



What Do Iranians Think? Not Much of America, Thanks to Donald Trump

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Negotiations over restoring the nuclear agreement with Iran aren't quite moribund, but the Biden administration has begun to sound a bit like its predecessor in muttering threats of military action. War with Iran would be a catastrophe, much worse than with Iraq. And sending in bombers would only delay, not halt, construction of nuclear weapons, if that became Tehran's objective.

When President Donald Trump took office the Islamist Iranian regime was contained by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Then Trump, knowing nothing of Iran, ignorant of the JCPOA's terms, certain of his negotiating genius, and in thrall both Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu and Saudi Arabia's Mohammed bin Salman, tore up the agreement and announced his "maximum pressure" campaign. Trump expected Iran's rulers to scurry to Washington, D.C., acclaim his greatness, and sign surrender documents. Instead, Tehran proceeded to demonstrate that Trump's America was a "paper tiger," as Mao Zedong once insisted.

Iran, along with its proxies and allies, remained active in Yemen, Lebanon, and Syria. Tehran disrupted oil production and transport and attacked US facilities and personnel throughout the Mideast. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who famously delivered the administration's surrender terms in a speech noteworthy for its ostentatious arrogance and ignorance, was reduced to whining that he might have to close the US embassy in Baghdad due to attacks by local Iran-backed militias. Worse, Tehran revived its nuclear activities as hardliners took complete control politically.

Seldom has a president made so counterproductive yet predictable a mistake. Although Trump remains oblivious to the disastrous impact of his actions – here and everywhere – even Israeli security officials now admit that that Trump blundered spectacularly and actually accelerated Iranian nuclear research. In desperation the new Israeli government is shamelessly pushing Washington toward war with Iran, fulfilling the role former Defense Secretary Robert Gates once attributed to Saudi Arabia which, he said, would "*fight the Iranians to the last American.*"

A recent survey from the Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland and IranPoll has little good news for the US. Trump's maladroit sanctions did worsen Iran's economy, as expected, which the Iranian people also readily recognized. Between 75 percent and 80 percent of Iranians believe US sanctions have had at least "some" negative impact on the economy.

However, as a result of US policy, public opinion also modestly shifted blame from domestic mismanagement to foreign pressure. And support increased for autarky, or economic self-sufficiency, which would help insulate Iran from the impact of future sanctions and reduce the attractiveness of economic contact with the West. Such a turn would risk turning Tehran into another North Korea, which would not be in America's interest.

Trump's decision to play Thanos to the Iranian economy also helped sweep moderates from the political process. While the Islamic Republic long effectively barred Western-style liberals from the political process, reform factions still had looked westward economically and were willing negotiate over Iran's nuclear program. By demonstrating that the US could not be trusted, Trump weakened support for then-President Hassan Rouhani and then-Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, making it easier for the hardline faction, now represented by President Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi, to take control.

From 2014 to 2016 Rouhani enjoyed favorability ratings in the 80s. By 2019 his rating had gone negative; in September his favorables barely broke 20 percent. In August 2015, shortly after the signing of the JCPOA Zarif enjoyed a favorability rating of 89.4 percent. His rating fell, though not quite so quickly, to 58.5 percent in September. In contrast, Raisi's favorables were under 50 percent in May 2017. However, his favorability rating has since moved steadily upward, hitting 78.0 percent in September. And 71.4 percent of people said they were satisfied with his election. Large majorities believed that he would have prevailed even had other candidates been allowed to run.

There was a general expectation that Raisi will attempt to improve Iran's relations with neighboring countries. But not with the West. The public's attitude shifted against the US and its allies. A majority advocated strengthening ties with Asian nations. There was strong support for expanded economic relations with China. Only 39.1 percent wanted to focus on Europe.

Support for continued nuclear development always was very strong, with approval in the 90s through 2018, and then in the mid-80s. (Iranians also strongly backed their nation's missile program; in September 70.8 percent of Iranians said it was "very important.") However, support for the JCPOA was at 75.5 after it was signed, when Iranians hoped that they could join the global economy and enjoy the resulting prosperity.

Support slowly ebbed as expected economic benefits were slow to arrive, but two-thirds of Iranians still supported the agreement when Trump killed it. In 2019, a year into Trump's disastrous "maximum pressure" campaign, many Iranians gave up on America and support dropped under 50 percent, where it remained last September, with approval and disapproval roughly equal.

Nor have Trump's sanctions won any Iranian fans. Only a minimal number of Iranians believed in July 2017 that sanctions helped promote human rights, 8.4 percent. That number fell even further, to 7.3 percent, last September. An incredible 72.6 percent of Iranians believed that the US definitely or probably is seeking to prevent humanitarian aid from reaching Iran. Iranians evidently weren't fooled by Trump posturing as their friend while destroying their economy. And additional sanction threats aren't likely to have much impact politically: in September 60.9 percent of respondents figured that Washington had done its worst and couldn't impose much more hardship on them.

Iranians also tie the US to attacks on their nation. Such is America's reputation that majorities ranging between 73.2 percent and 91.1 percent believe that the US had prior knowledge of Israeli attacks on the nuclear program, terrorist actions against civilian Iranian targets, the Islamic State's offensive in Iraq, and even Iraq's invasion of Iran (under Saddam Hussein). Sizeable majorities believe that Washington could have helped Iran rebuff Israeli and other attacks.

Greater skepticism toward the JCPOA's benefits and the Biden administration's threats left a majority of Iranians backing the tougher stance taken by the Raisi government. Most believed that full reinstatement of the nuclear agreement would improve Iran's economy and their lives. Nevertheless, as of September 15.9 percent of Iranians opposed trying to reinstate the nuclear agreement. 51.7 percent said Tehran should hold firm and insist that Washington show flexibility. Only 26.7 percent thought Iran also needed to make concessions.

Two-thirds of Iranians backed their government's demand that the US not interfere with a European Euro-trading system with Iran. Two-thirds agreed that the JCPOA should ensure monitoring of compliance by all members – meaning America – and not just Tehran. And what to do "if the United States does not provide reliable assurances the Iran will get all the promised benefits from the JCPOA if it resumes full compliance"? Two-thirds of Iranians said no more Mr. Nice Guy: 36.1 percent would not fulfill all of Tehran's commitments and 27.7 percent would withdraw from the accord.

Particularly striking is the Iranian public's view of the consequences of the latter. What would happen if the Raisi government walked? No biggie, they responded, despite Uncle Sam's threatening rhetoric. The numbers suggest a collective middle finger raised toward Washington.

Iranians affirmed that they are not afraid to go it alone: 63.6 percent believed the economy at least would be no worse off; 66.9 percent believed that foreign trade would improve or be about the same; 66.7 percent believed Tehran's standing in the world would actually get better or at least be unchanged; 77.2 percent believed Iran would be more secure or no worse off than before; 79.7 percent believed Iran would be as able or even more able to negotiate a better deal with world powers. (In the latter case 55.7 percent of Iranians believed Tehran would be in a stronger negotiating position!)

Americans should be embarrassed by Iranians' view of Washington's trustworthiness, or lack thereof. If the US rejoined the JCPOA, what is the likelihood that America would live up to the agreement's terms? Not quite a third of respondents believed that it is somewhat (28.1 percent) or very (4.6 percent) likely. Almost two-thirds said somewhat or very *unlikely*. They had more confidence in the Europeans, but skeptics still outnumbered optimists.

Indeed, Iranians have learned a difficult lesson from the Trump experience. Asked to assess the process, almost three-quarters, 73.1 percent, agreed that: "The JCPOA experience shows that it is not worthwhile for Iran to make concessions, because Iran cannot have confidence that if it makes a concession world powers will honor their side of an agreement."

Washington also has inadvertently done its best to enhance the role of America's adversaries in Iran. In general, Iranians liked China (57.4 percent at least somewhat favorable) and Russia (56.1 percent). They didn't like France (59.4 percent at least somewhat unfavorable). They really didn't like Saudi Arabia but viewed states and groups friendly to Tehran with favor.

As for America, not so much. The US had a somewhat/very favorable rating of about 30 percent until Trump reneged on the JCPOA. Since then America's reputation has crashed: in September only 3.2 percent of Iranians had a very favorable view of the US (who are those people?!), while 10.8 percent had a somewhat favorable view. When asked how they assess the Biden administration's policy, 26.1 percent thought it was neither friend nor unfriendly, 4.6 percent said some degree of friendly, and 66.8 percent said some degree of unfriendly (33.5 percent said "completely hostile").

Iranians did say there were some actions Washington could take to improve their opinion of the US. For instance, eliminate barriers to importing the COVID-19 vaccine. Exchanging Iranian prisoners held by the US. Condemn Israel's assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists. Stop blocking loans from the International Monetary Fund. Lift sanctions on the Central Bank of Iran. And return to the JCPOA, fully adhering to its terms – 76.3 percent said that would be a meaningful step. Yet so far the Biden administration refuses to do so, earning the highly negative rating from the Iranian population.

Notably, Iranians support military action against the US. When asked if Tehran was justified in using its military "to increase the costs to the US for its staying in the region," 23.2 percent said fully and 34.5 percent said somewhat. It turns out that treating another country as an enemy, wrecking its economy, impoverishing its people, threatening its security, supporting other nations which murdered its scientists and attacked its facilities, and violating agreements with it were not the best strategy to appeal to its people.

If Iran was not so important Americans could have an uproarious laugh at the staggering arrogance, ignorance, and incompetence of Trump and his cronies. Prior administrations, most notably that of George W. Bush, also acted foolishly and irresponsibly. However, Trump set the gold standard for failure. He and his officials understood little of the Iranian people, exhibited grand illusions utterly disconnected from reality, and turned a challenge into a catastrophe. Yet they still have no clue as to how badly they served the American people.

President Biden still can rescue the JCPOA. However, time is running out. Adopting Trump's misbegotten "maximum pressure" strategy risks losing the next generation of Iranians. And the result likely would be years more of regional instability, proliferation fears, violent conflict, and US interference. Biden should make a determined bid for peace before extremists in both America and Iran cause a military confrontation that both seem to desire.

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