

The Scope of Conflict and Its Outcome: The Winners and Losers of the 2009-15 Nuclear Issue

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Framework: The Scope of Conflict in Relation to Its Outcome

In *The Semisovereign People*, E. E. Schattschneider introduces his theory of conflict. The theory posits that the audience of a given conflict has a significant bearing on its outcome.¹ This theory is then applied to political conflicts and their outcomes, as the author establishes a link between the *scope* of a political conflict and its *outcome*. Although the author limits his theory's application to American domestic politics, it provides a useful lens to analyze foreign policy conflicts between nations. To demonstrate, this analysis investigates the conflict between Iran and the United States — between the years 2009-2015 — over the nuclear issue. The expansion of the *scope* of conflict by the United States and its allies greatly affected its *outcome*.

Schattschneider bases his theory on two key propositions. The first is that “the outcome of every conflict is determined by the extent to which the audience becomes involved in it.”² He argues that every added or subtracted participant to a conflict alters the result of it by changing the balance of the forces involved.³ For instance, if a bar fight breaks out between the strong Mac and weak Harry, in a vacuum with no one else involved, Mac is more likely to emerge the winner. However, if Harry's friend comes to his aid, the outcome of the conflict is altered and Harry is more likely to win than in the first instance.

The second proposition is a product of the first. Schattschneider states that “the most important strategy of politics is concerned with the scope of the conflict.”⁴ He argues that “conflicts are frequently won or lost by the success that the contestants have in getting the audience involved in the fight or excluding it.”⁵ In other words, the conflicting parties have an

¹ Elmer E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America* (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2013), 2.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 2-3.

⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁵ Ibid., 4.

opportunity to change the possible outcome of the conflict by attempting to either *expand* or *shrink* the pool of those involved in it. For instance, in the previous bar fight example, Mac has the incentive to attempt to *shrink* the scope of the conflict and keep Harry's friend out of it to maximize the likelihood of his victory. Naturally, Harry has the incentive to *expand* the scope of the conflict by getting more parties involved in an attempt to change the otherwise likely outcome of his defeat.

Two key dynamics ought to be highlighted in this analysis: competitiveness and visibility. Both of these dynamics could serve as variables in the expansion or shrinkage of conflict.⁶ In terms of competitiveness, Schattschneider argues that the *loser* is the party that calls in outside help in hopes of changing the outcome of the conflict.⁷ When it comes to visibility, he contends that it is a factor in expanding the scope of the conflict; when a conflict is more visible there is a higher chance that the scope of it will expand, changing the possible outcome (the opposite is also true when visibility is reduced).⁸

Now that the theoretical framework has been outlined, applying it to the case of US-Iran relations in the context of the nuclear issue could highlight the strength of this framework. However, to classify the *winners* and *losers* throughout this multi-year-long conflict, one needs to establish the objectives of the two main sides of it. It is important to note that objectives are not static and can change as the conflict evolves. This analysis will utilize rational choice theory to identify Iranian objectives and Congressional records to discern the objectives of the United States.

⁶ Ibid., 16-17.

⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁸ Ibid.

Rational Choice Theory and Objective Identification

In his last article, William H. Riker writes on the political psychology of rational choice theory. He argues that the rational choice model starts with an assumption that agents know what they want and can order their differing wants transitively.⁹ He further mentions another key assumption of this theory: that the agents attempt to choose the best means to achieve their ends.¹⁰ This theory helps with understanding the behavior of political actors in the context of their intentions, objectives, and the methods they utilize to achieve them. Nonetheless, this theory is equally valuable as an investigative tool. In politics, especially international politics and conflicts, the goals of political entities are hard to discern; using this theory will help identify the objectives of political actors. To demonstrate the strength of this theory, this analysis investigates the conflict between Iran and the United States — between the years 2009-2015 — over the nuclear issue. Using rational choice theory will yield more clarity on the objectives of the United States and Iran over the course of this conflict. This will help us identify the *winners and losers* of this conflict based on the achievement (or lack thereof) of each's objectives.

Rational choice theory is a powerfully simple theory that provides a unique lens of analysis when utilized in the political arena. Its tenants could be summarized in a few brief words: actors behave to serve their best interest(s), they attempt to choose the ideal instruments to aid them with realizing those interests, and the choices of one actor could affect the behavior of another.¹¹ One essential facet of using rational choice theory in politics is that — unless you are one of the actors — the objectives of those involved often vary from vague to unknown.¹²

⁹ William H. Riker, "The Political Psychology of Rational Choice Theory," *Political Psychology* 16, no. 1 (March 1995): pp. 23-43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3791448>, 24.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

¹² *Ibid.*, 25.

That is doubly true for international politics, especially international conflicts, such as the Iran-US conflict over nuclear issues. Secrecy over objectives could yield a strategic advantage for the actors in this conflict.

Nonetheless, this is where rational choice theory comes into play. Through the interactions between intentions, actions, and outcomes, we can systematically make educated assumptions as to what the objectives of political actors are. Riker sketches a rough outline of how the process of objective identification goes with the utilization of rational choice theory. He argues that “it is necessary to work back and forth among outcomes, actions, and intentions to discover goals people actually have.”¹³ In practice, here’s what that *working back and forth* looks like:

Step 1: Assume the goals of the actors

Step 2: Based on the assumed goals, predict actions and outcomes

Step 3: Verify if the assumed actions and outcomes come to fruition or not

Step 3A: If the predicted actions and outcomes occur, the process is completed and the objective has been identified

Step 3B: If the predicted actions and outcomes do not occur, the assumed goal must be reconsidered and the process must be restarted¹⁴

Hunting for Iran’s Objectives

Riker’s objective identification framework will prove extremely useful in our pursuit of better understanding the Iran-US nuclear conflict and its outcome. It will help us discern what Iran’s actual objectives were over the course of the conflict, which will form the cornerstone of

¹³ Ibid., 26.

¹⁴ Ibid.

our “winners and losers” analysis in the following sections. The focus will be on Iran’s objectives in this section as the US objectives were much clearer than those of Iran and thus do not call for the use of Riker’s framework.

The two assumed Iranian objectives under consideration are (1) attaining a nuclear weapon and (2) achieving self-sufficiency and ensuring regime survival. Although these objectives are not completely mutually exclusive, they are different enough to warrant two separate analyses. It is also important to note that the objectives of political actors are not static and can change over time to adapt to the situation the actors face. Not only that, but political actors also themselves are not a fixed variable and can change over time as well. This most certainly applies to the case study under investigation here as the conflict in question took place over an extended period of years (2009-15).

Let’s assume that Iran’s objective in the conflict was to develop sufficient nuclear capabilities to produce a nuclear weapon. Based on that assumption, we can come up with predicted actions and the outcomes they lead to. If Iran wants to build up its nuclear capabilities, it will have to increase the proportion of uranium-235 in its uranium samples.¹⁵ U-235 is needed for both peaceful and non-peaceful nuclear programs. The process used to increase the proportion of U-235 in uranium samples is called enrichment.¹⁶

Uranium could be enriched to various levels, and the level of enrichment is a key indicator of a given nuclear program’s purpose. Enrichment occurs when uranium is converted into gas and placed in spinning centrifuges that separate U-238 from U-235. There are two categories of enriched uranium: low-enriched uranium (LEU) and high-enriched uranium

¹⁵CFR, “How Do Countries Create Nuclear Weapons?,” Council on Foreign Relations (Council on Foreign Relations), accessed November 8, 2022, <https://world101.cfr.org/global-era-issues/nuclear-proliferation/how-do-countries-create-nuclear-weapons>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

(HEU).¹⁷ LEU has less than 20 percent U-235 while HEU has 20 percent or more U-235.¹⁸ Technically, any level of HEU could be used in making a weapon. However, HEU enriched to at least 90 percent — what they call weapons-grade uranium — is most used in manufacturing nuclear weaponry.

Thus, if Iran's goal were to build a nuclear weapon, Iran would have had to actively pursue higher levels of uranium enrichment for that assumed goal to be achieved. As mentioned above, weapons-grade uranium consists of uranium enriched to at least 90 percent or higher. However, according to a timeline by Arms Control Association, the highest level of enrichment Iran reached over the period of 2009-2015 was 20 percent, making all its enriched stockpile LEU.¹⁹ Although enough stockpiled LEU would have made it easier for Iran to enrich HEU up to 90 percent, Iran never pursued that course of action during the period in question and never converted its LEU to HEU.²⁰

Therefore, based on our rational choice theory framework, we can conclude that the assumed objective of Iran obtaining nuclear weapons is incorrect. That is due to the mismatch between the assumed actions we derived and the reality of Iranian actions during the period under investigation. Thus, we reached step 3B of the framework outlined above and we ought to reconsider the assumed goal and start the process of objective identification over again.

Let us assume this time that Iran's objectives during this conflict were to achieve self-sufficiency and ensure regime survival. These objectives produce a different set of assumed actions and outcomes that should be investigated to ensure proper objective identification. There

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Kelsey Davenport, "Timeline of Nuclear Diplomacy With Iran," (Arms Control Association, October 2022),

<https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Nuclear-Diplomacy-With-Iran#2009>.

²⁰ Ibid.

is a relatively big number of predicted actions for these objectives. However, this analysis will focus on energy and scientific self-sufficiency through the development of native uranium enrichment capabilities and regime survival through *hedging*.

In terms of energy and scientific self-sufficiency, polls show that a majority of the Iranian public supports those pursuits: 74 percent of respondents favored a deal in which Iran guarantees a peaceful nuclear program in return for trade and investment, 83 percent of respondents strongly favored Iran having nuclear energy, and only 31 percent responded in favor of abandoning nuclear enrichment in return for sanction relief.²¹ Although Iran is not a democracy and these polling numbers do not directly translate into policy decisions, it is crucial to highlight the strong domestic support for a peaceful Iranian nuclear program.

One of the predicted actions one can derive from the preceding assumed objective of energy and scientific self-sufficiency is Iran limiting its uranium enrichment to 20 percent and only producing LEU. That is because LEU is most common for civilian applications such as energy generation at 3-5 percent enrichment levels and scientific purposes under 20 percent.²² Nations enriching uranium at 20 percent or lower somewhat signal their intentions of having a solely peaceful nuclear program. Nonetheless, we must acknowledge that having a stockpile of LEU makes it easier and quicker to produce HEU and reach weapons-grade enrichment status (through a shorter breakout time).²³ However, Iran over the course of 2009-2015 never pursued

²¹ Steven Hurst, “2009-15: Obama and the Road to the JCPOA,” in *United States and the Iranian Nuclear Programme: A Critical History* (EDINBURGH: EDINBURGH UNIV PRESS, 2020), pp. 190-245, 196.

²² Rowan Humphries, “Fact Sheet: Uranium Enrichment: For Peace or for Weapons,” Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation (Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, August 26, 2021), [https://armscontrolcenter.org/uranium-enrichment-for-peace-or-for-weapons/#:~:text=Highly%20enriched%20uranium%20\(HEU\)%20is,applications%20for%20this%20fuel%20too](https://armscontrolcenter.org/uranium-enrichment-for-peace-or-for-weapons/#:~:text=Highly%20enriched%20uranium%20(HEU)%20is,applications%20for%20this%20fuel%20too).

²³ CFR, “How Do Countries Create Nuclear Weapons?,” Council on Foreign Relations (Council on Foreign Relations), accessed November 8, 2022,

such a course of action and only enriched up to 20 percent without attempting to weaponize its stockpile of LEU.²⁴

Another predicted course of action derived from our assumed objectives is Iran's attempt to reach *hedging* to ensure regime survival. This means that Iran would attempt to gain the technical know-how of producing a nuclear weapon without attempting to actually produce one. This is often dubbed the *Japanese option* of attaining the materials and knowledge necessary to produce a nuclear weapon but choosing not to manufacture one (because Japan is believed to have such capabilities).²⁵

According to IAEA's GOV/2011/65 report on the status of Iran's nuclear program, Iran had reached an advanced level of attaining the technical know-how to produce a nuclear weapon by 2011. Their "Analysis of Payload" attachment at the end of the report shows that Iran's program met many criteria of a weapons program that is *likely* to be of nuclear nature (refer to *Fig. 1* on page 23). The IAEA report practically ruled out biological, chemical, high explosive, EMP, and satellite applications of the program and asserted that Iran's actions were likely in pursuit of a nuclear application.²⁶

Nonetheless, one crucial factor must be accounted for to complete the analysis of Iran's pursuit of *hedging*, which is the level of uranium enrichment by Iran. As mentioned above, Iran never pursued uranium enrichment past 20 percent, making all its enrichment activities

<https://world101.cfr.org/global-era-issues/nuclear-proliferation/how-do-countries-create-nuclear-weapons>.

²⁴ Congressional Digest, "Iran Sanctions," International Debates 8, no. 9 (December 2010), <https://congressionaldigest.com/issue/iran-sanctions/iran-sanctions-article/>.

²⁵ James Dobbins, "Iran's Interests, Objectives, and Strategies," in *Coping with a Nuclearizing Iran* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2011), pp. 9-28, 26.

²⁶ IAEA, "GOV/2011/65 - International Atomic Energy Agency," International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA, November 18, 2011), <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gov2011-65.pdf>.

non-applicable for use in a nuclear weapon. This fact supports the hypothesis of Iran's pursuit of *hedging* to ensure regime survival.

By using rational choice theory, we were able to identify the possible objectives Iran had during the conflict over the nuclear issue (2009-15). The framework showed us that the mismatch between predicted actions and the actual behavior of Iran negates the assumed objective of attaining a nuclear weapon. The analysis of another set of assumed objectives helped shed light on the realities of what Iran had wanted to achieve over the course of the conflict.

By assuming that Iran's objectives were self-sufficiency and regime survival, but not producing a nuclear weapon, we were able to derive a new set of predicted actions Iran could take to pursue those assumed objectives. The match between the predicted and actual actions of Iran in this second instance indicates that objective identification was completed.

US Objectives: Loud and Clear

While attempting to identify Iran's objectives during the nuclear issue (2009-15) proved difficult and required the utilization of rational choice theory, figuring out US objectives is a relatively simple task. The simplicity of this task stems from the fact that the United States is a democracy and thus is beholden to its people. The system of government in the United States lends itself to a great deal of transparency, especially through the functioning of the most democratic branch of government, the legislative branch (i.e., Congress).

Therefore, to ascertain what the objectives of the US were when it came to dealing with Iran (2009-15), one needs only to investigate Congressional records and activity over the course of the conflict. Luckily for this analysis, the US Senate's Foreign Relations Committee held a hearing titled *U.S. Strategic Objectives Towards Iran* (S. HRG. 112-366) on December 1, 2011.

The hearing's witnesses were key figures in the Obama administration who dealt with Iran's nuclear issue and had a huge role in shaping the posture of the US towards Iran; statements from Wendy Sherman (Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs at the Department of State) and David Cohen (Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence at the Department of the Treasury) were presented to the committee during the hearing.

These statements — verbal and written — provide key insights into the calculus of the Obama administration towards Iran in late 2011. They clearly and precisely outline what the US hoped to achieve at that point in the conflict. They also shed light on the methods the US utilized to achieve its objectives. Although these statements provide a wide multiplicity of goals, this analysis will only mention ones pertaining to the nuclear issue.

Under Secretary Sherman outlined four main objectives of the administration and the mechanisms utilized in hopes of achieving said objectives: (1) preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons (2) establishing a vast, internationally multilateral sanctions regime against Iran (3) increasing the pressure on Iran via targeted sanctions — with emphasis on sanctioning the Central Bank of Iran (4) further expanding the internal debates/divisions among the Iranian leadership.²⁷ Under Secretary Cohen echoed the objectives outlined by his colleague, stating that the administration is “resolved to build and sustain as much pressure as necessary to bring Iran to meet its international obligations” and that “the key to achieving this goal is to bring together an international coalition to work in concert to reduce exposure to the CBI and to Iranian oil exports.”²⁸

²⁷“U.S. Strategic Objectives towards Iran: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, One Hundred Twelfth Congress, First Session, December 1, 2011,” U.S. strategic objectives towards Iran: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, One Hundred Twelfth Congress, First Session, December 1, 2011 § (2012), 4-6.

²⁸ Ibid., 9.

Thus, the US sought to catalyze internal divisions within the Iranian ruling class by handicapping the Iranian economy with unbearable sanctions. By fostering said divisions via the imposition of heavy sanctions, the US hoped to influence internal Iranian political dynamics to replace hardliner Iranian President Ahmadinejad with one more open to negotiations with the US and its allies. By doing so, the US objectives towards Iran at the end of 2011 — applying pressure on Iran through multilateral sanctions to ensure that it does not pursue weaponization of its nuclear program — were more likely to be achieved than before the imposition of these sanctions.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that this hearing only provides us with the objectives of the Obama administration at the time, not throughout the conflict. The objectives of political actors are not static and can change over time to adapt to the situation on the ground. For instance, the objectives of the United States shifted from preventing Iran from enriching any uranium at all to only limiting Iran's enrichment capabilities to the point where Iran could not produce a nuclear weapon via its own native enrichment processes.²⁹ This second set of objectives is what the analysis will use to determine the winners and losers of this conflict.

This framework of objective identification is valuable for the following sections of this analysis as it greatly aids us in classifying the winners and losers of a given conflict based on the objective achievement (or lack thereof) of the conflicting parties.

Case Study: US-Iran Relations & Conflict Expansion via Sanctions

On one end, the US and its allies sought to block Iran's access to nuclear-related materials and halt/limit Iran's uranium enrichment and possibly nuclear weapons programs.³⁰ On

²⁹ Hurst, 213-214.

³⁰ CFR, 1.

the other end, Iran's *red-line* demand consisted of not submitting to a zero-enrichment solution (as part of their M.O. of self-sufficiency), ensure regime survival, as well as the lifting of suffocating sanctions imposed on the nation.³¹

In dealing with Iran, the Obama administration pursued a dual-track policy — of persuasion and pressure — in hopes of achieving its goals.³² The administration signaled a preference for diplomacy between early 2009 and early 2010.³³ Nonetheless, after a period of fruitless negotiations (the first track), the US sought to pursue the second track of pressuring Iran into a deal through the expansion of sanctions.³⁴ The shift from persuasion to pressure was catalyzed by the US not being able to achieve its objectives through the first track, and therefore being a *loser* in this part of the conflict.

According to Schattschneider, the *losers* of a given conflict have the incentive to call in outside help in hopes of altering the outcome of it.³⁵ In this instance, based on the objectives outlined above, the US is considered the *loser* of the part of the conflict between 2009-2010; it failed to get Iran to commit to halting enrichment through persuasion and diplomacy.³⁶ Thus, the US had the incentive to *call for outside help* in hopes of changing the conflict's outcome, which is precisely what occurred with the massive expansion of multilateral sanctions on Iran.³⁷

The US sought support from its allies — namely the EU — but also from Russia and China in the imposition of sanctions on Iran on the UN stage.³⁸ Resolution UNSCR 1929 was approved by the UN Security Council on 9 June 2010. It imposed an arms embargo on Iran and it

³¹ Tabatabai and Samuel, 181-182.

³² Hurst, 202.

³³ Ibid., 192, 203.

³⁴ Ibid., 203.

³⁵ Schattschneider, 17.

³⁶ Hurst, 205.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 205-206.

denied any financial services to Iran that could contribute to its arms and nuclear programs.³⁹ It also froze the assets of the IRGC and Iran's national shipping line.⁴⁰ However, in an effort to further *expand the scope of conflict on the UN stage* by garnering Chinese and Russian backing for this measure, the Iranian energy sector was excluded from this round of sanctions on the UN stage.⁴¹ It is important to note that the exclusion of Iran's energy sector from the sanctions regime only happened when sanctions were imposed through the UN Security Council, not when the US and EU imposed their own separate sanctions on Iran.

Naturally, the US Congress didn't feel inclined to stop at the resolution passed by the UNSC, which eventually led to Obama signing The Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act into law on 1 July 2010. This act enacted a variety of restrictions on the Iranian energy and financial sectors. It also imposed secondary sanctions on firms that have made an investment of \$20 million or more in the Iranian energy sector and it denied foreign banks doing business with Iran and firms supplying Iran with potential WMD technology access to US markets and trade.⁴² The Obama administration also successfully pressured Japan and South Korea to comply with disengaging from doing business with Iran, adding more parties to the ongoing conflict in the process and *expanding its scope*. The EU followed suit, enacting — on 26 July 2010 — similar measures to the ones the Obama administration approved.⁴³ Further sanctions were imposed by the United Kingdom and Canada on Iran, damaging the Islamic Republic's banking, shipping, and energy sectors.⁴⁴

³⁹ Ibid., 205.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 205-206.

⁴³ Ibid., 206.

⁴⁴ Alireza Nader, "Influencing Iran's Decisions on the Nuclear Program," *Sanctions, Statecraft, and Nuclear Proliferation*, 2012, pp. 211-231, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511862380.011>, 214.

Following the 2010 rounds of sanctions and up until 2012, the US and EU continued to expand the system of sanctions imposed on Iran. The Obama administration, through a series of executive orders and legislative actions, enacted sanctions against many Iranian entities as well as secondary sanctions targeting foreign banks doing business with sanctioned Iranian entities. The administration also put pressure on the consumers of Iranian oil by enacting a range of punishments for those states and companies involved in buying Iranian energy products.⁴⁵ The EU's measures were even more sweeping, as they included a total ban on oil and gas imports from Iran, freezing the assets of Iran's Central Bank, as well as blacklisting Iran from the SWIFT worldwide financial transaction system (effectively isolating Iran's financial system from the rest of the world).⁴⁶

By enacting such strict and heavy sanctions, the US and its allies have effectively *expanded the scope of the conflict* to impose further pressure on Iran in the hopes of changing its outcome. Whereas the conflict once involved a few key players, namely the governments of the US and its allies and Iran, by the end of 2012 many more participants have been added to the conflict. They brought into the conflict a mixture of states, banks, technology firms, and energy firms (from across the globe) — effectively creating a regime of expanded, multilateral, private & public sector sanctions.

The expansion of the *scope of the conflict* through harsh, multilateral sanctions shifted the dynamics of the conflict in question. It served as an incentive for Iran to approach negotiations more pragmatically in the hopes of attaining sanction relief. Whereas Iran had a relatively smaller incentive to negotiate a deal before the imposition of these crippling sanctions, the sanctions provided a novel dynamic in negotiations where a *quid-pro-quo-type* deal could be

⁴⁵ Hurst, 212.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

brought to fruition; Iran would restrict its nuclear activities and allow the IAEA to monitor its facilities and in return would get substantial sanction relief from the US and its allies.

In summary, the US utilized *conflict expansion* to change the *outcome* of the conflict, as it went from *loser* in 2009 to arguable *winner* with the signing of the JPA in 2013 & JCPOA in 2015. It brought state allies, energy & technology firms, and financial institutions into the conflict by lobbying for the imposition of primary sanctions on the UN and international stages as well as the implementation of secondary sanctions on non-governmental actors dealing with Iran. These sanctions served to isolate Iran from international markets as well as a deterrent for governmental and non-governmental entities dealing with Iran.

Although classifying the *winners & losers* comes later in this analysis, there is little doubt that by 2015 the United States' position in this conflict was much improved compared to 2009. The US managed to achieve many of its objectives — previously thought of as unattainable — as Iran agreed to limit its uranium enrichment and allow international inspectors to access its nuclear sites, ensuring the enforcement of the JCPOA.⁴⁷ This change in dynamic is in large part thanks to the utilization of *conflict expansion* as a mechanism to influence the *outcome* of the conflict; the following section investigates how conflict expansion shifted the dynamics of the conflict and affected its outcome.

Sanctions and Shifting Domestic Dynamics in Iran

Through the utilization of heavy sanctions, the United States had hoped to bring Iran back to the negotiating table and thus attempt to achieve its objectives through diplomacy. The sanctions eventually led to Iran coming back to negotiations. However, it is important for this

⁴⁷ CFR, 2.

analysis to investigate the ways in which the expansion of the scope of the conflict via multilateral sanctions helped achieve US objectives. Sanctions heavily influenced internal Iranian political and economic dynamics and eventually catalyzed a change in Iranian leadership through the election of Hassan Rouhani as President of the Islamic Republic.

The election of Rouhani as President is a crucial development that helped facilitate the signing of the JCPOA in 2015. Hassan Rouhani was considered a moderate, whereas his predecessor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was from the hardliner camp. The election of Rouhani came as the culmination of discontent with hardliners' leadership within the Iranian public. After years of crippling sanctions and international isolation as well as a legitimacy crisis that the regime was facing following the 2009 re-election of Ahmadinejad and the advent of the green movement, the opportunity for a *breath of fresh air* in leadership presented itself.⁴⁸

The sanctions were arguably the most important factor in catalyzing the leadership change. Following the imposition of sanctions on Iran due to its nuclear program, the country's GDP shrank by 9 percent during 2012-14 and the value of its currency declined by 56 percent.⁴⁹ Inflation reached 40 percent in 2011-13 and the oil sector lost out on \$160 billion in revenue between 2012-15 (as oil exports dropped from 2.2 million barrels per day in 2012 to 1.1 million barrels per day in 2015).⁵⁰

Naturally, due to the economy suffering under the unbearable burden of sanctions, many Iranians faced hardship in their day-to-day lives. With GDP shrinking and inflation rising, Iranians made less money as their lives got more expensive. This, in conjunction with other factors such as international isolation and lack of trust in the ruling class in power, led to popular

⁴⁸ Ariane Tabatabai, "Negotiating the 'Iran Talks' in Tehran: The Iranian Drivers That Shaped the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," *The Nonproliferation Review* 24, no. 3-4 (April 2017): pp. 225-242, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2018.1426180>, 226-227. / Nader, 213.

⁴⁹ Tabatabai, 233.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

discontent among the Iranian people. This coincided with the regime's surprising move of allowing elections to take their natural course and not tampering with them much.⁵¹

Rouhani capitalized on these factors, running on a platform that put the economy first. His assertion was that "it is good for centrifuges to operate, but it is also important that the country operates as well and the wheels of industry are turning."⁵² Rouhani's economy-first platform resonated with many Iranians as the performance of the economy and the removal of sanctions became crucial issues that the public deeply cared about. This coupled with the hardliners splitting the vote between five candidates due to their internal strife helped Rouhani get a better chance at winning the election.⁵³ When all was said and done, Rouhani was elected with 50.7 percent of the vote in the first round, eliminating the need for a run-off.⁵⁴

Rouhani's agenda was clear once he was in office. He underlined the need to salvage the country's economy as well as revive constructive interaction with the rest of the world.⁵⁵ He also emphasized the need to build mutual trust with other countries through greater transparency on Iran's end. These stances Rouhani adopted as President are not at all surprising given his past background as lead Iranian negotiator in the early 2000s.

The negotiations Rouhani participated in for the Iranian side in 2003 differed greatly from those which took place under Ahmadinejad. They were held between Iran on one side and the E3 (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom) on the other. Rouhani, as Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council at the time, headed the talks for the Iranian side.⁵⁶ The negotiations, which took place in the last two years of reformist President Mohammad Khatami

⁵¹ Hurst, 218.

⁵² Ibid., 217.

⁵³ Ibid., 218.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 217-218.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 218.

⁵⁶ Tabatabai, 227.

(2003-05), produced a resolution that would later become unthinkable under Ahmadinejad. In November 2004, the talks led to the Paris Agreement, whereby Iran agreed to temporarily and voluntarily suspend its enrichment activities as well as abide by an Additional Protocol permitting intrusive verification processes as negotiations continued.⁵⁷ Such a concession of halting native Iranian enrichment activities would be impossible in just a few years under the leadership of Ahmadinejad.

Thus, it is no wonder that once the scope of the conflict was expanded via multilateral sanctions, which helped facilitate a shift in internal Iranian political dynamics and a change in Iranian presidential leadership through Rouhani's election, the negotiations between Iran and the US and its allies took on a more accelerated pace in the summer of 2013.⁵⁸ Rouhani's former position as lead negotiator under a reformist President and his ideological leaning as a moderate somewhat foreshadowed the signing of both the JPA in 2013 and the JCPOA in 2015. A former negotiator who accepted the terms of the Paris Agreement in 2004 was now President of the Islamic Republic, making Iran more likely to compromise in negotiations in order to salvage its economy.

Conclusion: Winners & Losers of the Conflict

Thus, based on the objectives of Iran and the United States that this analysis outlined and based on the terms of the JCPOA, we can begin to deduce the winners and losers of this conflict. Though this analysis does not provide winners and losers in a binary black-and-white way, assigning winners and losers *relative* to the consequences of conflict expansion via multilateral sanctions is possible.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 228.

The objectives of both nations are central to this method of classification; the categorization of winners and losers is based on each actor's ability to achieve their own respective set of objectives throughout the conflict. However, due to the complexity of assigning winners and losers when the objectives are dynamic and changing over time, this analysis will use a fixed set of objectives to assign winners and losers. Here are each party's objectives:

- **Iran: (1) Scientific and energy self-sufficiency (2) Regime survival (3) Sanctions relief**
- **US: (1) Prevent Iran from acquiring WMDs (2) Foster debate and division among Iran's ruling class (3) IAEA monitoring of Iran's nuclear facilities**

Setting the nations' objectives as fixed variables, we can separate the conflict into two main parts based on its scope. The first part consists of the period before the introduction of multilateral sanctions while the second is the period during and after the imposition of said sanctions. The reason for breaking the conflict down into two distinct parts is simple; the dynamics of the conflict fundamentally changed when the US expanded its scope by adding more actors and stakeholders to it via sanctions. This decidedly had a significant impact on the outcome of the conflict.

In the first part of the conflict, it is safe to argue that the United States was the loser of it while Iran was the winner. Based on the objectives of each actor, the United States achieved none while Iran achieved two out of three (only failing to achieve the objective of sanctions relief). Whereas the United States could not prevent Iran from its journey to WMDs, could not implement IAEA monitoring, and was not able to foster debate and division among Iran's ruling class, Iran was able to pursue scientific and energy self-sufficiency as well as ensure regime survival.

Iran was able to achieve its objectives in this first part of the conflict via two distinct methods. The objective of scientific and energy self-sufficiency was achieved via Iran's native uranium enrichment capabilities. Iran was able to achieve energy and scientific self-sufficiency by enriching uranium to 3-5 percent (for energy generation purposes) in some of its nuclear reactors while also enriching uranium up to 20 percent (for medical and scientific purposes) in others. Iran was also able to ensure regime survival via its policy of hedging, emphasizing the importance of acquiring the technical know-how of producing nuclear weapons to deter adversaries from threatening the Iranian regime.

Nonetheless, the dynamics of the conflict shifted greatly with the introduction of international multilateral sanctions against Iran in the second part of the conflict. With that, the outcome of the conflict shifted greatly as well. The achievement of the United States' objectives was tightly linked to the Obama administration's policy of expanding the conflict to shift the balance of power in its favor. With said policy, the United States was able to alter the outcome of the conflict and move from being a loser to a winner in this conflict.

The three objectives of the United States outlined above were all achieved mainly through the utilization of a multilateral sanctions regime that heavily burdened the Iranian economy and catalyzed a breakthrough in negotiations. By utilizing primary and secondary sanctions on states and private entities dealing with Iran (and effectively expanding the scope of the conflict), the United States was able to greatly hinder Iran's ability to acquire the materials and equipment necessary to run a weaponized nuclear program.

By using the same method, the United States was also able to eventually achieve the two remaining objectives it had as well as solidify the achievement of the first objective with the eventual signing of the JCPOA in 2015. The sanctions regime, as discussed above, heavily

influenced internal Iranian political dynamics. It bred dissatisfaction among the Iranian people with the leadership of hardliners such as then-President Ahmadinejad. That dissatisfaction gave moderate candidates such as Rouhani a window of opportunity to place blame on the hardliner camp of leadership in the run-up to the elections of 2013. The United States' objective of fostering internal debate and division among the Iranian ruling class was achieved when Rouhani was elected President of the Islamic Republic in the summer of 2013. To the liking of the United States, Rouhani was a moderate who was more willing to compromise and provided a better platform for negotiations on which the JCPOA was to be struck.

The last objective, IAEA monitoring of Iran's nuclear activities and facilities, was achieved with the signing of the JCPOA in 2015. Iran, under the leadership of Rouhani (US objective #2), agreed to restrictions on its nuclear program (US objective #1) as well as allowed the monitoring and verification of said restrictions by the IAEA (US objective #3).⁵⁹ In return, Iran would receive substantial sanctions relief to aid its ailing economy (Iran objective #3).⁶⁰

The United States, by utilizing conflict expansion via sanctions, was able to strike a deal with Iran where both sides compromised for a *win-win* outcome. The objectives of both Iran and the United States were achieved through the JCPOA. The United States went from achieving none of its main objectives in 2009 to achieving all three in 2015; Iran went from achieving two out of three of its objectives in 2009 to achieving all three in 2015.

Without the dynamics of the conflict being altered by the United States via the expansion of its scope, one could easily imagine an outcome that is not of the *win-win* variety. Nonetheless, and luckily for the rest of the world, the outcome of this highly charged conflict was altered in a way that satisfied the two main adversaries, at least until 2018.

⁵⁹ Kali Robinson, "What Is the Iran Nuclear Deal?," Council on Foreign Relations (Council on Foreign Relations, July 20, 2022), <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-iran-nuclear-deal>.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Attachments

Fig. 1: Analysis of Payload⁶¹

	BIOLOGICAL	CHEMICAL	HIGH EXPLOSIVE	E M P	SATELLITE	NUCLEAR
Applicable Mass and Dimensions						
Contains a HV generator box						
Airburst <3000'						
Multiple Detonators Present						
No Capability for Release of Chamber from Capsule or Load from Chamber and no Antenna(s)						
Presence of 400m Shaft in Test Sketch						
Total Package Taken as a Whole						

LIKELY

POSSIBLE

UNLIKELY

IMPOSSIBLE

⁶¹IAEA.

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