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Opinion – Iran at the Crossroads Pending Trump's Return

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SIRVAN KARIMI, DEC 1 2024

Given the prevailing perception of Iran's Islamic regime as the most immediate threat to American national security, Trump's return to the presidency in January 2025 may have profound consequences for the ruling clerical regime. Despite its reckless and disruptive behavior and military maneuvers intended to showcase its military power and impress its perceived enemies, it can be argued that the Islamic regime is prone to acting rationally when it perceives a threat to its political survival. The political pragmatism of the regime, as manifested in its inclination to make temporary political concessions, is conducive to forestalling and deflecting any planned US menace on its political existence.

Several compelling signs indicate a pulverizing and debilitating pressure that the incoming Trump administration will exert on the Islamic Republic of Iran. First, in its preparation to hand over power to the incoming Republican administration, President Biden warned President-elect Trump that Iran is the most impending danger to American national security. Second, the alleged Islamic regime-sponsored assassination attempt on the life of Trump has led Federal prosecutors to charge an operative of the Islamic regime for plotting revenge for the killing of Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force (the elite wing of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard) on January 3rd, 2020. Third, US Intelligence services have identified the Islamic regime of Iran as a disruptive culprit behind funneling money and other logistic support into anti-Israel demonstrations on US college campuses. Fourth, based on the International Atomic Energy Agency's alarming report released on Oct 26, 2024, the Islamic regime has increased its stockpile of near weapons-grade uranium which signals Iran's outright defiance of international demands to rein in its nuclear program.

Finally, during Trump's first term presidency, European powers were not only reluctant to support US sanctions on Iran but also sedulously attempted to devise a strategy known as the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX) to circumvent and bypass American sanctions. However, with the military cooperation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Russia in its aggression against Ukraine, European powers have not only reconsidered their ineffective appeasement policy towards Iran but have resorted to imposing restrictive measures on the Islamic regime. It is therefore logical to extrapolate that the European Union will to a great extent get along with the incoming Trump administration's sweeping economic and political measures on the Islamic regime.

Undoubtedly, Iran will factor heavily into the incoming Trump administration's foreign policy. Given the ongoing bloody war between Israel and the Islamic regime's proxies in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq which has culminated in a confrontation between Israel and Iran, the Islamic regime threat landscape appears significantly different heading into 2025 than in 2017 when Trump first assumed office. There are signs that herald the incoming Trump administration's aggressive and crashing approach toward the Islamic Republic of Iran. President-elect Trump is in the process of compiling one of the most pro-Israel Cabinet in American history. Some of the president-elect's pro-Israel and hawkish nominees such as Senator Marc Rubio (Trump's nominee for Secretary of State), Rep Mik Waltz (Trump's pick for National Security Adviser), Rep Elise Stefanik (nominee for U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations), Mike Huckabee (nominee for ambassador to Israel), Steve Witkoff (US Special Envoy to the Middle East), and Fox News Host and Army veteran Pete Hegseth (nominee for Secretary of Defense) have in the past clearly expressed their hardline position on the Islamic regime in Iran. Though Trump will set the overall tone of the

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new US administration's foreign policy, these Iran hawks can to a great extent influence and shape Trump's stance on the Islamic regime.

Moreover, leaked information from the incoming Trump administration points to the firm determination of President-elect Trump to revive and intensify the maximum pressure strategy to emasculate and bankrupt the Islamic regime's ability to fund regional proxies and develop nuclear weapons. Finally, it is claimed that the President-elect team members have already begun contemplating devising plans to erode the pillars of the Islamic regime which is geared to toppling the clerical leadership in Iran. Accordingly, dismantling the current theocratic power structure in Iran purports to be a long-lasting solution to effectively halt the Islamic regime's nuclear programs, choke off funding to the regime-sponsored militant groups and organizations, and hence stabilize the region.

In the wake of Trump's electoral victory, factions within the Islamic regime have voiced differing opinions on how to manage what they anticipate could be a volatile and dangerous period for Iran. While some political figures push for negotiations, a few hardliners urge caution and emphasize resilience. The regime appears to have encountered a situation where no available choices are attractive. Resisting and challenging the incoming Trump administration's expectations of Iran to dismantle its nuclear weapon program and halt its support of regional proxies will be met with stifling sanctions that can deprive the regime of oil revenues. Given Trump's declared support for Israel and the recent condemnation of Iran by the UN Nuclear Agency, this option can embolden and justify Israeli assaults on Iran's vital military and revenue-generating infrastructures and installations.

Despite exhibiting reckless and destabilizing behaviors, the clerical leadership has proven to be rational whenever they perceive an impending threat to the survival of the regime. Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic regime in 1979, was known for his obstinate and uncompromising stance on the continuation of the war with Iraq in the 1980s. However, when he was informed of military defeat on the battlefield that could have jeopardized the very survival of the Islamic regime, he relented to accept the peace with Iraq which he described as taking a glass of poison.

In order to deflect the perceived menace on its political existence, the Islamic Republic of Iran has already signaled its readiness to engage in negotiation with the incoming Trump administration and make temporary concessions. After receiving a stern warning from the current US administration, the Islamic regime is reported to have sent a written guarantee that it will not seek Trump's assassination. To cool off the tension with the incoming administration, the Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations is reported to have had a secret meeting with Elon Musk whom President-elect Trump named one of the heads of the newly created Department of Government Efficiency. On November 16, 2024, Iranian foreign minister, Abbas Araghchi publicly expressed Iran's preparedness to resume negotiations over its controversial nuclear program. Finally, Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian has accentuated Iran's readiness to mend its relationship with the West.

With the return of Donald Trump to the White House, the Islamic Republic of Iran stands at a crossroads. Challenging the incoming US administration's demands for halting uranium enrichment and regional interference will inevitably trigger US-driven maximum economic, political, and military pressures including debilitating enforcement of the oil sanction that can drain government coffers. Given the near destruction of the Islamic regime's network of regional allies as a result of Israeli military strikes which have diminished Iran's deterrence capability, and given the high level of Iranian dissatisfaction with the regime that has the potential to be translated into a full-blown political uprising in the advent of war with Israel, the clerical leadership is poised to fall back on its rationality and unwillingly incline to make temporary concessions in order to deflect the impending threat on its survival. For Iran, conceding to the Trump administration's demands may be a logical step to avoid falling from the looming precipice.

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