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# The History of US-Iran Relations and its Effect on the JCPOA Negotiations

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The History of US-Iran Relations and its Effect on the JCPOA Negotiations

By Chase McCain

October 22 (Fall, 2015)

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## Abstract

Relations between the United States and the Islamic Republic have ranged from limited to non-existent over the past 36 years, and have been impeded by threatening rhetoric and perceived betrayals on both sides. The elections of Barack Obama and Hassan Rouhani allowed for relations to move forward, but both presidents are hampered by people within their governments who are unwilling to let go of ingrained threat perceptions and distrust of the other. Despite these challenges, the P5+1 and Iran managed to create the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action for Iran’s nuclear program,

which can be used as a starting point for a diplomatic thaw. This paper follows the history of US-Iran relations, and analyzes how this tumultuous past has affected the P5+1 and Iran's nuclear negotiations. Both are studied through secondary research as well as interviews with experts on the Islamic Republic. This paper adds to the body of knowledge on US-Iran relations, and analyses of the JCPOA.

### Acknowledgements

I would first like to acknowledge my interviewees, experts in US-Iran relations who took the time to discuss my research topic with me. Roohollah Shahsavari, advocate and journalist; Suddha Chakravarti, lecturer and Interim Research Coordinator of the Globecraft Institute at the Geneva School of Diplomacy and International Relations; Marc Finaud, Senior Program Advisor for the Emerging Security Challenges Program at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy; and Jubin Goodarzi, Deputy Head and Associate Professor for the International Relations Department at Webster University in Geneva. Each interviewee provided invaluable and unique insights that I would otherwise not have been able to access. I would also like to acknowledge the staff and professors of the School for International Training in Geneva for their support and guidance throughout this process.

### Introduction

On October 14, 2015, the Guardian Council of the Islamic Republic of Iran ratified the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, an international deal regulating Iran's nuclear program. The United States, one of the signatories of the JCPOA, has had a tumultuous relationship with Iran that has been well documented over the last seven decades. While devoid of direct military confrontation, both sides have used harsh and

condemning rhetoric to express their dislike and distrust of the other. Throughout the years, real or perceived threat perceptions have accumulated, and the United States and Iran now find themselves in a state of fundamental distrust. It is impossible, as well as ill advised, to study the current nuclear negotiations without also studying the relevant history. This research paper will first address what factors led to this fundamental lack of trust, and then how it has affected the current nuclear negotiations.

There is a wealth of literature about US-Iran relations over the past century, as well as Persian history and identity. There is literature addressing events, aggressions, and mishaps that laid the foundation for the fundamental lack of trust between the two states. There is little information or literature, however, on how this fundamental lack of trust has influenced the nuclear negotiations and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action reached by the P5+1 and Iran. This research paper will attempt to bridge that gap, and contribute to the research on the current Iranian nuclear negotiations by answering the following question: How was the fundamental lack of trust between the United States and Iran created, and how has that lack of trust affected the Iranian nuclear negotiations?

#### Literature Review

Literature review for this paper can be separated into three main sections. For each category I will review the most relevant piece of literature used in this research paper. The first section is Persian history and identity, and how anti-imperialism came to be a foundational aspect of both. *British Policy in Persia: 1918-1925* by Houshang Sabahi focuses on a critical time in the creation of Iran's anti-imperialist tendencies. *British Policy* provides an in-depth study of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, the coup of Reza Khan, and the attitudes of Western hegemony after World War I. Persia is treated

as a plaything, without regard to its sovereignty or needs, creating a deep mistrust of foreign imperialist powers that imbeds itself into the collective Iranian identity.

The second section focuses on how the United States and Iran have created such a deep mistrust of each other. For this section, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* by Michael Axworthy is particularly useful and relevant. Axworthy analyzes the foundations and rationale behind the Islamic Revolution, the reasons for and aftermath of the Hostage Crisis, and the various Supreme Leaders and Presidents who have governed the Islamic Republic. To understand the foundations of the Islamic Republic as well as the foundations for the lack of trust between the United States and Iran, *Revolutionary Iran* was exceedingly helpful.

The third section focuses on the Obama and Rouhani administrations, and how the lack of trust between the two governments has impacted the current negotiations. For this section, *The Iran Deal: Achievement and Starting Point* by Marc Finaud allowed for a reasoned and level-headed look at the negotiations and the motivations behind the respective governments. While the first two sections of this paper have extensive literature resources, this last section is where there is a gap in knowledge, which Marc Finaud's paper helps to bridge.

There are two main schools of thought on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action between the P5+1 and Iran. There are those who support the deal, who tend to follow a more constructivist point of view: if you include the Islamic Republic in the international community, it will be incorporated into the rules and norms that govern other nations, and will be less likely to promote extremism, violence, and nuclear proliferation. Then there are those who do not support the deal, who tend to follow a realist perspective: the

international system is anarchic, and every state acts in its own self-interest. It is in the self-interest of the Islamic Republic of Iran to possess nuclear capabilities, and the JCPOA is simply delaying the inevitable.

### Research Methodology

How was the fundamental lack of trust between the United States and Iran created, and how has that lack of trust affected the Iranian nuclear negotiations? To answer this research question, both secondary and primary sources were used. The major primary sources were the four interviews conducted, and speeches and statements made by members of government. Quantitative data collection methods allowed for individual interviews to anchor the research, acting as a sounding board for ideas, opinions, and questions, as well as providing unique insight into the topic.

Ethical considerations were reviewed with each interviewee at the beginning of the meeting, discussing their rights and their wishes for using quotes in the paper. Because the interviews were conducted with professionals and experts in the field, they were comfortable with the procedure and were willing to be quoted in the paper. Interviewees as primary sources were invaluable to the depth of content of this research paper. Other primary sources, mainly speeches and statements released during the nuclear negotiations, were used to get an undiluted look at the opinions of government leaders and officials, rather than an interpretation of their opinions.

Secondary sources were used extensively for the first part of the research paper, which addresses how the lack of trust between the United States and Iran was created. For this section I used academic journals such as *Middle Eastern Studies*, *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, and *World Policy Journal*. In addition to academic journals,

books such as *British Policy in Persia* by Houshang Sabahi, *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies* by Barbara Salvin, and *Revolutionary Iran* by Michael Axworthy. These books provided a thorough, in-depth analysis of US-Iran relations and Persian history that can be difficult to effectively cover in shorter papers or articles. Both academic journals and books were important secondary sources for this research paper.

## Analysis

### Pre-Revolution History

To understand Iranian culture and politics, it is necessary to begin more than 2,500 years ago. In 550 B.C., Cyrus the Great began his campaign to dominate the Fertile Crescent, conquering neighboring kingdoms and achieving an empire that spanned 2,000 miles.<sup>1</sup> The ancient Persian Empire built the historic Royal Road across its vast lands, standardized coinage, invented algebra, and adhered to Zoroastrianism, traces of which can be found in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam today.<sup>2</sup> One thousand years later, the Muslim conquest swept what is now the Middle East and North Africa. Decades of struggle against the Muslim conquerors resulted in a compromise: the Persian Empire would adopt Islam while retaining its Persian language and cultural heritage—a testament to the strength of Persian identity.<sup>3</sup> Today, Iran is one of the few nation-states in the Middle East with a cohesive cultural identity, a collective heritage and a shared history, contrary to nation-states like Iraq, Syria, or Jordan, which were created by Western powers after World War I.

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<sup>1</sup> Aldrich, Robert. *The Age of Empires*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2007. Print.

<sup>2</sup> IBID

<sup>3</sup> Yarshater, Ehsan. "Persian Identity in Historical Perspective." *Iranian Studies* 26.1-2 (1993): n. pag. *JSTOR*. Web. 20 Oct. 2015.

The strength of the Persian Empire diminished over the next ten centuries, and by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Persia had become a strategic entity for the British and Russian empires.<sup>4</sup> At the end of the century, “the north [of Iran] seemed to be irreversibly in Russian hands,” while Great Britain moved to secure southern Iran for its own interests.<sup>5</sup> By 1907, the Anglo-Russian Convention officially divided up Persia into spheres of influence: Russia in the north, Great Britain in the south, and a buffer zone in the middle of the country.<sup>6</sup> Persian representatives were conspicuously absent during this convention; a testament to how far Persian power and influence had fallen. The Anglo-Russian Convention amplified Persia’s anti-imperialist identity.

A few years earlier in 1901, an Australian businessman, William Knox D’Arcy, was granted an exclusive, sixty-year concession for the exploration, exploitation, and sales of natural gas and petroleum in Persia by Muzaffar ul-Din Shah.<sup>7</sup> After striking oil in 1908, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company was created. Coinciding with the conversion of the British navy from steam to petroleum, APOC significantly increased the British Empire’s stake in Persia.<sup>8</sup>

As the Persian monarchy granted concessions and bowed to imperialist powers, there was increasing domestic unrest. Throughout Persian history, weak monarchies ran the risk of rebellion, and the Qajar dynasty was no different. In 1905, as Great Britain and Russia competed for power over Persia, Iran’s Constitutional Revolution began.<sup>9</sup> By

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<sup>4</sup> Sabahi, Houshang. *British Policy in Persia: 1918-1925*. London: Cass, 1990. Print.

<sup>5</sup> IBID

<sup>6</sup> IBID

<sup>7</sup> Bakhtiari, Samsam. "D'Arcy Concession Centennial." *A.M. Oil and Gas* (2001): n. pag. *ProQuest*. Web. 20 Oct. 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Sabahi, Houshang. *British Policy in Persia: 1918-1925*. London: Cass, 1990. Print.

<sup>9</sup> Katouzian, Homa. "The Revolution for Law." *Middle Eastern Studies* 47.5 (2011): n. pag. *EBSCOHost*. Web. 20 Oct. 2015.

1906, a constitutional monarchy had been established—the first time in Iranian history that executive power was defined and limited.<sup>10</sup> While these limits were often ignored by the Qajar and Pahlavi dynasties, Persia was no longer an absolute monarchy.

In the aftermath of World War II, as European powers declined and America became a hegemonic global power, Mohammad Reza Shah, the last Shah of Iran, was loyal not only to the British government, but also the United States. Over the ensuing decades the United States developed a close relationship with Mohammad Reza Shah, providing weapons and protection in return for intelligence and a strong ally in a volatile region.<sup>11</sup> It was during Mohammad Reza Shah's reign that the United States agreed to assist Iran with the development of its nuclear program by supplying fuel, technology, and training.<sup>12</sup>

Believed by most Iranians to be a pawn of the United States government, Mohammad Reza Shah was unpopular domestically. In 1951 Mohammad Mossadegh, whose main campaign goal was to nationalize the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, was elected Prime Minister. After two years of an antagonistic relationship, the Shah dismissed Mossadegh, which caused widespread demonstrations and protests. Due to this internal pressure, Mossadegh was reinstated and the Shah fled the country. In 1953, the United States, worried about the expansion of Soviet power into Iran, aided in a coup of the democratically elected Mossadegh, reinstating Mohammad Reza Shah.<sup>13</sup> Already

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<sup>10</sup> Katouzian, Homa. "The Revolution for Law." *Middle Eastern Studies* 47.5 (2011): n. pag. *EBSCOHost*. Web. 20 Oct. 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Axworthy, Michael. *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic*. New York: Oxford UP, 2013. Print.

<sup>12</sup> "Iran and America: An Intersecting History." *Newsweek* 153.22 (2009): 29-52. *Academic Search Elite*. Web. 20 Oct. 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Zahrani, Mostafa T. "The Coup That Changed The Middle East Mossadeq V. The CIA in Retrospect". *World Policy Journal* 19.2 (2002): 93. *Historical Abstracts*. Web. 20 Oct. 2015.

unpopular, Mohammad Reza Shah's legitimacy was irreparably damaged by the coup and the debt that he owed to the United States, which was now viewed as an actively neo-imperialist nation with no respect for Iranian sovereignty.<sup>14</sup>

In an attempt to bolster his power and legitimacy, the Shah established a brutal authoritarian rule, banning all forms of opposition.<sup>15</sup> In the early 1960's the Shah began an aggressive reformation program called the White Revolution, an attempt to Westernize Iran and bolster its global status.<sup>16</sup> He enacted a massive land reform program that destroyed most of Iran's large landowners, effectively eliminating Iran's upper class.<sup>17</sup> Women were granted the right to vote, went to schools and college, and began dressing in Western clothes.<sup>18</sup> The Shah invested in infrastructure, hospitals, roads, American weapons, and opened massive new shopping malls, effectively putting small shopkeepers and baazaris, "the heart of the cities' economic systems," out of work.<sup>19</sup>

During this time, Imam Ruhollah Khomeini emerged as a "powerful dissenting voice," capitalizing on "indigenous religious nationalism" that was increasingly powerful as the Shah continued his attempts to Westernize Iran.<sup>20</sup> As Khomeini became more popular, the Shah, who viewed the Imam as "radical and backward," called for his exile in 1964.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Zahrani, Mostafa T. "The Coup That Changed The Middle East Mossadeq V. The CIA in Retrospect". *World Policy Journal* 19.2 (2002): 93. *Historical Abstracts*. Web. 20 Oct. 2015.

<sup>15</sup> IBID

<sup>16</sup> IBID

<sup>17</sup> IBID

<sup>18</sup> IBID

<sup>19</sup> Baghat, G. "Khomeini: Leader of the Islamic Revolution in Iran." *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 48.1 (1987): 31-41. *JSTOR*. Web. 20 Oct. 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Zahrani, Mostafa T. "The Coup That Changed The Middle East Mossadeq V. The CIA in Retrospect". *World Policy Journal* 19.2 (2002): 93. *Historical Abstracts*. Web. 20 Oct. 2015.

<sup>21</sup> IBID

Because Iran follows the Twelver school of Islam, Imams have a certain level of inherent authority. Twelver Shi'a Islam believes that, of the twelve Imams who were the spiritual and political successors to the prophet Mohammad, one has remained in a state of "noncorporeal existence, expected to return as a Mahdi, or rightly guided one".<sup>22</sup> Iranian Imams derive their power as "deputies of the absent Imam".<sup>23</sup> Imams like Khomeini, therefore, command a level of authority deeply rooted in Iranian religion and culture, and have often contested monarchical power when Iran is opened to customs that are "contrary to Muslim culture and tradition".<sup>24</sup> In an attempt to combat the rising levels of religious and cultural dissent, the Shah placed heavy censorship on the media and the powerful clerical class, and his CIA-trained secret police dealt with dissenters swiftly and violently.<sup>25</sup>

#### Post-Revolution History

In 1979, Iran finally erupted in revolution. Every economic class was involved, from baazaris, who had been put out of work by the Shah's shopping malls, to the elite landowning classes, who had lost their wealth during the White Revolution.<sup>26</sup> Tired of being used and controlled by foreign powers, the Islamic Revolution displayed virulently anti-Western and, more specifically, anti-American tendencies. America had supplied weapons to the Shah and had trained the SAVAK, the hated Iranian secret police.<sup>27</sup> The chant of "death to America" quickly became a rallying cry for revolutionaries, and was

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<sup>22</sup> Baghat, G. "Khomeini: Leader of the Islamic Revolution in Iran." *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 48.1 (1987): 31-41. JSTOR. Web. 20 Oct. 2015.

<sup>23</sup> IBID

<sup>24</sup> IBID

<sup>25</sup> IBID

<sup>26</sup> IBID

<sup>27</sup> Baghat, G. "Khomeini: Leader of the Islamic Revolution in Iran." *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 48.1 (1987): 31-41. JSTOR. Web. 20 Oct. 2015.

established as a “pillar” of Khomeini’s revolutionary identity.<sup>28</sup> Revolutionary movements are often founded not only in what they stand for, but what they oppose: Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution were fundamentally anti-American.

Iranians showcased this hatred and distrust by capturing the United States embassy. The Iranian Hostage Crisis was widely and thoroughly covered by the American media in its entirety, causing an uproar in the United States and creating an indelible image of Iran as a backwards, violent, unpredictable regime. The Hostage Crisis was the American public’s first experience with the fledgling Islamic Republic. It marked the official termination of diplomatic relations between the two countries, and its impact on America’s collective image of Iran cannot be understated. Due to this breach of international protocol, international support for the Islamic regime plummeted.

In September of 1980, newly elected Saddam Hussein invaded the Iranian province of Khuzestan in an effort to control the oil rich region and “reassert [Iraq’s] sovereignty of the Shatt al-Arab”, a river forming the natural border between the two countries, and Iraq’s only access to the Persian Gulf.<sup>29</sup> Unannounced and relatively unexpected, Saddam Hussein’s attack was an attempt to take advantage of Iran’s transitional, destabilized government in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution.<sup>30</sup> Had it not been for the Hostage Crisis, the international community would not have turned so firmly against the fledgling Islamic Republic, and left it isolated at the time of the Iraqi invasion.

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<sup>28</sup> Emery, Christian. “United States Iran Policy 1979-1980: The Anatomy and Legacy of American Diplomacy.” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 24.4 (2013): 619-639. *Military & Government Collection*. Web. 20 Oct. 2015.

<sup>29</sup> *Iran: The Essential Guide to a Country on the Brink*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2006. Print.

<sup>30</sup> Axworthy, Michael. *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic*. New York: Oxford UP, 2013. Print.

In keeping with Iran's view of America as a neo-imperialist nation, the Iraqi invasion was perceived by many Iranians as an American plot to destroy the Islamic Republic.<sup>31</sup> The Iran-Iraq War became known in Iran as the "imposed war," a war perpetuated by the "money, equipment, and know-how of the United States".<sup>32</sup> Contrary to popular opinion, however, the United States did not call for the invasion; in fact many in Washington were surprised by it.<sup>33</sup>

In 1984, Iraq began attacks on Iranian oil export terminals and tankers in the Persian Gulf in an effort to pressure Iran into accepting a ceasefire. The Iranians retaliated, and the conflict soon became known as the Tanker War. The threat to oil supply drew international powers into the war. In 1987, the US threw its weight behind Iraq and began a direct military presence in the Gulf. As the war continued to progress, the US was no longer a presence in the shadows; it had stepped out and was now a direct threat to the Islamic Republic. The war was no longer against Iraq, and had not been for some time. Iran now saw it as a direct war against the United States, which had the force and might of the international community behind it. In July of 1988, Khomeini and the Islamic Republic officially accepted UN Resolution 598, a ceasefire agreement between Iran and Iraq that neither named Iraq as the aggressor nor made either country pay war reparations.

One year after the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini died. With no equal to fill the shoes of Khomeini's cult of personality, the Islamic

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<sup>31</sup> Axworthy, Michael. *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic*. New York: Oxford UP, 2013. Print.

<sup>32</sup> Blight, James, Janet M. Lang, Hussein Banai, Malcolm Byrne, and John Tirman. *Becoming Enemies: U.S.-Iran Relations and the Iran-Iraq War, 1979-1988*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012. Print.

<sup>33</sup> Crist, David. *The Twilight War: The Secret History of America's Thirty-Year Conflict With Iran*. New York: Panguin, 2012. Print.

Republic entered a critical time. Into this gaping void stepped Ayatollah Khamenei, President of Iran from 1981-1989. In terms of US-Iran relations, Khamenei did not offer much relief from the anti-America sentiment of the Islamic Republic. He saw rejection of the Islamic Republic as rejection of Iran's development, and maintained that the United States did not accept the sovereignty of the Islamic Republic and aspired to regime change.<sup>34</sup>

At the time of Khamenei's appointment, George H. W. Bush became America's 41<sup>st</sup> President. At his 1989 inauguration, George Bush Sr. hinted at improving relations with Iran, stating that "goodwill begets goodwill".<sup>35</sup> Iran's pragmatic new President, Akbar Rafsanjani, responded to this gesture by facilitating the release of American hostages in Lebanon.<sup>36</sup> In the United States, however, Iranian aid with the hostages was seen as simply "belatedly doing the right thing," not deserving of any particular thanks, and Iran's show of "goodwill" went unreciprocated.<sup>37</sup> The Islamic Republic saw this silence in Washington as betrayal, another example of the United States manipulating Iran for its own benefit, without regard to Iranian interests.

In 1997, four years after Clinton replaced George H. W. Bush as President of the United States, Mohammad Khatami was elected President of the Islamic Republic. Khatami ran on a platform of reform, winning almost 70 percent of the vote, surprising both the international community and the government of the Islamic Republic. US-Iran relations entered a hopeful period with Khatami's election, when during his inauguration

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<sup>34</sup> Maleki, Abbas. *U.S.-Iran Misperceptions*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014. Print.

<sup>35</sup> Bush, George H. W. "Inaugural Address." Presidential Inauguration. Washington D.C. 20 Jan. 1989. *The American Presidency Project*. Web. 6 Nov. 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Axworthy, Michael. *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic*. New York: Oxford UP, 2013. Print.

<sup>37</sup> IBID

speech he stated that Iran was willing to have “relations with any state which respects our independence”.<sup>38</sup> A year after his election, Khatami did an interview with CNN in which he expressed regret for the hostage crisis (an unprecedented concession for the Islamic Republic), and praised American culture and history.<sup>39</sup> Khatami expressed interest in breaking down the “bulky wall of mistrust between [Iran] and the US administration” through “an exchange of ‘professors, writers, scholars, artists, journalists, and tourists’”.<sup>40</sup>

President Clinton responded enthusiastically to this display of friendship, sending an American wrestling team to Iran. The Iranian public warmly received the team members, who were the first official representatives of America in Iran since the hostage crisis.<sup>41</sup> As relations between the two countries improved, Khatami visited the United States in September of 1998. There finally seemed to be enough momentum for an US-Iran détente.

Then, in 1999, relations with Iran turned sour again as investigations into the Khobar Towers bombing progressed. In 1996, a truck bomb had detonated in front of a housing complex in Khobar, Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Hezbollah, with whom the Islamic Republic had been affiliated in the past, was thought to be behind the attack.<sup>42</sup> Clinton attempted to capitalize on the improving relationship with Iran, and wrote a letter to Khatami asking for help with the investigation. Khatami did not reply, and investigations

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<sup>38</sup> Slavín, Barbara. *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies*. New York, NY: Griffin, 2009. Print.

<sup>39</sup> IBID

<sup>40</sup> IBID

<sup>41</sup> IBID

<sup>42</sup> IBID

into the terrorist attack stagnated, effectively reversing any diplomatic progress made by the Clinton administration.<sup>43</sup>

In 2001, George W. Bush was elected President of the United States. Eight months later, al-Qaeda, a militant Islamist organization, attacked the World Trade Center. Because al-Qaeda is a Sunni organization, Shi'a Iran was quickly ruled out as a suspected affiliate. Furthermore, in the immediate aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>, both Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and President Khatami condemned the attacks, and thousands of Iranians took to the streets in solidarity with the United States.<sup>44</sup>

After the United States invaded Iraq and quickly disposed of Saddam Hussein, the Islamic Republic grew nervous that the United States still harbored aspirations of regime change in Iran. In an effort to avoid confrontation with America, Khatami's government put together a list of concessions that the Islamic Republic was willing to make, including ending support for Hezbollah, recognizing Israel, and entering into discussions about their nuclear program, in exchange for an end to sanctions and a promise not to attempt regime change.<sup>45</sup> The proposal, which was sent to the US via Swiss diplomats in 2003, came to be known as the Grand Bargain; George W. Bush and his government ignored it.<sup>46</sup> Later, when the US began to falter in Iraq and the hubris from the initial victory began to fade, ignoring the Grand Bargain came to be seen, rightfully, as a mistake.

In addition to their attempt to compromise with the United States, the Islamic Republic provided intelligence and military aid in the fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan. Although both countries had mutual interest in the downfall of the Taliban,

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<sup>43</sup> Slavin, Barbara. *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies*. New York, NY: Griffin, 2009. Print.

<sup>44</sup> Axworthy, Michael. *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic*. New York: Oxford UP, 2013. Print.

<sup>45</sup> IBID

<sup>46</sup> IBID

Iran's government hoped that their aid to the United States would improve US-Iran relations.<sup>47</sup> Instead of receiving thanks for their help, however, Iran was named in George W. Bush's 2002 State of the Union address as a part of the "axis of evil," along with Iraq and North Korea.<sup>48</sup> This was deeply insulting to the Islamic Republic, and, in addition to the Grand Bargain being ignored, reinforced the perception in Iran that the United States took what it needed and gave nothing in return.

France, Germany, and the United Kingdom began nuclear negotiations with Iran in 2004, after a resolution between the IAEA and Iran fell through. The negotiations secured an agreement, but the election of hardline conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 placed the negotiations under heavy strain. After it became known that Ahmadinejad was continuing development of Iran's nuclear program, the negotiations were officially halted. Ahmadinejad maintained and acted on his radical views throughout his presidency, aiding Hezbollah and continuing Iran's nuclear program. Relations between Ahmadinejad and the international community, particularly the administration of George W. Bush, remained in a state of tension and distrust. The United States officially entered the nuclear negotiations in 2006, but remained on the periphery and avoided direct contact with the Islamic Republic. Little changed until the election of Barack Obama in 2008.

The next section of this paper will focus on the Obama and Rouhani administrations and their actions in the nuclear negotiations. It is essential to understand, however, the decades of distrust that had been built up before the elections of two pragmatic leaders who were willing to reengage in diplomatic relations. The collective

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<sup>47</sup> Axworthy, Michael. *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic*. New York: Oxford UP, 2013. Print.

<sup>48</sup> IBID

Persian identity and its anti-imperial sentiments have not faded, but were merely transferred to the United States as it became a hegemonic world power. The United States readily contributed to its image as a neo-imperialist nation, supporting the autocratic Shah, removing Mossadegh, and aiding Saddam Hussein in the “imposed war”. The United States never acknowledged the aid and rational actions of the Islamic Republic throughout the years, continuing to lambast them on the international stage as irrational, violent, religious fanatics.

For Iran’s part, the Hostage Crisis had a deep, lasting impact on American perception of the Islamic Republic. The government of the Islamic Republic, from Ayatollah Khomeini to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has used extreme rhetoric against both America and its strongest ally in the Middle East, Israel. Regardless of whether this violent rhetoric reflects the ideas of Iranian citizens, it has been combined with Iranian support for regional terrorist groups like the Lebanese and Saudi Hezbollah, and has created and maintained an image of Iran as fanatical, destabilizing, and untrustworthy. It is from these two platforms that Barack Obama and Hassan Rouhani began their diplomatic efforts.

#### Obama’s Election

In 2008, Barack Obama was elected president of the United States, campaigning on a platform of change. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had decimated American image and credibility abroad, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa, and Obama was eager to prove that his administration would not repeat Bush’s mistakes. In his first year as president, Obama embarked on a tour of the Middle East and North Africa, attempting to stimulate open dialogue. In a Cairo speech addressed to the Muslim

world, Obama emphasized the dignity and accomplishments of the Middle East and North Africa, accomplishments that paved the way for the European enlightenment.<sup>49</sup> He emphasized his personal relationship with Islam, and acknowledged that, while “no single speech can eradicate years of distrust,” he was anxious to create a new relationship based on “mutual respect”.<sup>50</sup>

One of Obama’s main points in the speech was the Iranian nuclear program. He acknowledged the “tumultuous relationship” shared by the United States and the Islamic Republic, the coup of Mossadegh and the Iranian Hostage Crisis, and the inescapable fact that the Islamic Republic defines itself, in part, in opposition to America.<sup>51</sup> Obama became the first American president since 1979 to officially recognize the Islamic Republic *as such*, stating his willingness to move forward, and overcome the decades of mistrust that had built up between the nations.

Obama continued to shift the rhetoric of the United States towards the Islamic Republic in 2009 with his Nowruz statement. Speaking directly to the Iranian people, Obama recognized the achievements and historical clout of the Persian Empire, and its contributions to civilization.<sup>52</sup> He cited the respect that the United States has for the Islamic Republic, and his administration’s commitment to diplomacy.<sup>53</sup> True to his word, the Obama administration began full participation in the nuclear negotiations. Additionally, the Obama administration moved away from demanding complete cessation

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<sup>49</sup> Speech to the Muslim World. Cairo University, Cairo. 25 Feb. 2015. *YouTube*. Web.

<sup>50</sup> IBID

<sup>51</sup> IBID

<sup>52</sup> Obama, Barack. "The President's Message to the Iranian People." The President's Message to the Iranian People. The White House, Washington D.C. 19 Mar. 2009. Address.

<sup>53</sup> IBID

of uranium enrichment, which was crucial to the success of the negotiations.<sup>54</sup> Iran viewed its right to peaceful nuclear power as inalienable, and was not willing to cease all enrichment.<sup>55</sup>

In addition to the Obama administration's recognition of Iran's right to uranium enrichment, secret talks began between the governments of the United States and the Islamic Republic. Mediated, for the most part, by Oman, the talks began in 2009 with the Islamic Republic testing Obama's commitment to diplomacy.<sup>56</sup> Among other things, the Iranian government asked for the release of multiple Iranian prisoners and an increased number of visas for Iranian students.<sup>57</sup> The Obama administration acceded on many demands, facilitating the release of four prisoners, and doubling the number of Iranian students in the United States.<sup>58</sup> All of these events, however, happened during Obama's first term, when Ahmadinejad was still president of Iran, which meant that there was little change in relations between the two governments.

The importance of Obama's shift in rhetoric, however, must be understood. In the history of US-Iran relations there had been little direct confrontation between the two countries. For the United States there was the Hostage Crisis, and attacks made by an Iran-affiliated terrorist group on the US embassy and military barracks in Lebanon in 1983. For Iran, there was the coup of Mossadegh in 1953 and the "imposed war" from 1981 to 1989. For the most part, however, threat perceptions of the two governments

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<sup>54</sup> Finaud, Marc. "A Nuclear Iran: Avoiding a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy." *Middle East and North Africa Programme*. Geneva Centre for Security Policy, Jan. 2012. Web. 23 Oct. 2015.

<sup>55</sup> IBID

<sup>56</sup> Solomon, Jay. "Secret Dealings With Iran Led to Nuclear Talks." *The Wall Street Journal*. Dow Jones & Company, 28 June 2015. Web. 25 Oct. 2015.

<sup>57</sup> IBID

<sup>58</sup> IBID

were based in rhetoric and perceived intention. When Obama came to office there were few concrete measures that he could take to amend relations with Iran—there was no war, there was no occupation to end. Shifting rhetoric was one of the few and one of the most effective ways to improve relations with the Islamic Republic. The Obama administration made it more difficult for the Iranian government to claim that the American government still aspired to regime change, and had no respect for Iranian sovereignty. When this argument lost value, Iran was forced to restructure its threat perception of the United States.

#### Rouhani's Election

In 2013 the political situation in Iran shifted with the election of Hassan Rouhani. The election of Rouhani, who was the only moderate among the six candidates approved by the Guardian Council, surprised the international community as well as Iranian citizens, who had expected Khamenei to rig the election in favor of a conservative candidate.<sup>59</sup> Roohollah Shahsavari, an Iranian journalist who was exiled in the aftermath of the 2009 election, maintained that the controversy around Ahmadinejad's reelection may have alerted Khamenei to the dangers of disregarding the wishes of the Iranian people.<sup>60</sup> Dr. Jubin Goodarzi, Associate Professor at Webster University in Geneva, agreed with this idea, stating that the wish to retain what little amount of legitimacy the regime still held was more powerful than the need for a conservative president.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Sherrill, Clifton W. "Why Hassan Rouhani Won Iran's 2013 Presidential Election." *Middle East Journal* 21 (2014): n. pag. *EBSCOHost*. Web. 23 Oct. 2015.

<sup>60</sup> Shahsavari, Roohollah. "Roohollah Shahsavari Interview." Personal interview. 23 Sept. 2015.

<sup>61</sup> Goodarzi, Jubin. "Jubin Goodarzi Interview." Personal interview. 27 Oct. 2015.

Hassan Rouhani campaigned on a platform of reform, promising to work with the international community to relieve sanctions that were crippling the Iranian economy.<sup>62</sup> Rouhani promised to regain Iran's dignity, which had been deeply diminished by the unpredictable and irrational Ahmadinejad. A testament for the Iranian people's yearning for reform and moderation, Rouhani won the election in a landslide, receiving more than three times the number of votes than any other candidate.<sup>63</sup> Three days after his inauguration, Rouhani called for the nuclear negotiations to be resumed, and offered to be more transparent regarding Iran's nuclear program.<sup>64</sup> The Obama administration reacted enthusiastically, and a phone call between Obama and Rouhani became the first direct contact between the American and Iranian presidents since the 1979 revolution.<sup>65</sup>

#### Analysis of Current Negotiations

The negotiations began again, but Iran's red line remained the same. Iran refused to concede to complete cessation of uranium enrichment. Iran's nuclear program began under the supervision and guidance of the United States government, but the program was shut down after the 1979 revolution. The program was resumed in the mid 1980's due to the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>66</sup> Saddam Hussein was seen as a direct threat to the Islamic Republic, and Iran wanted to remain a step ahead. Jubin Goodarzi argues that after the American government toppled the Iraqi regime, the Islamic Republic stopped their

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<sup>62</sup> Naji, Kasra. "Profile: Hassan Rouhani, President of Iran." *BBC News*. British Broadcasting Corporation, 5 Aug. 2015. Web. 24 Oct. 2015.

<sup>63</sup> Sherrill, Clifton W. "Why Hassan Rouhani Won Iran's 2013 Presidential Election." *Middle East Journal* 21 (2014): n. pag. *EBSCOHost*. Web. 23 Oct. 2015.

<sup>64</sup> "Timeline of Nuclear Diplomacy With Iran." *Arms Control Association*. Arms Control Association, Oct. 2015. Web. 23 Oct. 2015.

<sup>65</sup> *IBID*

<sup>66</sup> Goodarzi, Jubin. "Jubin Goodarzi Interview." Personal interview. 27 Oct. 2015.

military nuclear program.<sup>67</sup> Goodarzi maintains that many of the inconsistencies and setbacks in prior negotiations were caused by the Islamic Republic attempting to cover up their past attempts to achieve a nuclear threshold state, rather than current, on-going attempts to create a nuclear bomb.<sup>68</sup>

By 2003 Iran's nuclear program had been opened up to intense international scrutiny, their primary security concern, Saddam, had been taken care of, inadvertently, by the United States, and the Islamic Republic did not want to test the international community's willingness to engage in direct military confrontation. For these reasons, experts such as Dr. Goodarzi believe that the Islamic Republic has ended its military nuclear program. However, the Islamic Republic has always maintained its right to peaceful nuclear power. The Iranian government is proud, and unwilling to be treated differently or talked down to; pursuit of peaceful nuclear power is a right of all Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty signatories, and Iran is not prepared for Western powers to take away that right. The Obama administration realized this, and moved away from requesting complete cessation of uranium enrichment. The new red line drawn by the Americans was Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon.<sup>69</sup> It was from these two stances that the governments of the United States and the Islamic Republic attempted to reach a compromise.

When viewed as a necessary compromise that releases steam from a region in turmoil, the deal is a successful starting point.<sup>70</sup> The Joint Comprehensive Plan of

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<sup>67</sup> Goodarzi, Jubin. "Jubin Goodarzi Interview." Personal interview. 27 Oct. 2015.

<sup>68</sup> IBID

<sup>69</sup> Finaud, Marc. "The Iran Deal: Achievement and Starting Point." *Global Insight*. Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 27 Aug. 2015. Web. 23 Oct. 2015.

<sup>70</sup> IBID

Action, concluded in July of 2015, requires the neutralization (dilution) of half of Iran's twenty percent enriched uranium, and the cessation of enrichment above five percent.<sup>71</sup> There is to be no further development of enrichment plants or the heavy-water reactor at Arak, no new enrichment locations, no reprocessing or development of a reprocessing facility, no new centrifuges, and a reduction by two-thirds of its current centrifuges.<sup>72</sup> The IAEA is allowed to inspect both declared and undeclared facilities, has access to Iran's nuclear supply chain, and all uranium mines and mills.<sup>73</sup> The JCPOA features a detailed and thorough inspection and verification system, due to the history of "cheating, dissimulation, renegeing on past agreements or procrastination by Iran".<sup>74</sup>

The United States government estimates that these provisions move Iran's breakout timeline—"the time that it would take for Iran to acquire enough fissile material for one weapon"—from where it rests now, at two or three months, to one year.<sup>75</sup> In return for these concessions, Iran is receiving sanctions relief. After verifiable proof that Iran has fulfilled the commitments outlined in the JCPOA, all UN Security Council resolutions on the Iranian nuclear issue will be lifted, as well as nuclear-related sanctions by the United States and European Union.<sup>76</sup> If, at any time, Iran fails to comply with its commitments, the sanctions can be immediately put back in place. In keeping with the mistrustful relationship between America and Iran, the United States has taken a hesitant

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<sup>71</sup> Finaud, Marc. "The Geneva Accord on Iran's Nuclear Programme." *Global Insight*. Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 29 Nov. 2013. Web. 23 Oct. 2015.

<sup>72</sup> IBID

<sup>73</sup> "Parameters for a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action Regarding the Islamic Republic of Iran's Nuclear Program." *U.S. Department of State*. U.S. Department of State, 02 Apr. 2015. Web. 03 Nov. 2015.

<sup>74</sup> Finaud, Marc. "The Geneva Accord on Iran's Nuclear Programme." *Global Insight*. Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 29 Nov. 2013. Web. 23 Oct. 2015.

<sup>75</sup> "Parameters for a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action Regarding the Islamic Republic of Iran's Nuclear Program." *U.S. Department of State*. U.S. Department of State, 02 Apr. 2015. Web. 03 Nov. 2015.

<sup>76</sup> IBID

approach to relieving sanctions. The United States has kept its trade embargo on Iran, as well as all sanctions relating to human rights abuses, terrorism, and ballistic missiles.<sup>77</sup>

Distrust for the Islamic Republic can be clearly seen in the domestic backlash against the deal in the United States. In arguments against the deal, opponents often used tired rhetoric, accusing the Islamic Republic of being irrational and untrustworthy. The argument that we “cannot trust Iran” is a simple attempt at explaining a complex regime: the Islamic Republic is not crazy or irrational simply because it is different.<sup>78</sup> In many ways, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his fanatical rhetoric was a gift to those who would call Iran crazy and irrational, but this argument, already weak during Ahmadinejad’s presidency, does not hold up against Rouhani’s pragmatism.<sup>79</sup> In the United States Senate, a Republican effort to block the deal failed to reach the necessary number of votes. All 54 Senate Republicans as well as four Democrats voted to block the deal, with 42 Democrats opposing.<sup>80</sup>

Tired rhetoric aside, Senators in opposition to the deal did voice valid criticism. Chuck Schumer (D-NY) laid out many of the most compelling reasons in his press release in August of 2015. The reasons included the 24-hour delay before inspections (i.e. not anytime, anywhere inspections), the inability of the United States to demand unilateral sanctions, and money from the sanctions relief potentially going to

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<sup>77</sup> "Parameters for a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action Regarding the Islamic Republic of Iran's Nuclear Program." *U.S. Department of State*. U.S. Department of State, 02 Apr. 2015. Web. 03 Nov. 2015.

<sup>78</sup> Finaud, Marc. "Marc Finaud Interview." Personal interview. 16 Oct. 2015.

<sup>79</sup> Goodarzi, Jubin. "Jubin Goodarzi Interview." Personal interview. 27 Oct. 2015.

<sup>80</sup> Jacobs, Ben. "US Senate Attempt to Block Iran Deal Fails." *The Guardian*. The Guardian, 10 Sept. 2015. Web. 3 Nov. 2015.

international terrorist organizations.<sup>81</sup> Many Senators in opposition believed that the United States should kill the current deal and start over again, enacting tougher sanctions and pushing the Islamic Republic to accept more invasive provisions.

Opponents of the deal need to consider, however, the history of US-Iran relations, and the impact of the United States backing out on the deal. International negotiations on Iran's nuclear program began in 2003. The JCPOA, twelve years later, is the first comprehensive deal struck between Iran and Western powers. The Obama administration enacted crippling sanctions that helped devalue Iranian currency by 300 percent.<sup>82</sup> Iran was forced to the negotiating table in a way that it previously had not been, but the continuation and augmentation of sanctions would have been both inhumane and ineffective.<sup>83</sup> As markets and economic relationships develop between Iran, China, Russia, and India, sanctions become increasingly less effective and the efficacy of future sanctions, if threatened by countries in the West, could have very little impact on the Iranian economy, which remains the eighteenth largest in the world even with international sanctions.<sup>84</sup>

Aside from the danger of inefficacy, the political implications of backing out on the deal would have manifold consequences on US-Iran relations. The election of Rouhani and the negotiations have resulted in the highest, most robust level of communication between the two governments in the history of the Islamic Republic. If the United States had backed out on the deal, it would have been another example of the "Great Satan's" disregard for Iranian efforts at diplomacy, akin to the Grand Bargain or

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<sup>81</sup> Schumer, Chuck. "My Position on the Iran Deal." *Medium*. Medium.com, 07 Aug. 2015. Web. 03 Nov. 2015.

<sup>82</sup> Goodarzi, Jubin. "Jubin Goodarzi Interview." Personal interview. 27 Oct. 2015.

<sup>83</sup> Shahsavari, Roohollah. "Roohollah Shahsavari Interview." Personal interview. 23 Sept. 2015.

<sup>84</sup> IBID

Iran's aid in the fight against the Taliban. This time, however, the disregard would have been incredibly public, sending a message of disrespect not only to the Iranian government but also to the Iranian people. The United States proving its untrustworthiness, once again, would have strengthened the positions of the most conservative, hardline parts of the Iranian government, and weakened the legitimacy of moderates like Rouhani.

Hardline conservatives, most notably Ayatollah Khamenei, have maintained anti-American rhetoric throughout the negotiations. The Ayatollah's Twitter feed was a stream of anti-American commentary, returning over and over to the dangers of trusting the United States. Two examples are the Ayatollah's tweets on October 21, 2015, including "US deceptive involvement in nuclear talks has been intended to advance their hostile policies towards Iran" and "POTUS claims in his 2 letters to me that he is not after regime change in Iran soon proved as a lie with him backing internal conspiracies".<sup>85</sup> Tweets and rhetoric such as these illustrate a fundamental aspect of the Iranian regime. Founded in opposition to America, letting go of this fundamental definition would hurt the regime's legitimacy. Distrusting America and Western powers was not a transitional aspect of the Islamic Republic; it was founded in a deep rejection of imperialism and imposed Western values. As relations between Iran and the United States move towards normalization, the rhetoric of the Iranian regime will be the hardest to change.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Khamenei, Ayatollah (Khamenei.ir). 21 October 2015. Tweet.

<sup>86</sup> Chakravarti, Suddha. "Suddha Chakravarti Interview." Personal interview. 14 Oct. 2015.

## Conclusion

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”.<sup>87</sup> While perhaps a hackneyed phrase, George Santayana’s famous quote is an important lesson in diplomacy. The United States government must remember not only recent events, like the failure of the Grand Bargain, but ancient history, like Cyrus the Great and the vast Persian Empire. Iran has a long, venerable history, forming a strong collective identity and culture. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries cemented a deeply anti-imperialist sentiment into the Iranian identity, and the United States cannot forget the role that it played in disrespecting the values and wishes of a sovereign nation.

The neo-imperialism of the United States, combined with a perceived lack of respect and recognition for the multiple diplomatic endeavors of the Islamic Republic over the past decades has reinforced the anti-American foundation of the Islamic Republic’s government. The negotiations were able to succeed in spite of this fundamental lack of trust, primarily due to the efforts of the Obama administration in reforming the aggressive rhetoric of previous American presidents.

The United States government has less at stake as relations between the two countries improve, primarily because none of the legitimacy of the American government rests in opposition to the Islamic Republic. There has still been, however, a major backlash against both the negotiations and the JCPOA in the United States. Iran has behaved questionably in past negotiations, and this has augmented the lack of trust for the Iranian government in the United States. Senator Chuck Schumer, in his statement about the JCPOA, said that whether or not one supports or opposes the deal rests almost

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<sup>87</sup> Santayana, George. *The Life of Reason*. New York: Scribner, 1954. Print.

entirely in ones perception of the Iranian government.<sup>88</sup> It is understandable that, after 36 years of antagonistic rhetoric and little to no direct communication with the Iranian government, many perceive it as untrustworthy and thus view the JCPOA as a dangerous concession.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action is not destined for success no matter what: that is to say, it is vital that the United States government continues to promote positive relations with the Islamic Republic and hold up its end of the agreement. It is possible that, with the election of a Republican president, relations with the Islamic Republic would once again turn sour. The JCPOA is a binding piece of international legislation, and thus the United States will not be able to back out of the agreement with the election of a new president. However, because so much of the antagonistic relationship between the United States and Iran is based in rhetoric, a Republican president who reverses the positive steps taken by Obama in this regard could do heavy damage to US-Iran relations.

On the other hand, if relations between the United States and Iran continue in this positive trajectory, the future is bright. Iran will be reintegrated into the international community, and will be more subject to international norms and laws. The Iranian government will be forced, to some extent, to open up, creating an environment where the Iranian people will be able to thrive and make connections across the world. This deal could be a starting point for substantial diplomatic relations between the United States and Iran, but it requires continued effort and cooperation by both governments.

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<sup>88</sup> Schumer, Chuck. "My Position on the Iran Deal." *Medium*. Medium.com, 07 Aug. 2015. Web. 03 Nov. 2015.

As of now, there are too many variables to accurately predict the future of US-Iran relations. As the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action begins to unfold and Iran's economy receives relief from international sanctions, continued study will be needed to understand the effects of both. In such a tumultuous region, the progression of Iran towards reintegration will have manifold ramifications, the importance of which cannot be understated. The future of the Islamic Republic must continue to be thoroughly studied as it unfolds, with a complete and nuanced understanding of the past.

#### Abbreviation List

APOC: Anglo-Persian Oil Company

JCPOA: Joint-Comprehensive Plan of Action

IAEA: International Atomic Energy Agency

NPT: Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

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