

# The Puzzle of U.S. Foreign Policy Revision Regarding Iran's Nuclear Program

Written by Sina Abolghasem Rasouli

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SINA ABOLGHASEM RASOULI, JUL 10 2020

Foreign policy choices usually vary from historical decisions to everyday ones. Political front-runners make decisions to go to conflict, shape an alliance, reach an agreement, make peace, create diplomatic relations, apply a standpoint on nuclear non-proliferation or impose sanctions on other actors. Foreign policy decision making identifies the alternatives that individuals, groups, and coalitions choose which can affect a nation's actions on the international level. These decisions are usually categorized by high stakes, massive ambiguity, and even substantial risk (Mintz, DeRouen, 2014). In that sense, the main aim of this short essay is to understand how the U.S. foreign policy, particularly during the beginning of Trump's Administration, has been revised toward Iran's nuclear program from the perspective of *groupthink decision-making* theory. To have thoughtful analysis, it is important to first briefly discuss the timeline of Iran's nuclear agreement with world powers. Later on, this paper presents the concept of groupthink decision making within the context of the United States. The third section of this paper attempts to analyze the U.S. policy revision towards Iran's nuclear program within the framework of the groupthink model. Finally, this paper concludes that the process of advocacy coalition and groupthink contestation at the beginning of Trump's administration have played a role in the U.S. foreign policy towards Iran's nuclear program.

### Iran's Nuclear Agreement

In the 2000s, the U.S. president George W. Bush and Western allies have criticized Iran for its secret nuclear activities, and have imposed substantial sanctions, and threatened Iran for military action (Lantis, 2019). During Barak Obama's presidency, he established a broad coalition of support that promoted diplomatic negotiations with Iran for seven years. After years of global tension over Iran's suspected struggle to develop a nuclear weapon, in 2015, world powers, also known as P5+1 (the US, UK, France, China, Russia and Germany), have reached an international agreement. Considering decades of hostile relations between Iran and the U.S., this agreement, which is also known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), was considered to many as one of the top diplomatic accomplishment for all parties (Schwammenthal, 2018). Under this agreement, Iran accepted to limit its nuclear activities to some great extent and to allow the unexpected inspection of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors in return for the lifting of economic sanctions (US-Iran relations: A brief history, 2020). President Obama, in a statement, called it "the strongest non-proliferation agreement ever negotiated" (What is the JCPOA?, 2020).

However, the deal remained to be a contested matter in both Iran and the U.S. since it came to execution in 2015. Shortly after reaching the JCPOA in July 2015, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed Resolution 2231 endorsing the deal on all members (President Trump Withdraws the United States from the Iran Deal and Announces the Reimposition of Sanctions, 2018). During the next round of U.S. presidential election, Donald Trump, as a candidate, made clear that, if voted, he would "rip up" (Lantis, 2019: 466) the deal with Iran. Nonetheless, the JCPOA continued in place until 2018, and all IAEA reports, throughout this period, confirmed Iran's compliance with its nuclear obligations under the JCPOA. On May 2018, Trump signed an executive memorandum, announcing the unilateral U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, calling it "the worst deal ever" (Robbins, 2018). He, then, regulated the re imposition of strong primary sanctions that had been earlier lifted under the JCPOA (President Trump Withdraws the United States from the Iran Deal and Announces the Re imposition of Sanctions, 2018). He also signed an

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executive order imposing secondary sanctions on any foreign corporation that continues to do trade with Iran. The executive order gave companies 90-day periods to remove themselves from remaining Iranian exchanges or face retributive US sanctions (Borger, Dehghan, Holmes, 2018). Soon after Trump's decision, leaders of the UK, Germany and France issued a joint statement, expressing their "regret and concern" (ibid) and emphasized that they will remain committed to the legal framework of the UNSC Resolution 2231:

"We urge the U.S. to ensure that the structures of the JCPOA can remain intact, and to avoid taking action which obstructs its full implementation by all other parties to the deal" (ibid)

After reemploying crippling sanctions, Iran's economy fell into a profound recession. Iran-US relations deteriorated between 2019 and early 2020, when the U.S. squeezed the sanctions by targeting Iran's main source of income, such as crude oil export. In retaliation, Iran began a counter-measure campaign. Between May and June 2019, Iran was accused of the explosion of several oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman. On June 2019, Iranian forces shot down a U.S. navy drone, claiming that the drone has been violating Iran's air space. Later on, in July 2019, Iran began rolling back from its key commitments under the JCPOA. Finally, in January 2020, the tension between the U.S. and Iran has reached to its peak when an Iranian top military commander, Soleimani, was killed by a U.S. drone strike in Iraq. In response, Iran pulled back from the JCPOA and vowed severe revenge. Iranian officials stated that Iran will respond one way or another because there was an act of war combined with an act of terrorism against a top-ranked military official and a citizen of Iran. A few days later, Iran launched more than a dozen missiles against two U.S. military bases in Iraq, which has left no one injured. According to some political analyst, the events in early 2020 were acts of face-saving, because neither side wanted a confrontation at the peak of tension (US-Iran relations: A brief history, 2020).

## **What is Groupthink Model and what are the Conditions for its Formation?**

As Mintz and DeRouen argue, the U.S. foreign policy is often a victim of the groupthink syndrome. In the concept of groupthink, group dynamics can impact how information is treated and how decisions are made. The cohesion (or incoherence), structure, internal processes, dynamics, and administration of the group, affect decisions. The group that is making the decision pursues agreement within their in-group at the expense of exploring a diversity of options from other groups. Conformity to the group's understandings is a central concern for all members, so opposition is muted and, in some cases, even penalized (Mintz, DeRouen, 2014). The group expresses a feeling of immunity or invulnerability, and it usually does not tolerate opposing viewpoints as it pursues to consolidate its union. The group constantly criticizes other groups (Obama's administration in this case) and views itself as ethically or intellectually superior (ibid).

Groupthink acquires more influence when members of the group come to ignore information that does not correspond to their majority position. Conditions that may lead a group into an unintentional groupthink model are more probable if the group is isolated from external input. It is also more probable if the group lacks an unbiased leader who can tolerate opposition groups. In that sense, a leader's personality is important because it affects the weighting of preferences or how he or she may respond to signs or symbols (Ibid). Symbols, therefore, are also important because they can unite individual around ideals. Symbols are alive outside of the domain of the real and the practical. Symbols, therefore, allow coalitions to be formed (Stone, 2012). Absence of norms or processes for decision making also leaves the group susceptible to a groupthink dynamic. Groupthink offers security and safety for decision-makers and these merits can be attractive if the condition at hand is narrated as crisis or has moral suggestions, or if it is narrated as a recent policy failure (Mintz, DeRouen, 2014).

Consequently, it is not unexpected to see the decision-making to be more vulnerable during crises; because members need other affiliates of the group for validation and support. Several reasons have been identified to understand why groupthink is usually expected to be harmful to foreign policy decision making. One obvious reason is that the search for alternatives and information is inadequately carried out. Here, external experts are not invited, and thinking is conformist. When a decision is made, it is unlikely to be scrutinized for potential problems and undesired consequences. Since the group regularly has an idealistically high opinion of itself and its capability to accomplish, it is unlikely to have a backup plan in case of catastrophe or the capacity to examine past decisions.

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Mintz and DeRouen argue that it is possible to avoid groupthink, and the one obvious way is for the political leader to actively pursue diverse options (ibid).

However, the old-fashioned groupthink model has been expanded and developed over time to include extra group pathologies and processes. In beyond groupthink, it has been argued that small groups are employed in an advisory process, and they are diverse in role and composition. These smaller groups make it even more complex to understand the decision-making process. Groups can be ad hoc combinations of individuals, bureaucratic agencies, or coalitions. Although this group shares an agreement, their plan, method and preferences for reaching their goals and ordering structures might be different. Therefore, group developments regularly involve bargaining among group members (premier). These groups can be institutional and political factors, and they can even operate above the level of the group that describe and shape their role. Examples of group decisions include decisions of presidential advisory groups, UN Security Council members, or the U.S. National Security Council (ibid).

In that sense, one can raise extra questions concerning the groupthink model. For example, it becomes more complex to understand how and through which channel a decision is made. Most of the present research on the groupthink model is limited to the U.S. foreign policy and its presidential system. Therefore, one can fairly argue that understanding the process of U.S. foreign policy decision making should be rather focused on its unique presidential advisory system. Moreover, it is important to mention that the groupthink model should not be conflated with the study of group decision making. In summary, one may require to delve deeper into small group decision making rather than just the groupthink bias (ibid).

## **Discussion**

Although at the top of U.S. foreign decision making Trump is the most visible actor, one may fairly argue that the U.S. foreign policy decisions are influenced by group dynamics. In this sense, this section attempts to understand Trump's administration behavior within the framework of the groupthink model. As it was discussed before, small groups are employed in an advisory process, and they are diverse in role and composition. These groups might be ad hoc mixtures of individuals, administrative organizations, or coalitions. In the case of the U.S., the pro-engagement coalition (proponents of the JCPOA) is some members of the administration, some top officials of members of Congress such as Nancy Pelosi, and think tanks, such as the National Iranian American Council. In turn, this coalition competed with conservatives in the Congress, right-wing media, and most importantly presidential advisory groups and the U.S. National Security Council (Lantis, 2019).

In the case of Iran, there were at least two coalitions in the U.S. contesting for a policy shift towards Iran over the past decades. The first coalition of actors preferred a policy change in the embrace of a nuclear deal with Iran and support for its normalization as an actor in the Middle East and outside. This coalition is present form both inside and outside the U.S. government. Moreover, this coalition is not limited to only Obama's Administration. It includes top officials in both Trump and Obama Administrations, member of Congress and think tanks in the U.S. capital city. In this sense, this paper argues that, at the beginning of Trump's presidency, their efforts were contested by the other coalition which was more conservative, and had a deep-rooted or biased disagreement with the members of Congress. This coalition is supported by the rightwing media, and in particular, they were among Trump advisors (Lantis, 2019). In March 2018, Trump revealed that he is terminating Secretary of State Tillerson and replacing him with the CIA Director Mike Pompeo. When he was asked about the grounds of firing, he mentioned disagreements over the JCPOA and said:

"When you look at the Iran deal, I think it is terrible. I guess [Tillerson] thinks it was OK. I either wanted to break it or do something, and he felt a little bit different. With Mike Pompeo, we have a similar thought process. I think it is going to go well" (Lantis, 2019: 489).

A few days later, the White House made a statement that the national security advisor, General McMaster, would be stepping down, and to be replaced with John Bolton. Bolton, as a diplomat who served as George W. Bush's ambassador to the United Nations and a strong proponent of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, has a long history supporting a forceful U.S. foreign policy and the use of military, including the right to strike first against potential

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threats (Bolton was fired after disagreeing with Trump on Iran: Report. 2019). Bolton's aggressive style and support for arm strikes over diplomacy created the potential for a substantial shift in the equilibrium of power in the coalitions for and against Iran's nuclear policy (Lantis, 2019). Nonetheless, in late 2019, Trump fired John Bolton, his third national security adviser, because of major disputes over how to manage key foreign policy challenges like Iran and North Korea (Bolton was fired after disagreeing with Trump on Iran: Report. 2019). Although he was terminated from the office, he had an impact on Trump's campaign promise on withdrawing the U.S. from "endless wars" (ibid). Only a few three months after his dismissal, the U.S. was so close to getting into direct military conflict with Iran.

This paper also argues that after extensive contestation in 2017, the coalition opposed to engagement with the JCPOA seems to have increased dominance in 2018. The termination of Tillerson and another opposing member of the group and their replacement with interventionists such as Bolton seemed to interrupt the struggle. The campaign of the pro-diplomacy coalition showed to be too weak to influence the leader and the newly dominant coalition of opponents to the deal. Furthermore, Trump's official statement on the U.S. unilateral withdrawal from an international agreement marked a dramatic turning point in not only the U.S.-Iran relationship but also U.S. ties with its European allies that tried to recover the JCPOA.

## Conclusion

This paper concludes that the U.S. foreign policy concerning Iran's nuclear program has been a victim of the groupthink syndrome, particularly between 2017 and 2019. Group dynamics have impacted how decisions are made regarding Iran's nuclear program activity. President Trump, as a leader, has sought conformity through silencing opposition and even penalizing opponents (terminating administrative members). At the beginning of Trump's presidency, groupthink theory can explain the behavior of Trump's Administration through criticizing other groups, by not tolerating opposing views to persuade and consolidate its coalition. Furthermore, small groups are active in an advisory process, and they are diverse in role and configuration. While this group share an agreement, their strategies and preferences for reaching their goals may or may not be diverse.

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*Written at: Malmö University*

*Written for: Mikael Spång*

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