

AN ATTEMPT AT DIPLOMACY: HOW THE PURSUIT OF A NUCLEAR DEAL WITH IRAN AFFECTED THE UNITED STATES- ISRAEL RELATIONS

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Abstract

This article follows the United States' pursuit of a comprehensive agreement with Iran over its nuclear program, by putting it in the context of U.S. – Israel relations. Firstly, it offers an overview of the highly contextual relations between Israel and Iran, in order to understand the historical evolution of their present-day rivalry. Secondly, it observes the Iranian regime under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the aftermath of George W. Bush's foreign policy actions, and the increased international focus on Iran's nuclear capabilities. Finally, the focus shifts from President Bush to President Obama and how his foreign policy priorities in the Middle East, particularly the dialogue with Iran, affected the relations with the Israeli government the closer the negotiators got to achieving a final nuclear agreement. This paper seeks to emphasize the interdependent character of the Iran-Israel-U.S. dynamics through the perspective of one of the most pressing regional and international concerns: Iran's nuclear program.

Keywords: Israel, United States, Iran, Nuclear Program, JCPOA

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1. How We Got Here: The Development of Relations between Israel and Iran

To say that Israel was welcomed in the international community of states with extreme distrust and dissatisfaction by neighboring states is an understatement. Following the adoption of Resolution 181(II) by the United Nations in November 1947, by which the hitherto Palestinian territories under a British Mandate would be partitioned into an Arab state, a Jewish state and the city of Jerusalem as a *corpus separatum*¹, the reactions from the Arab world to the creation of the state of Israel prefigured the oncoming wars and conflicts between the two. From the very beginning, the geopolitical has dictated Israel's development, as its very existence has been denied and fought against by regional states.

Iran, however, has had a somewhat less clear-cut attitude towards Israel. A non-Arab state, Iran was one of the eleven states in the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), tasked to propose a solution on the future of the territories in question. The concluding UNSCOP report contained the proposal for partition, which was accepted by a majority of the members, but Iran, along with India and Yugoslavia, were in disagreement with such a solution; instead, they formulated an alternative plan for the creation of a federal state, which "shall comprise an Arab state and a Jewish state."² Thus, when the partition plan was eventually voted upon in the General Assembly in November 1947, Iran was one of the thirteen states who voted against it.

And yet, despite the stark opposition to the existence of the state of Israel as part of a partition plan, Iran understood the strategic advantages of a possible alliance with a non-Arab state who maintained especially good relations with the West. Israel, in turn, recognized its own need for security by fostering good relations with a regional actor. What developed was not exactly a typical form of cooperation, but rather a tacit strategic

¹ General Assembly Resolution 181(II), *Resolution adopted on the report of the ad hoc Committee on the Palestinian Question*, A/RES/181(II) (29 November 1947), [[https://undocs.org/A/RES/181\(II\)](https://undocs.org/A/RES/181(II))], accessed on 16.10.2018

² UNSCOP, *Report to the General Assembly*, A/364 (3 September 1947), [<https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/0/07175DE9FA2DE563852568D3006E10F3>], accessed on 16.10.2018

alliance that did not transfer to the public discourse. The nature of the alliance was predominantly “military, economic and intelligence”³-related.

From Iran’s point of view, maintaining close ties with Israel would strengthen its relations with the United States as well.⁴ However, such a cooperation need to be kept, as much as possible, under the radar of the Arab states in the region, lest it would trigger unwanted tensions. As Trita Parsi explains, “it behooved Iran to tread a path between overt hostility and overt alliance.”⁵ Israel’s perspective came to be defined as the *periphery doctrine*, a foreign policy strategy envisioned by Israel’s Prime Minister David Ben Gurion in the 1950s.⁶ Its core principle was to approach and develop good relations with non-Arab states as a means of protection against belligerent Arab states; unsurprisingly, Iran was one of those states.

The military and intelligence cooperation between Iran and Israel flourished for the rest of Mohammad Reza Shah’s rule in Iran, but began to experience some challenges once the Islamic revolution overthrew the pro-Western monarchic system in 1979. The rhetoric towards Israel changed dramatically; Iran cut diplomatic ties with Israel, as well as with Egypt soon after the two states signed a peace treaty in March 1979.⁷ Even so, the substance of the Israeli-Iranian cooperation persisted after 1979, especially in the context of the Iran-Iraq war. Despite the newly proclaimed ideology, Iran’s rivalry with its Arab neighbor provided the Islamic Republic a reason to heavily rely upon external supply of “modern military equipment.”⁸

³ Dalia Dassa Kaye, Alireza Nader and Parisa Roshan, *Israel and Iran: A Dangerous Rivalry*, RAND Corporation, 2011, p. 9

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 11

⁵ Trita Parsi, *Treachorous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran and the United States*, Yale University Press, 2008, p. 20

⁶ Yossi Alpher, *Periphery: Israel’s Search for Middle East Allies*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2015, p. 3

⁷ Semira N. Nikou, “Timeline of Iran’s Foreign Relations”, *United States Institute of Peace*, [<https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/timeline-irans-foreign-relations>], accessed on 16.10.2018

⁸ Dalia Dassa Kaye, Alireza Nader and Parisa Roshan, *Israel and Iran: A Dangerous Rivalry*, RAND Corporation, 2011, p. 14

Indeed, as early as two years into the armed conflict, Western intelligence sources revealed that Iran was receiving military aid from Israel, as well as from the Soviet Union, Syria, and other states.⁹

The Gulf War (1990-91) was especially relevant for solidifying Iran's presence in the region and, simultaneously, worsening its relations with Israel. It is important to note that despite the decades-long strategic alliance, the Iranian political discourse had consistently been anti-Israeli, with successive generations of leaders refusing to recognize Israel's right to exist. Yitzak Segev, a former Israeli military attaché to Iran, explained the rhetoric as follows: "The moment that [the Shah] found out that all Arab countries are hostile against Israel, it was very good for him to continue to push all Arabs to be against Israel...Israel would be the subject that would take all the Arab anger [away from Iran]."¹⁰

The Iranian threats had never materialized into actions, but once Iraq ceased to be the more immediate menace in the region after the toppling of Saddam Hussein, the tensions between Iran and Israel became more tangible. Not only was Israel becoming increasingly anxious about Iran's extensive efforts to bolster its uranium enrichment program, but the two states have been engaged in a proxy war, most notably during the 2006 armed conflict between Israel and the Hizballah, an Iranian-backed militant group based in Lebanon. This proxy war in particular was a turning point in Iran-Israel relations, as Jalil Roshandel explains that it "did cause Israel to pause and regroup,"¹¹ deciding to shift the principal focus on the Iranian nuclear threat.

⁹ Leslie H. Gelb and Special To The New York Times, "Iran Said to Get Large-Scale Arms From Israel, Soviet and Europeans", *The New York Times*, March 8, 1982, [<https://www.nytimes.com/1982/03/08/world/iran-said-to-get-large-scale-arms-from-israel-soviet-and-europeans.html>], accessed on 16.10.2018

¹⁰ Interview with Yitzak Segev, Tel Aviv, October 17, 2004 *apud* Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran and the United States*, Yale University Press, 2008, p. 45

¹¹ Jalil Roshandel with Nathan Chapman Lean, *Iran, Israel, and the United States: regime security vs. political legitimacy*, First edition, Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011, p. 113

2. The Nuclear Framework: Ahmadinejad and the United States between Bush and Obama

The Iranian nuclear program was revealed in August 2002, by the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI); less than a year later, following an on-site inspection, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) acknowledged that Iran had violated the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.¹² The exposure of these rapid developments heightened Israel's security concerns, and "moved the Iran issue to political levels and to the public's attention."¹³

In this context, the regime led by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad following the 2005 presidential elections did anything but assuage Israel's anxiety regarding Iran's possible use of nuclear weapons. Ahmadinejad's public discourse was fiercely anti-Israeli, with infamous public appearances in which he threatened that the nation would be "eliminated"¹⁴, as well as many public instances in which he espoused and encouraged Holocaust denial.¹⁵ At the same time, the Iranian president seemed keen on continuing the development of a nuclear program. Interestingly, however, Ahmadinejad signaled willingness to also pursue a diplomatic approach with Europe and the United States regarding the issue, but only as long as "the minimum requirements expected by the Islamic Republic"¹⁶ were respected, which related to Iran's right to a peaceful use of nuclear energy.¹⁷

¹² Reuters, "Chronology of Iran's Nuclear Program", *The New York Times*, August 8, 2005, [<https://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/08/international/chronology-of-irans-nuclear-program.html>], accessed on 17.10.2018

¹³ Interview with former Israeli official, August 22, 2010, Herzliya *apud* Dalia Dassa Kaye, Alireza Nader and Parisa Roshan, *Israel and Iran: A Dangerous Rivalry*, RAND Corporation, 2011, p. 23

¹⁴ Louis Charbonneau, "In New York, defiant Ahmadinejad says Israel will be 'eliminated'", *Reuters*, September 24, 2012, [<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-assembly-ahmadinejad/in-new-york-defiant-ahmadinejad-says-israel-will-be-eliminated-idUSBRE88N0HF20120924>], accessed on 17.10.2018

¹⁵ Parisa Hafezi, Firouz Sedarat, "Ahmadinejad says Holocaust a lie, Israel has no future", in *Reuters*, September 18, 2009, [<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran/ahmadinejad-says-holocaust-a-lie-israel-has-no-future-idUSTRE58H17S20090918?rpc=64&sp=true>], accessed on 18.10.2018

¹⁶ Nazila Fathi, "Iran Warns Europeans to Respect Its Rights on Nuclear Program", *The New York Times*, July 24, 2005, [<https://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/24/world/middleeast/iran-warns-europeans-to-respect-its-rights-on-nuclear.html>], accessed on 19.10.2018

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

Where was the United States situated in this uncertain dynamic? In the early years of Ahmadinejad's tenure, the Bush administration had already constructed a general foreign policy of unilateralism, with a focus on fighting terrorism through the states that supported terrorist networks. In this context, Iran was directly targeted as one of the states that comprised the "axis of evil,"¹⁸ but preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons was not an explicit foreign policy goal of the Bush presidency.

The Bush administration focused its military efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, the latter having the result of indirectly empowering Iran. Instead of intimidating (via force) or encouraging (via diplomacy) the Iranian regime to halt its nuclear advancements, Bush's policies provided the ideal circumstances in which its nuclear program could evolve;¹⁹ most importantly, the lack of genuine engagement with Ahmadinejad only reinforced those conditions. Because of the foreign policy context constructed by Bush's presidency, then, negotiations for a nuclear deal between Iran, the United States and Europe were very unlikely.

However, precisely because of its growing influence in the region, and considering Israel's security concerns, the need to engage with Iran on its nuclear program was becoming one of the most pressing issues of the West's relations with the Middle East. While the Bush administration had not made noticeable progress on the matter²⁰, one candidate in the 2008 American presidential elections made it a top foreign policy concern of his campaign.

From the outset, President Obama shaped his foreign policy objectives in terms of a reversal of many of George W. Bush's decisions in the Middle East, including the war in Iraq, as well as the Israeli-Palestinian

¹⁸ George W. Bush, "Bush State of the Union address", CNN, January 29, 2002, [<http://edition.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/01/29/bush.speech.txt/>], accessed on 19.10.2018

¹⁹ As referenced to before, a weakened Iraq had already improved Iran's position of regional superiority after the Gulf War, but Bush's policies in Afghanistan and Iraq led to the removal of Iran's two main security concerns: the Taliban and Saddam Hussein's regime.

²⁰ That is not to say that attempts at negotiation were not made. The United States was involved during the 2006 talks between Iran and the European powers, but Trita Parsi argues that the American negotiators were not entirely keen on publicly compromising with the Iranian regime. Because of this, the negotiations were not likely to lead anywhere. For more, see Trita Parsi, *A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama's Diplomacy with Iran*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012, EPUB format, p. 24-5

peace process. The overarching framework of action around the Israel-Palestine conflict had two major tenets, which Dennis Ross, a former Middle East aide in the Obama administration, described as follows: “preventing the spread of nuclear weapons and transforming our relations with Muslim-majority countries.”²¹ Both of these objectives would clearly implicate Israel: the first by targeting so-called “rogue nations,”²² – particularly Iran – while the second contained the risk of unpredictability – would it prove to be a transformation of U.S. relations with Muslim states at the expense of its relations with Israel?

When considered from the perspective of U.S.-Iran relations, the answer to the question is seemingly *yes*. Right from the very beginning of his presidency, Barack Obama was keen on starting a direct dialogue with the Iranian government. This was part of the *dual-track approach*, which consisted of an “appropriate balance between talks and incentives [...] and hard-hitting sanctions;”²³ together, they would efficiently push for a solution to the nuclear threat posed by Iran.

Evidently, Israel would have a vital interest in following America’s foreign policy towards Iran and ensuring that Iran did not emerge empowered by the strategies pursued. The Obama administration acknowledged the importance of including Israel in their calculations, as Ross discloses the details of a meeting between President Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu in May 2009.²⁴ When clarifying what the dual-track approach would imply, Obama made sure to alleviate Israel’s concerns that Iran would merely stall for time by agreeing to talk. He revealed that unless Iran made meaningful progress during the engagement phase by the end of the first year, the United States would change course and focus on sanctions. Additionally, he confirmed that the U.S. would be ready and willing to react militarily to the Iranian threat if it came to it.

²¹ Dennis Ross, *Doomed to succeed: the U.S.-Israel relationship from Truman to Obama*, First edition, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015, EPUB format, p. 350

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ Trita Parsi, *A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama’s Diplomacy with Iran*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012, EPUB format, p. 25

²⁴ Dennis Ross, *Doomed to succeed: the U.S.-Israel relationship from Truman to Obama*, First edition, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015, EPUB format, p. 371

Between the years 2009 and 2013, the changes that occurred in U.S.-Iran relations were monumental, considering that the two states had not had diplomatic relations since 1980. Only two days after Obama's presidential election victory, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad sent the President-elect a congratulatory letter²⁵, followed in the next few months by back-and-forth public displays of conciliatory and diplomatic tones between the two heads of state. However, in spite of such a promising rhetoric, Iran remained skeptical about the intentions behind America's gestures. There was, as Trita Parsi observes, a very clear distinction between *saying* and *doing*, which Iran relied heavily upon in their calculations: "At the same time that the Iranians were cautiously entertaining the possibility of change in U.S. foreign policy, they were increasingly preparing for it not to happen."²⁶

In other words, the inviting and open new approach of the Obama administration, profoundly different from that of the Bush administration, meant little to the Iranian regime; changes in public discourse had the appeal of domestic political gains for President Obama, especially when those changes were a drastic departure from his own predecessor's, but they did not guarantee that the new American administration had, indeed, a real interest in "strategic engagement"²⁷ with Iran, which would bring about concrete developments.

3. Enter Rouhani: A New Chance for Negotiations

What paved the way for the genuine possibility of dialogue was the presidential election in Iran of June 2013. Hassan Rouhani, the newly-elected President of Iran, was a promising moderate figure in the eyes of U.S. and European officials alike, having been one of the very few diplomats who managed to convince Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to

²⁵ Nazila Fathi, "In Rare Turn, Iran's Leader Sends Letter to Obama", *The New York Times*, November 6, 2008, [<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/07/world/middleeast/07iran.html>], accessed on 21.10.2018

²⁶ Trita Parsi, *A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama's Diplomacy with Iran*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012, EPUB format, p. 50

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 51

conclude a nuclear agreement with the West back in 2003.²⁸ Once in office, President Rouhani readily expressed Iran's willingness to hold direct talks with the United States²⁹, although the leader called for his American counterparts to make the first step.³⁰

The stakes drastically changed for the United States. What had hitherto been hypothetical, promptly became a tangible opportunity to negotiate a nuclear agreement before the end of Obama's second term and thus, bring to completion one of his most valued foreign policy priorities. In the months following Iran's presidential election, there was a sense of urgency that had been largely absent during Ahmadinejad's rule, which was also reflected in the relations between the United States and Israel. As we shall observe, the closer the negotiators got to signing a final, comprehensive deal with Iran, the more the American and Israeli governments publicly clashed.

In this new context, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu conveyed a lack of enthusiasm regarding Hassan Rouhani's appeasing rhetoric to the United States. As the leaders of the world were preparing to hear the Iranian President's speech at the United Nations in New York on September 24, Netanyahu expressed his distrust in Iran's seriousness: "We will not be fooled by half-measures that merely provide a smoke screen for Iran's continual pursuit of nuclear weapons."³¹ What was needed, Netanyahu underlined, were actions that matched the words – a similarly skeptical approach that Ahmadinejad's regime had shown towards the Obama administration.

²⁸ Thomas Erdbrink, "President-Elect Stirs Optimism in Iran and West", *The New York Times*, July 26, 2013, [<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/27/world/middleeast/president-elect-stirs-optimism-in-iran-and-west.html>], accessed on 21.10.2018

²⁹ Michael R. Gordon, "Iran Is Said to Want Direct Talks With U.S. on Nuclear Program", *The New York Times*, July 26, 2013, [<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/26/world/middleeast/iran-is-said-to-want-direct-talks-with-us-on-nuclear-program.html>], accessed on 21.10.2018

³⁰ Thomas Erdbrink, "Iran's New President Calls for Nuclear Talks Without Rejecting Direct U.S. Role", *The New York Times*, August 6, 2013, [<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/07/world/middleeast/irans-new-president-says-nuclear-talks-could-succeed.html>], accessed on 21.10.2018

³¹ Jodi Rudoren, "As the New Iranian Leader Gets a Warm Reception, Israel Calls for Caution", *The New York Times*, September 25, 2013, [<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/25/world/middleeast/israel-continues-to-sound-alarm-on-iranian-overture.html>], accessed on 21.10.2018

4. The Road to a Nuclear Deal: The Geneva Interim Agreement

In order to better understand the following developments in the multilateral relations between Israel, Iran and the United States, it is essential to grasp how Israel understands the Iranian threat and why negotiating with this particular enemy is not even considered as an option. For decades, Israel has been the major nuclear player in the Middle East, despite the government's assumed policy of "strategic ambiguity,"³² meaning that it has neither denied nor confirmed its nuclear capabilities. However, the nuclear supremacy that Israel has in the region has not been and cannot be contested.

For Iran to acquire nuclear weapons, it would not only be of extreme danger to Israel because of its possible use by the Iranian regime; it is, in fact, just as dangerous for Iran to be close to reaching the stage of producing nuclear weapons because of how regional dynamics would be affected and, thus, how Israel's dominant position would be challenged. A former Israeli Deputy Minister of Defense puts it simply: "They don't have to use [a nuclear bomb]; the fact that they have it is enough."³³

Moreover, the emergence of a new nuclear power – such as Iran – would also alter the way the United States and Israel interacted, as it would "acquire strategic significance in the Middle East at the expense of Israel."³⁴ Considering President Obama's foreign policy priorities, it is not hard to see how Israel was reading the international context at the time as detrimental and quite dangerous to Israel's position and national security. By merely agreeing to negotiations with Iran, the United States was signaling a recognition of Iran's power to become Israel's equal in terms of nuclear significance in the near future.

Eventually, and in spite of Israel's dissatisfaction, discussions did begin in October 2013 between Iran and the P5+1 countries (France, Russia, United States, United Kingdom, China and Germany) in Geneva, Switzerland, and the representatives agreed to meet once again on

³² Rory McCarthy, "Israel's nuclear capability and policy of strategic ambiguity", *The Guardian*, May 23, 2010, [<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/may/23/israel-nuclear-capability-strategic-ambiguity>], accessed on 22.10.2018

³³ Trita Parsi, *A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama's Diplomacy with Iran*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012, EPUB format, p. 38

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

November 7 and 8.³⁵ It is right before the second round of talks began that Dennis Ross recounts meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu, who had just been on a phone call with President Obama. Netanyahu's apprehension over Iran had reached a new high, as an interim agreement "was suddenly on the brink of happening"³⁶ in Geneva, contrary to the briefing³⁷ of the status of the talks that his team had received. The phone call was intended to prepare and convince Netanyahu on the advantages of a possible deal being concluded soon, but it was unsuccessful.

And yet, Iran and the P5+1 states did announce the signing of a deal later in November, which came to be known as the Joint Plan of Action or the Geneva interim agreement. Under it, sanctions against Iran's petrochemical exports, auto industry, gold and precious metals were suspended and the reduction of Iran's crude oil sales was paused.³⁸ In return, Iran agreed to some limitations over its own nuclear activities – such as not enriching uranium over 5% for the following six months, as well as allowing enhanced monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency.³⁹ It was a breakthrough both for the foreign policy of the Obama administration and for U.S.-Iran relations since 1979.

For Israel, however, the Geneva accord was nothing short of a disappointment. In a Cabinet meeting shortly after the announcement, Prime Minister Netanyahu described it as a "historic mistake" and explained that "sanctions have been given up in exchange for cosmetic Iranian concessions that can be cancelled in weeks."⁴⁰ The concern regarding the

³⁵ Michael R. Gordon, "After Talks on Iran's Nuclear Program, Officials Highlight the Positive", *The New York Times*, October 16, 2013, [<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/17/world/middleeast/iran-nuclear-talks.html>], accessed on 22.10.2018

³⁶ Dennis Ross, *Doomed to succeed: the U.S.-Israel relationship from Truman to Obama*, First edition, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015, EPUB format, p. 369

³⁷ According to Dennis Ross, Susan Rice, who was Obama's national security advisor, had denied authorizing the Israelis on the real status.

³⁸ *Full Text of Iran-5+1 agreement in Geneva*, Islamic Republic News Agency, November 24, 2013, [http://www.irna.ir/en/News/80918859/Politic/Full_text_of_Iran-5_1_agreement_in_Geneva], accessed on 22.10.2018

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ *PM Netanyahu on the Geneva agreement*, Jerusalem: Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, November 25, 2013, [<http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2013/Pages/PM-Netanyahu's-remarks-at-the-start-of-the-weekly-Cabinet-meeting-24-Nov-2013.aspx>], accessed on 22.10.2018

interim deal was that it did not strip Iran of its nuclear capabilities and allowed it to keep its 11,000 centrifuges already operating for the following six months, during which the negotiations were supposed to continue to reach a final agreement. Therefore, getting so little out of Iran's nuclear program in exchange for suspension of a set of sanctions, the Israeli thinking went, does nothing else but relieve "the pressure that brought Iran to the table"⁴¹ in the first place.

Simultaneously, the ongoing tensions between the United States and Israel, which had developed during the Obama administration, only deepened with the signing of the Geneva interim agreement. The White House had clearly prioritized Iran over other affairs in the Middle East; Israel, for its part, had just witnessed an American administration who proved to be unpredictable and hesitant in its behavior towards regional allies in the context of the Arab Spring, particularly during the overthrow of Egypt's President Mubarak⁴² and during the Syrian "red line"⁴³ episode. Both of these instances robbed the Israeli government of the chance to correctly predict the changes in American behavior, and instead, left Israel cautious of American commitment to its interests and security. Despite numerous assurances from the U.S. that Iran would not emerge empowered by a nuclear deal, the fact remained that Israel's confidence in the Obama administration was put to test once more.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² Referring to President Obama's firm call for the Egyptian President to step down in 2011 amid growing pressure and protests from the Egyptian population to do so. In the Arab world, this was largely perceived as the Obama administration abandoning a long-time ally such as Mubarak, underlining a conditionality of the United States with its Middle Eastern allies. Naturally, Israel perceived it as a signal of unreliability.

⁴³ Referring to a famous episode in Obama's foreign policy repertoire, when President Obama sought Congress authorization to respond with force to a critical chemical weapons attack during the Syrian civil war in 2013. Only a year before, President Obama had established that the use of chemical weapons in Syria represented a red line that, if crossed, would be assuredly followed by a swift American military response.

5. The Final Nuclear Agreement: JCPOA and the Rift with Israel

The height of the strained relationship that grew between the United States and Israel over the Iranian nuclear threat was the historic address that Prime Minister Netanyahu gave to the U.S. Congress in March 2015, just a few weeks before the Israeli legislative elections.

At the invitation of House Speaker John A. Boehner and without prior coordination with the White House,⁴⁴ Netanyahu addressed both houses of Congress on the perils of concluding a nuclear deal with Iran. He warned of the drawback of an agreement which would allow Iran to retain “a vast nuclear infrastructure,”⁴⁵ the unreliability of inspections and the danger of lifting sanctions in about a decade that would “pave Iran’s path to the bomb.”⁴⁶ The White House responded by dismissing Netanyahu’s remarks, as he had not “offered any viable alternatives”⁴⁷ on dealing with the Iranian nuclear threat.

The speech was the most visible damage that U.S.-Israel relations had suffered during Obama’s presidency. Whatever public clashes the two leaders had previously been involved in, the fact that Prime Minister Netanyahu chose to confront the diplomatic policy towards Iran that the U.S. had so strongly maintained for close to two years, in front of the American Congress, sent a very strong message to the Obama administration. More specifically, it conveyed that the rift did not involve nor extend to the entire American government, but rather, to the members of the administration, including the President himself, who had fiercely chosen to follow a compromise with Iran.

In this way, only the specific policy of pursuing talks with Iran on its nuclear program was attacked, but President Obama, along with his surrounding advisors, were more powerfully singled out. Furthermore, the

⁴⁴ Dennis Ross, *Doomed to succeed: the U.S.-Israel relationship from Truman to Obama*, First edition, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015, EPUB format, p. 391

⁴⁵ Benjamin Netanyahu, “PM Netanyahu’s speech to a joint session of the US Congress”, *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, March 3, 2015, [<http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2015/Pages/PM-Netanyahus-speech-to-Congress-3-March-2015.aspx>], accessed on 22.10.2018

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ Stephen Collinson, “Bad relationship gets worse for Obama, Netanyahu”, *CNN*, March 4, 2015, [<https://edition.cnn.com/2015/03/03/politics/netanyahu-speech-analysis-congress/index.html>], accessed on 22.10.2018

address to Congress acted as a forceful reminder that Obama's strategy faced fierce internal opposition as well, emphasized by the invitation of the House Speaker and the loud signals of approval from members of Congress that echoed through the room during Netanyahu's speech.

A few weeks after the controversial address, Iran, the European Union and the P5+1 countries convened in Lausanne, Switzerland, to conclude a framework that would allow a final agreement to be detailed. Finally, after a new round of negotiations, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was revealed on July 14, 2015. Under the JCPOA, Iran agreed to several restrictions on its nuclear program, such as cutting down its number of centrifuges for enriching uranium, while also limiting enrichment to 3.7% (compared to the 20% level of enrichment that Iran had maintained until then).⁴⁸ The implementation of those measures was to be done under the inspection of International Atomic Energy Agency, who would be allowed access to Iran's nuclear sites and verify suspected covert facilities.⁴⁹ In turn, depending on the successful implementation of the agreement, U.N. and some E.U. sanctions, together with secondary U.S. sanctions, would be terminated.

In the end, for all its attempts to re-direct the attention of the United States on the dangers of a nuclear deal, Israel was still not able to halt the advancement of a comprehensive nuclear agreement with Iran. The clashes between the Obama administration and the Netanyahu government over Iran reached unprecedented highs the closer the negotiators got to a final deal.

Conclusions

The relation between the United States and Israel has always gone beyond the strictly bilateral alliance between the two states; it has always consisted of thorough considerations on Israel's neighbors and regional stability. Similarly, the United States-Iran relations have also been driven

⁴⁸ William J. Broad and Sergio Peçanha, "The Iran Nuclear Deal – A Simple Guide", *The New York Times*, January 15, 2015, [<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/03/31/world/middleeast/simple-guide-nuclear-talks-iran-us.html>], accessed on 22.10.2018

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

by strategic calculations, as the American foreign policy has always contextualized the importance of Iran in the region. In the past few decades, the three states have become increasingly conjoined, and an American policy towards either of the two rivals must balance the interests, concerns and threats deriving from both Israel and Iran.

Barack Obama was the first American President to capitalize on the Iranian nuclear threat as a major priority of his foreign policy agenda. Perhaps an unusual choice for a presidential candidate who wishes to win the upcoming elections, this goal to commence a dialogue with Iran was, actually, favorable in the context of his predecessor's actions in the foreign policy area. President Obama's approach had been very much Arab world-centric from the very beginning, and while the relation with Israel was not directly targeted, Israel would gradually feel how contextually defined its alliance with this new American administration actually was.

Therefore, President Obama's decisive position on the most efficient manner in which to respond to the Iranian nuclear threat put the interests of the United States in direct contrast with those of Israel. The time before Hassan Rouhani's election was one of relative understanding between the two states, largely due to the fact that the opportunity to pursue a nuclear deal had not yet materialized, but also because the Obama administration seemed more responsive to the worries of the Israeli government regarding hypothetical negotiations.

However, the moment talks began between Iran and the P5+1 states, the conduct of the United States revealed an administration which dedicated itself completely to the goal of concluding a nuclear agreement with Iran, even if it came at the expense of the already-strained relationship with Israel. Progress occurred at a faster rate than Israel was comfortable with, but precisely because of this, Obama could not risk endangering the development of the negotiations only to strike an unrealistic balance between his interests and those of Israel.

Since 2015, however, the situation has drastically changed with the new Trump administration. His foreign policy has materialized in stark contrast to the one during the Obama administration. The rhetoric is not only visibly much closer to Israel's interests and expectations, but it also returns to a pre-Obama era perception of Iran as an enemy that cannot be

discussed with, relying on sanctions rather than diplomacy to halt its threatening behavior. On May 8 this year, the President announced that the United States would withdraw from the nuclear agreement and re-impose the economic sanctions that preceded the deal in 2015.⁵⁰

From this point of view, the Iran-Israel-U.S. dynamic is being redefined in a manner more consistent with the traditional American model, one that strongly believes and acts according to the benefits of the Israeli alliance, while discouraging diplomatic progress with Iran. While popular with a significant segment of the American population and interest groups, this policy line is being pursued at the expense of a mutual compromise, balancing interests and overall regional security for the long-term.

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