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## Reading Trump in Tehran

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At least before the U.S.-Iran exchanges of early 2020, Iranian leaders tended to view the Trump administration with some fear, along with a bit of hope, given his unorthodox approach to statecraft. On the latter count, they regarded his professed aversion to U.S. entrenchment in the Middle East as reassurance that he would avert a war. The developments of late 2019, during which Iran initiated a series of provocative acts in the Gulf and Iraq in response to U.S. economic sanctions, appeared to suggest that Trump might remain passive. Those provocations, including the downing of a U.S. drone, drew no forceful response from the administration. But the killing of a U.S. contractor in Iraq in late 2019 shuffled the U.S. calculus. The perception that Trump talked big but above all wanted to avoid Middle East military engagement was upended by the U.S. targeted airstrike on January 3 that killed Qasem Soleimani, who commanded the elite Qods Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, along with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the head of the militia Kataib Hezbollah, and others.



The U.S. withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear agreement, meanwhile, caused understandable distress among high-level Iranian officials. The accord had laid the ground for a level of trust between the United States and Iran, even as its purported benefits failed to reach all levels of Iranian society.

Putting recent events aside, Iranian leaders insist that the U.S. foreign policy orientation is fixed regardless of administration, Democratic or Republican. But these pronouncements do not fully reflect the Iranian view—especially when it comes to the current administration.

### DISSEMBLING AFTER THE U.S. ELECTION

On November 16, 2016, more than a week after Trump's election triumph, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei tried to hide his surprise behind the usual anti-American rhetoric that does not differentiate between presidents or parties: "I have no judgment on the American election. That party and this party, whoever came [to power] was naughty toward us." He sought advantage, however, in the presidential candidates' critique of the current state of affairs in the United States, as expressed during the televised debates: "The realities that have been discussed during America's presidential race were previously said by others, but certain people were reluctant to believe them."<sup>1</sup> Apart from everything else, Khamenei appeared to project some *schadenfreude* over the victory of Trump, arguably the most outspoken critic of Washington politics among the candidates: "The one who was more candid attracted more attention from American people."<sup>2</sup>

While former president Barack Obama was perceived as having a distinctly conciliatory approach to Iran, Khamenei was never convinced—according to his speeches, which are posted on his *Khamenei.ir* website—that the former administration was drastically modifying the U.S.

attitude toward Iran and had abandoned the idea of regime change. During the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump attacked his predecessor for signing a nuclear deal with Iran, calling it "a very bad deal" that benefited Iran more than the United States. With much sarcasm, Trump suggested that Iran should thank Obama for this great gift. Khamenei believed differently. On January 25, 2017, in reaction to Trump's remark, Khamenei said:

**Why should we thank America's former administration? For anti-Iran sanctions? For creating [the Islamic State]? For setting the region on fire in Syria and Iraq? Or for its hypocrisy, namely, expressing affection and [willingness for] cooperation in the confidential letter while publicly supporting the *fitna* [his term for the protests; lit. sedition] after [Iran's] 2009 election?... This is all proof of the very velvet glove by which America's former administration was covering its iron fist.<sup>3</sup>**

Khamenei followed by again thanking Trump for his verbal assault on previous U.S. administrations: "Certainly, we are grateful to this newly arrived man, because he made our job easy by revealing America's real face in his statements and attitudes during the electoral campaign and recent years."<sup>4</sup>

### KHAMENEI'S MINDSET

Supreme Leader Khamenei tends to view politics in terms of provisional friend and permanent enemy. By branding someone an enemy, in Khamenei's view, one can more easily fashion one's own identity. He thus understands politics as Ivan Ilyin, the twentieth-century Russian philosopher and ideologue, defined it: "the art of identifying and neutralizing the enemy." This impulse is joined by one to engage in threat inflation, defined by Trevor Thrall and Jane K. Cramer as "an attempt to create concern for a threat that goes beyond the scope and urgency that a disinterested analysis would justify."<sup>5</sup> This includes an inflated Iranian threat, in the

imagined perception of the United States. The killing of Soleimani only reinforced his belief in the irreconcilable nature of the relationship between Iran and the United States. The Islamic Republic's leaders and ideological apparatus systematically suggest that Iran is at the heart of U.S. security and military policy planning.

Iran not only perceives the United States as its enemy par excellence, it also casts Washington as considering Iran the ultimate global threat against which all capabilities and efforts should be mobilized. In their rhetoric, Islamic Republic Leaders warn the Iranian people to ignore the supposedly generous or benign rhetoric of the American people and instead to listen to U.S. leaders who express the hidden American agenda, along with hypocritical behavior and malicious intentions. The general rule, whereby the "Supreme Leader is the ultimate measure of ideological truth," applies here too. His analysis of the "enemy's" language and diagnoses of its motivations should be recognized by others as fact. By presenting the United States as the ultimate security threat, Iran's rulers legitimize their efforts to adopt drastic security measures and further militarize the regime. In his speech addressing air force commanders and staff, Khamenei responded to critics who question why Iranians chant "Death to America." He stated, "To enlighten the minds of American officials, I emphasize that we have nothing against the American people. 'Death to America' means death to U.S. rulers, namely, in this period, death to Trump, [former national security advisor John] Bolton and [Secretary of State Mike] Pompeo ... As long as the U.S. regime behaves in a malevolent, evil-minded, and malicious way, the 'Death to America' slogan will [continue to come forth from] the powerful nation of Iran."<sup>6</sup>

Given that the purported bases of Iran's enemy/friend politics are truth and morality, pure opposition to the enemy is regarded as a guiding principle. Khamenei has frequently stated that "our policies in the region are opposites to U.S. policies."<sup>7</sup> Since the "enemy" is existentially different and fundamentally

evil, a true Muslim must avoid any friendly approach to it and also avoid being susceptible to its influence in any way. Muslims should be constantly vigilant about the incurably evil essence of the enemy and remind one another that the world is but a battlefield, and the decisive victory a guarantee of divine promise and providence.

Khamenei's rhetoric serves to caricature the United States as a monster that should be both humiliated and annihilated, rather than just defeated. With this as a baseline, it is impossible to establish a reliable grounding for meaningful negotiations that normalize these relations. Needless to say, Trump's bellicose rhetoric and now actions have reinforced the Supreme Leader in this view. Meanwhile, conducting talks with the United States would mean letting Washington infiltrate Tehran's politics and execute its plan to overthrow the regime. In responding to the Trump administration's gestures suggesting a willingness to negotiate, Khamenei said, "Everyone should know and be attentive; this is a trick!"<sup>8</sup>

### THE FALL OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

In assessing Iranian official rhetoric about the United States, one must remember that for Khamenei, America is not so much a living, breathing nation-state as a symbol of the cosmic evil known as modernity. In this construction, Iran too is a symbol—of the forces of good—instead of a worldly nation comprising diverse populations and varying viewpoints, even within the leadership. This dynamic reflects the Manicheism that guides Khamenei's politics—that of a continuing, messianic battle between good and evil. Such a drama will end with what God promised his true believers: the categorical victory of the righteous and the demise of their evil adversaries. Rooted in such an eschatological approach, Khamenei firmly believes that America, which his predecessor Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini labeled the "Great Satan," will vanish, to be replaced by a single world government ruled by representatives of true Islam.

In 2019, marking the thirtieth anniversary of Khomeini's death, Khamenei repeated what he describes as the "divine promise." In characterizing America as being in a state of "termite-like demise," he cited "official" statistics indicating "America's economic decline and its loss of influence over the world economy." For instance, as a "sign" of diminishing U.S. authority and "America's economic demise," he mentioned its "800-billion-dollar budget deficit" and "15-trillion-dollar debt," even if these metrics hardly indicate national decline in isolation.<sup>9</sup>

In so denouncing America, Khamenei is prophesying the decline as well of everything associated with the United States and the West—namely, liberal democracy. The U.S. president's personal idiosyncrasies have helped the Supreme Leader make this case: "Also in the political realm, America's authority has declined; electing someone with Mr. Donald Trump's characteristics is the obvious sign for the decline of American politics... bestowing the responsibility of the destiny of more than three hundred million [in] population on someone whose mental, psychological, and moral equilibrium is seriously doubtful...is vivid proof of America's moral and political decline."<sup>10</sup> This caustic language, it bears noting, comes from a man who views himself as the visionary crafter of the ideal Islamic state-civilization.

On October 21, 2019, about two months before the Trump administration finally struck back against Iranian provocations across the region, Khamenei declared victory in the forty-year contest against the United States, arguing that, from "a broad perspective, America's power, authority and grandeur are in decline; today's America is far weaker than four decades ago...Not only are America's spiritual authority and soft power declining, but the behavior of America's current eccentric president has discredited 'liberal democracy,' which is the cornerstone of Western civilization."<sup>11</sup> Without naming him, Khamenei mentioned Francis Fukuyama as "a well-known

world scholar" who revisited his theory of the end of history and expressed a belief in the "weakness and decline of America and liberal democracy." "Don't make an effort in groundless planning [against Iran]," Khamenei declared, "the demise of America is a reality...According to the divine providence, America is doomed to vanish from the global power scene."<sup>12</sup> He also beseeched the country's university students not to forget "America's hostility [toward Iran]."

## DECIPHERING TRUMP

Setting aside Khamenei's prejudices and perceptions about all U.S. presidents, Trump's ascendance in particular appears to have left an ambivalent impression on him. On the one hand, while the Supreme Leader remained irrevocably suspicious about U.S. intentions and policies toward Iran, Trump's presence appeared to signal safety from future threats—following fifteen years of an unnerving military threat emanating from Washington. The nationalist-populist U.S. leader did not want foreign adventurism; he wanted out of the Middle East—and this seemed to provide a measure of safety for the regime. Not only that, but a U.S. pullback would dampen similar threats of retribution from actors such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. A full-fledged war from those parties would receive neither approval nor promised collaboration from the United States. Such an apparent reassurance enabled him to repeatedly and decisively, in his speeches, rule out the possibility of war. This perception of safety has also allowed him to commit risky acts such as the September 2019 attack on Aramco facilities without being seriously concerned about the Saudi reaction.

On the other hand, Trump's "maximum pressure" policy, paired with his unpredictable offers to meet Iran at the negotiating table, appear to have legitimately flummoxed the Supreme Leader. Unable to read Trump's zigzagging tweets and statements, he prefers to avoid any action before being



convincingly reassured that Iran will not be deceived, or exposed as naive, by the United States. On May 22, 2019, Khamenei elaborated on the “enemy’s varieties of gamesmanship,” contending that the United States attempts to deceive Iran “sometimes by threats and sometimes by enticement...like the very recent slyness of...the U.S. president, who said that Iran, even with its current leaders, can make great progress...‘We do not want to overthrow you and we are willing to recognize you, so no worries.’”<sup>13</sup> Khamenei has publicly cautioned Iranians to simply steer clear of the United States and its stratagems. “It is true that if Iran’s current leaders and officials... take advantage of the potential in the best way, certainly greater progress will be made, but provided that Americans stay away.” He emphasized that the “political trickery of the American president” would not make a fool of either the Islamic Republic’s officials or its people. As he put it, “Iran must not let them get close. Their presence is portentous; and wherever they have stepped in, they have initiated war, fratricide, calamity, exploitation, colonization, and contemptuousness.”<sup>14</sup>

Khamenei likewise addressed the newly elected speaker and members of the Assembly of Experts and responded to Trump’s speech on November 17, 2017. Pointing to “Trump’s nonsense,” Khamenei described the U.S. president and ruling elite as suffering from “mental retardation” owing to “their inability to understand the developments in Iran and the region...This is why they are trapped in miscalculation and consecutive failures by the Iranian people.” He advised all to “avoid negligence in facing America’s deceit and deception...The American president’s pose of stupidity should not lead to negligence about the enemy’s [level of] deceit and conspiracy...Of course, war will not happen, but there are issues no less important than war. Therefore, we should be careful and able to predict it.”<sup>15</sup> Among the issues “no less important than war,” in this formulation, are sanctions.

On September 29, 2019, Khamenei warned the Iranian people that the “enemy” had targeted the “understanding and judgment” of Iran’s decisionmakers as well as its people. “That said,” he continued, “the enemy is trying hard to distort our understanding of reality.” Moreover, he added that the U.S. president, a few days earlier, had pretentiously showed “pity for the Iranian people and implied that they would be better off if they listened to us, in fact obey us.” On many occasions, Khamenei has reiterated his view that the only way to defeat the enemy is to resist it. Thus, on May 22, 2019, in a speech commemorating Khomeini’s death, the Supreme Leader said: “The reason behind Americans’ animosity toward Iran is that they expect Iran, in the face of bluster, to throw up its hands and resign. And since the nation refrains from submitting to such dishonor, arrogant [powers] start their hostility.” Based on the last forty years of experience, he argued, whenever “we resisted, we benefited from success and progress, and whenever we behaved according to the other party’s desire, we failed.”<sup>16</sup>

Against the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Iran’s reluctant initial decision was to stay within the nuclear deal rather than “burn” it. Reassured that Washington wanted to avoid military confrontation, Khamenei began engaging in harsher rhetoric against the United States. A chief goal was to humiliate the president, and the political dynamics reassured him that such rhetoric would not have practical costs. On May 9, 2018, the day after the United States announced its withdrawal from the nuclear deal, Khamenei responded to Trump’s accusation that Iran supported terrorism with these words: “Last night, you heard the American president’s words, ridiculous and thoughtless talk; probably more than ten lies were included in his speech...He threatened both the Iranian people and the Islamic Republic...so on behalf of the Iranian people, I would say, Mr. Trump! You have no right!”<sup>17</sup> Previously, on September 11, 2017,

referring to Trump's speech at the United Nations General Assembly, Khamenei described his remarks as "worthless, inconsistent, despicable, stupid and entirely untrue," delivered "not out of power but out of resentment, frustration, and silliness, because they are extremely angry and unhappy that thanks to the Islamic Republic of Iran's effective presence, their many years' plans for the Western Asia region failed."<sup>18</sup>

Khamenei, who dates bilateral hostility not to the 1979 revolution but to 1953, when the United States coordinated the overthrow of Iran's democratically elected prime minister Muhammad Mossadeq, has sought to emphasize American decline over those many decades. In his November 3, 2019, speech, he divined that "the wolfish America has certainly become weaker but more beastly and impudent."<sup>19</sup> According to him, the Mossadeq government could only be toppled by coup because it "trusted the Great Satan." In an attempt to demonize and belittle the enemy, Khamenei said, "In Iranian people's minds, no one is more abominable than the president of America." He emphasized too that "since [the 1953 coup] America has never changed; the very wretchedness, wolfishness, attempts to establish an international dictatorship, and limitless dominance exist in America, of course, with higher barbarity and brazenness." He concluded that negotiation with the United States "is truly fruitless... Certain [politicians] who regard negotiations with America as a problem solver are definitely wrong; there will be no result from dialogue with Americans, because they will not give us any positive point." Khamenei brought up another repeated claim of his by insisting that "American demands are endless" because "they are after reversing the situation to the pre-revolutionary time."<sup>20</sup>

On May 14, 2019, by exaggerating the current socioeconomic crisis in America, then promising Iran's definitive victory in its battle with the United States, Khamenei stated that "negotiating with America is a poison and [negotiating] with the current administration is a double poison."

## LATENT RESPECT FOR THE BUSINESSMAN-PRESIDENT

Despite the ultimate leverage exercised by Supreme Leader Khamenei over national decisionmaking, the Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani, has his own reasons for outrage toward Trump, with the angle here being negotiations. On December 16, 2019, for example, two weeks before the new year's escalation, Rouhani said that "if there was a different president in America, we would have negotiated." This reinforces a comment made two months earlier, on October 14, 2019, when he said that "Trump's personality has made things difficult for everyone."<sup>21</sup>

The broader perception of the president, however—among Rouhani and others—appears to be more complex. On April 11, 2019, Hossein Shariatmadari, Khamenei's confidant and representative at the Kayhan Institute, a media organization under the leader's direct supervision, said, "Trump is stupid, but unlike some prevailing wisdom, he is not insane."<sup>22</sup> On January 29, 2017, Shariatmadari opined, "Unlike [former Soviet premier Mikhail] Gorbachev, who was a social democratic advocate of the communist system, Trump is a billionaire capitalist—but what is common between the two is deconstruction which aims to reform the system." On October 15, 2017, Gen. Amir Ali Hajizadeh, commander of the IRGC Aerospace Force, offered: "America's hostility [toward Iran] is an unchangeable strategy, and only its tactics vary...today, America presents as crazy [to us] in order to gain advantage through a crazy method." He criticized those frightened by Trump's aggressive attitude and convinced of the necessity of avoiding provocation because of the U.S. leader's posturing as a warmonger: "Today, Trump pretends that he is crazy for the sake of gaining points... People should not worry about war...our country is so powerful that no one can attack and confront the Islamic Republic."<sup>23</sup>

On April, 25, 2018, Rouhani called Trump “a businessman, constructor, and tower builder” who “knows nothing about politics and the law.”<sup>24</sup> Trump is widely perceived by Iranian decisionmakers and elites, not unlike domestic U.S. critics, as someone who has turned his back on his country’s political traditions and instead followed his personal instincts and habits as a businessman. For instance, in reacting to the IRGC’s targeting of U.S. drones, on April 24, 2019, Majlis member Abolfazl Mousavi Biuki said, “Trump is a businessman, and no businessman wages war.” Hojatoleslam Abdollah Haji Sadeqi, a Majlis member, likewise emphasized in 2019 that the U.S. president’s views on [the Iran issue] have a propaganda, commercial, and electoral dimension: “Trump is a businessman and looks at everything from a business perspective.”<sup>25</sup>

### DISTORTING THE IMAGE OF THE UNITED STATES

In the Islamic Republic, little has changed over forty years regarding the effort to caricature the United States—to transform it into a demon, rather than presenting the pluralistic, democratic, complex society it is. Donald Trump has no doubt given fodder to this effort. His loud threats and manipulations of fact, among other behavior, make it easier for Iranian leaders to cast the United States as an unstable state rather than a steady superpower. But whoever the U.S. leader may be, official Iranian attempts to brainwash the public will persist.

Analysis of Khamenei’s speeches demonstrates weaknesses in his ideological apparatus. He is using a familiar form of rhetorical chicanery: portraying the Iranian citizenry as a monolith and simultaneously asserting that his own will and beliefs genuinely reflect the entire nation’s heart and mind. Those who disbelieve in the political system or disagree with him, according to this model, belong among the wretched who dwell beyond the country’s

symbolic borders or else must be exiled beyond its real borders. These “subjects” do not fit the profile of “true Iranians” and should be excommunicated by any means possible.

The attempt to distance Iran from “disbelievers” presents itself not only in Khamenei’s rhetoric; it is also widely institutionalized. The entire government-employment system is based on ideological screening that takes place at Gozinesh (“selection”; ideological inquisition and qualification) offices nationwide. According to the Gozinesh Law, passed in 1985,<sup>26</sup> all applicants for government jobs should prove not only their belief in *velayate faqih* (rule of the jurist) but also their practical commitment to this precept. Following Khamenei’s discourse pattern, the state’s official rhetoric uses “Iran,” “Iranian people,” or “our nation” interchangeably to refer to the Supreme Leader or the regime. By employing this rhetorical trick, the government portrays its own critics and adversaries as national enemies and threats and generates the false impression that opponents of its own roguish policies and attitudes are sworn enemies of each Iranian citizen. The more that Islamic ideology loses its appeal—a trend strongly under way—the more desperate the government becomes to take refuge in patriotic sentiments and people’s emotional ties to their homeland or their fellows. In recent remarks, for example, Khamenei beseeched citizens to vote in the upcoming parliamentary election: “A person may dislike me—no problem—but does he love his country? [If so] he should participate in the election.”<sup>27</sup> The events surrounding the death of Soleimani, including his widely attended funeral, provided further opportunity in this area.

### UNDERMINING IRAN’S RHETORICAL SYSTEM

Any effort to decouple nationalism from Islamism could harm the Iranian regime’s ability to demonize

the United States and soften the associated antagonism between the United States and the Iranian people. Given the decline of Islamic ideology's seductive force, the ideological disarmament of the Iranian regime—i.e., preventing it from misusing nationalism to cover for its ineffective exercise of power—would cost the system in profound ways.

To combat the Iranian regime's typecasting, the United States should avoid taking any measure that hurts the Iranian people more than the regime or punishes them for being ruled by it. Given that U.S. economic sanctions hurt people directly and deeply, the United States should first develop an effective public diplomacy campaign to explain its policy and the purpose behind sanctions, while also taking different measures, beyond just words, to prove its friendly attitude toward Iranian citizens. As an example, the visa ban on Iranian citizens is commonly perceived in the Islamic Republic as proof of the U.S. intention to penalize ordinary Iranians for their government's misdeeds. Following the Soleimani strike, extra scrutiny of Iranian-Americans has had much the same effect.<sup>28</sup> Tehran uses these policies to reinforce its claim that U.S. hostility is not directed toward the government but rather targets Iranians for their national identity. Washington need not grant Tehran such useful implements in its "anti-Western indoctrination" toolkit. Greater openness in areas that affect ordinary Iranians, and do not affect U.S. national security, represents a first step in the right direction.

Furthermore, setting up redlines clearly and consistently, along with full, well-thought-out preparation of plausible reactions to any attempts by Iran to cross or even delicately test these redlines, could help ameliorate the tarnished image of U.S. government propaganda. The structural reimagining of U.S. public diplomacy vis-à-vis Iran would entail, undeniably, the transformation of Voice of America—Persian into a cutting-edge, twenty-first-century media outlet for today's highly competitive media

market. VOA Persian TV suffers from structural problems that have made it the least influential Persian satellite station in Iran. A fundamental reappraisal should address everything from its editorial style to its programs' formats.

Last but not least, the United States can plant seeds of doubt in the Iranian people's minds about the domestic propaganda they consume by exploiting factional fissures and constant infighting within the regime elite. This could help loosen official Iranian rhetoric about the United States and the West, bringing to light alternative points of view held by well-known Iranian figures and unveiling the government's inconsistencies and hypocrisies in dealing with the world's Muslim- and non-Muslim-led governments. Even the apparent unity brought about by the Soleimani killing will undoubtedly give way to the same sort of squabbling that came before.

## PROSPECTS FOR NEGOTIATION

One should not mistake the essentialist understanding of "America" and its presidents for an unwillingness to negotiate in certain circumstances. For instance, during a "state of emergency," which only Khamenei can declare and define, the Supreme Leader holds the exclusive authority to manage all affairs of government by using his constitutional right to overrule both sharia and the country's constitution and its entire legal system. By invoking the principle of *maslahat*, or "expediency" of the government, the Supreme Leader legitimizes his "innovative" provisions, actions, and orders—namely, his apparently arbitrary decisions guided by the need to survive, or by *raison d'état*. These allow him to suspend the law and identify his will with the law.

As with his decision during President Obama's tenure to invoke "heroic flexibility" in accepting the JCPOA terms, Khamenei may now be similarly persuaded to talk if circumstances appear to require



it. To be sure, direct negotiations with Trump may be off the table, given the Soleimani strike and matters of national pride, but indirect talks could still happen.<sup>29</sup> To put it in vivid terms, in Islamic jurisprudence, eating carrion is not permitted. But according to an Islamic juridical principle, “necessity sanctions an illicit [act],” such as in the case of a person who finds nothing else to eat and faces death. Therefore, just as a dying person can justify eating carrion, an Islamic Republic near collapse or paralysis can justify engaging in talks with an unsavory actor. Of course, only the Supreme Leader can make this call in the end.

Khamenei may thus, whatever his disdain for this U.S. administration and previous ones, see negotiation as the final hope for saving the regime from an existential crisis. The Soleimani killing and the administration’s maximum pressure policy may not preclude such a development. Actually, contrary to common wisdom, Khamenei likely views capitulation to Obama’s pressure as more painful than to Trump’s, based on the idea that brandished aggression is preferable to concealed aggression. In his interview with Euronews on September 5, 2019, Khamenei emphasized the fundamental sameness of Obama and Trump: “The difference between Obama and Trump is only that Obama has hidden his iron hand under a velvet glove while Trump’s iron hand is bare. Such bareness is much better for us.”<sup>30</sup>

While insisting “there is no reason to negotiate with Trump,” Shariatmadari—noted earlier for implying that Trump was only crazy like a fox—has said that Iran has no preference in the 2020 U.S. election, Democrat or Republican: “They are the same.” In an editorial in Iran’s *Kayhan* newspaper, Shariatmadari argued extensively that Obama was even worse than Trump because “among the presidents of the United States since [Iran’s 1979] revolution, Obama has imposed and implemented the most sanctions against Iran...no sanction was imposed by Trump except those whose structure was designed by Obama. Obama never changed the structure of

sanctions in the JCPOA.”<sup>31</sup> If Obama, Trump, or a future Democratic president are all the same, then all negotiating with America is “bargaining with the devil.” If it was permitted in the past, then it can happen again in the future.

Iran faces a crisis on multiple levels. Sanctions have decimated its economy, the people of Lebanon and Iraq are protesting Iranian incursion into their political systems, and now the regime has lost its foremost military leader. As in its January 7 strikes on the al-Asad Air Base in Iraq, Iran will engage in aggressive measures to save face and maintain a measure of deterrence. But none of this changes the reality that the country needs urgent help. Negotiations, however distasteful to Iranian elites, could help forge a path to a more sustainable future.

As for talking with Trump, Iranians tend to believe his pedigree as an unorthodox businessman will make him a tougher negotiator than his predecessors, whether this perception is true or not—and even if negotiations are conducted through a third party. A businessman the likes of Trump may appear amateurish in politics, but he must possess long experience and superior skills in bargaining, in the Iranian view. Therefore, Iran will be very keen on choosing the right time as well as conditions if it feels forced to negotiate.

U.S. politics, and Iranian perceptions of the political winds, play into the story as well. Trump has now been acquitted by the U.S. Senate in his impeachment trial, thus maintaining his reasonable chance for reelection in 2020. If Iranian leaders sense Trump is desperate to make a deal with them for the sake of his electability, they may be more inclined to talk—believing an eager Trump might give up more and take less in negotiations. A victorious Trump post-election, Iranian leaders know, will have much less motivation to talk. Alternatively, if Iran assesses Trump’s chance for victory to be falling—even if he plays the negotiation card—then

they may look forward to opportunities under the incoming Democrat president.

Whoever does the negotiating on the U.S. side, that leader must be aware that Iran, at least under Ayatollah Khamenei, does not seek an encompassing deal aimed at mutual understanding and cultural reconciliation. Such developments are impossible under the Islamic Republic—and in fact threaten its very existence. Any deal under the current leadership will be one with the “devil”; it will be the equivalent of “eating carrion.” For the regime, even war might be preferable to full peace. Only existential necessity justifies dealmaking, and any deal will be transactional, bringing about a bilateral dynamic of no peace, no war. Such an outcome would allow Tehran to sustain its hostile policy toward Washington and U.S. allies for years to come.

NOTES

1. See Khamenei.ir, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=34912>.
2. BBC Persian, "Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's Reaction to Trump's Election: We Will Not Mourn or Rejoice" (in Persian), November 16–26, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-38000207>.
3. See "Meeting of Army Air Force Commanders with Commander-in-Chief" (in Persian), Khamenei.ir, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=35561>; the "confidential letter" refers to a 2009 missive sent by President Obama to the Supreme Leader offering the prospect of negotiations.
4. Ibid.
5. Trevor Thrall and Jane K. Cramer, eds., *American Foreign Policy and the Politics of Fear* (Abington, UK: Routledge, 2009).
6. "Leader of the Revolution: Death to America Means Death to Trump, Bolton, and Pompeo" (in Persian), <http://sazandeginews.com/News/2384>.
7. Khamenei.ir, August 17, 2015, <http://bit.ly/2tP4WAJ>.
8. Khamenei.ir, "Statements at the Meeting of the Authorities" (in Persian), September 17, 2019, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=39655>.
9. Khamenei.ir, "Statements for Students..." (in Persian), <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=40833>.
10. Khamenei.ir, "Statements on the Thirtieth Anniversary of Khomeini's Death" (in Persian), <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=42758>.
11. "Statements for Students...", <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=40833>.
12. Ibid.
13. "Statements on the Thirtieth Anniversary," <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=42758>.
14. Ibid.
15. Khamenei.ir, "Statements at the Meeting of the Young Scientific Elite" (in Persian), <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=37949>.
16. Khamenei.ir, "Statements on the Twenty-Ninth Anniversary of Khomeini's Death" (in Persian), <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=39796>.
17. Ibid.
18. Khamenei.ir, "Statements by the Chairman and Members of the Leadership Assembly" (in Persian), <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=37721>.
19. "Statements for Students...", <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=43896>.
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