

# Indagare

A Journal of Scholars

Available online at [www.indgr.org](http://www.indgr.org)



## USA-Iran Resentment to the Nuclear Debate: A Study on Peace-Building in the Middle East

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11229233>

Citation S A. Zunaid, S. A. Z. (2024). USA-Iran Resentment to the Nuclear Debate: A Study on Peace-Building in the Middle East. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11229233>

Author: S A. Zunaid  
Peace and Conflict  
Annalist, Indagare  
Research Centre.

Article Received: 10 March 2024  
Article Accepted: 25 April 2024  
Published Online: 17 May 2024

### Abstract:

After the cold war, Middle East has become a prominent conflict zone affecting the world peace, economy and humanity. Iran and USA have been bitter rivals for decades. This rivalry caused hostage taking, assassination, proxy wars, economic sanctions, turbulences and huge security threat in the region. Due to recent conflict of the parties for dominance over Middle East, world communities are tensed about a possible World War-III. Through a study on literatures this article focused on unearthing the root causes of the USA-Iran conflicts and look for possible ways to build a durable peace for the humanity. Hope this study shall generate more clear comprehension about the issue among people; researchers will find further scope of study; and policy makers to engage in peace-building.

**Keywords :** Nuclear; Rivalry, Peace; Middle East; USA;

---

# **USA-Iran Resentment to the Nuclear Debate: A Study on Peace-Building in the Middle East**

## **Introduction**

USA-IRAN has got entangled in a hostile conflict that has taken the center stage of world geopolitical discourse since 2003. However, the hostilities started surfacing from almost before a century. The current conflict between the United States and Iran has its immediate historical roots in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century when Iran declined into a semi-colonial state under British and Russian dominance. Later, CIA was involved in ousting a popular Prime Minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq, by assisting in staging a coup d'état back in 1953. Thereafter, The Iranian Revolution was a severe blow to U.S. interest, as it instilled nationalist sentiment among the Iranians back in 1979. During Iraq-Iran war, USA supported IRAQ tacitly. Sense of mistrust among these two countries started surfacing keeping behind all the opportunities.

In 21<sup>st</sup> century, Iran started leaning heavily toward nuclear capability by developing an extensive nuclear fuel cycle, including sophisticated enrichment capabilities, which became the subject of intense discussion in international forum between 2002 and 2015. Meanwhile, with the changing dynamics of middle-east, Iran's aspiration to become prime player in this region was quite obvious. However, this seemed to be threatening for USA. For USA, the assurance of energy security from the oil rich middle-east is of utmost importance. In May 2018, the Trump Administration withdrew itself from the 'Iran Nuclear Deal'(Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA), accusing that the accord did not address the broad range of U.S. concerns about Iranian behavior. USA also believed that the Deal would not permanently preclude Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, triggering a wide range of actions by both the countries. (meaning is not clear) Today, the conflict between Iran and the United States is directly and indirectly related to parallel armed conflicts in the region. Recently, on a number of occasions, the two countries have approached almost near the brink of a war.

From U.S. point of view, Iran poses a complex security threat because of its nuclear program and asymmetric activities across the Middle East. On the contrary, Islamic Republic of Iran's perspective is that the USA is a hostile country having intent on regime change. Iran also believes that USA uses economic sanctions and military pressure to deny Iran its rightful place as a regional power. Hence, an endeavor is needed to be made to defuse a probable conflict, which might have severe detrimental effect over the global peace.

This paper aims to reflect a dissecting view of the root causes of USA-Iran conflict; followed by a list of plausible options for peace.

## **Root Causes of USA-Iran Conflict**

### **Historical Context**

History reveals that Reza shah Pahlavi set into power back in 1921 with the help of U.K. Subsequently, Pahlavi established monarchy by getting help from western allies. Thereafter, Mohammad Reza Shah, son of Pahlavi, took over the power in 1941 with the help of Israel. In 1953, Mohammad Mossadeq was democratically elected as Iranian prime minister. Newly elected prime minister intended to nationalise the oil industry of

Iran. Consequently, in 1953, the CIA and British intelligence initiated the process to overthrow the elected prime minister, Mohammad Mossadeq, due to his perceived alliance with the communists and for conflicting the interest of western allies. Again, Mohammad Reza Shah took over the throne of Iran in 1953. The nationalist coup of 1953 had already stirred the Islamic clergy in Iran. Incumbent leader of Iran backed by western countries started suppression over Iranian people. Ayatollah Khomeini soon established himself as a symbol of 'resistance and hope' to the common Iranians against Shah's repressive regime. Finally, it took more than two decades for Ayatollah Khomeini to garner enough support to set a popular revolution into motion and overthrow the Shah of Iran in 1979, and thus the U.S. involvement. In 1979, however, prime internal dissent surfaced anchored on radical Islamic clerics who intended all influence out of their land. The Shah was quickly over thrown, and over 60 Americans from the Embassy were held hostage for more than a year. Revolutionary fervor shown by Iranian and post-revolutionary counter move led by Iran to adopt neither East nor West policy. During Iraq-Iran war, support to Iraq, shooting down a passenger plane of Iran by USA in 1988 further infuriated Iranian people towards Moreover, rhetoric and counter rhetoric like Great Satan, Axis of Evil, Islamic Fundamentalist, Rogue State and so on by both the countries further aggravated the relationship. Thus, from historical standpoint, the overwhelming U.S. presence in Iran after the Second World War and their influence in internal statecraft were, to many Iranians, psychologically indistinguishable to any other foreign intrusion of the Iranian polity throughout the centuries.

### **Iran's Race for Nuclear Program**

Iran initiated its nuclear program back in 1950 with the help of USA Later considering the oil reserve and predicted energy requirement by Iran, Mohammad Reza Shah, the then prime minister planned to build 20 nuclear reactors. Iranian nuclear program renewed its operation from 1990 with the help of Germany and Russia after a pause since 1979. Henceforth, Iran expanded nuclear program exponentially till 2003-IAEA inspector unveiled advanced level nuclear reactor of Tehran. Subsequently, IAEA demanded Iran to disclose all nuclear activities for the inspection or else warned against dire actions to be taken against Iran. Thereafter, entire world got alarmed and Iran came under the global spotlight for leaping towards WMD. Ostensibly, Iran claimed that their nuclear program is meant to be peaceful. However, western countries, specifically, USA didn't pay any heed to Iran's claim. Manifestation of concerns, from all around the world, ultimately led to enforce military-economic sanction on Iran by the UN in 2006. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia, a strong actor in Middle East having western back up also claimed for their own WMD. Coupled with all these factors, the USA perceives Iran's quest for nuclear energy as a threat to self-interests in the Middle East as well as to the success of the existing non-proliferation regime. Given the situation, an initiative was undertaken by P5+1 in 2013. Finally, in June 2015, Iran reached to final deal (JCPOA) with P5+1 to de-escalate the tension related to WMD of Iran. On this deal, restrictions and constraints were imposed on Iran nuclear program. In exchange, economic sanction on Iran was lifted. In contrast, Saudi Arabia and Israel got alarmed with the improved relation of Iran with western allies. Later on, in 2018, U.S. president Trump re-imposed sanctions on Iran with the plea that JCPOA was not comprehensive. Moreover, he claimed that JCPOA did not assure Iran's nonproliferation of WMD as well as ballistic missile threat. Newly imposed economic sanction brought about huge economic recession in Iran which incited Iran to breach the conditions laid in JCPOA. Thereafter, USA followed the suit of "Maximum pressure" to bring Iran under control. However, other members of P5+1 are not supporting this standing on Iran Issue. Additionally,

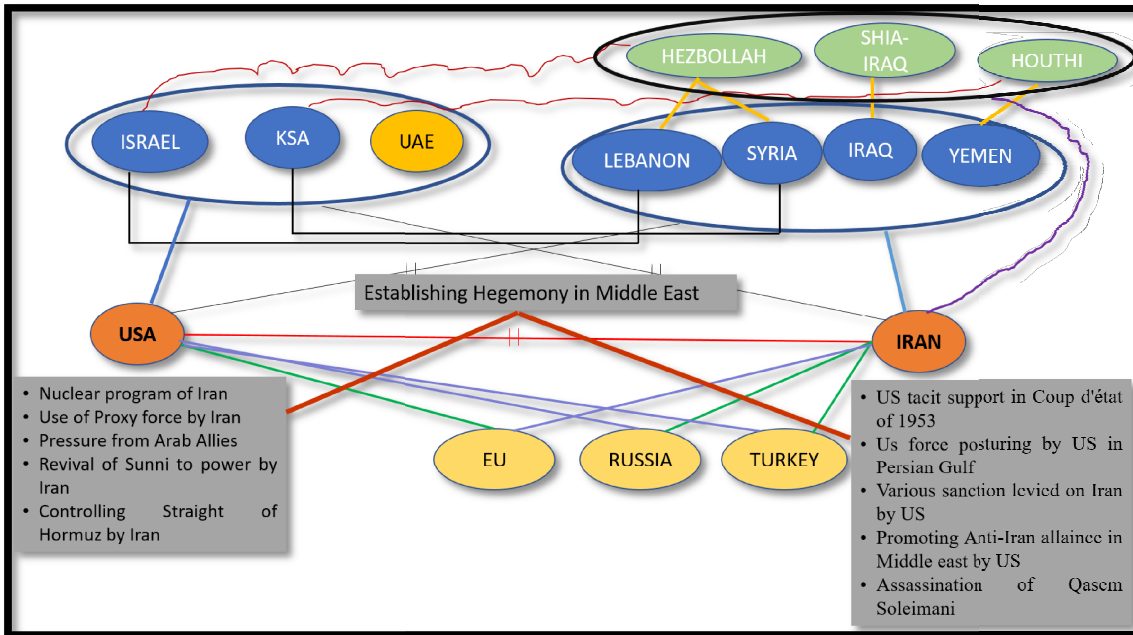
many scholars argued, Trump's withdrawal from JCPOA was only aimed to take the favor of nationalist sentiment in the 2021 election. Iran, on the other hand, indulged in breaking all the restrictions and constraints imposed by JCPOA, causing mayhem in security spectrum of Middle East. In retaliatory action, Iran gunned down a drone of USA which was replied by U.S. with assassination of Major General Qasem Soleimani, a QUDs force commander of IRGC. Consequently, to avenge the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, Iran launched rocket strike targeting U.S. officials in Baghdad in January 2020. Hence, nuclear issue is one of the manifested root causes watering USA-Iran conflict.

### **Domination of Middle East**

In last eight years dynamics of relationship between USA and Key players of Middle East have changed rapidly. This is a resultant effect of changing foreign policy of gulf actors in favor of their own interest, which is discerned to be a zero-sum game for every actor. All the aspired actors of Middle East pursue an assertive and hard-power-driven policy which is likely to make them regional hegemon where Iran is not an exception. Growing aspiration of Iran to become the regional hegemon in Middle East is the main latent root cause of Iran-USA conflict. The main pillar of impediment in between peace and conflict in Middle East has been the fiery recurring of incidents between Iran and those countries opposed to it - led by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel, and strongly supported by the U.S. In post 9/11 era, Iran with the support of western allies, specifically USA could successfully eliminate both the heaviest threats- Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussain in Iraq. Taking opportunity of Arab Spring in Bahrain, Iran started gaining prominence in Persian Gulf's regional politics. Iran extended its helping hand towards Syria, Iraqi Sunni group, Houthi group in Yemen. More importantly, Iran also influenced the Lebanon state politics by proving proxy force namely Hezbollah. Gaining prominence of Iran has pushed USA backed allies-Saudi Arabia, UAE and Israel into difficult situation. Iran is either directly or indirectly influencing all the allies of USA in Middle East. Yemen, a bordering country with Saudi Arabia is engaged in conflict since 2011, which now turned to a civil war. According to Saudi Arabia and the Saudi-backed Hadi government, the Houthis are an Iranian proxy; they therefore frame the war as an effort to counter Iranian influence in Yemen.

It is to be mentioned that, since March 2015, Saudi led coalition is engaged in a costly war in Yemen. Presumably, Iran got the opportunity to distract Saudi Arabia from Syrian front. However, there might be argument about using Houthi as proxy by Iran but it is for sure, Iran is tending to exploit the internal instability and dissatisfaction of Yemen. Traditionally, Iran do not consider Saudi Arabia as enemy rather a country who execute the order of USA. But, due to over expressed media campaign against Iran for supporting Hezbollah and Iran's role in Syria, Iran started treating Saudi Arabia as 2<sup>nd</sup> order opposition after. Finally, Iran is successful in engaging Saudi Arabia led coalition in Yemen conflict with least possible military expenditure. On the other hand, acceptance of Iran as an influential country in Middle East has increased further.

Iran allegedly influenced Lebanon's domestic politics through Hezbollah, a non-state actor. In addition, Hezbollah is also keeping Israel- a non-separable ally of USA at bay of threat. Indeed, Hezbollah was the primary means of power projection of Iran beyond its own boundary with a plausible means of deniability.



Symbol	Meaning
	Primary Actor
	Secondary Actor
	Tertiary Actor
	Non-state Actor
	Conflicting Relation
	Power Relation
	Apparently Hostile Relation
	In Conflict
	Alliance
	Hostile Relation between State and Non-state Actor
	Friendly Relation between State and Non-state Actor

Figure: Conflict Mapping of –Iran

Hezbollah has become the standalone non-governmental actor influencing Lebanon within the Iran’s orbit. However, Hezbollah is also training the Shia militants in order to extend the operational reach of Iran. In brief, creation of Hezbollah as proxy of Iran and its multifaceted employment in Middle East explicitly express Iran’s aspire to dominate regional politics of Persian Gulf which is a conflicting interest with USA and her allies in Middle East. Moreover, in Syria, Iran operates as supporters of Assad regime and Use gray zone activities to curve the actions taken by withdrawal of U.S.Forces from Syria seemed to be an apparent defeat of U.S. caused by Syria-Iran-Russia alliance. Iran is also successful in spreading its influence over Iraq. Iran has three-pronged influence over Iraq namely, interstate level, intra party of Iraq and military strategic level. Iran has successfully assisted revival of Shia faction into power race. Apart from this, Iran established itself as an arbitrator among the various Shiite groups which ultimately led Iran to influence shaping the decision of Iraqi government.

Iran tends to act as regional hegemony against US backed allies in Middle East. To project its own power, Iran adopted asymmetric methods like using proxies, non-state

actors and so forth combined called as Axis of Resistance. On the other hand, U.S. and its allies in Middle East vehemently oppose Iran activities as mediator as well as aiding country to other gulf states. US foreign policy is adopted to pursue its interest for smooth flow of oil and keep its allies in Middle East safe. Subsequently, U.S. adopted a combination of force projection and various sanctions to curve Iran's cascading growth in Middle East. Thereby, conflict between Iran and the USA is inevitable.

### **Ways to Peace**

After 2<sup>nd</sup> World War Middle East has become a fertile ground for practicing and demonstrating powers by intra state, interstates, and extra regional states. Specifically, in last one decade, the gulf region has faced constant and rapidly evolving challenges, getting knotted in escalatory rhetoric and actions/counter actions with resultant numerous near war situation. However, recent situation between USA and Iran may trigger a miniature world war due to involvement of regional and extra regional state and non-state actors. Hence, a roadmap needs to be drawn for the benefit of global peace, if not, at least for Persian Gulf states. Though options are limited for peace against such complex phenomenon of conflict, yet there is enough space in the room of effort taken by concerned actors.

### **A Comprehensive Nuclear Deal**

The key bone of contention between Iran and the USA is Iran's nuclear program. A pragmatic solution was sought by JCPOA in July 2015 but did not last for more than three years. Later, Withdrawal of USA from JCPOA lend this endeavor into a corner, which caused retaliatory actions in terms of Nuclear enrichment by Iran with a strategic patience of one year from 2018 to 2019. Presently, Iran is on full swing towards expansion of nuclear program which induced sense of fear among Arab allies of the USA. By now it is further crystalized that without nuclear deal there will not be any sustainable peace in Persian Gulf. Given the situation, EU or the remaining members of P5+1 should come forward with a plausible solution having the foundation of win-win term for Iran. In doing so, remaining members of EU of P5+1 need to provide economic stimulus for Iran. Furthermore, they also need to pursue the USA to join back JCPOA. However, rejoining of USA in JCPOA might take several months. Newly elected security adviser of Biden administration already hinted about rejoin of in JCPOA on the condition of fruitful negotiation.

### **Developing the Culture of Respect towards Diplomacy and State Sovereignty**

Diplomatic endeavor must be respected by both Iran and the USA. In doing so, both the countries need to depart from traditional confrontational approach. For example, USA should not threaten Iran by force posturing in Persian Gulf area. In return, Iran should not also provide proxies to Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. Iran should be allowed to enhance his own security without interfering sovereignty of other Gulf state. USA should not also ponder in providing retaliatory rhetoric by her allies in Middle East. U.S. should also lift all the levied sanction on Iran in order to setting it free to pursue its domestic economic demand. On the other hand, Iran will not also impede any incursive activities in the Strait of Hormuz with a view to keeping the 'liquid gold' transporting channel free for everyone. As such, diplomatic ties between Iran and USA which is absolutely absent at present might create a conducive environment for peace.

## **Role of Extra Regional Actors**

Middle East became hotspot for all the global powers to show their superiority. Due to complex dynamics of domestic, regional and international politics anchored in Middle East interest of various actors are mostly latent. Arguably, most of the extra regional actors anonymously keep the situation volatile in Gulf States to ensure their own state interest-mostly uninterrupted flow of oil and billion-dollar arms sale. Presently, China, Russia, Turkey and USA are the key extra regional actors in Persian Gulf. Extra regional actors should avoid fueling the conflict and contribute in positive way for creating a harmonious solution. As such, role of Turkey and Russia is very crucial since their involvement in Syrian crisis. On the other hand, USA need to accelerate its foreign policy shift in order to make a trilateral agreement with Russia-Iran-Turkey for two folded purpose namely termination of conflict in Syria and setting benchmark for mutual trust with Iran. In addition, USA might keep their Arab allies in suspended animation especially from propagating anti-Iran rhetoric. Cumulative fallout of all this effort is likely to put USA and Iran in the track of peace again.

## **A Possible Roadmap**

Israel, Iran and Saudi Arabia have regional security dynamics in play. Israel is a nuclear power albeit not disclosed. USA is a security guarantor of Israel, hence will not allow Iran to ever have nukes. Iran finds it mandatory to have nukes for existence. Saudi Arabia feels threatened by 'nuclear' Iran.

Another dimension is increased polarization of great powers which at times mimics cold war. Iran is a regional power aligned with Russia, China, Pakistan and others. Israel and other Middle East states align with USA and NATO interests. That makes peace not so easily achievable as regional powers are trapped in renewed great power competition.

A close alternative would be to reduce security of worries of Iran by emplacement of guarantees by Russia or other nations as done by USA to Israel. This is close to what is called Mutually Assured Destruction or MAD.

As a first step, actors should exercise restraints to defuse tensions. Recent call by MBS to cooperate with Tehran for regional peace is a great strategy. EU remained stubborn against Trump's unilateral withdrawal from JCPOA. They should add more positive energies to contain escalation of tensed situation. Biden Administration needs to restore what has been damaged by past administration. Gradual rebalancing, tolerance and re-entry of USA in JCPOA is the only working tool available as of now.

EU has a somewhat neutral position and provides best chance for peace as a mediator. So, complete denuclearization of Middle East is the theoretical solution to remove security dilemma. But that would be hard to achieve as actors like Israel would not recognize having one in the first place. They would not even allow inspections. But such an effort should not be kept out of negotiations or discussions.

## Conclusion

U.S.-Iran conflict started from the last century and got serious momentum in the second decade of this century. The root causes for this conflict are mostly related to Iran's nuclear program, U.S. anarchic attitude towards state sovereignty of Iran, regional power dynamics of Persian Gulf, influence of extra regional actors and so on. However, conflict never crossed the threshold of full-scale military retaliation. During 1<sup>st</sup> decade of this century, given the volatile security architecture and influence of Arab Spring, Iran has established itself at the center stage of gulf regional actors. Contrarily, U.S.allies in Middle East are gradually engaging themselves into complex security challenges, mostly posed by Iran. Hence, conflict between USA and Iran is inevitable. U.S withdrawal from JCPOA has further complicated the relation of these two countries. Recently, after the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, relation between U.S. and Iran is at the peak of animosity.

There is no silver lining for peace between U.S. and Iran. Nevertheless, addressing a win-win nuclear deal might defuse the present tension. Iran should be allowed to continue peaceful nuclear program for their domestic energy necessity with set constraints by JCPOA partners. USA should also relinquish all types of sanctions over Iran. In addition, continuous diplomatic engagement might open the arena for smooth negotiation for different conflicting issues. Iran should be provided with due space for managing their domestic issues. In exchange, Iran should also avoid providing surrogates in various gulf states. Hence, extra regional power might be very influential to mediate such an issue. Impartial act by USA might build mutual trust among Iran and USA, which will ultimately lead to lasting peace in the Persian Gulf.

## References:

Azharul Islam (2020). USA-IRAN Conflict.[Online] Available at (PDF) USA-Iran Conflict [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338885060\\_USA-Iran\\_Conflict](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338885060_USA-Iran_Conflict) [Accessed 28 April 2021].

Ben Hubbard, "Saudi Crown Prince Likens Iran's Supreme Leader to Hitler", in The New York Times, 15 March 2018, <https://nyti.ms/2FJmA9N>.

Brian O'Toole, (Atlantic Council: Rejoining the Iran Nuclear Deal: Not So Easy), p7.

Colonel Dabbous Aldasam (2013). Relations Between the U.S. and Iran. [Online] Available at <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a589052.pdf> [Accessed 27 April 2021].

Colonel Dabbous Aldasam (2013). Relations Between the U.S. and Iran.. [Online] Available at <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a589052.pdf> [Accessed 27 April 2021] p 23.

Daniel H. Joyner, (The United States' "Withdrawal" from the Iran Nuclear Deal), August 2018, pp 1-2, <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/08/21/the-united-states-withdrawal-from-the-iran-nuclear-deal/>

Ilan Goldenberg, Nicholas A. Heras, Kaleigh Thomas and Jennie Matuschak, (Center for a New American Security: Iran-U.S. Conflict in the Gray Zone, 2020), p3.



Frederick W. Kagan et al., *Iranian Influence in the Levant, Egypt, Iraq, and Afghanistan* (Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War, May 2012), pp. 62-68

Graham E. Fuller, *The center of the universe: the geopolitics of Iran*, A Rand Corporation research study (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1991), 19.

Ellie Geranmayeh, (*Istituto Affari International: Regional Geopolitical Rivalries in the Middle East: Implications for Europe*, 2018) p3.

Ellie Geranmayeh, (*European Council on Foreign Relations: The Coming Clash: Why Iran will Divide Europe From the United States*, 2017), pp 9-10.

Laura Rozen, "Europe, Biden aligning on saving Iran deal before expanding on it," *Diplomatic*, December 21, 2020, <https://diplomatic.substack.com/p/europe-coming-round-to-biden-idea>.

Meir Litvak, (*Institute for National Security Studies: Iran in Iraq: An Area of Strategic Influence*, 2018), pp 42-43

Mohammad Sahimi, Pirouz Mojtahed-Zadeh and Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, "Energy: Iran needs nuclear power" *The New York Times*, October 14, 2003.

Mustafa Kibaroglu, "Good for the Shah, Banned for the Mullahs: The West and Iran's Quest for Nuclear Power" *Middle East Journal*60, no.22006.

Nazir Hussain, *US-Iran Relations: Issues, Challenges and Prospects*, (United Kingdom: Pluto Journals, 2015), Vol. 12, No. pp. 29-47.

Nils Jordet (2010). *Explaining the Long-term Hostility between the United States and Iran: A Historical, Theoretical and Methodological Framework*. [Online] Available at <https://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/98-00/jordet.pdf> [Accessed 27 April 2021].

Owen Matthews and Christopher Dickey, "Triumph of the Turks," *Newsweek* 7 December 2009, pp 31-33.

Paul K. Kerr and Kenneth Katzman. *Iran Nuclear Agreement and U.S. Exit*, CRS Report R43333.

Punnet Talwar, October 2020. *BETWEEN WAR AND PEACE: A ROADMAP FOR U.S. POLICY TOWARD IRAN*, Asia Policy Society. P 1.

Saeed Khatibzadeh, (*Istituto Affari Internationali: HOPE for a New Regional Security Architecture: Toward a Hormuz Community*, 2020) p3.

Shireen T. Hunter, *Iran and the World: Continuity in a Revolutionary Decade*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 46-54.

"Iran nuclear deal: International sanctions lifted," *BBC News*, January 16, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35335078>.

The Nuclear Threat Initiative, June 2020.

<https://www.nti.org/learn/countries/iran/nuclear/> [Accessed 27 April 2021].