

# "Sanctions Are Coming": Fear and Iranophobia in American Foreign Policy

Written by Sagnik Guha

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SAGNIK GUHA, JAN 7 2019

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November 2018, President Trump's twitter account carried a picture of himself with the caption 'Sanctions Are Coming', referring to the United States' (U.S.) decision to reinforce a second round economic sanctions against Iran after an initial round in August. His tweet parodied the phrase 'Winter is Coming', popularised by the HBO series *Game of Thrones* and was the latest in an extensive list of tweets, speeches and press statements that reflected his administration's blatant antipathy towards Iran. That said, Donald Trump wasn't the first American President to assert his antipathy towards Iran. Several preceding Presidents have displayed anti-Iran sentiment in their foreign policy – most prominently Bush Jr. in 2002 when he placed Iran on an 'axis of evil'. However, paradoxically, during the time of both Bush Jr. and now Trump, Iran had been pursuing peaceful reforms or maintaining a desire for multilateral engagement on contentious issues like nuclear energy.

Why then has Iran, at moments when it has sought to pursue reform and multilateral cooperation been branded as the 'great evil' in the Middle East? At a time when there is talk about bringing peace to the Middle East and reconstructing a devastated and conflagrated region, why has Iran's cooperation as an influential regional actor not been sought? I posit that the inflammatory comments by the American political elite are symptomatic of a broader institutionalised Iranophobia within American foreign policy. I reason that Iran as the 'great evil' in the Middle East is a socio-political construct meant to benefit the realpolitik of the US and its allies in the region, primarily Israel and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA).

To this end, this paper is divided into three sections. In the first I present a brief overview of Iranophobia in American foreign policy since 1979 with emphasis on the Presidencies of Bush Jr. and Obama. In the second section, I explore the theoretical undertones of these developments by evaluating a synthesis of the 'balance of threat' model proposed by Stephen Walt (1985) and Alexander Wendt's (1992) theory of the social construction of power and state interactions. Thereafter, I examine the relationship between the idea of Iranophobia, and the interests of the US and its allies that the idea helps mask. I examine four major interests and also identify certain obstacles to the export of Iranophobia beyond American borders.

### **Iranophobia in American Foreign Policy: Then and Now**

An overview of Iranophobia in American foreign policy must begin with the birth of the Islamic Republic in 1979. Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution was able to achieve what many had thought impossible – overthrowing the regime of the Shah which had been receiving military aid and support from the US. People power played a crucial role in the revolution with student groups, young men and women and the Iranian middle class taking to the streets to protest the Shah – an experience that was repeated thirty years later in Iran's 'Green Movement' in 2009 (Efsandiari, 2012).

However, the US wasted little time in adjusting its foreign policy towards Iran and capitalizing on incidents like the women marching against Khomeini's decision to impose the hijab onto female government workers. They seized the opportunity to demonize and paint Khomeini as a tyrant who made Iran an 'enemy' of the US (Chan-Malik, 2011). Khomeini's decision to discard the Shah's pro-Americanism to adopt a 'neither East nor West' strategy and 'export the revolution' that took place in Iran disturbed the US, especially in the context of the Cold War. The latter is still

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today considered a threat by officials in the US. In the words of Mike Pompeo (2018)

The [Iranian] regime is also committed to spreading the revolution to other countries...The total fulfilment of the revolution at home and abroad is the regime's ultimate goal...the regime has spent four decades mobilizing all elements of the Iranian economy, foreign policy, and political life in service of that objective.

Despite Khomeini acting decisively against the Soviets (Trenin, 2018, p. 28), the nature of Cold War politics meant that the US was unable to trust a state that didn't ally formally with them. Throughout the 1980s, Iran featured multiple times in President Reagan's speeches. Rarely was the blatant Iranophobia of Bush and Trump evident in his speeches, despite the fact that Iran at the time was engaged in war with the US-supported Iraq. Instead, most of his speeches adopted a neutral to conciliatory tone and claimed it to be in American interest to maintain dialogue with Iran (Reagan Presidential Library, 1986). Despite American foreign policy being anti-Iranian after the 1979 revolution, Iranophobia remained largely subdued in the Reagan era, possibly owing to the US's clandestine sale of arms to Iran through Israel despite an arms embargo and the humiliation of the discovery of the Contra Affair.

Under Bill Clinton, several figures in Washington sought US-Iran rapprochement, especially at a time when Europe was actively engaging with Iran. However, Clinton's foreign policy sought to isolate and contain Iran (Freedman, 1999). Despite a post-Khomeini, moderate leadership giving the US an opportunity for rapprochement, the Clinton Administration acted against Iran, banning American companies from investing in the Iranian energy industry, preventing Azerbaijan from engaging in energy partnership with Iran and passing the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act which sanctioned foreign firms investing in Iranian oil (Freedman, 1999). The election of the moderate-reformist Khatami to the Presidency of Iran in 1997, his 'good neighbour' policy and espousal of a 'dialogue among civilisations' eased tensions and repaired strained ties with the US to some extent. This led to a brief *détente* between the US and Iran manifested in diplomatic exchanges in sports, monetary aid to Iran and a call for the end of 'dual containment' in the region among other policies (Mahdavi, 2014).

However, this *détente* did not last long. Iran and the US cooperated in military campaigns in Afghanistan after the September 11 attacks, with Iran rounding up Arabs accused by the Bush administration as being complicit in the attack (CBS, 2008). However, just one year later, Bush formally institutionalized Iranophobia in American foreign policy with his infamous 'axis of evil' speech in 2002 in which axed his Iranian counterpart's 'dialogue among civilizations'. Bush reset US-Iran relations back by decades and placed it among a group of rogue states like North Korea and Iraq. The US presented its rationale with examples of human rights abuses, nuclear ambitions, sponsoring terrorism and opposing Israel despite not having any legible proof (Mahdavi, 2014). At a time when the US was favourably placed to revitalize US-Iran relations, Bush's hostile rhetoric not only institutionalized Iranophobia in America but created a lasting distrust of America within domestic Iranian politics. Indeed, as Mahdavi (2014, p. 153) observes, "Bush's administration contributed to the rise of Iran's neoconservatives as a mirror image". It is clear from the hostile rhetoric that the Bush administration's Iran policy was 'contain or defeat'.

What made matters worse was how America's blatant Iranophobia led to fears of regime change within Iran which had, just in the previous year, assisted the US in administering regime change in Afghanistan (Mahdavi, 2014; Parchami, 2014). Moreover, the discovery of previously undeclared nuclear facilities in Natanz and Arak in Iran was capitalized upon by the US to justify their opposition to Iran. Despite top American officials like John Bolton and Richard Armitage admitting that the US had prior knowledge of these facilities (Parchami, 2014), the 'outrage' displayed by the Americans was seen by many within Iran – most notably then chief nuclear negotiator and current President Hassan Rouhani- as an attempt to "‘manufacture’ an international crisis" (Parchami, 2014, p.317).

Further efforts to administer a P5+1 dialogue on the Iran nuclear issue by Bush's Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice yielded little result (Parchami, 2014) due to the election of the right-wing Ahmadinejad as the President of Iran. Distrust of America caused by the rhetoric of Bush and his Neoconservatives and fear of regime change caused Iran to adopt a hostile policy against the US. This in turn led Neoconservatives to feel vindicated in their stance. Neither side was able to see the development of "competitive systems of interaction" (Wendt, 1992, p. 407) which facilitated a security dilemma wherein both sides attempted to ramp up their security and in turn became more threatening to the other. As a result, Iranophobia remained constant in Bush's foreign policy throughout his presidency.

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According to popular perception, Iranophobia declined under Barack Obama's liberal reformism. Many have enthusiastically pointed to the Iran Nuclear Deal as a triumph of multilateral diplomacy and rapprochement in US-Iran relations. However, to claim that Iranophobia was absent in the Obama era is a highly fallacious assumption that presents a false picture of American foreign policy towards Iran at the time. Not all of Obama's policies towards Iran were in the spirit of diplomacy and cooperation. Though he adopted a relatively more reconciliatory policy towards Iran than Bush, he made use of the same tactics as his predecessor – economic sanctions, diplomatic pressure, covert sabotage and threat of military intervention – to bring Iran to the negotiating table (Cram, 2017).

Though the Obama era lacked the overt Iranophobia of the era that preceded -and succeeded- it, Iranophobia was latently and prominently present in the underlying policies. The most blatant expression of this was the US-Israeli co-sponsored digital virus 'Stuxnet' unleashed on Iran in 2009. The malicious program promulgated a virus onto Iran's digital network and was meant to create an obstacle to Iran's nuclear ambitions (Naughton, 2012).

New York Times Journalist David Sanger's revelations about the virus was corroborated by James Cartwright, a former vice-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff informally labelled 'Obama's General' (Groll, 2016). As Sanger's investigation reveals, though the virus was conceptualized under the Bush government, it was studied and personally authorized for use by Obama (Sanger, 2012; Naughton, 2012). In the face of a defiant Ahmadinejad and slow burn of the economic sanctions, the Obama-administration, in collaboration with Israel, launched, what can only be described as a cyberattack on Iran's uranium-enrichment process – a legal process under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Thus, it can be seen that Iranophobia has, in some form and to varying levels of intensity, persisted within American foreign policy since the birth of the Islamic Republic. However, it is possible that in its present state, US-Iran relations under Donald Trump may sink to the lowest it has ever been. Trump has made no secret of his intense antipathy towards Iran and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) during his presidential campaign. He has made good, through rhetoric and policy, on institutionalizing and entrenching Iranophobia in its starkest expression into America's foreign policy under his administration. However, global politics don't always operate along predictable lines and it is possible that the present trajectory may change in the coming years.

## Theoretical Underpinnings

Understanding Iranophobia in American foreign policy requires understanding certain theoretical aspects of International Relations. Iran's tangible military capacity is not up to par with several regional actors in the Middle East and certainly nowhere close to the capacity of the US. Despite this, Iran is seen as a major threat and destabilizing actor in the region. This paper utilises a synthesis of Stephen Walt's 'balance of threat' theory with Alexander Wendt's social constructivism to explain the Iranian 'threat' in American foreign policy. Walt's theory is based off the balance of power model which posits that states come together to balance and prevent the rise of a hegemon and maintain equilibrium. However, this theory has been subject to criticism. Many have pointed to how states failed to balance American hegemony after the fall of the Soviet Union or how states have often allied against relatively weaker powers, such as Britain and France allying against Germany in the 1930s.

Walt (1985) explains this inconsistency by asserting that states do not balance on the pretext of power differences but on their assessment of threat. Japan and China did not bandwagon to balance the US -a stronger power- in the 1990s because neither perceived a threat from it. Britain, France and the US *did* ally against Germany, a relatively weaker power during the Second World War, due to their assessment that Germany posed a threat. Walt's argument holds true in many other cases. In South Asia, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have not chosen to ally with Pakistan to balance dominant India owing to a lack of perceived threat. However, in the Middle East, divergent actors like the KSA and Israel have allied with the US to balance a perceived Iranian threat.

However, the question remains, how serious is the Iranian 'threat' to the US and its allies in the region? Walt (1985, p.9) asserts that four factors govern a state's assessment of threat and therefore it's decision to ally or oppose: aggregate power, proximity, offensive capability and offensive intent. Walt (1985, p.9) defines aggregate power as "a state's total resources (i.e., population, industrial and military capability, technological prowess, etc)." While Iran is a

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powerful state and has accumulated a degree of wealth from oil revenue, by no means is its aggregate power disproportionately higher than other major actors in the Middle East and certainly not the US. In terms of offensive capability, in 2017 Iran spent 3.1% of its GDP on the military, compared to the 10.3% of KSA which is the third-largest military spender in the world (SIPRI, 2017). In military expenditure, Iran lags behind countries like KSA, Turkey, Israel, Jordan, Oman and Kuwait among others (SIPRI, 2017).

Further, Iran maintains a primitive air force of aircrafts acquired from the US before the 1979 revolution (Reuters, 2018). In terms of offensive intent, Iran has been accused of being a threat to its neighbours. While the aggressive rhetoric from Ahmadinejad has not helped abate this perception, it is fallacious to assume that Iran offers more offensive intent than KSA which makes no secret of its hostility towards neighbours like Yemen, Bahrain, Qatar and Syria and has made good to act upon them through bombings and embargos.

Among Walt's criteria, proximity can be the only actual reason to consider Iran a 'threat'. Iran's geographical position gives it lucrative access to the Strait of Hormuz, through which a third of all the oil traded from the Middle East passes enroute to major energy consuming states like India, Japan and China (Japan Times, 2018). Further, Iran has access to not only Iraq and the Arab monarchies of the Gulf, but also is a gateway into Central Asia. However, Iran's geographical proximity to Afghanistan has been used by the Americans in 2001 to act against Al Qaeda (CBS, 2018). This brings up the question of why Iran wasn't considered a threat then, but merely a year later, placed on an 'axis of evil'?

Thus, when placing Iran within Walt's model, it is very difficult for any reasonable analysis to view Iran as the sort of threat conceptualized by Trump. This is where constructivism may be insightful. As one of the leading scholars of social constructivism, Alexander Wendt (1992) highlighted the role of a state's identity as an indicator of how other states would react to them in terms of security considerations. In Wendt's (1992), the manner of interactions between states go a long way in their assessment of threat and security. By this logic, Khomeini's anti-Western, 'revolutionary' rhetoric would be a natural enticement of threat perception from Iran in American eyes. However, Iran has witnessed a full spectrum of leaders post Khomeini, from right-wingers like Ahmadinejad, to reformists like Khatami as well as centrists like Rafsanjani and Rouhani. Why then has Iranophobia remained constant?

It is not inconceivable then, that Iran today is a 'threat' because it is constructed as one. To clarify, this doesn't imply that Iran is an innocent player in the region. However, the notion of the Iranian threat being a construct holds true to the extent that Iran is not a fantastical malicious power with infinite resources and covert forces spread across the Middle East, ready to engage in dubious and conspiratorial activities against America and its allies. While this may seem exaggerated, it is precisely the picture Trump created in his speech to the United Nations in 2018, claiming that Iran is a major evil that creates "chaos, death, and destruction...and spread mayhem across the Middle East and far beyond" (Politico, 2018).

It is inconceivable that the US and Israel, two states that operate the most sophisticated intelligence and espionage networks in the world, could be unaware of Iran's capacities. Since the removal of Ahmadinejad from office, anti-Western rhetoric has been replaced by demands for multilateral cooperation under Rouhani. If Wendt's (1992) model held true, the reconciliatory signal from Iran should have sparked a cautious but marked détente from the US. However, instead, Iranophobia has skyrocketed since Trump assumed office.

What do the proponents of Iranophobia stand to gain from this? I posit that America *requires* a fantastical evil to justify its actions in the Middle East, without which its actions would be seen as provocative and contrary to America's identity as the propagator of democracy and freedom. In the past, this 'great evil' was the Soviet Union and the threat of Communism which launched President Truman's Containment doctrine. Today, Iran as the 'great evil' needing containment is an idea sold to the American people (and the global community) to justify America's interests in the region. These interests range from Israeli influence, geopolitical concerns, political and economic profiteering. This implies that regardless of capabilities or intent, assuming a lack of radical change in the Iranian or American elite, Iran is likely to remain a 'great evil' in American foreign policy for the near future. This prospect is explored in greater detail subsequently.

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## Ideas Masking Interest: the Many Faces of Iranophobia

For centuries now, ideas have been a strong motivating factor shaping interest and policy. The 'idea' of a Holy Land, for instance, spurred religious wars in early medieval times, creating the impression that it was in the 'interest' of every Christian that the Holy Land be reclaimed from the hands of Muslim 'infidels'. Further, the idea of an alternative interpretation of the Bible spurred the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, leading to sweeping developments that changed European life, religion, politics and intellectual thought. Ideas like republicanism and liberal democracy have been major facets of European and later American foreign policy through the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Needless to say, in today's context, ideas are rarely propagated without an underlying interest that is beneficial to the propagator. In this section, I highlight four 'interests' that motivate the US to sell the 'idea' of Iranophobia to the American people and to the world. These interests explain the rationale for the US to continue to institutionalize Iranophobia in its foreign policy and maintain the construct for as long as it has. I also examine some of the obstacles towards the act of exporting Iranophobia beyond Americans borders.

### *The Israeli Interest*

In explaining how Iranophobia is manufactured as an idea in American foreign policy, one must observe the dynamics of geopolitics in the Middle East. America's interests in the region are largely in the continued prosperity and influence of its allies, primarily Israel. Israel had a significant role to play in shaping Iranophobia in American foreign policy. Parsi (2008) presents a detailed analysis of Iranophobia that was manufactured and exported by Israel in the 1990s. He observed that at the time, taking advantage of a weakened Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), Israel launched a reversal of its Periphery Doctrine (Parsi, 2008). This was a doctrine in which Israel had, until this point, sought to develop friendly relations with major non-Arab Muslim countries in the region to counter the Arab states that denied Israel's existence. Primary among the countries Israel sought cooperation were the pre-revolutionary Iran, Turkey and Imperial Ethiopia.

In the 1990s, however, Israel reversed this doctrine to take advantage of its empowered position in its immediate neighbourhood (Parsi, 2008, p.160). Instead at this time, Israel identified Iran, a major peripheral actor in the region (that was not an American ally) as a threat. Parsi (2008, p. 161) observes, "the charges were based not on an existing Iranian threat but on the anticipation of a future Iranian threat". At the time, Israel's construction of Iran as a threat received scepticism from the American media and hesitation from the Clinton administration, however, its attempts to manufacture Iranophobia continued well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It was a challenge for them to convince the world how Iran with a population of 60 million and military budget of 6.7 billion, could overnight become a threat to Israel with a population of 4 million and military budget of 8.7 billion (Parsi, 2008, p. 166).

With Trump, this challenge was made easier. Israel found a sympathetic ear to entrench Iranophobia into the American system. As a President often labelled as endorsing unreferenced claims in a 'post-truth' era, Trump fully accepted Israel's Iranophobic rhetoric and institutionalized it within his own administration's foreign policy. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu took great pride in claiming credit for Trump's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA and allegedly assigned Mossad to provide documents that convinced Trump of Iran's nuclear ambitions (Fulbright, 2018). The BBC observed that though Trump maintained a negative view on the JCPOA during his campaign, he was hesitant to take as extreme a view on it as he did post-election. His shift in stance was largely seen as a "pivot to Netanyahu" (Zurcher, 2018) and a clear statement of the influence of Israel on his administration.

Accusations against Iran are largely centred around the issues of nuclear ambitions, sponsoring terrorism and violating the sovereignty of its neighbours. Not only do such accusations lack evidence, but more applicable to other states in the Middle East like Israel, KSA and Turkey, none of who are demonized to the extent that Iran is in American policy. Israel's rationale is not difficult to understand. It is not uncommon for Israeli -and now American- leaders to use rhetoric of a 'great threat' to maintain a fearful population, generate nationalist sentiment, excuse poor governance or justify aggressive military action. In the words of an Israeli expert on Iran, Israelis "need an existential threat ...[because]... When you are always prepared for the worst, you can pass off sub-par performances as the best thing that ever happened" (Anonymous, cited in Parsi, 2008, p. 167).

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## *The 'Culture of Fear' Interest*

This leads into the question of instrumentalizing fear to generate mass approval for the idea of Iranophobia among the Israeli and American people. This argument would suggest that Iranophobia is constructed because there needs to be an 'enemy' in the region for America to justify its alliance with autocratic monarchies and to defend Israel's aggressions. It highlights the discourse surrounding the concept of fear and the production of a 'culture of fear' (Glassner, 2010) which posits that the insecurities of Americans have been instrumentalized and exploited for profit by the political, economic and media elites. This generally manifests as economic gain for corporations, high ratings for media companies or a political/power gain for the politicians. The fact that, "People react to fear, not love" (Nixon, cited in Glassner, 2010, p. 36) was seen most starkly in the 2016 elections when a populist campaign exploiting fear of immigrants, war, job-losses and economic collapse defeated the campaign espousing unity, diversity and togetherness.

Generating a 'culture of fear' has several lucrative benefits for those in power. Skoll (2016) claims that fear allows greater political control of a people who turn to the state to protect them from whatever adversary lurks in the horizon. He claims that the "principal seat of the global ruling classes and of these two apparatuses [of political fear] is the United States" (Skoll, 2016, p. 2). It is in the interests of both the American and Israeli governments to instil within their people, a phobia of Iran. Their rhetoric creates an impression of Iran's allegedly destructive intentions and capabilities; and instils within the minds of their people that security from Iran is a necessity.

This in turn allows them to take more aggressive action with greater justification or use the perpetual sense of threat to explain away incompetence of hypocrisies in foreign policy or governance. To provide an example, the culture of fear proved useful for Donald Trump when he spent much of his opening address on the Saudi assassination of Jamal Khashoggi deflecting the role of the crown prince Bin Salman and instead focusing on blaming Iran for killing Americans (O'Connor, 2018). No matter the hypocrisy or logical fallacy, the elite are always able to fall back on the notion of a 'greater evil' that requires more attention and becomes a convenient scapegoat for their use.

One of the most pervasive studies of Iranophobia was conducted by Haggai Ram (2008) who brought up the notion of 'moral panic' as an analytical tool to discuss the culture of fear. 'Moral panic' referred to a mass hysteria exploiting the insecurities of people who are fed fear through various avenues, mainly the media and the political class. Ram (2008, p. 17) contends that, "conflicting texts, overlapping representations, and diverse interests converged in a powerful way to produce a sense of exaggerated anxiety about the Iranian threat among much too many Israeli Jews".

A similar situation can be observed in the US, with Trump and other elite like John Bolton and Mike Pompeo as well as among some media outlets and gets transferred onto the population. For instance, a 2010 Gallup Poll found that 89% of surveyed Americans found Iran's military power to be a critical or important threat to American interests (Gallup, 2010), despite the fact that America's military prowess and capability is several hundred times greater than Iran's.

## *The Geopolitical Interest*

In his speech to the United Nations, Trump labelled Iran "the world's leading sponsor of terrorism" (Politico, 2018). While rhetoric is not uncommon from this President, Trump also played on the fear of sanctions to export his Iranophobia and isolate Iran from the global community. This was veiled in his call for nations to stop importing oil from Iran or risk facing the wrath of the US. Naturally, the latter part was left unsaid. Though recent events showed this strategy's impact to be rather limited, it did cause Italy, Greece, Japan and South Korea to cease oil imports from Iran, European companies to move operations out of Iran and Iran's largest customers: China and India, to reduce oil imports (Reuters, 2018).

In terms of geopolitical interests, the US's move to isolate Iran through fear of sanctions was also to contain the growing Russo-Iranian nexus developing in the last few years. While Russia had remained largely absent as a major player in the Middle East after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Syrian crisis and the support of the Russian state to

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Assad's Syria has revived Russian ambitions in the region (Trenin, 2018). To this effect, there has been an imperfect but growing relationship between Russia and Iran, especially in reference to Syria, which the US would be seeking to dispel. Curtailing and isolating Iran from the world stage allows the US to make a pariah out of any state showing support to Iran. In doing so, it is likely that the US may have created a second 'axis of evil' consisting of Syria-Russia-Iran.

This same nexus, alongside China and Turkey has side-lined the US's presence in Syria and presents a challenge to the US-Israel-KSA alliance (Sedghi, 2017, p.91). This was particular made manifest in the Astana talks held in Kazakhstan in 2017 to discuss peace-talks and de-escalation of conflict in Syria and were repeated in 2018 in Sochi. The talks were led by Russia alongside actors representing both sides of the Syrian conflict, Turkey and Iran. (Al Jazira, 2018). The US faces further challenges in isolating Iran given its geopolitical importance to states like Turkey, China and India.

The desire to contain Iran in the region is not limited to the US, but is even more pervasive for its allies in the region, namely Israel and more prominently, the KSA. The Saudis see Iranian opposition as the major obstacle to their regional hegemony. This is manifested in the Iranian support for the Houthis in Yemen, Iranian support for the anti-American Assad regime in Syria, absolute control of the Strait of Hormuz as well as the growing fear of the so-called Shia crescent, a concept constructed by the King of Jordan which claims that Iran claims control and influence over the Shi'ite communities across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza and seeks to challenge, "the interest of the status quo axis made up of the US, Israel, and conservative Arab regimes" (Mahdavi, 2014, p. 161).

## *The Economic Interest*

The need to maintain its allies' geopolitical interests is not the only factor motivating the United States to retain Iranophobia. The US is essentially held hostage by virtue of the amount of economic engagements with allies in the region especially with regard to arms trade. The US is the largest arms exporter in the world and Saudi Arabia alone accounts for around 18% of American arms exports (Bowler, 2018). The US has signed an arms deal with Saudi Arabia valued at 350 billion dollars over the next decade (Sedghi, 2017, p. 85). Further, Trump's family have personal stakes in maintaining the alliance of Israel and the KSA, with the President's son-in-law Jared Kushner acquiring 7 billion dollars in real-estate investment profits over the last ten years and Donald Trump Jr. owning several luxury real-estate ventures in the UAE, a close Saudi ally (Sedghi, 2017, p.85). Already fear of the Saudis cancelling the arms deal and turning to China or Russia for it has spurred President Trump to brush the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, an American permanent resident under the rug and provide a clean slate to the Saudi Crown Prince.

Beyond its allies' interests, the US has its own interests to consider as well. Its targeted persecution of the Iranian energy industry is also setting the stage for a highly lucrative position that the US is set to enjoy in the coming years. Ideally, as major consumers like China and India reduce imports of Iranian oil, they would most likely be looking to diversify their imports to maintain a stable inflow of crude oil. In such a case, they would benefit by importing from suppliers like Russia and the KSA. However, what is increasingly being noted is that the US is enroute to becoming the largest producer and exporter of energy resources in the near future and is likely to exceed its projected output, exporting more than 12.06 million barrels per day in 2019 (Kumar, 2018).

Demand for American oil is likely to rise in the years to come. A shale revolution in the US and large reserves implies that supply will increase as well, creating an ideal situation for America's energy industry (Kumar, 2018). Removing Iranian oil from the market would have most likely created a demand deficit which the US could fill for its allies who are suffering as a result of Iranian sanctions. While there may be resistance from states like China and Russia, others in Europe, Japan, India and South Korea may well be persuaded to buy from the US and its allies while avoiding sanctions rather than fighting the establishment and continuing to import Iranian oil. However, this scenario is highly idealistic. The US is unlikely to have free reign in isolating Iran and cutting off its economic engagements from the rest of the world. The US faces several obstacles, both internal and external in attempting to export its Iranophobia. These are discussed subsequently.

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## Obstacles to American Iranophobia

Neither Trump, nor the group of influential 'Iran hawks' in Washington D.C. like John Bolton, Mike Pompeo and Ted Cruz can expect to have a smooth run in exporting Iranophobia. The Trump administration risks seriously alienating strategic partners like Turkey and India if it follows its unilateral trajectory. Iran also has significant strategic value to many states. Particularly, Russia and Turkey seek Iranian cooperation in rebuilding Syria. Moreover both Russia and China have a stake in keeping the US involvement in the region in check (Juneau, 2014). The Chabahar port in Iran which is being jointly developed with India has been a major foreign has been a major strategic initiative to connect India to Afghanistan and the Middle East without Pakistan. Thus, the discourse surrounding Iran's 'strategic loneliness' (Juneau, 2014) is not as pervasive as is often made out to be.

Already, European states have been working to set up a 'Special Purpose Vehicle' to allow continued trade with Iran while dodging US sanctions (Wintour & Dehghan, 2018). There has also been talk of Iran trading with South Korea and Iraq in local currencies (Financial Tribune, 2018; RT, 2018) instead of the American dollar, something it already does with India, Russia and Turkey, to avoid the pressure of sanctions. While such efforts have been slow, the concerted attempt has important symbolic value that highlights a global commitment against isolating Iran.

Aside from the global obstacles, domestic opinions on Iran within the US is not unanimous. There is considerable disagreement even among the Conservative/Republican camp in Washington. On one side is Trump who was one of the only Republican presidential candidates in 2016 to criticize the Iraq war and vow to not repeat a military invasion. Trump's foreign policy (or lack thereof) is largely centred around his personal image and is meant to reflect his own achievements as a President. This can become a favourable factor for rapprochement if a deal is made that allows him to claim a personal triumph. He has in the past openly expressed his willingness to broker a 'better' deal with Iran on his terms (Parsi, 2018). His position has often seen support from moderates and pragmatists in his administration like Defence Secretary Mattis and Treasury Secretary Mnuchin (Johnson, 2018).

On the other side are the neoconservatives like John Bolton who hold key positions as advisors in the White House and want the President to go harder on Iran and have actively spoken about regime change. However, such rhetoric has been critiqued by both Democrats and Republicans as reckless and unnecessarily provocative. Further, attempts by more hawkish Republicans like Ted Cruz to create legislation adding more pressure to Iran has been dealt a fatal blow following the Democrats winning the House of Representatives in the 2018 mid-term elections. There is evidently a difference in priorities between Trump – who seeks a personal foreign policy triumph resembling US-North Korea 'rapprochement' – and the Conservative camp who wish for greater sanctions and pressure on Iran presumably with the objective of administering a regime change. The latter position is dangerous given the examples of Libya and Syria where regime change failed with disastrous consequences.

What is the most damaging development for American Iranophobia is that both of Trump's most vocal anti-Iran allies face uncertain futures. In Saudi Arabia, the Crown Prince's reputation as a progressive leader was dealt a fatal blow among American politicians on both sides of the aisle for his alleged involvement in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. A recent briefing at the Senate by CIA Director Gina Haspel left several Republican senators more or less certain about Bin Salman's involvement with the Khashoggi murder and Trump's own support for the Prince has been heavily criticised by both Democrats and Republicans alike (Parsi, 2018). In Israel, PM Netanyahu faces serious criminal charges and a government collapse on charges of bribery and fraud (Halbfinger and Kershner, 2018). Finally, Trump himself faces a leadership challenge with the indictments of his former campaign manager Paul Manafort and former lawyer Michael Cohen as part of the Russia investigations (Parsi, 2018). At a time when a number of actors are rallying to prevent Iran from collapsing, the main actors of the anti-Iran alliance face severe leadership challenges.

Despite these obstacles, it is unlikely that Iranophobia will be erased from American foreign policy in the near future. It is possible that Trump may seek a 'better deal' with Iran on his own terms in order to showcase his foreign policy prowess and claim a personal victory over that of Obama's legacy. Certainly the example of North Korea and Trump's warm rapprochement with Kim Jong-Un, who he presented as America's leading enemy not so long ago, shows this is not an impossible prospect. However, the influence of Israel and neoconservatives in Washington will



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most likely continue to perpetuate a fear culture and phobia of Iran for the foreseeable future.

## Conclusion

In this paper I demonstrated that Iranophobia has been practiced in American foreign policy from the birth of the Islamic Republic in 1979 and Khomeini's decision to depart the 'American umbrella'. Iran and the US have maintained relations that have been tensely accommodative at best since then. I argued that Iranophobia in American foreign policy has become institutionalized, particularly after the presidency of George W. Bush. I asserted that Iranophobia is a product of Stephen Walt's 'balance of threat', however I problematized the equation by analysing the Iranian 'threat' as a social construct. America is incentivised to manufacture a phobia and fear of Iran by both domestic and international actors, geopolitical interests and economic gains. As a result, I posited that regardless of its policies, intent or capabilities, Iran is likely to remain a 'threat' in American eyes for the foreseeable future.

Ultimately, in the battle of political elites, the ones most pervasively affected are the Iranian people who have little stake in the policies of their leaders as well as other world leaders. While the temporary waivers awarded to select states by the US are likely to ease the bite of the sanctions, it is inevitable that economic hardships will most pervasively affect the Iranian middle class. Though Iran is no stranger to sanctions and Iran's leadership has thus far remained defiant, it remains to be seen how this trajectory will play out in the days to come.

In a classic case of life imitating art, there is an unlikely group of actors banding together -ironically, as they have in the *Game of Thrones*- to resist Iran's upcoming 'winter' of sanctions. Concerted efforts to bypass the sanctions are under way from the EU, China, Russia, India and actors in the Middle East who have an interest in seeing Iran not collapse. While it is unknown how successful they will be in the face of American pressure, they have succeeded in letting the US know that unilateralism is unlikely to get them far. While their actions are unlikely to erase Iranophobia from American foreign policy, there is reason to hope that Trump may seek a 'better' deal with Iran that might allow him to present a triumphant face domestically - regardless of the actual merits of such a deal - while simultaneously allowing the Iranian regime to function without the burden of crippling sanctions holding them back.

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