regard to Iran nuclear deal. In these efforts the study also explores not only the external difference of opinion among the stakeholders, but also an internal divide between democrats and Republicans in US on issue of nuclear deal.

1.1 Research Questions

- What measures can be employed to make Iran nuclear deal operational and its adherence by all stakeholders including US and Iran?
- What could be possible regional and global implications if the agreement gets suspended permanently and in its entirety?
- What kind of external and internal challenges are impeding the complete compliance of agreement?

2.0 Literature Review

The phenomena of proxy warfare in various manifestation is ages old, in recent human history, however, cold war era presented a classic example of proxy warfare involving the whole world into tug of war between US and former USSR. Despite their persistent presence throughout the history, security and strategic studies has focus more on formal wars and direct battles fought among nations or state actors, diminishing the importance of ‘war of shadows’ as most of scholars terms the proxy wars owing to discreet identities of their fighters. Identifying this issues, Andrew Mumford in his book, *Proxy Warfare* (2016), has tried to highlight historical continuity and contemporary dynamics of proxy warfare from cold war to recent war against terrorism. The authors present a detailed an informed analysis of proxy wars developments throughout last century linking them with contemporary developments. The book not only provides a good historical background of the proxy warfare but also presents a very comprehensive theoretical description of the phenomena. Since most of proxy wars waging today find their roots in cold war confrontations of bipolar world, it is imperative to understand the superpower rivalries their alliances and proxy warfare in cold war era, Avery Elizabeth, in his book *Superpower Rivalries and Proxy Warfare* (2017), had presented a comprehensive description of tensions, political events, decisions, which played a pivotal role in shaping the cold war and its proxy conflicts. Focusing more on contemporary developments, a combine volume of work, *Understanding the New Proxy Wars* (2022), Peter Bergen, Candace Rondeaux, Daniel Rothenberg and David Sterman has particularly focused on the ongoing proxy wars and tracing their origin, causes and developments. In this collection, authors have endeavored to identify the factors behind proxy war and how these wars are waged with particular focus on West Asia and Middle East.

Iran’s nuclear program is considered as one of the most pressing issue of contemporary proliferation concerns, given Iran’s record of sponsoring non-state actors, proxy warfare and human right violations. to understand Iran’s nuclear program particularly from backdrop of its historical developments, David Patrikarakos authored book *Nuclear Iran: The Birth of an Atomic State* (2012), presents a detailed insight of Iran’s nuclear program. Saira Khan in her book *Iran and nuclear weapons* (2011) narrates the motivational factor of Iran to pursue a nuclear program. She presents protracted conflicts in the region as major cause of nuclear proliferation by Iran. The study presents an in-depth theoretical analysis of causes of nuclear proliferation with Iran as a case study. *Iran’s perilous pursuit of nuclear weapons* (2021) by David Albright and Sarah Burkhard, presents a detailed chronicle of Iran’s efforts to build a nuclear program including its motivations to build a nuclear weapon. To understand Iran’s nuclear program in details.

Saira Khan in her recent publication *The Iran Nuclear Deal: Non-proliferation and US-Iran Resolution* (2024), has made a comprehensive analysis of all events related to Iran nuclear deal concluded in 2015. Detailed negotiation process and sessions are covered in the study. The US exit from deal in 2018 and its aftereffects are major focus of the book. With unilateral exit of US from nuclear deal the future of the deal has become increasingly uncertain. Rest of European signatories of deal has shown their resolve to abide by the provisions of the deal, however subsequent to deterioration of ties between Iran and US and Iran's reported defiance from the deal has generated a serious debate with regard to implication in case deals becomes totally ineffective.

2.1 Contending Theoretical Explanations of Nuclear Proliferation

Scholars of International Relations advance a range of theoretical explanations as to why any state might seek to acquire nuclear weapons. Even so, the rational for possessing a nuclear weapon rest on a combination of several underlying security and political incentives. Those concerning the security issue rest on the realists' belief in superior power, the assumption that nuclear weapons could be used for deterrence, coercion, and as a weapon of last resort. As for political incentives, these could include enhancing a regime's domestic status; a state's international prestige and the associated leverage, and serve as an affirmation of both authority and influence.

Multiple theoretical perspectives frequently considered useful for explaining and understanding the nuclear decision-making of the nuclear-weapons states, be they aspiring, potential or *de facto*. These theoretical perspectives included traditional balance-of-power model, the logic of which is based on the structural realists' presumption of the omnipresence of security dilemmas (Frunzati,1998). An alternative explanation is advanced by the neoliberal institutionalists who focused on the role of institutions as sources of cooperation, the role of domestic politics (of both regimes and organizations), and constructivist argument stressing the role of norms and social behaviors in nuclear decision- making. Despite multiple theoretical explanations, realist justification based on state survival and security is still considered as dominating the power dynamics of state actors in world of mistrust and uncertainties.

'Realism' is considered as one of the most influential approaches to international politics. From old school as illustrated by writings of Thucydides to contemporary neo-realism, all variants of realism include a conviction that the state is a primary actor; that its survival is the basic national interest; and that a strong defense through the maximizing of power is the best mean to guarantee the ultimate aim of state survival. According to classical realism, although states may differ in their internal structures, their primary national aims are similar in that all seek their survival and safety in the international system (Devetak et al.,2011). In context of neo-realists as exemplified by Kenneth Waltz, structural constrains of an anarchic international system compels states to acquire power to ensure their own security and survival. The hallmark of realism is the concept of power, and the rationale behind the concept of power is the concept of deterrence. Put simply, a state seeks to acquire nuclear weapon in order to upgrade its power *vis-a-vis* one or more adversaries who are equally or more powerful, either conventionally or unconventionally (Gartzke & Lindsay, 2019). This approach is known as deterrence, and underlying it is the threat and

consequent 'fear of punishment', which is rooted in the rational behavior of human nature. So the rationale for obtaining a nuclear weapon is to deter another state or states from launching an attack, or from taking a particular course of action, by threatening a high level of destructive retaliation (Beasley,1962). This approach is known as deterrence and underlying it is the threat and consequent 'fear of punishment', which is rooted in the rational behavior of human nature. Based on the principle of rational choice inherent in deterrence theory in general, nuclear deterrence is a military strategy created to be especially relevant to the use of nuclear arsenals. So realists believe that deterrence will work if the leaders of states are rational actors who share the rational goal of avoiding the huge costs of a nuclear attack. Deterrence therefore is the strategy by which governments threaten a massive retaliation if attacked, in order to deter an aggressor who wishes to avoid the great damage an aggressive action would entail (Brodie, 2015).

3.0 Methodology

In terms of research methods, for this purpose, the descriptive research using content analysis and empirical observation was used to present the pace and events of negotiations to conclude an all-encompassing nuclear agreement. To actually establish the significance of negotiations and their impact on Iran's nuclear program events will be analyzed as per specific timeframe in a chronological manner will be considered an important factor.

Both primary and secondary sources will be used in this research. The primary sources include official documents, among which are government press releases, hand-outs, policy statements, speeches, and so on. As for the secondary sources, these include books, articles, journals, newspapers, web sources and other relevant material that were deemed useful for this study. The purpose for using these multiple sources is to achieve a clear understanding of the topic under study, and to include a diversity of opinions so as to comprehend the entire scope of the issue under investigation. To better evaluate the origins of issue of Iran's nuclear program a descriptive methodology has been employed that helped in understanding the root causes of present-day security paradigm in the region. To answer the specific research questions posed, an interpretative analysis was used to analyze the current situation to understand the security relationship between Iran and its Arab counterparts, and role of the Western powers (particularly that of the United States) in handling the Iran nuclear issues and its political and security implications.

4.0 Findings and Results

4.1 An Overview of Negotiations over Iran's Nuclear Program

Since revelation of Iran's clandestine nuclear program, there have been multiple rounds of talks held between Iran and the five permanent veto powers of the UNSC, with Germany included as well. Together the latter are known as the 'five plus one'. The Western powers offered Tehran political and economic relief from sanctions if the Iranians agreed to suspend its enrichment activities. Most rounds of talks ended in a deadlock. The prospects of a breakthrough brightened only with the victory of Hassan Rouhani, considered a moderate, as the new President in the Iranian elections 2013, replacing the hardliner Ahmadinejad. After marathon rounds of negotiations among all stakeholders, all negotiating states including Iran, reached a Comprehensive Joint Plan of Action, (CJPOA), commonly called as Iran Nuclear Agreement, signed on July 14, 2015 and

came into effect on January 2016. In brief, under the agreement, Iran agreed to roll back some aspects of its nuclear program in exchange of the relaxation of sanctions. Salient aspects of the deal included reduction in number of centrifuges by two-third, ban on enrichment activities at key facilities, restricted uranium related research and development to the Natanz facility and restrictions on uranium enrichment level at 3.67 percent. The deal also puts stringent IAEA verification mechanism in place (*Key Excerpts of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), 2015*). In return, sanctions on Iran would be relaxed. The comprehensive framework for joint plan of action came as a result of intensive negotiations among negotiating parties. Most difficult part was drafting of an agreement acceptable by each party. On part of Iran, lifting of sanctions was considered as the most glaring outcome. As per the agreement, EU would lift its sanctions related to energy and banking sectors and the US would remove its unilateral sanctions, particularly related to business related entities in Iran.

4.2 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA): Global Responses

Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), met with a mixed reaction by international community. All negotiating parties including Iran and US hailed the agreement. Than US President Barak Obama who went a long way to cut this nuclear deal termed it as a “good deal”, whereas Iranian foreign minister declared it as a “win-win situation” (Robinson, 2023). In a joint press conference EU foreign policy chief along with Iranian foreign minister termed the deal as a “decisive step”, Iranian foreign minister welcomed the deal as a positive major step and said the deal would prove the peaceful nature of Iranian nuclear program (Ap, 2015). Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani termed the agreement as a “historic memory” for Iranian nation (Robins-Early, 2017). Israel, however, openly opposed the agreement, as it did in such previous endeavors. Similarly, Republicans in the US Congress also reacted pessimistically. According to Israeli prime minister, deal would “threaten the survival of Israel” (Robins-Early, 2017). According to the Israel’s position, the deal could not stop Iran from developing a nuclear bomb and would rather increase the risks of nuclear arm race and wars in the region (*Netanyahu: Speech to Congress Not Politically Motivated, 2015*).

Responding to the Republican Congressmen’s threat to disapprove the agreement, President Obama said that if the agreement would be disapproved by the Congress, it would lead to collapse of international unity and lead to conflict (Jazeera, 2015). Though most of the Republicans and analysts criticized the agreement for not being sufficiently tough for Iran, all participating countries considered it a big diplomatic success. The nuclear deal remained a bone of contention between Democrats and Republicans in the US Congress. The issue remained the most controversial foreign policy topic throughout the Presidential campaign of the USA between Trump and Hillary Clinton. Democrat candidate, Hillary Clinton, supported the deal, than Republican candidate, President Donald Trump firmly opposed the agreement, terming it the ‘worst deal ever made by the US’. In his first presidential debate with Hillary Clinton, Trump called the deal as “one of the worst deals ever made by any country in history,” (Forward, 2016) in the same debate to strengthen his argument Trump also referred Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who also disapproved the deal even the day it was finalized. Not only Israel but

republicans too disapproved the deal immediately after it was inked in 2015. This disapproval on Republican's part was quite visible in Trump position on Iran's nuclear deal throughout his presidential campaign. In a speech to pro-Israel society AIPAC, Trump on record declared to dismantle the deal, once he gets into the president office, "my number one priority is to dismantle the disastrous deal with Iran". Throughout his campaigns, Trump censured the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), for its relaxed provision with regard to Iran. Republicans criticized the deal for not stopping or rolling back the Iran's nuclear program rather just slowing it down particularly with regard to its "sunset" provision (Forward, 2016). Trump repeatedly describes the agreement as "worst deal ever" however, in another statement he said to re-negotiate the deal with Iran if not dismantle the deal entirely. As per Iran's reaction to Trump public rhetoric on Iran nuclear deal was concerned, Iran adopted a rather cautious stance and restrained to take any tough reaction on Trump's rhetoric, terming it the part of an internal political campaign to increase vote bank. Moreover, Iran had urged the incumbent president to respect the deal being a multilateral agreement and not a bilateral deal (Farivar, 2016). Reacting to Trump's stance to 'tearing the deal', a top Iranian official said that "Iran will set it at fire" (Iqbal, 2019).

4.3 President Trump's Withdrawal from Deal: Outcomes and Implications

Donald Trump emerged as victorious candidate for US's president-ship in November 2016 presidential elections. Despite various predictions calming Trump's victory, It appeared as an unexpected outcome for not only international community but also for domestic political pundits. Trump's victory as US president was sparked a new debate owing to Trump's extreme positions on most controversial issues like immigrants' policy, anti-Muslim's sentiments, non-diplomatic behavior, health reforms are few among many. Another controversial issue which remained spotlight of his whole presidential campaign was his non-approval of Iran's nuclear deal. After the Trump has assumed the office of President, many analysts predicted that the things would not be as extreme as pictured in the electoral campaign, as diplomatic norms of presidential office are different than that of candidate's political campaign. At that time negotiators of the deal including Iran were of the view that US would not be able to scrape the deal unilaterally as the agreement has passed under the UNSC resolution. However, there was no legal binding on US president to follow the deal as the agreement was passed by the non-binding resolution of UNSC. With regard to legal binding, as mentioned, the US president has no formal legal obligation to honor the agreement; it is worth mentioning that the nuclear agreement was rejected by the House of Representatives, more than fifty-seven senators who on record opposed it. If the US Congress could be brought together to reject the agreement, it would be easy for the President to follow the decision.

As was expected considering Trump's presidential campaign slogans and its official statements, United States under President-ship of Trump withdrew from the nuclear agreement in 2018. Despite Iran's initial compliance to the term of nuclear agreement, as indicated by IAEA's certification in 2016, Trump announced its withdrawal from the agreement. The withdrawal was based on the allegations of Iran's failure to address its missile program and supporting proxy warfare in the region against US's interests and human right violations. Not only US withdrew

from the deal, it put toughest sanctions on Iran's oil and banking sector, adversely effecting Iran's already crumbling economy. All negotiating partners including Iran showed their disappointment to this unilateral decision of US. The European partners rejected President Trump's invitation to follow the course and to abandon the nuclear deal (Lipin, 2020). Moreover, EU foreign affairs Chief Josep Borrell reiterated the resolve that the 28-nation bloc will keep doing whatever it can to save the deal (Lipin,2020). Iran reacted relatively more cautiously, at least initially, responding to US withdrawal, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said, "Tehran would bypass Washington and negotiate with the other signatories of the deal, calling the US move "unacceptable" (Jazeera, 2018). France, Germany and UK, initial negotiating partner, strongly condemned US move. China and Russia, two other signatories of the deal also condemned the US unilateral decision to quit the deal, showing their resolve to keep the deal functioning. Needless to say, Israel and Saudi Arabia, major regional rivals of Iran, welcomed US decision, UAE and Bahrain followed the course. One year after the withdrawal, Iran continued its oil exports with European partners under US waiver of importing oil from Iran; in response of beneficiary of this oil trade waiver Iran relatively continued its overall compliance of the nuclear deal during 2019, despite reports of the breaches. However, in year 2020 major events took the crisis to further height. One, the oil waivers ended by the US, to completely stop Iran's oil exports, followed by US targeted killing of general Qasem Soleimani in January and assassination of its founding nuclear scientist in November same year. In retaliation, Iran announced to no longer follow its obligation to limit uranium enrichment, one of the key elements of the nuclear deal. This announcement was followed by the beginning of construction of centrifuge production facility at Nantaz, allegedly attacked and destroyed by Israel previously (Robinson, 2023b).

Since US withdrawal in 2018, stats-quo prevailed despite multiple harsh measures by both Iran and US against each other, in parallel, efforts to re-negotiate the deal too carried on. In March 2023, revelation of Iran's uranium enrichment up to level of 83.7 percent induced a fresh wave of concern among all negotiating members of the deal and rest of international community. Biden admiration despite strongly condemning Trump's administration of its decision of unilateral withdrawal from nuclear deal, is still unable to renegotiate or revive the nuclear deal, despite signatories' bids to bring the US and Iran on negotiation again. US deny any direct talks with Iran on revival of nuclear deal. "Rumors about a nuclear deal interim or otherwise are false or misleading," stated by US spokesman for State department (Crowley, Fassihi & Bergman, 2023). Nevertheless, US is reportedly reaching out Teheran tacitly on issue of nuclear deal, particularly containing enrichment at 60 percent by Iran.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

Since US back off from Iran's nuclear deal in 2018, last few years have seen few extraordinary security and political developments, adversely effecting global peace and security. These include outbreak of global calamity in form of Covid-19, Russia-Ukraine war, US withdrawal from Afghanistan into the hands of Taliban and more recent Hamas's attack on Israel and subsequent Isreal declaration of state of war. Amidst these issues of international security, Trump's unilateral exit from nuclear deal badly damaged the nuclear halt which nuclear deal successfully established

since 2015. Iran's series of attacks on oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman, its proxy's attacks on Saudi oil field, attacks on US and European citizens including their imprisonments just added fuel to already ignited fire of animosity between US and Iran. As mentioned, assassination of Iran's general and later its top nuclear scientist took the tension to further heights. US hard-hitting sanctions on Iran oil and banking sector, forcing governments and companies from Europe to Asia to end their economic engagement with Tehran, badly effect already choked economy of Iran.

These pressures however, intensified Iran's defiance to US, with clear breaches of nuclear deal provisions including non-cooperation with IAEA inspection teams. Tensions got intensified with Iran's export of drones to Russia during Russia-Ukraine war. Prospects of revival of nuclear deal got further diminished with coming of conservative regime in Iran, replacing moderates in presidential elections of Iran in June 2021. Despite many sanctions put by US on Iran and followed by European countries, European signatories so far has not yet announced any withdraw from the deal. European partners seem following a more prudent approach, keeping in view threat of Iran's full bloom reversal towards a nuclear weapon program, fear of Israel's military attack on Iran's nuclear installation, danger of Iran's and its proxy's aggressive retaliation sparking a full-scale war in Middle East. Moreover, some of sunset clause of the nuclear deal is bound to expire in end 2023, their extension or renewal entirely depends on the overall revival of the nuclear deal.

Since US withdrawal, first formal attempt of renegotiation, was made through Vienna negotiation in April 2021 (*PressReader.com-Digital Newspaper & magazine Subscription, n.d.*). Talks ended without any mutual agreement, with renewed tensions with opening of Russia-Ukraine war in February 2022 and Iran's support of the Russia. With stalemate in formal negotiation over the fate of nuclear deal, informal talks reportedly were started with meeting of EU mediator visiting Iranian representative in Qatar on June 2023 (Jazeera, 2023). Reportedly US is also tacitly directly engaged in talks with Iran. As per analysts the agenda may not to revive a full-scale nuclear deal, but to reach at some working terms. The core agenda is to restrict Iran's uranium enrichment beyond sixty percent, to negotiate terms to return US and European prisoners back and refraining Iran to provide physical support to Russia. In return, US and its European allies would consider unfreezing some of Iranian assets and accounts abroad (Robinson, 2023). At the time of writing this paper, no formal nuclear accord has yet finalized, formal talks have suspended, tacit negotiations are being reported to be carried by US and European allies separately. Analysts are predicting a kind of interim arrangement in form of a tactical measure, instead of an overarching nuclear deal like that of 2015.

If viewed optimistically, Iran's rapprochement with Saudi Arabia as brokered by China, is reflection of Iran's willingness to give way to diplomacy over tension. Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, reportedly emphasized Iran's cooperation with IAEA on its commitments. While delivering a talk to nuclear officials and experts on June 11, he "strongly recommended" continued cooperation with the IAEA, but only "within the framework of safeguards agreements." (Review, 2023).

Moreover, as China has also emerged another regional player, US would never like China to fill space, which US may shed by not diplomatically engaging Iran on its nuclear program and

other issues. As positive sign, no side has at least discarded the deal yet, maintaining the status quo. In March 2023, IAEA's nuclear chief Rafael Grossi's visit to Iran further paved the way of Iran's cooperation with IAEA. The IAEA team visited subsequent to discover of Iran's uranium enrichment up to 84 percent, which sparked a great wave of concern to international community. Iran agreed to re-install IAEA's monitoring camera, which Iran disconnected previously, agreed to give frequent access to IAEA inspection team at its nuclear sites and committed such other confidence building measures (Jezeera, 2023). Despite Biden's announcement of "all options on table" or resorting to "plan B" if Iran's fails in its obligations of nuclear accord, singling a military confrontation, it seems unlikely that US will be ready for another military confrontation in the region, keeping in view growing Russian and China's influence in the Middle East in general and their ties with Iran in particular. Any future scenario depends much on Iran's fair implementation to its final nuclear deal. On the part of the US, winning the confidence of regional allies would be essential for a long-term settlement of Iran's nuclear issue, to achieve a long lasting political stability for the region. Recent diplomatic revival of Saudi Arabia with Iran' which always remained an opponent of Iran's nuclear deal, may also prove a positive development to broker a renewed deal between US/European and Iran.

Tamknat Fatima Jabbar: Problem Identification and Theoretical Framework

Conflict of Interests/Disclosures

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest in this article's research, authorship, and publication.

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