

## **U.S Foreign Policy and Regional Power and Influence of Iran: A Comparison of Bush, Obama and Trump Administrations**

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### **Abstract**

In the present study, the impact of U.S. foreign policy strategies on Iran's regional power and influence is investigated. The main question is how U.S. foreign policy strategies on the Middle East and Iran during George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump's presidencies affected Iran's regional power and influence. The hypothesis is that various principles and strategies of U.S. foreign policy during Bush, Obama and Trump administrations have led to the greater regional power and influence of Iran. In order to test this hypothesis, after investigating the historical context and selecting a conceptual framework, the impact of U.S. foreign policy on Iran's regional power and influence has been studied. Next, the impact of the U.S. foreign policy strategy on Iran's regional power and influence, such as aims, interests, behaviors, actions, costs, achievements, effects, and implications are analyzed.

**Keywords:** Regional influence, Iran, Bush, Obama, Trump.

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## **1.Introduction**

Since the Second World War, the Middle East has played an important role in U.S. foreign policy. Consequently, the security of this region has been the center of attention for U.S. officials. In the Pahlavi Era, Iran was the regional administrator of U.S. foreign policy. Hence, it played an important role in U.S. foreign policy, as well as the region. However, with the Islamic revolution, Iran's approach to the U.S. and the region changed. On the other hand, the U.S. foreign policy considering the Middle East and Iran changed as well. Attempts to curb Iran's regional power and influence were on the top agenda of U.S. foreign policy. With Clinton's dual containment policy on Iran and Iraq, a new chapter started. Since George W. Bush's presidency, it has become an important issue in U.S. foreign policy.

Discussing the effect of U.S. foreign policy does not convey ignoring the effectiveness of Iran's regional policy. In fact, Iran could take advantage of the opportunities provided as a result of the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, and the fall of Saddam Hossein in Iraq was one of the first opportunities.

Another chance was provided later with the Arab Spring unrest. Considering the recent developments, Iran-backed groups (e.g., Ansarollah) seized power in Yemen or Shi'ites in a number of countries (Bahrain or Saudi Arabia) participated in anti-government demonstrations. In addition, Iran and the 5+1 nuclear deal (also known as JCPOA), as a result of Iran and the U.S.' close relationship, diminished the impact of pressure and sanctions against Iran. It also paved the way for Iran to support its allies in the region. In Syria, the direct military presence of Iran, Shi'ites from other countries, and Shi'ite Hezbollah militia from Lebanon increased the hard power of Tehran. In this way, the military forces of Iran could establish numerous military bases in Syria. As a result of these developments, the regional power and influence of Iran –shaped by the U.S. attack on Iraq– was enhanced.

This trend changed drastically during Trump's presidency. Unilateral withdrawal of the U.S. from the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) increased sanction pressure on Iran and spoiled chances available in Obama's presidency. Finally, it did not impose U.S. will on Iran, but demonstrated the resistance and resilience of Iran towards the United States' maximum pressure. So, this brutal and inhumane policy as the last option, instead of diminishing Iran's regional power and influence, led to the political and diplomatic isolation of the U.S.

In fact, since there was a change in U.S. foreign policy on the Middle East and Iran, along with a development in Iran's regional power and influence, an attempt was made to examine the correlation between these variables. For this purpose, developments in the U.S. foreign policy during the Bush, Obama and Trump administrations along with changing in Iran's regional power and influence are investigated. In other words, considering that U.S. foreign policy is an independent variable and Iran's regional power and influence is a dependent variable, in this study, an attempt was made to examine what is the effect of U.S. foreign policy strategies on Iran's regional power and influence? The hypothesis is that with various principles and strategies in U.S. foreign policy during the Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations, U.S. foreign policy strategies in their presidency increased Iran's power and its regional influence in the Middle East. In order to test this hypothesis, after a cursory look at the historical background of U.S. foreign policy on Iran, a conceptual framework is explained to compare the impact of U.S. foreign policy on Iran's regional power and influence during the Bush, Obama and Trump presidencies.

## **2 .Method**

The present study is a historical comparison at theoretical and practical levels. At the theoretical level, by using library documents and sources, Iran's historical position in U.S. foreign policy is examined. At the next level, the conceptual and theoretical principles for comparing the effect of the U.S. foreign policy on Iran's power and its regional influence during different periods are given based on historical developments.

## **3 .Theoretical Framework**

In order to inspect the impact of U.S. foreign policy and its strategies on Iran's regional power and influence, it is vital that with attention to the past, the developments in the strategies and political relationship between Iran and the U.S. are discussed.

### **3-1. From Strategic Allegiance to Diplomatic Opposition**

Iran and U.S. relationships could be divided into two opposite periods considering the Islamic Revolution. Before the Islamic Revolution, the two countries had good relationships at a strategic level (Vazirian and Shakori, 2019:31-33). For Iranian people, the United States meant a balancing third power against Russia and England (Bill,1988:15-18). Soon after the end of the Second World War, the first confrontation between the U.S. and the

Soviet Union occurred in Iran, when Stalin did not agree to withdraw the Russian army from Iran. However, with behind the door pressure of the U.S. and the vigilance of Iranian officials (e.g., Ahmad Ghavam) its soldiers had to leave Iran (Keddie and Gasiorowski,1990:146). For this reason, the Shah realized that a weak Iran would be threatened by the Soviet Union. Hence, the best policy was to approach a superpower for safety (Alvandi,2014:12-13). For this reason, the United States appears to be the best option (Bill, 1988:86).

After a long period of favorable relationship between the Shah and the U.S. during Eisenhower's administration, Kennedy's rise to power was different. Kennedy's main policy revolved around the balance between top-to-bottom reformation and persistence in supporting him (Yaghub,2003:58). However, the only choice for Kennedy to stop any serious unrest inside Iran was to further support the Shah (Alvandi,2014:22-23; Bill,1988:132).

Like Kennedy, the next president of the United States, Johnson, was also from the Democrat Party. However, he did not believe in pressure for reformation, actually. Therefore, he supported Shah without pressure. An important issue for Johnson was England's decision to withdraw from the Persian Gulf. For this reason, he had to prepare Iran to take responsibility of managing this region (Yaghub,2003:60-61).

England's decision to leave the region changed the situation for the next president, Nixon. Muhammad Reza Shah turned from a mere weapons customer into a U.S strategic ally to stop the Soviet Union's influence in the region (Alvandi,2014:29). Based on the Nixon doctrine, Washington supported its key allies, rather than direct intervention in each region's affairs. So, the actors' task was to observe stability in their region. In this way, Iran and Saudi Arabia became the two main allies of the U.S. in the Middle East. Iran had a more significant role considering the military issues in the region. This trend continued in Jerald Ford's administration, due to the presence of Kissinger in his government, as well as Ford's full support to arming the Shah.

The Iran and U.S. relationship during Jimmy Carter's presidency was in a way that Carter could not do much to change it. Carter was a representative of the Democratic Party, and human rights mattered a lot to him. As a result, a huge contradiction appeared in White House goals. Despite the fact that Carter was aware of Shah's activities, similar to former officials, he decided on full support of him (Yaqub,2003:84-85). In order to take advantage of

Carter's support, Shah gave a number of political freedoms, endorsed by Carter. On the other hand, Shah's performance paved the way for the opposition to topple the Pahlavi regime (Gilbert,2014). In fact, as it was mentioned, the U.S. aside from supporting the Shah, reached its goal to create a power balance between Iran and Soviet-supported Iraq.

### **3-2. From Diplomatic Opposition to Military Confrontation**

The Iran and U.S. relationship was not chaotic in the early years after the revolution, but the crisis was provoked when the Shah entered the U.S. to receive medical treatment. Carter disagreed with this request for several months, but finally he accepted it (Hahn,2005:73-74). After Carter's permission, a number of Iranian students entered the U.S. embassy and its employees were taken hostage for 444 days. This hostage-taking was the beginning of the tensions in Iran and U.S. relationships after the Islamic Revolution.

An important event after the Islamic Revolution was the start of a war by Saddam against Iran which lasted for eight years. The U.S. aimed to preserve the balance between Iran and Iraq but the revolution in Iran was a hindrance, so the war between Iran and Iraq created a balancing opportunity for the United States. For this reason, the U.S. decided to support Iraq to prevent the formation of a victorious revolutionary Iran. However, it does not imply that The US was willingness to see the one-sided victory of Iraq because it could disturb regional peace. In fact, the U.S.' main goal was to save the balance. For this purpose, the U.S. preferred that Iran and Iraq neither fully win, nor lose the war. Based on this main policy, after Saddam's decision to expand the attacks to Iran's critical locations (e.g., oil infrastructure and tankers), the U.S. actually participated in that war (Wright,2019; Sonnenberg,1985).

Generally, Ronald Reagan – during whose presidency the Iran and Iraq war happened – had a strict policy about the revolutionary Iran and seized every opportunity to curb Iran (Ryan,2018:105). So, one of Reagan's first actions was to ban selling arms to Iran. However, in order to preserve the power balance, the U.S. aided Iran by sending arms surreptitiously to avoid its defeat because of deficiencies (Marie and Naghshpour,2011:147; Hersh, 1991). Another evidence of the U.S.' attempt to preserve the power balance was during the presidency of George Bush Senior, when Saddam attacked Kuwait and U.S. did not attack Iraq's capital to overthrow Saddam.

### **3-3. Dual Containment of Iran and Iraq**

The United States' strategy on the Middle East during Bill Clinton's presidency, underwent dramatic changes regarding the way, not the aims, and was affected by the post-cold war era (Yazdanfam,2008; Lake,1994: 46). In this era, developments in the world forced Clinton and high-rank cabinet members to change ranking of the U.S. approach towards the Persian Gulf region from power balance to dual containment. According to this new way, the U.S. did not rely on one actor to balance the other's power (Sick,1998:7). Now, it could directly curb Iran and Iraq at the same time by relying on its military supremacy and cooperation of its allies (Sicherman, 1997:227).

In fact, Clinton and other U.S. presidents were reluctant about the rise in power in Tehran or Baghdad because of their desired interests, such as protection of Arab countries, continuation of free trade of oil in the region, oil's fixed price for the customers, a regional peace system, fighting extremism and terrorism, and destruction of weapons of mass destruction (Sabet,1999:70). The policy of curbing Tehran-Baghdad faced serious challenges when George W. Bush was elected. His decisions disrupted the region's power balance. This change marked the beginning of Iran's power and regional influence increase – despite the following presidents' attempt to change this situation.

### **3-4. A Framework for Comparison of the Impact of U.S. Foreign Policy on Iran's Regional Power and Influence**

Foreign policy includes a number of actions that a country takes to achieve its international interests. Henry Kissinger finds a close relationship between foreign policy and domestic policy and believes that "foreign policy starts when domestic policy ends" (Kissinger,1997:11). There are numerous methods for the investigation and analysis of foreign policy. One method is based on realistic or liberal classification. Thomas Juneau uses this method in his article about Obama's foreign policy in the Middle East (Juneau, 2020). Ilana Kass's article is another study. It is written at the time of rivalry between the two superpowers: the USSR and the United States. The author attempts to create a clear framework for American policy-makers to explain the Soviet Union's strategy during Gorbachev's presidency. He also believes that the United States' unpreparedness to encounter with a politician like Gorbachov led the U.S. to appear unprepared conceptually (Kass,1989).

Muhammad Muslih is another researcher whose article studies Syria's foreign policy strategies. He divides Syria's foreign policy into three different stages and examines Hafez Asad's actions and changes in foreign policy according to the above-mentioned framework (Muslih,1998). Considering the examples provided above and the method which is often used for analysis of strategies, in order to investigate every U.S. president's strategy for the Middle East and Iran, four main criteria are used. 1) aims and interests that each president had on the agenda,2) actions and measures taken to achieve its goals,3) costs and achievements of Iran and U.S.,4) implications that each strategy has for the United States and Iran. In fact, an attempt has been made to study and compare U.S. foreign policy regarding Iran based on the following table (1):

**Table (1): Framework for Comparison of the Impact of U.S. Foreign Policy on Iran's Regional Power and Influence**

Comparison criteria	George Bush	Barak Obama	Donald Trump
Aims and Interests			
Behaviors and Actions			
Costs and Achievements			
Implications and Effects			

#### **4 .Research Findings**

Based on the given framework, the impact of the U.S. foreign policy on Iran's regional power and influence is examined and compared according to the aims and interests, actions and measures, costs and achievements, and the implications.

##### **4-1. Comparison of Aims and Interests**

George W. Bush, because of his personal background, did not have much experience in politics (e.g., foreign policy and international affairs). Bush's ignorance laid the foundation for neo-conservative theorists to dominate his cabinet's decisions and actions (Mossalanejad,2012:117). For this reason, some people use the word 'revolution' to describe the United States' foreign policy during the Bush's presidency (Daalder and Lindsay,2003). The best opportunity for realization of neo-conservative goals happened at the time of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. It was because of those attacks that Bush decided to use hard power under the influence of people around him, ignoring the pre-existing regional orders in the Middle East. An example of the United States' appeal to harassment and extremism in this region is placing Iran and

Iraq on a list next to North Korea known as the axis of evil. It was officially announced in a speech in 2002 (Office of the Press Secretary,2002) and continued with actual war. Considering American politicians' hostile attitude towards Iran, and the destiny of the first country on the list (Iraq), which was attacked by the U.S., Bush intended a similar destiny for Iran (Blake, 2010). In other words, Bush, under the influence of the post-Cold War and neo-conservative thinkers, decided to eliminate Iraq (and then Iran) to harness the regional powers in the Middle East. The Iraq War was so haphazard that it is considered a fiasco in terms of probable achievements. Some experts even compare it to the Vietnam War (Peleg,2018: xii). This war disturbed the peace that the U.S. had tried to keep for decades in the Middle East. Generally, the United States' foreign policy during George Bush's eight years of presidency relied on a kind of radical realism that, regarding rational roots and financial factors, is thought of as a zero-sum game resulting in the United States on the winner side and Iran on the loser side.

Unlike Bush who had limited political experience and knowledge, Obama had relevant education and work experience. Bush's futile foreign policy on Iran for eight years, compelled Obama to make some important changes in this regard. Obama believed that curbing Iran was possible only by diplomacy. For this reason, harnessing Iran was permissible by diplomacy not force. Hence, when running for presidency he promised to negotiate with Iran (the Commission on Presidential Debates,2008). Taking this into account, during Obama's eight-year presidency there was no intention of regime change in Iran. Instead, he decided on diplomacy so that through negotiation, U.S.' interests in rivalry with China (Kavianirad and et al,2017:36-39), and the main purpose of curbing Iran would be served. With the new administration in Washington, it was decided to manipulate the sum-zero game to change it into a win-win game to encourage Iran.

The United States' next president was similar to George Bush, not only in membership in the same party, but also in other respects. For instance, Donald Trump, despite having a successful business experience, did not have adequate knowledge of foreign policy. This caused the dominance of other people on Trump's foreign policy (particularly on Iran). Radical individuals (e.g., Mike Pompeo or John Bolton) played an important role in Trump's foreign policy on Iran and changed the U.S. foreign policy strategy revolving around eight years of diplomacy into enforcement (from 2018

onwards). With this in mind, the U.S. planned for regime change in Iran, since the achievement of many Washington goals was not possible without regime change in Iran (Slavin,2020). According to the aforementioned information, it is evident that the U.S. during the Trump era practically attended a zero-sum game, despite the belief in negotiation with Iran (The White House,2018a). However, he withdrew from an official deal endorsed by the Congress and the Security Council, because of the other side's advantages. This is another reason for his disbelief at a win-win game.

**Table (2): Comparison of Aims and Interests of Bush, Obama and Trump's Foreign Policy**

Comparison Criteria	George Bush	Barak Obama	Donald Trump
<b>Aims and Interests</b>	Regime change and strictness against Iran	Acceptance of the Islamic Republic and seeking interest by negotiation and flexibility	Return to regime change and making demands from Iran that were practically impossible without it

#### 4-2. Comparison of Behaviors and Actions

The behaviors and actions of every American government towards Iran have been affected by its goals and interests. So, Bush's susceptibility to neo-conservative thoughts and high reliance on enforcement and military force, one of the first measures of his government was to place Iran on the list of axis of evil (Office of the Press Secretary,2002), so that after Iraq's crisis was defused, the issue of Iran's power would be solved permanently. The hope of eliminating Iran drove Bush to avoid leniency in all respects. For example, on nuclear issues, the U.S. did not attend initial negotiations, but because of its strict conditions, such as disagreement with the rights of Iran (Tarock,2006:646) laid the foundation for failure in negotiations, discouragement of Iran to proceed with negotiations, and investigation of Iran's case in the Security Council. Other examples of such strict conditions are evident in Iran's missile program and numerous sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran. However, Bush's actions against Iran were not limited to such domains, since Washington established a number of institutes to promote democracy in Iran for the purpose of regime change (Sharp,2010:19) and to provoke dissidents inside the country. Furthermore, supporting groups such as Mojahedine khalgh (which was on the list of terrorist groups of the Foreign Ministry of the United States for several years) and Pejak to stimulate unrest in Iran, are a number of activities of

Washington in George Bush's presidency (Hersh,2008). Despite all these measures, a U.S. military attack on Iraq plays an important role in Iran's rise to power.

Consequently, with the Shi'ites seizing power in Iraq, Iran could increase its dominance there and take advantage of its geographical proximity to Syria and Lebanon to form the axis of resistance (also known as the Shi'ite Crescent). Iran's progress due to government change in Iraq led the U.S.' government to take other actions to stop Iran's rise of power and regional influence (e.g., attempt to unite Arabs and create a Sunni crescent versus the Shi'ite crescent) (De Quetteville,2006). Another way to fix the imbalance was selling arms. The U.S. made a lot of effort to establish a power balance against Iran by selling modern arms to Arab countries. (Lyon,2007). Failure in their plans drove the U.S. to take different actions (e.g., increasing the military forces). In this way, Iran's desire to withdraw foreign forces from Iraq would not be fulfilled and full control of Iraq would not be lost (Sanger, 2007). It should be kept in mind that, despite the fact that Iran expressed its willingness to solve the problems, Bush's actions against Iran turned to radicalism (Marandi and Halalkhor,2015:106). However, Bush's radicalism ruined all diplomatic opportunities. Bush's failure in enforcement led the next president to negotiate with Iran.

To do so, Tehran had to agree first. This drove Obama to use the carrot and stick policy. According to this two-step policy, much international pressure was required to leave no choice for Iran but to negotiate. The second step focused on leniency by the U.S. to encourage Iran to negotiate at the same time (Takeyh and Maloney,2011:1282). For this reason, during the initial years of Obama's presidency, crippling international sanctions were imposed on Iran. At this time, the international community followed these sanctions. Even Iran's close allies obeyed these sanctions and Iran was isolated internationally (Fischer,2010). This global consensus is the hallmark of Obama's foreign policy, since it prevents crossing the sanctions. As a result, the sanctions aimed at Iran's economy could increase the pressure on Iran. A sign of such pressure was Russia's refusal to send S-300 missile systems (Akbarzadeh,2011:170), which signifies that Iran's ally complied with the sanctions. In addition, Obama's policy took a second step which relied on awards and encouragement. The U.S. president's unprecedented message to Iran and addressing the country by its official name the Islamic Republic of Iran (Onea,2013:150), mild reaction after the 2009 election, emphasis on

respecting Iran's government (Akbarzadeh,2011:168), and changing the nature of the institutions that were responsible for the internal incitement of the Iranian people during Bush's era (Sharp,2010:19) were another aspects of his policy. In this way, Iran was no longer at the center of their attention. Also, a few letters to the supreme leader (Mashregh,2019a) were some of the U.S.' incentives during Obama's presidency.

The U.S.' adaptation was real and willingness to negotiate led Obama to send envoys to start the negotiations. Iran's positive response to Oman's mediation resulted in secret negotiations (Rozen,2015), which led to approval of JCPOA. Although Obama's negotiation approach was successful, it had more achievements for Iran than for the westerns, since the global consensus against Iran disappeared, many international sanctions were lifted, and with access to financial resources, Iran could hold economic growth record of the region in a short period of time (Tabrizi, Coville & Jalilvand,2018:3) and could reach a better position at regional and international levels (Khalili and et al,2019:105-134). The issue of Iran with nuclear technology based on JCPOA would be solved in a short time and when the limitations were eliminated Tehran could restart its nuclear program.

On the other hand, Iran's regional activities did not change significantly. This situation has raised Trump's criticism since running for presidency (The Commission on Presidential Debates,2016a). Consequently, one of his first actions against Iran was to withdraw from the nuclear deal. In this way, the sanctions returned and Iran could not benefit from the nuclear deal (the White House,2018b). The U.S.' one-sided withdrawal from JCPOA was not supported by the international community.

The restriction and comprehensiveness of the sanctions put a lot of pressure on the Iranian people. Trump and his team members had a negative attitude to Iran. For instance, Mike Pence, Trump's vice president, believed "Iran is the main sponsor of terrorism" and the reason for instability in the region (Karami and Mousavi,2018:167). U.S.' actions during the Trump administration signify deep hostility towards Iran in that era. They include deployment of military forces to the Middle East, designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist group, and the order to assassinate Soleimani show a sharp contrast with Obama's policy and indicate the extent of radicalism. Another action of Trump to achieve its

goal against Iran, was to establish some institutions (e.g., Iran Action Group in the foreign Ministry) to focus on Iran (Katzman,2020:24).

**Table (3): Comparison of Actions and Behaviors of Bush, Obama and Trump’s Foreign Policy**

Comparison Criteria	George Bush	Barak Obama	Donald Trump
<b>Actions and Behaviors</b>	Placing Iran on the list of axis of evil, broad sanctions against Iran, supporting internal unrest and building institutions in this regard, efforts to create a balance of power with Iran in the region	Two-step policy: international pressure followed by allies, along with incentive negotiations, negotiating with Iran and approve of JCPOA, continuation of sanctions in non-negotiated areas	Withdrawal from JCPOA, one-sided crippling sanctions against Iran, sending military forces to the region, designation of IRGC as a terrorist group, Assassination of Sardar Soleimani, rebuilding institutions to confront Iran.

**4-3. Comparison of Costs and Achievements**

In comparison with the actions during Bush's eight-year presidency, it can be concluded that his foreign policy strategy on Iran was not successful. The small number of achievements in his policy were a result of Iran's mistakes. For instance, Iran's nuclear program which was publicized in 2002, finally, due to Iran's negligence and U.S. restrictions, was sent to international assemblies (i.e., IAEA and United Nation's Security Council) and provided an opportunity for Bush's government to impose various sanctions on Iran. Also, negligence of the trade-off principle in the negotiations and violation of Iran's nuclear rights, propelled Iran to accelerate its nuclear program. A decision that united the international community and the U.S. against Iran. It should be kept in mind that iranophobia was on the rise in the region and the world, and Bush tried to act in favor of the U.S.' interests by selling arms. All of these acts comprise Bush's achievements, but the costs his foreign policy imposed on the U.S. outweigh the achievements. One noteworthy cost is overthrowing the Sunni regime of Saddam and establishing a democratic government in Iraq that resulted in Iran-backed Shi'ites seizing power (Nasr,2006). In this way, Iran's influence in Iraq increased. This incident (which had international drawbacks and led to disagreements between some European allies and the U.S.) was crucial for Iran. Because of

Iran's influence in the political structure of Iraq, it was able to pursue other interests. For instance, negotiations between Iraqi and U.S. officials, where the U.S. pledged not to attack Iran from its soil (Roberts,2016:16). In other words, Iran could negotiate with the U.S. via. Iraq and gain benefits. In addition, Iran's influence in military institutes and trade was on the rise (Beehner and Bruno,2008).

The U.S.' cost of the attack on Iraq was not limited to Iraqi borders, since Iran and Syria are connected through Iraqi soil. It should be kept in mind that Syria under Bashar Asad's rule used to be a potential target for George Bush. Although Syria was not listed on the axis of evil list, it was considered as a rebellious country, which the U.S. had to take some action against it (BBC NEWS,2002). It was this aspect of Bush's foreign policy that left no choice for Syria but to establish ties with Iran, which became stronger with the corridor in Iraq connecting Iran and Syria. In this way, Iran was considered as Damascus's closest ally (Bakri,2011). This geographical connectedness further leads to Lebanon from Iraq and Syria, where one of the main allies of Iran (i.e., Hezbollah) is established. Iran, with this route (known as axis of resistance), was able to support the Shi'ite soldiers in the south of Lebanon.

These developments occurred as a result of a U.S. attack on Iraq and disruption of the power balance that was dominant in the region for decades. Also, the price of miscalculation by the U.S., including its support of Israel and the war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006, prevented Washington from uniting its friends against Hezbollah and resistance forces (Lobe, 2006). Bush's radical foreign policy strategy, led to the radicalization of Iran. When Tehran faced Washington's aggressive actions, it adopted a more aggressive policy. For example, in the nuclear program, Tehran crossed the limitations and expanded its missile and space programs, which had previously raised concerns (Crail,2008). It should be kept in mind that these actions led to its more prominent role in the region, which is in contrast with the U.S.' goal to curb and isolate Iran.

Obama's victory in the elections ameliorated U.S.' policies, an implication of which was the more tangible achievements. As it was mentioned, Obama in his two-step policy tried to form an international unity against Iran which includes its allies (Russia and China) as well. Obama's diplomacy was successful in this regard. The pressures aimed at Iran to accept negotiations on its nuclear program. Again, Obama's diplomacy worked and he could

achieve his goal in policy (i.e., negotiation and reaching a nuclear deal) (Lyons,2015), so that we could impose restrictions on Iran's nuclear program and alleviate concerns. However, this so-called achievement cost a lot for the United States. For instance, Iran's nuclear restrictions were designed for a specific period of time and then lifted. Also, after several years, arms sanctions will be removed and Iran could buy weapons. Many people in the U.S. considered the nuclear deal as incomplete (Gerecht, 2018), because other issues such as regional activity and missile programs were not included in the negotiations. Iran's access to its resources because of the nuclear deal could enhance U.S. concerns about other domains. Another important price of Obama's foreign policy strategy was its passive reaction in the Arab spring, when Iran's policy makers took advantage of this opportunity to strengthen the resistance axis (particularly Iraq and Syria). The U.S. adopted a passive approach to developments and did not punish Bashar Asad for crossing Obama's red line (Chollet,2016). Such reactions along with other orders (e.g., withdrawal of military forces) indicate that Obama's foreign policy strategy played an important role in increasing Iran's power in the region. In fact, Iran could introduce itself as an important player in the region.

The U.S.' return to radicalism in Trump's presidency had fewer achievements than using diplomacy. Probably one of the first actions of Trump was fulfilment of his obligation to withdraw from the nuclear deal. Trump's hostility to Iran, which was accompanied by the promotion of Iranophobia, resulted in more demands for arms. However, the costs for the U.S. were higher than before—even in comparison with the Bush administration. Trump's order to withdraw from the nuclear deal was one-sided and even the U.S.' European allies did not follow Washington (Landler,2018). Similar to Bush's one-sided attack on Iraq, once again there was a gap between the U.S. and its allies. This time, the U.S. went further and endangered the interests of its allies. It also damaged the international reputation of the U.S. by cancelling the agreement of the former president passed in the most important international security institute by all of its allies with a single signature. Other Trump actions titled foreign policy strategy, increased U.S. costs because of lack of any plan (Wiener,2018). The U.S.' Careless actions were answered with a wise response from Iran. For instance, when the U.S. aimed at Iran's oil export with its sanctions, Iran threatened to close the strait of Hormoz (Mashregh,2019b).

However, in practice (supposing the correctness of speculations), by playing in the gray zone, Iran tried to make the Hormoz Strait unsafe, so that Trump could realize his decision's aftermath. With the presence and enhancement of U.S. military activities in the region, Iran destroyed one of their most important drones (Bozorgmehr,2019). When an Iranian oil tanker was confiscated, a Western oil tanker was seized in response to it (Dursun, 2019). The U.S.' withdrawal from the nuclear deal was a response to Iran's step by step restart of its nuclear activities (Press TV,2020). Additionally, when the U.S. attacked and killed Soleimani, Iran responded with a missile attack (Kube and Madani,2020). So, the two countries were engaged in a military conflict, which had its price for the US. Trump, who had decided to isolate Iran, despite having a high cost for Iran, did not succeed in doing so. Conversely, it lost the support of its allies, who supported Iran in international assemblies (e.g., United Nations) and a more active role in the region's development. Actually, his maximum pressure campaign, changed to maximum resistance and resilience by the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as isolation of the US.

This cost was not limited to the interests of U.S. and Europeans. These tensions sometimes cause damage to the Arab countries of the region (e.g., damage to oil tankers or sensitive industries). Even Saudi Arabia, one of the most conservative Arab countries, was on the verge of military confrontation (Kumar,2019). For this reason, Trump's foreign policy had negative effects on U.S.' allies in the region and increased the instability in the region, along with the feeling of insecurity. At the time of these developments, the U.S. deployed more military forces to the region. This was against Trump's personal will to withdraw its forces from the region - another price of Trump's foreign policy.

**Table (4): Comparison of Costs and Achievements of Bush, Obama, and Trump's Foreign Policy**

Comparison Criteria	George Bush	Barak Obama	Donald Trump
<b>Costs and Achievements</b>	<p><b>Achievements:</b> Imposing cost on Iran.</p> <p><b>Costs:</b> distance between US and allies, turning Iraq into an ally of Iran</p>	<p><b>Achievements:</b> global consensus and imposing sanctions against Iran, forcing Iran to negotiate and sign JCPOA,</p>	<p><b>Achievements:</b> adherence to withdrawal from JCPOA</p> <p><b>Costs:</b> distance between US and allies, more</p>

	<p>and connecting Iran with Syria and Lebanon (axis of resistance), failure in stopping Iran's nuclear program, failure in diminishing Iran's power and influence in the region</p>	<p><b>Costs:</b> lack of consensus on all the given domains, more freedom of action with lifting the sanctions, enhancing the axis of resistance due to U.S.' passivity, significant regional role of Iran</p>	<p>aggressive policies of Iran in reaction to U.S.' actions, Iran's more active role in the region, enhancement of instabilities, military confrontation of US with Iran, and increasing in military expenses</p>
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**4-4. Comparison of the Effects and Implications**

As was mentioned before, the most significant decision of Bush was the attack to Iraq, which changed the power balance in favor of Iran. Iran took advantage of this opportunity and increased its influence in Baghdad. In this way, it could gain considerable advantages in many aspects (economic, political and so on) (Beehner and Bruno,2008). Using Iraq's geographical position, Iran could connect to Syria and Lebanon and form an axis of resistance. The importance of this path was evident in the war between Hezbollah and Israel in 2006 (Milani,2013:83). Hence, one of the most significant implications of Bush's foreign policy strategy was to pave the way for the formation of the axis of resistance by Iran. Although Washington put a lot of effort into curbing Iran and the axis of resistance, it was not successful in this regard. The U.S.' achievements (e.g., effectiveness of the sanctions) were a result of Iran's situation and decisions. During Bush's presidency, the U.S. could not reach its goal of a nuclear deal and Iran adhered to its nuclear program despite pressure. With this in mind, when the poor aims of Bush's foreign policy strategy were not achieved, the major aim (i.e., regime change) was out of question. Finally, the result of Bush's foreign policy could be summarized in one sentence: Iran's growth (becoming a regional hegemony) and failure to curb Iran.

Practical failure of Bush's foreign policy strategy, resulted in a change in the policy of the U.S.' next president and adherence to diplomatic means with Iran. For this reason, he emphasized the negotiations that resulted in the nuclear deal. This deal aimed to curb Iran, but in practice could not fulfil this goal. In contrast, the obstacles to Iran's empowerment and influence were removed. Lifting the international sanctions against Iran, which were passed after long processes and had a lot of costs for Iran (Kamali Dehghan,

2016), facilitated Iran's access to new resources. Changing Iran's restrictions (e.g., arms sanctions) from limitless to limited in time and lack of negotiation on Iran's missile program resulted in a new approach in the nuclear deal. As a result, Iran expanded its activities. For this reason, Trump in presidential debates of 2016 mentioned the advantages of the nuclear deal as “we [ourselves] turned them from a weak country to a powerful country in the three years ago” (The Commission on the Presidential Debate, 2016b). Apart from access to new resources for Iran, Washington's passivity in the Arab Spring sheds more light on Obama's foreign policy in turning Iran into a regional hegemony as a consequence of the U.S.' incorrect reaction. Iran played a more important role in regional developments as a strong country without any rival. It was during such developments that Tehran could support the axis of resistance it had established in Syria and Iraq at the time of Bush and demonstrate its power and role to its neighbors. To be more specific about Iran's high influence on the axis of resistance, Iran's influence in Iraq reached to the point of setting conditions for selecting a new prime minister, only based on those conditions (Asre-Iran, 2014). However, Iran's presence in Syria did not stop there. Due to support of Iran, Bashar Asad's government was saved and Iran achieved a number of important goals through its presence (Tabatabai, 2018). It should be kept in mind that with Iran's increasing power, Hezbollah has gained more power, too. This group, aside from domestic activities in Beirut's power structure, participated in Syria's war and, even without informing the central government in Lebanon, showed its power (Hage Ali, 2019). Briefly, the axis of resistance formed with the help of George Bush's foreign policy strategy, became stronger at the time of Obama.

The legacy of Obama's foreign policy and the resultant threat to U.S.' interests in the Middle East propelled Donald Trump to decide on a serious change in approach after the 2016 election. When he did not manage to impose his desire to alter the nuclear deal (to make it more comprehensive), and to negotiate with Iran to reach a more inclusive deal, he decided to withdraw from it and isolate Iran by maximum pressure (The White House, 2018c). However, Washington's foreign policy actions and Tehran's reactions resulted in a counter-effect on U.S.' goals, since Iran gave more hostile responses, such as disrupting the oil tanker traffic, confiscation of Western tankers, destruction of American drones, and missile attacks on

U.S. military bases. These actions did not change Iran's policy and they played a more prominent role. So, Trump's foreign policy strategy did not succeed in achieving his goals against Iran. At that time, new negotiations or reforms did not occur. By imposing crippling sanctions (BBC NEWS,2018) U.S. created crises inside Iran (Wallsh,2020), but Iran was not isolated in the world and its actions did not change in the region.

In fact, Iran resisted one-sided pressures and responded to them, and in this way laid the foundation for the U.S.' isolation in the world.

**Table (5): Comparison of Implications and Effects of Bush, Obama and Trump's Foreign Policy**

Comparison Criteria	George Bush	Barak Obama	Donald Trump
<b>Implications and Effects</b>	Imbalance of regional power, beginning point of Iran's rise to power and influence in the region, formation of axis of resistance by Iran and its allies	Iran's access to significant sources by JCPOA, new approach for strengthening Iran and the axis of resistance, taking advantage of U.S.' ignorance to Arab Spring to support axis of resistance	Failure to achieve Iran's isolation, more activity of Iran in reaction to U.S.' actions directly or indirectly, increasing unrest in the region, Iran's resistance to U.S.' crippling sanctions, failure to form a new agreement and failure to amend the existing nuclear agreement

### 5. Analysis

Based on this study, it is implied that the U.S.' interests were only served when no independent hegemonic government existed in the region. Since Iran and Iraq are the only two potential countries, curbing them has always been on the top agenda of U.S. officials. An important issue is the change that occurred since Bill Clinton's time in America's strategy against Iran and Iraq, and influenced by the post-Cold War world, he put simultaneous confrontation with both on his agenda.

In a similar vein to Clinton's approach, Bush decided on not only curbing the two countries, but also the elimination of Tehran and Baghdad from regional developments. Based on his strategy, Iraq should be eliminated first, followed by regime change in Tehran to solve the problem of curbing these countries. Events that occurred after the overthrow of Saddam in 2003 stopped the U.S. from proceeding to the next step, because the U.S.

provided the best opportunity for Iran. In this way, Iran could have a considerable influence. With the American democracy established in new Iraq, Iran managed to assign its agents to the power and security structures of Iraq and take control of that country. Iran's vast influence in Iraq led Iran to establish close ties with Bashar Assad in Syria. Doing so was one of Bush's goals, too. The consequence of Iran's reactions to the U.S.' miscalculations was the formation of the axis of resistance against the U.S., which posed a serious threat to Washington's allies and their interests. Although Bush was aware of his foreign policy strategy's legacy, he tried to confront Iran in regional, nuclear, and missile aspects and enact international sanctions. However, none of the above actions changed Iran's path to power and regional influence.

The U.S.' failure in the region, highlighted the necessity of change in Washington's foreign policy strategy. The next president of the U.S. with the slogan of change did so. Barak Obama avoided radical and one-sided policies and aimed for a win-win game with Tehran. Obama's notable achievement in foreign policy strategy lies in the nuclear deal, in which the U.S. did its best to avoid threat by Iran. In fact, it was Iran which won the nuclear deal. Through Iran's engagement in negotiation strategy, it took advantage of its nuclear program and had some achievements that were unprecedented in Bush's presidency. For instance, Iran's right to enrichment that was banned previously is recognized now. In this way, Iran had to accept limitations in the nuclear deal and then would return to a normal situation which was agreed by the U.S. and all world countries. Also, Tehran managed to exclude its missile program from negotiations. Moreover, the previous restrictions and sanctions against Iran resulting from a global consensus were cancelled. Iran was able to access resources it was not able to reach before. As a result, Tehran reached a period of economic growth and stability after some economic hardships. Nuclear deals at the level of the region enhanced Iran's activities, so that Iran –which was a former ally of Iraq and Syria – expanded its presence in the axis of resistance by fighting ISIS and being active in Yemen. In other words, Obama's strategy in the Middle East helped Iran to become a key player in the region. None of the U.S.' allies in the region had the strength to confront Iran.

The unrepresented growth of the power and influence of Iran in the region raised concerns of U.S.' traditional allies in the region and the policy makers

in Washington. However, with the presidency of Trump, this situation was challenged. From the beginning, Trump attacked the nuclear deal, which in his opinion served the interests of Iran, and referred to it as the worst deal in history. He announced that the deal with Iran had to be modified, otherwise the U.S. would withdraw from it. Finally, when the U.S. could not convince other countries to improve it, Donald Trump decided to withdraw from this international agreement and decided to pressure Iran with more sanctions in a maximum pressure campaign. U.S.' pressures resulted in even larger chaos in the country and Iran's economy faced serious difficulties. The U.S. took other measures, including the designation of the IRGC as a terrorist group and the assassination of Ghasem Soleimani (commander of Quds Forces). Washington's activities at that time were endorsed by its regional allies. On the other hand, the flexibility of Iran's strategy against the U.S. and its hostile approach, was surprising for them.

In spite of maximum pressure, Iran responded wisely. Hence, actions and reactions of Washington and Tehran made the region insecure. The insecurity of the region did not matter to Tehran, which was involved in an economic war, but was unacceptable to U.S.' Arab allies requiring peace for their financial activities.

Direct and proxy conflicts reached the point of engaging Saudi Arabia (one of the most important allies of the US) and Iran. Due to the insecurity of the region, Iran's power and military strength were exhibited. Responding to the world's number-one military power and the only hegemony at the international level was an honor to Iran's power. Simply put, Trump's foreign policy expanded Iran's activities and unlocked the potential.

## **6 .Conclusion**

The present study investigates the effect of U.S' foreign policy strategy on the power and influence of Iran. Based on this study, U.S. foreign policy strategies during Bush, Obama, and Trump's presidencies, with notable differences in principles and methods, enhanced Iran's regional power and influence. This trend started when Bush eliminated Saddam Hossein in Iraq. In fact, by changing the power balance of the region, the U.S. laid the foundation for Iran's growth and formation of a resistance axis. Despite Bush's attempt to fix his government's mistakes, his government did not get the chance to restrain Iran's growing power and influence. The situation led Obama to stop Iran by negotiation and diplomacy. However, doing so had a countereffect, since by an international agreement better opportunity were

provided for Iran. At that time, Iranian policy-makers could take advantage of the opportunity to negotiate, and free their resources under limited obligation to take their operational power in the region to a new level after the Islamic Revolution. Iran's power and influence in the region propelled Trump to impose crippling sanctions against Iran, to stop this growth. Iran changed its strategy, as well, and decided to resist Washington. A decision that, despite its great cost, was successful and resulted in the failure of Trump's foreign policy strategy. So, enhancement of Iran's regional power and influence, which started with Bush's foreign policy strategy, hastened the available opportunities in Obama's and Trump's foreign policy strategies. Their governments could not achieve U.S. goals of restraining Iran's regional power and influence, despite imposing great damage on Iran. Therefore, it could be concluded that the U.S. foreign policy strategy in the region and Iran in all three eras increased Iran's regional power and influence in different ways.

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