

The Persian Gulf Crisis 2019-2020 and the U.S.-Iran interactions

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Key-words: the Middle East, U.S.-Iran relationship, the nuclear power, the Persian Gulf crisis, Iran's nuclear power

Abstract

The Persian Gulf crisis 2019-2020 is one of the challenges the international community is currently facing. After the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani, the crisis has taken on new dimensions, calling into question the effectiveness of the U.S. strategy and its legitimacy in the Middle East. In order to provide a better view of the relationship between the U.S. and Iran, we identified the main underlying causes that contributed to paramount animosities and the reputation for resolve, classifying them into several categories: geostrategic, economic, symbolic, etc. To decipher the actions taken by combatants in 2019 and 2020, we analyzed the strategies adopted, the miscalculations, the strategic costs involved, and how they impacted the future interaction in the Middle East.

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Having access to numerous American primary sources (press, American officials' speeches, official releases), we used theoretical aspects of political psychology in order to highlight the U.S. strategic incoherence. In the case of Iran, we used secondary sources to demonstrate the unjustified Iranian assertiveness during the crisis. This paper aims to question the rationality behind the decisions taken by the leaders of the two states and to determine to which extent these decisions were the product of a solid and rational decision-making process or the product of cognitive rigidity. This paper also emphasizes that the inference that the other's image is the product of aggressiveness, was the main reason why coercive strategies did not have the desired effect on the initiator.

The dynamics of US-Iran relations (1979-2016)

After the Islamic Revolution, the interactions between Iran and the U.S. were generally characterized by tense moments, the negative attitude persisting even after almost 40 years since the Iranian regime change. The animosity between these two states was exacerbated by the competition for power in the Middle East, the main strategic stake being the Persian Gulf. Moreover, in the 21st century, the development of Iran's clandestine nuclear program has complicated the international climate. The current crisis in the Persian Gulf presents a number of underlying causes, which we have identified in the paragraphs below, providing a brief overview of the dynamics of the U.S.-Iranian relations. As a result, the hostility was driven by several factors, including Iran's internal events in the 1970s, geostrategic competition for the Persian Gulf, the emergence of a possible Iranian nuclear power, and Iran's sponsorship of the U.S. labeled 'terrorist organizations'.

First, a reference point in understanding the U.S.-Iran conflicting interactions is the overthrow of Reza Pahlavi (a key ally of the United States) from

the leadership of the Iranian state, the change that has led to significant dissents. Thus, in 1979, power was taken over by the Council of the Islamic Revolution, which successfully exploited popular aversion towards its former ally. The hostage crisis has irreparably damaged the U.S.-Iran diplomatic relations, marking the end of the official dialogue and the beginning of economic sanctions.¹ The rupture in the communication flow generated a favorable context for increased tensions and misinterpretation of the other party's intentions.

During different American administrations, the dynamics of the American-Iranian relationship had had negative valences. After the Islamic revolution, the tense moments between the U.S. and Iran alternated with secret negotiations, the U.S. had pursued the release of the American hostages by Hezbollah (Lebanon), a pro-Iranian group. Although steps were taken to reconcile, relations could not be significantly improved. An important element in the deterioration of U.S.-Iranian relations has been the financial support that Iran has directed to some groups in the Middle East, classified as "terrorist organizations" by the State Department.²

In addition to long-standing rivalries and the increasingly difficult relation between Iran and the United States, competition in the Middle East has complicated the power equation. The dominance of the Persian Gulf continues to be the central element of the geostrategic competition between the two sides.

¹ Kenneth Katzman, *Iran: Internal Politics and U.S. Policy and Options* in "Congressional Research Service", 2020, p. 21. Ever since 1980, the interests of the two states have been represented by a third one. An Iranian Interests Section has been set up at the Pakistani Embassy in the U.S.; regarding U.S. interests, Switzerland is the protecting power.

² According to the State Department, Iran gives support to the non-state actors in several countries, including Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Kata'ib Hezbollah in Iraq, al-Ashtar Brigades in Bahrain, Houthi in Yemen and Shi'ite militias in Iraq, through his unit in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps of Iran (IRGC) - Al-Quds Force in U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2018*, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2018/>.

Analyzing the region's strategic value for Iran's policy, we can distinguish several aspects. From a geostrategic point of view, the Persian Gulf is a natural border between Iran's Shiite majority and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, the latter being predominantly Sunni.³ Regarding Iran's economy, it is essential to mention Iran's dependency on oil exports, being the 7th largest exporter in the world, according to World meter.⁴ The Persian Gulf also has a symbolic value for Iran, evoking the Persian identity and historical importance that Persia once had in the region. This self-image also generated the desire to assert itself as the main actor in establishing the regional balance.

The possibility of Iranian hegemony in the Persian Gulf area has created the need for Arab states in the region to gain the support of external power. Given the presence of American troops in the area, the United States were the only viable international option. The common vision of the Iranian threat has aggrandized the strategic dialogue between the GCC and the United States and also has defined the U.S. goals.⁵ There is a significant interest in the U.S. evolving role, asserting itself as an 'indispensable nation' involved in protecting Arab allies.⁶ In order to strengthen this position, the U.S. economic goal is to maintain the free flow of oil and natural gas in the region and prevent a possible blockade of the Strait of

³ The Gulf Cooperation Council was set up in the context of a revolutionary Iranian state expressing a desire for regional assertion, as well as amid the outbreak of war between Iran and Iraq. Sina Azodi, *Iran, the US, and the Persian Gulf* in "The Diplomat", November 05, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/11/iran-the-us-and-the-persian-gulf/>.

⁴ *** Worldometer, *Oil Production by Country*, <https://www.worldometers.info/oil/oil-production-by-country/>.

⁵ Kenneth Katzman, *op.cit.*, pp. 31-33.

⁶ Chas W. Freeman, *Arabia, the Persian Gulf, and Great Power Competition* in "Middle East Policy Council", Oct 17, 2019, <https://mepc.org/speeches/arabia-persian-gulf-and-great-power-competition>.

Hormuz by Iran. Most of the U.S. actions in the Persian Gulf revolved around the idea of containing Iran.

The danger of Iran's nuclear program is another key concern in understanding the U.S.-Iran interaction. With the unveiling of Iran's clandestine nuclear program, it was outlined the threat of possession of atomic devices. Thereby, the Iranian program has become a major concern for the U.S. regional approach; a nuclear device owned by Iran would ultimately lead to a regional nuclear race and would reinforce the image of Iran's "security-intangible state" (reducing its vulnerability to attempts at invasion, domination or regime change)⁷

The negotiations on limiting Iran's nuclear activities became effective when the two sides' leadership took a flexible and moderate stance as a direct dialogue between Barack Obama and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani. The significant multilateral effort, which began in 2003, found its final form in the *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action* (JCPOA). The 2015 nuclear agreement was an essential first step on the road to nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. The agreement has provided a reduction in Iran's uranium enrichment capacity and, consequently, an extension of up to 10 years, during which time Iran could develop a nuclear device. Iran has also accepted international monitoring of its activities in exchange for lifting economic sanctions imposed in the 1980s.⁸

The U.S. withdrawal from JCPOA and the 'maximum pressure' campaign.

⁷ Kenneth Katzman, *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies* in "Congressional Research Service", 2020, pp. 8-9, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44017.pdf>.

⁸ Paul K. Kerr, Kenneth Katzman, *Iran Nuclear Agreement and U.S. Exit* in "Congressional Research Service", 2018, pp. 9-18, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R43333/94>.

Ever since the election campaign, Donald Trump has taken a critical stance on the provisions of the JCPOA. Thus, in May 2018, we are witnessing the increase of tensions between Iran and the U.S., generated by the American withdrawal from the JCPOA. Among the cited reasons, Trump mentioned the “malign behavior” of Iran and the nuclear deal’s inability to assure the nuclear ban, the restrictions imposed by the agreement diminishing after 10 years.⁹

After ceasing participation in the JCPOA, the United States initiated a policy of “maximum pressure” on Iran's economy, aiming to renegotiate the nuclear deal and prevent the emergence of Iranian regional influence. According to the analysts, the U.S. strategy is unclear and ambiguous, having across-the-board objectives, other than those publicly supported goals such as the collapse of the current regime or even regime change.¹⁰ The former National Security Advisor, John Bolton, reiterated the idea of extensive goals toward Iran in his memoirs: “A lot remained to be done to bring Iran to its knees or to overthrow the regime, Trump’s stated policy to the contrary notwithstanding (...) the regime change was far and away the most likely way to permanently alter Iranian behavior. Even if that was not the Trump Administration’s declared policy, it certainly could happen as the effects of sanctions took hold.”¹¹

⁹ Richard Goldberg, *Trump Has an Iran Strategy. This Is It* in “The New York Times”, 24 Jan. 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/24/opinion/trump-iran.html>.

¹⁰ Brian Katulis, Peter Juul, *Putting Diplomacy First* in “Center for American Progress”, March 2020, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2020/03/12/481512/putting-diplomacy-first/>

¹¹ John Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened. A White House Memoir*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2020, pp. 74-75.

On May 21st, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo outlined 12 demands made by the Trump administration in order to resume the negotiations.¹² These conditions were unacceptable for Iran, as they would have meant abandoning its strategic interests in the Middle East. The fact that Iran did not give up on economic pressure and did not accept the U.S. requirements is the American administration's miscalculation. Instead, the Iranian approach focused on the idea of resistance to American initiatives.

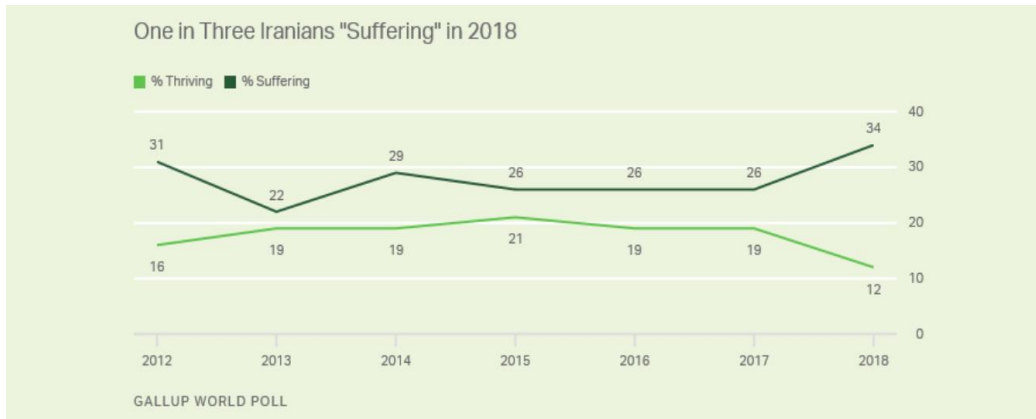
The Iranian dual policy.

Between May 2018 and May 2019, Iran adopted a policy of 'strategic patience' in response to 'maximum economic pressure'. In order to minimize the effect of economic sanctions, Iran publicly supported further compliance with the JCPOA provisions and continued negotiations with the United Kingdom, China, Russia, France, and Germany. However, the suffocation of the Iranian economy has led to a severe economic crisis. The sanctions have had a strong impact on the lives of Iranians, which is why from there on we can observe increasing pressure and popular widespread dissatisfaction with the standard of living.¹³

According to Gallup polls, imposing sanctions by the U.S. has accelerated other underlying economic problems. The data provided for 2018 indicated a record level of Iranian citizens (34%), who did not meet a satisfactory level in terms of quality of life.

¹² Mike Pompeo speech, *What are the 12 demands given to Iran?* in "AL JAZEERA", 21 May 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/05/mike-pompeo-speech-12-demands-iran-180521151737787.html>.

¹³ ***Six charts that show how hard US sanctions have hit Iran in "BBC", December 9, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48119109>.



Source: GALLUP

The ambiguity of Iran's strategy has been suggested by the duality of its actions. Publicly, Iran's strategic line has taken the form of a dialogue with other JCPOA signatories. At the same time, however, it has used the Iranian forces led by General Qasem Soleimani to counter the American policy.

The escalation of political and military tensions

The increasing bilateral tensions has led to severe measures, and the parties relied on uncompromising attitudes to discourage their opponent. However, neither party produced significant changes in the other's behavior, but only a proportionate response. In April 2019, Washington classified the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps of Iran (IRGC) as a terrorist organization.¹⁴ Iran has

¹⁴ ***US labels Iran's elite Revolutionary Guard Corps a terror group in "AL JAZEERA", April 8, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/04/designates-iran-elite-irgc-terrorist-organisation-trump-190408141756166.html>.

had a mirrored response, designating the U.S. a “state sponsor of terrorism” and the U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf area have been called terrorist groups.¹⁵

As part of its response to U.S. economic pressure policy, Iran announced in May 2019 that it would drop some JCPOA provisions and would increase its enriched uranium stock. In addition to concerns about the resumption of Iran's nuclear program, attacks by Iranian-backed military factions were considerably multiplying against U.S forces in the region.¹⁶

The American reaction has brought new measures against Iran. In the second half of 2019, the U.S. took action to reduce Iranian oil exports to zero,¹⁷ according to Donald Trump the main goal being to strategically weaken Iran and force it to negotiate a broader settlement of disputes between the two parties. From a military point of view, the United States responded to the attacks of Iran's regional allies by sending additional troops and aircraft carriers to the Middle East, asserting its defensive intentions.¹⁸ Although there is an oscillation in Donald Trump's speeches between resolve and conciliation, the increased military presence did not defuse the situation, instead of increasing the perception of threat and the imminent danger that Iran has had over time.

¹⁵ ***Iran's parliament approves bill labelling US army as 'terrorist' in "AL JAZEERA", April 24, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/04/iran-parliament-approves-bill-labeling-army-terrorist-190423111221587.html>.

¹⁶ Kenneth Katzman, Kathleen J. McInnis, Clayton Thomas, *U.S.-Iran Conflict and Implications for U.S. Policy* in "Congressional Research Service", 2020, pp. 3-4, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R45795.pdf>.

¹⁷ Tom DiChristopher, *Trump aims to drive Iran's oil exports to zero by ending sanctions waivers* in "CNBC", April 22, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/04/22/trump-expected-to-end-iran-oil-waivers-try-to-drive-exports-to-zero.html>.

¹⁸ ***Iran tensions: 1,500 US troops head to Middle East as Trump seals \$7bn Saudi arms sale in "The Guardian", May 24, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/may/24/us-military-new-troop-middle-east-iran-trump>.

Tensions have escalated in the Middle East, civilian ships in the Gulf of Oman have been damaged, Houthi rebels have launched multiple attacks on Saudi oil pipelines, and a rocket has been launched near the US Embassy in Baghdad. These actions by pro-Iranian factions were the first step in changing Iran's policy - we see a shift from a 'strategic patience' to a policy of "counter-pressure" towards the U.S. and the Arabian Gulf states.¹⁹

The summer of 2019 was characterized by an increase in violence. Iran has backed incidents on and around oil tanks in the Gulf, it shot down a U.S. military surveillance drone and launched an attack on oil facilities in Saudi Arabia.²⁰ The Trump administration's responses to Iranian military operations have taken the form of cyber-attacks and the imposition of additional economic sanctions.²¹ The U.S. coercive measures have not discouraged Iran; it has not given up support for terrorist groups in the Middle East, nor has it resumed nuclear activities.

The military tensions, as well as the lack of results from May to September 2019, have caused concern both among the U.S. regional allies and the international community. In June 2019, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe offered to build a conducive climate for negotiations. His initiative was unsuccessful, as, at the time, the U.S. and Iran relied on coercive tactics, making irrevocable commitments and pushing the opponent's resistance.

¹⁹ Sebastien Roblin, *Iran Has Its Own 'Maximum Pressure' Campaign against Trump* in "The National Interest", July 20, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/iran-has-its-own-maximum-pressure-campaign-against-trump-67787>.

²⁰ Daniel Benjamin, Steven Simon, *While You Weren't Paying Attention, Iran Was Ratcheting Up Tensions in the Persian Gulf in "POLITICO"*, Nov 14, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2019/11/14/iran-ratcheting-tension-persian-gulf-070770>.

²¹ Brian Katulis, Peter Juul, *op.cit.*

The U.S. attempt to destabilize the Middle East region in order to bring Iran to the negotiating table did not speed up the transition to dialogue but increased the distrust of U.S. regional allies in its defense capability. In the U.S. strategy, a key point was the proximity of its allies to Iran, allies who could have exerted a significant influence on Iranian actions. However, the position of the U.S. allies has undergone significant changes; the effectiveness of American action was questioned and secret dialogues were initiated with Iran. The United Arab Emirates has been in talks with Iran and tried to get involved in de-escalating regional tensions. In addition to the UAE, Saudi Arabia, a vital regional ally of the United States, which has publicly supported the American strategic trajectory, has initiated an indirect diplomatic dialogue through the Iraqi and Pakistani diplomatic channels.²²

The end of 2019 brings serious miscalculations of the parties, the transition from crisis to conflict providing clear clues about the wrong assessment of availability. Iran's economic suffocation and the imposition of new restrictions in the previous period did not achieve their goal of discouraging the opponent and forcing him to participate in negotiations under the terms imposed by the Trump administration. Analyzing the situation from Iran's perspective, the leadership erroneously assessed the importance of military challenges in the summer of 2019, believing that the U.S. will not get more involved in the Middle East.

The scale of the conflict reached new proportions in December 2019. The military actions targeted the Persian Gulf area until the end of the year, after that

²² Mark Mazzetti, Ronen Bergman, Farnaz Fassihi, *How Months of Miscalculation Led the U.S. and Iran to the Brink of War* in "The New York Times", Feb. 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/13/us/politics/iran-trump-administration.html>.

the incidents took place on the territory of Iraq. There were launched attacks on Iraqi facilities where U.S. forces were present and a rocket was launched in northern Iraq, several members of the U.S. military being injured. The American response has taken the form of airstrikes against the locations of Kata'ib Hezbollah, an organization the Trump administration has identified as guilty of previous violence. The incident was located in Iraq, damaging the cooperative relations between the Iraqi government (favorable to the U.S. presence in the region) and the Trump administration. 2019 ended with supporters of Kata'ib Hezbollah and other Iraqi-backed Iraqi militias surrounding the US Embassy in Baghdad, demanding the expulsion of US forces from Iraq.²³

The critical point of the crisis was reached on January 2, 2020, when General Qasem Soleimani was killed in a U.S.-initiated attack on Baghdad airport. The leader of the Al-Quds Force, a unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps of Iran (IRGC), was an influential figure in Iran and at the regional level he was a leading figure in Iran's foreign policy, more specifically in the Middle East.²⁴

The killing of Soleimani was called a 'decisive defensive action',²⁵ and the U.S. officials insisted that no retaliation was expected from Iran, a view based on the dissent among Iranian leaders. Although there were clear divisions between moderates and radicals, the death of General Soleimani stopped internal competition and popular frustration for the time being and dissatisfaction was redirected to the external enemy. We can say that this American action had no

²³ Kenneth Katzman, Kathleen J. McInnis, Clayton Thomas, *op.cit.*, pp. 9-10.

²⁴ Karen Zraick, *What to Know About the Death of Iranian General Soleimani* in "The New York Times", Jan. 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/03/world/middleeast/suleimani-dead.html>.

²⁵***Statement by the Department of Defense, *U.S. Dept. of Defense*, Jan. 2, 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2049534/statement-by-the-department-of-defense/>.

strategic reasons but generated strategic costs for the Trump administration's policy. The underlying problems of the crisis and regional instability have not been resolved, the Iraqi Parliament has voted to withdraw the U.S. troops from Iraq, the U.S. losing the support of Iraqi leaders. The January incident also sparked public commitments from Iran about future retaliation against U.S. forces in the region, which resulted in the launch of ballistic missiles at Iraqi bases where American personnel were hosted.²⁶

The control's loss of the events in January 2020 was a direct consequence of the coercive strategies adopted. The downing of the Ukrainian plane by Iran has increased the chances of escalation. Between February and July 2020, the sources of the conflict have not been resolved, but the current situation has not reached a new level of escalation. In March 2020, the U.S. announced its military reduction in Iraq in order to reduce its footprint in the country.²⁷ A further U.S. presence reduction took place in May when the administration removed some military personnel and equipment from Saudi Arabia.²⁸ During these months, there were some incidents in the Persian Gulf, identified as "miscalculations", which suggests Iran's general instability.²⁹ Moreover, there were taken some symbolic decisions in

²⁶***Iran attack: US troops targeted with ballistic missiles in "BBC", Jan. 8, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51028954>.

²⁷ Nafiseh Kohnavard. Iraq military bases: US pulling out of three key sites in "BBC", March, 16, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51914600>.

²⁸ ***U.S. to remove Patriot missile batteries from Saudi Arabia in "Geopolitics News", May, 7, 2020, <https://geopolitics.news/middle-east/u-s-to-remove-patriot-missile-batteries-from-saudi-arabia/>.

²⁹ ***Iran navy 'friendly fire' incident kills 19 sailors in Gulf of Oman in "BBC", May, 11, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-52612511>.

order to highlight the impossible-to-conciliate relationship between the two states, so Iran issued an arrest warrant for Donald Trump and other U.S. officials.³⁰

After the rampant tensions in January 2020, the number of regional incidents and violence has decreased, a situation mostly determined by the uncontrollable spread of the new coronavirus at a global level. This health crisis has downgraded the Persian Gulf crisis for the time being and directed the actors to focus on their internal capacity to manage the current situation, taking into consideration that both states have been majorly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Miscalculations and strategic errors during the Persian Gulf Crisis

The escalation of the Gulf crisis was largely caused by miscalculations, misperceptions about the adversary's behavior, and the cognitive rigidity of the leaders involved. Through the policy of brinkmanship, the parties tried to exploit each other's fear of war and make their enemy give up their commitments. Also relevant for our analysis is the understanding of the cognitive process of the protagonists, namely Donald Trump and Ali Khamenei.

The erroneous actions' evaluation of the opponent was the main reason why the coercive strategies did not have the initiator's desired effect. The main objectives of the 'maximum pressure' policy declared by the U.S. were to oblige Iran to accept the revision of the nuclear agreement, without imposing preconditions and also to comply with the terms listed in the 12 demands,

³⁰ Megan Specia. *Iran Issues Arrest Warrants for Trump and 35 Others in Suleimani Killing* in "The New York Times", June, 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/29/world/middleeast/iran-trump-arrest-warrant-interpol.html>.

published in 2018. The killing of Qasem Soleimani sought to discourage the Iranian side in future military action. Moreover, during 2019, the Trump administration sought to build regional alliances to counter Iran in the Middle East.

Taking into consideration the objectives the U.S. has publicly stated, we can determine what the strategic costs of current policy have been.³¹ First, the policy of maximum pressure did not lead to the dismantling of Iran's nuclear program but led to its acceleration and Iran's withdrawal from the JCPOA.³²

In what concerns Washington's influence in the area the main consequence was the U.S. isolation, its regional allies preferring to strengthen a direct dialogue with Iran. Through the Al-Quds Force, Iran has continued to support military factions in the Middle East, classified by the United States as terrorist groups, and continues to be an actual and real danger to America's most important ally, Israel.

The confrontational situation in December 2019 generated instability in Iraq. The attack on Baghdad airport and the assassination of General Soleimani called into question the U.S. legitimacy in the region and have generalized anti-American sentiment. As a consequence of the crisis, Iranian radicals won the majority in the parliamentary elections, the idea of reconciliation being perceived in an anachronic manner.³³

In the case of the United States, the strategic inconsistency displayed by the Trump administration stands out. The 'maximum pressure' campaign did not have the expected results, but the U.S. continues to follow this trajectory.

³¹ Brian Katulis, Peter Juul. *op.cit.*

³² David E. Sanger, William J. Broad, *Iran Challenges Trump, Announcing End of Nuclear Restrictions* in "The New York Times", Jan. 14, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/05/world/middleeast/trump-iran-nuclear-agreement.html>.

³³ Golnar Motevalli, *Hardliners' Victory in Iranian Elections Turns Back the Clock on Relations With the West* in "TIME", February 24, 2020, <https://time.com/5789565/iran-elections-hardliners/>.

Iran's military actions in the summer of 2019 took the shape of a campaign of “counter-pressure”, which should have reduced the presence of American forces in the Middle East. Iranian leaders believed that the multiplication of incidents and the threat of a possible resumption of the nuclear program would lead to a reduction in U.S. economic sanctions and a significant loss of support from European states for American actions. Iran's strategy proved to be erroneous, it did not achieve its goals, but it caused many strategic costs: serious economic problems, loss of legitimacy, and growing popular dissatisfaction with the regime. As a forecast, we can say that the resumption of the nuclear program will not improve Iran's position at the international level, but it will place it in an even more isolated area from the international community, losing the support of actors who have shown less intransigent attitudes (e.g. Russia and China).³⁴

The confrontational situation was strongly influenced by the attitudes, errors of perception, and lack of flexibility of decision-makers. The literature that addresses cognitive distortion and its implications in crisis management offers us numerous explanations for the misperceptions of the decision-making apparatus that lead, most of the time, to defective, rigid, and irrational results.

According to Robert Jervis, in order for decisions to be taken in conditions of optimal rationality, political factors must maintain a balance between continuity, persistence, and the ability to accept new information, to be flexible. Having a balance between “being open to new information and retaining beliefs

³⁴ Michel Duclos, Andrey Kortunov. *A Crisis Management Mechanism in the Middle East Is Needed More Than Ever* in “Institut Montaigne”, February 10, 2020, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/crisis-management-mechanism-middle-east-needed-more-ever>.

that have demonstrated their utility” means being consistent.³⁵ Jervis distinguishes two types of consistency - rational and irrational, in order to understand how these approaches can be applied to the decision-making process.

For instance, in the case of the Gulf crisis, we can see that Trump’s and Khamenei’s decisions are far from optimal, rather, they seem to be the result of cognitive closure. In both cases, decision-makers seem to accept only opinions favorable to their policy, having a low receptivity to different opinions. This lack of receptivity, which causes decision-makers to ignore critical information or deny it, is called by Jervis ‘irrational consistency’.³⁶

The aggressive policy of economic suffocation, promoted by Donald Trump, was not unanimously accepted by members of his administration; Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has had a different vision. Trump did not agree to have his policy over Iran challenged, which is why he replaced him with Mike Pompeo. Trump shows a tendency to support his subordinates to act in convergence with the policies he chooses, but the decision-making apparatus may not work optimally, as it encourages overconfidence in wrong policies.³⁷

Donald Trump’s public statements during the crisis have oscillated between categorical imperatives and openness to negotiations with the Iranian side. Several times, the administration has stated that it did not want to turn the crisis into a war with Iran, but the U.S. actions need a reality check.³⁸

³⁵ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2017, p. 117.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 128.

³⁷ Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War. The Nature of International Crisis*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981, pp. 114-115.

³⁸ Mark Landler, Maggie Haberman, Eric Schmitt, *Trump Tells Pentagon Chief He Does Not Want War with Iran* in “The New York Times”, May 16, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/16/world/middleeast/iran-war-donald-trump.html>.

The policy adopted by the administration and the speeches Donald Trump has delivered during the Gulf crisis are characterized by the lack of explicitness and expressiveness. On the other hand, we notice a fixed, rigid, monochrome vision in the case of Ali Khamenei.³⁹ As the main Iranian decision-maker, his perceptions have decisively influenced Iran's foreign policy. Khamenei's speeches show us reduced tolerance to compromises with the U.S., insisting on the idea of resistance to 'global arrogance'.⁴⁰ Khamenei's decisions seem motivated, to some extent, by the U.S. image as a hostile state, with Iranian leaders interpreting U.S. actions in terms of their own values or goals.⁴¹ At the same time, Khamenei's statements indicate that he is convinced that the main objective of the USA is to overthrow the regime in Iran. Consequently, this insecurity and mistrust generate aggressive behavior, which goes beyond defensive motivations.

Conclusions:

To sum up, the animosity between the U.S. and Iran has developed over almost 40 years. The relations' corrosion was fundamentally marked by competition between the two states, a competition projected on several levels: the geostrategic and economic influence over the Persian Gulf; the symbolic status as a main power in the Middle East; nuclear competition; and the development of an alliance system to undermine the other's regional position. In addition to long-

³⁹ Karim Sadjadpour, *The Iranian Hedgehog vs. the American Fox* in "The Atlantic", June 21, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/06/us-iran-conflict-driven-trump-and-khamenei/592297/>.

⁴⁰ Idem, *Reading Khamenei: The World View of Iran's Most Powerful Leader*, Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009, pp. 14-16.

⁴¹ Richard Led Lebow, *op.cit.*, p. 199.

standing hostilities and underlying causes, the recent Persian Gulf crisis has had several immediate causes, such as the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, violent clashes in the Middle East in the last few years, uncompromising leaders' attitudes, and the parties' unwillingness to accept mediation.

The responsibility for the way the crisis evolved belongs to the leaders of the two states, which exacerbated the confrontational situation through the lack of flexibility and receptivity. Favoring policies that conform to their pre-existing beliefs has contributed to the adoption of inconsistent policies on both sides, which have produced significant strategic costs for the US (the acceleration of Iran's nuclear program; Iran's withdrawal from the JCPOA; regional isolation; instability in Iraq; the questioning of the U.S. legitimacy in the region; the widespread of an anti-American sentiment) and also for Iran (serious economic problems, the loss of legitimacy and growing dissatisfaction with the regime, the loss of one of the most important Iranian figures; the international isolation of Iran).

So far, the Persian Gulf crisis has not reached the parties' goals. Tensions in the region did not escalate after the death of General Soleimani, but this is not due to a real effort to manage the crisis but to the outbreak of a global health crisis. The crisis is going through a stage of "stagnation", a stage that could become an opportunity for de-escalation. The Trump administration has publicly announced that there will be no penalties for providing aid to Iran, including the distribution of medical equipment, but economic sanctions (on oil exports, financial transactions, the energy sector, etc.) still amplify tensions.⁴²

⁴²****Coronavirus: Iran and the US trade blame over sanctions* in "BBC", April 17, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-52218656>.

From our point of view, The U.S. decisions in these months will fundamentally impact the trajectory of the crisis. A hypothesis can be that the prospect of cooperation will be significantly diminished if the Trump administration does not adopt less restrictive measures during the pandemic. The evolution of the crisis remains uncertain, at least until the time both states will have the coronavirus outbreak under control.