

RESEARCH ARTICLE

New accents in the U.S.-Iran relations. The perspective of Joe Biden's administration

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Abstract

The main aim of this article is to determine the leading interests and objectives, both articulated and unarticulated, in Joe Biden's Iran policy, as well as to present the determining factors which could lead to a potential reorientation of American policy towards this state. The article also aims to identify elements of continuity and change in Biden's Iran strategy as compared to the Trump administration. The main hypothesis of the article assumes that contrary to the Trump administration, Joe Biden has given priority to dialogue and diplomacy with Iran. However, the dialogue is not unconditional and does not constitute a sum of compromises on the part of the United States (U.S). The paper points that the objective of Joe Biden's administration is to introduce new accents through partial departure from the strategy pursued by the Trump administration focused on sustaining purposefully and deliberately hostile relations with Iran, intentionally presented as a backlash state, which allowed the U.S. to favour and strengthen its allies and Iran's adversaries in the Middle East – Israel and Saudi Arabia. The two leading goals in the new administration's policy towards Tehran are to persuade Iran's authorities to return to compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which would become a platform for negotiating a new nuclear agreement, and to stop Iran's support for Shia militias in Iraq and Syria. The key factor to determine the success or failure of such strategy is the victory of an ultraconservative candidate Ebrahim Raisi in the presidential election in 2021.

Keywords

The United States, Iran, the Middle East, Joe Biden, Ebrahim Raisi

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Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a state in the Middle East whose position and role in the United States (U.S.) national security and foreign policy has undergone the most significant reorientation and redefinition over the past five decades. Iran, which used to be America's closest regional ally, has become its major antagonist in the region. It has transformed from an American client state into one of the backlash states – a hostile state, accused of cooperation with and financing of terrorist organisations, and suspected of actively seeking nuclear weapons. Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the Iran hostage crisis¹ the mutual perception of the two states and their societies has been dominated by distrust and hostility and it is hard to identify areas of alignment of interests in the formally non-existent relations. The predominant elements of Iran's foreign policy, which are in contradiction to the American vision of the Middle East, now include a struggle for dominance in the region against the American allies – Sunni Saudi Arabia and Israel, participation and victory in the proxy wars in the Middle East (Syria, Yemen, Iraq), as well as maintaining the state's supremacy over the Shia Crescent states.

Nevertheless, it should be stressed that in the post-Cold War period, two Democratic presidents of the U.S. emphasised the conciliatory element aimed at signing an agreement with Iran and normalisation of mutual relations. It could even be argued that both the presidents succeeded in this area. Unfortunately, in both cases it was a short-term victory, and the chance for normalisation was destroyed by their Republican successors.

The main aim of this article is to determine and compare with the Trump administration the leading interests and objectives, both articulated and unarticulated, in Joe Biden's Iran policy at the beginning of his first term, as well as to present the determining factors which could in the period of his presidency lead to a potential reorientation of American policy towards this state. The above research problem will be resolved through providing answers to the following research questions: what factors determine the Biden administration's policy towards Iran?; what new accents occur in Iran policy pursued by the White House?; and can the presidential election in Iran in 2021 affect the U.S.-Iran relations? The main hypothesis of this article assumes that contrary to the Trump administration, Joe Biden has given priority to dialogue and diplomacy with Iran. However, the dialogue is not unconditional and does not constitute a sum of compromises on the part of the United States. The hypothesis of this article to be verified is contained in the assumption that the objective of Joe Biden's administration is partial departure from the strategy pursued by the Republican Trump administration focused on sustaining purposefully and deliberately hostile relations with Iran,

¹ B. Lewis, "The United States, Turkey and Iran," in *The Middle East and the United States. A historical and political reassessment*, ed. D.W. Lesch (Cambridge: Westview Press, Trinity University, 2003), 168–173.

intentionally presented to both the American society and to the wider international community as a backlash state, which allowed for the American military presence in the region, but it also constituted an element consolidating American allies in the region – especially Israel and Saudi Arabia – against a common enemy. This research problem will be resolved, and the hypothesis will be verified with the use of qualitative methods, mainly discourse analysis, analysis of primary sources, and desk research. Also, the comparative approach will be essential for resolving the research problem. The course will focus on comparing Trump and the Biden policy towards Iran. It will allow finding and evaluating similarities and differences in the attitude of the republican and democratic administrations towards Tehran. It will be imperative for the examination to analyse primary sources like U.S. National Security Strategies, Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, Global Posture Review, UN Resolutions, and other documents. A considerable role will hold the information obtained from the Congressional Research Service Reports in the study. Statements and remarks American policymakers will be critical to indicate new directions of Biden's policy towards Iran. Also crucial for the research will be the analysis of existing data: existing research, assessment of the current state of knowledge, a meta-analysis of articles, studies, comments, and books by other researchers. The comparative approach will be of great importance for identifying new accents in the policy towards Iran or for continuing the Trump course. Inductive reasoning will be used in the presented research. The dominant role of the U.S. as an external power influencing the policy of allied states towards the U.S. and hostile states in the Middle East region was assumed as an independent variable. In turn, the result of the presidential election in Iran was adopted as a dependent variable.

Iran in the U.S. foreign policy during Donald Trump's presidency

The perception of Iran as an enemy, an adversary and a state which could pose a real threat to American interests in the Middle East is the reason why Iran, since 1979, has been in the American sphere of particular and multifaceted interest. Internal factors, which have been determining the policy pursued by the subsequent American administrations towards Iran include: Iran's geostrategic location;² its energy resources;³ religious and ethnic composition; the dominant role of Shia Islam and the Sharia law;⁴ the constitutional system being a hybrid of theocracy with

² The World Factbook CIA, "Iran," accessed July 21, 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/iran/>.

³ "Statistical Review of World Energy 2020," 69th ed., June, 2020, accessed July 21, 2021, <https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2020-full-report.pdf>.

⁴ N. Shevlin, "Valejat-e Faqih In the Constitution of Iran: The Implementation of the Theocracy," *Journal of Constitutional Law* 1–2 (1998): 358–382.

features of a democratic system,⁵ as well as Iran's nuclear ambitions. As for the external factors determining American interest in Iran, they include: geopolitical rivalry with Saudi Arabia being a U.S. ally;⁶ striving for the status of a regional power and hegemon in the Persian Gulf sub-region; participation in the Middle East proxy wars in Syria, Yemen and Iraq; perceiving Israel as an enemy and posing a potential threat to its security; the U.S. authorities' endeavours to create an American alliance network in the Middle East (Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain), united against a common enemy – Iran.

Thus, in an attempt to find an answer to the question about the role and position of Iran in the American foreign policy in the period of the Biden administration, it is worth analysing his predecessor Donald Trump's policy first. Such an approach will make it possible to expose new accents, and thus to identify elements of continuity and change in Biden's policy as compared to Trump's policy. It can be certainly stated that it took the Republican administration only four years to lead to a total impasse in the U.S.-Iran relations, which entailed a setback and even withdrawal from the conciliatory policy that had constituted a huge success of the Obama administration. The new Biden administration should therefore be the one to reverse the negative trends and minimise the consequences of the erroneous decisions in respect of the anti-Iran strategy pursued by Trump and his administration.

In order to systematise the Trump administration's Iran policy, it should be stressed that the antagonistic accents, the undesirable change, and the new negative quality occurred as early as in mid-2016. Trump stressed that he was opposed both to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA),⁷ and to lifting of sanctions against Iran.⁸ Having taken the office of President of the United States, Trump permanently indicated Iran as a state posing a threat to American interests in the Middle East.⁹ Iran was perceived as a representative of radical Islam, which required confrontation and not cooperation.¹⁰ Hard-line policies adopted by the Trump administration were fully compatible with strengthening of strategic relations

⁵ A. Ganji, *The Road to Democracy In Iran* (Boston: Boston Review Book, 2008), 9–22.

⁶ A. Mirsepassi, *Democracy In Modern Iran. Islam, Culture, and Political Change* (New York, London: University Press, 2010), 110–113.

⁷ Security Council, "Resolution 2231 (2015) Adopted by the Security Council at its 7488th meeting, on 20 July 2015," July 20, 2015, accessed December 27, 2021, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2231.

⁸ M.A. El Khalfi, "Agreement on the Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action (JCPOA) between Iran and the United States," *Journal Pembaharuan Hukum* 7, no. 2 (2020): 185–187.

⁹ The White House, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," December, 2017, accessed January 2, 2022, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

¹⁰ Ş. Udum, "Fix It Or Nix It? An Analysis of the Trump Administration's Policy on the Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA)," *Turkish Studies* 13/14 (2018): 215–225.

with Israel and Saudi Arabia.¹¹ Trump's antagonistic policy towards Iran was most strongly reflected in the unilateral American withdrawal from the JCPOA on 8th May 2018 and imposition of further sanctions on Iran.¹² Trump justified his decision with the fact that Iran is the leading state sponsor of terrorism, it exports dangerous missiles, fuels conflicts in the Middle East, and supports militias of such terrorist organisations as Hezbollah, Hamas, the Taliban, or Al-Qaeda.¹³

Equally importantly, the normalisation of the U.S.-Iran relations during Trump's presidency was also hindered by a series of incidents, both on the part of Iran and the U.S., which escalated the spiral of conflict and mutual antagonisms.¹⁴ These incidents included holding the Middle East conference in Warsaw in February 2019 at the initiative of the U.S., where the issues concerning Iran were discussed without its representatives taking part, but with the emphasis on the dominant role of Iran's adversaries in the region (the so-called B Team). The subsequent incidents included imposing a full embargo on Iranian oil imports by the U.S. in May 2019 and shooting down an American unmanned RQ-4A Global Hawk surveillance aircraft by Iranian forces in the Strait of Hormuz in June 2019 which according to Tehran had purportedly violated Iranian airspace. In response to these events the U.S. imposed further sanctions against Iran, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.¹⁵ Then there were threats to block the strategic Strait of Hormuz and the detention of the British oil tanker *Stena Impero* by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in July 2019 in retaliation for the previous seizure of the Iranian ship *Grace 1* off the coast of Gibraltar on suspicion of violating EU sanctions against Syria. These incidents, in turn, became a pretext for the United States to launch a military mission in the Persian Gulf. On 14th September 2019 there were attacks on the Abqaiq refinery run by the state-owned oil company, Aramco, in Saudi Arabia and on the Khurais oil field. Although Yemen's Houthi rebels claimed responsibility for the attacks, the U.S. accused Iran.¹⁶ Tensions between the U.S. and Iran were also fuelled by a four-day joint military exercise held by Iran, China, and Russia in the northern part of the Indian Ocean in December 2019. Another problem occurred when the authorities in

¹¹ The White House, "Remarks by President Trump on Iran Strategy," October 13, 2017, accessed January 24, 2022, <https://eg.usembassy.gov/remarks-president-trump-iran-strategy/>.

¹² J. Thompson, "Trump's Middle East Policy," *CSS Analyses in Security Policy* 233 (2018): 1–4.

¹³ "Remarks by President Trump on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," May 8, 2018, accessed July 25, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-joint-comprehensive-plan-action/>.

¹⁴ K.A. Nazareth, "Trump's Policy Towards Iran: A Deal Undone," *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* 23, no. 2 (2019): 24–30.

¹⁵ K. Katzman, "Iran Sanctions," *Congressional Research Service Report*, November 18, 2020, accessed August 21, 2021, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS20871.pdf>.

¹⁶ K. Katzman, "U.S.-Iran Conflict and Implications for U.S. Policy," *Congressional Research Service Report*, May 8, 2020, accessed August 21, 2021, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R45795.pdf>.

Tehran were accused of orchestrating the attack of the Iraqi Shia militias on the American embassy in Baghdad, which contributed to the escalation of the conflict in late 2019 and early 2020.¹⁷ Finally, the incidents included the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani, Commander of the Iranian Quds Force on 2nd January 2020. The U.S.-Iran tensions escalated even further when Iran responded with a rocket attack against the Ain al-Asad airbase in Iraq, although no one was killed in this operation as Iran had warned of a retaliatory attack.¹⁸ The image of Iran was most severely affected as a result of the tragic shooting down, most probably unintentionally, of a Ukrainian civilian aircraft with 144 passengers on board, by Iranian forces. This incident, however, stopped further anti-American retaliatory actions on the part of Iran.¹⁹

It may therefore be concluded that the Trump administration did not learn a lesson from the wrong policy towards the Middle East adopted by another Republican president George W. Bush. Trump did not take into account that the policy of confrontation, which was the unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA, imposing sanctions on Iran and an embargo on Iranian oil, as well as a number of anti-Iranian political and diplomatic actions, constituted an impulse for the radical Iranian establishment, which not only consolidated its position but also developed anti-American attitudes among the Iranians.

Synthetising Iran's role and position in the American policy towards the Middle East during Trump's presidency, it can be assumed that it was a policy full of double standards, which can be explicitly demonstrated in a comparative analysis of Iran and Saudi Arabia. So, does belonging to the sphere of American influence constitute a *conditio sine qua non* of American support and acceptance? If, potentially, the authorities in Tehran changed course to a pro-American one, and even returned to the policy of political and military rapprochement with the U.S., would Iran enter the elite circle of American client states in the Middle East? Could Tehran then count on lenient treatment and political, military and financial support from the U.S., similarly to Riyadh?

Joe Biden's victory in the presidential election in the United States in 2020 and the Iran question

The potential election of Joe Biden, a politician with balanced views and extensive political experience, to the office of the President of the United States, heralded

¹⁷ R.N. Haass, "Evaluating the Trump Administration's Policy," *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 14, 2020, accessed August 22, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/report/evaluating-trump-administrations-iran-policy>.

¹⁸ C. Thomas, "U.S. Killing of Qasem Soleimani: Frequently Asked Questions," *Congressional Research Service Report*, January 13, 2020, accessed August 21, 2021, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46148>.

¹⁹ "Iran's final report blames air defence operator error for Ukraine plane crash," *Reuters*, March 17, 2021, accessed August 21, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-crash-ukraine-idUSKBN2B92CL>.

a change in the White House policy towards the Middle East, including Iran, during the election campaign in 2020.²⁰ According to Biden's statements, normalisation of the U.S.-Iran relations was to be the objective of the Democratic administration. As a candidate, Biden repeatedly emphasised his objection to Iran strategy pursued by the Trump administration. He particularly criticised Washington's decision of 2018 on American withdrawal from the JCPOA. Biden indicated his desire to resume the dialogue with Iran conducted during Barack Obama's presidency, and thus to revive the JCPOA. Obviously, his promises were not unconditional, but they required Iran to halt uranium enrichment as it was used for work on new nuclear and missile technologies.²¹

In Iran, Biden's victory, or rather Trump's defeat, was seen as a success of Iranian foreign policy, including the correctness of the hard-line policy towards Washington. Importantly, from the perspective of the now President Biden, Iran is no longer treated in the U.S. policy towards the Middle East as a major threat to the region and the U.S. interests in this part of the world. The Biden administration has understood that the policy of maximum pressure and support for Iran's adversaries in the Middle East at any cost, which had been pursued by Trump, ended in a fiasco. Trump's anti-Iran strategy proved to be ineffective and counterproductive. The fact is that Iran's economic situation has deteriorated radically as a result of economic sanctions reimposed by the Trump administration. However, contrary to the Republican administration's assumptions, public protests which took place in Iran in 2020, and which were intensified by the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, did not pose a threat to the power of the radical Iranian clergy. It should be emphasised that, on the contrary, the sanctions weakened the ruling group of pragmatists willing to conduct a dialogue with the West, represented by President Hassan Rouhani and by the Foreign Minister Javad Zarif. The sanctions, in turn, contributed to the strengthening of the socio-political status of the conservative and radical groups closely related to the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

It appears that the new Biden's administration has managed to recognise crucial aspects in the U.S. relations with Iran which the Trump administration failed to identify. This state of affairs is demonstrated by Biden's rational selection of competent members of his administration, primarily Antony Blinken's nomination for Secretary of State. Blinken's rational approach to foreign policy, his commitment to alliances, and critical approach to the America First policy, resulting from his extensive political experience gained, *inter alia*, during Obama's presidency, when

²⁰ "Election 2020: Voters Are Highly Engaged, but Nearly Half Expect To Have Difficulties Voting," *Pew Research Center*, August 13, 2020, accessed August 27, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/08/13/election-2020-voters-are-highly-engaged-but-nearly-half-expect-to-have-difficulties-voting/>.

²¹ D. Ross, "How Biden's Iran Policy Can Have a Chance to Succeed," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, December 26, 2020, accessed August 27, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pdf/view/16398/en>.

he served as both Deputy Secretary of State and the Deputy National Security Advisor of the then Vice President Joe Biden, give rise to the presumption that the new Democratic administration will prioritise dialogue with Iran.²² However, according to numerous Biden's and Blinken's statements, the U.S. administration is aware that following Trump's decisions and missing the opportunity to end Iran's isolation, this dialogue will be neither easy nor unconditional. The United States explicitly stresses that it is willing to talk and to re-join the JCPOA, provided that Tehran first returns to full compliance with the agreement of 2015. Blinken emphasised that the JCPOA should be presently used as a platform for discussion, to attempt to negotiate a longer and stronger agreement which would also include other aspects of Iran's destabilising activity in the region.²³ The Biden administration, similarly, to his predecessor, is committed to ensuring Iran never acquires nuclear weapons, however, contrary to his predecessors, he stressed that the chances to stop a potential aggression on the part of Tehran and terrorist threat it may pose, will be higher, if the issue of Iran's work on uranium enrichment is resolved diplomatically.

If an attempt was made to predict the shape of future U.S.-Iran relations during Biden's first term, first of all it should be stated that generally American policy towards the Middle East should be more toned-down and less speculative as far as its form is concerned. This means that it will be much more predictable for the parties concerned and devoid of spectacular and spontaneous turns, which during Trump's presidency were frequently announced not in an official manner, but through social media, especially Twitter. It should be stressed, however, that the transfer of power to Democrats will not signify an automatic reset in the U.S.-Iran relations and a return on the basis of *status quo ante bellum* to the period of Obama's presidency. Biden's Iran policy cannot constitute a direct continuation of what had existed before Donald Trump's presidency, as too many changes occurred in this period both in Iran itself and also in its surroundings. Circumstances in the Middle East have changed considerably, which also affects the shape of the Biden administration's Iran policy to a great extent.

Having analysed Joe Biden's election campaign, the selection of members of his administration, and also the new president's first decisions and remarks,²⁴ it can be concluded that the U.S. Iran strategy will be firm but definitely less confrontational and antagonistic. Biden will definitely favour the return to the multilateral dialogue with Iran, which can be proved by the talks of the signatories

²² "U.S.'s Blinken: 'The path to diplomacy is open right now' with Iran," *Reuters*, February 16, 2021, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-usa-iran-nuclear-idUSKBN2AG2LR>.

²³ M. Singh, "Biden's Iran Dilemma," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, February, 2021, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pdf/view/16517/en>.

²⁴ The White House, "Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World," February 4, 2021, accessed December 30, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>.

to the JCPOA resumed in Vienna in April 2021. However, as it was stressed even during the election campaign, it would not be an unconditional return. Iran is permanently viewed in the White House as a regional actor who wants to continue to pursue game-changing capabilities and technologies while threatening U.S. allies and partners and challenging regional stability.²⁵ Therefore, Iran will have to decide whether it will accept the conditions specified by the American authorities. Importantly, within the three months since Biden took office, despite the fact that the issue has been made a priority, an agreement in this area has not been reached. The main problem is that both the Iranian and American parties expect from each other to make the first step, which is connected – especially on the part of Iran – with the possibility of loss of prestige among the Shia community. Iran’s authorities’ concessions to the U.S. in the first half of 2021 had key importance to the presidential election which was held in Iran in June 2021.²⁶

Synthetising the implications related to the potential reset in the U.S.-Iran relations during Joe Biden’s presidency, attention should also be given to the new administration’s policy towards the leading Iran’s adversaries in the Middle East – Israel and Saudi Arabia. The unprecedented close relations between these states and the U.S. during Trump’s presidency constituted one of the key factors determining the deterioration in relations with Iran. A reset of the U.S.-Iran relations will therefore be resultant not only of the return to the JCPOA, but also of the strategy which the White House will choose as regards American relations with Saudi Arabia and Israel.²⁷ Importantly, however, also in this case Biden and his administration cannot be expected to radically change course as American policy towards the Middle East is characterised by continuity to a greater extent than by change. Nevertheless, the president can be expected to introduce new accents, which undoubtedly will be the more pro-Palestinian course in the case of Israel, although the U.S. embassy will stay in Jerusalem. The new accents should be seen in the opening of the Palestinian representative office in Washington and restoring American aid to the Palestinians, as well as in promoting a peace agreement between Israel and Palestine based on the two-state solution. That excludes the plans for Israel to annex a part of the West Bank approved by Benjamin Netanyahu and Donald Trump.²⁸ In the case of Saudi Arabia and the monarchies in the Persian Gulf

²⁵ The White House, “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance,” March, 2021, accessed January 2, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

²⁶ D. Brumberg, “Iran and the World Wait for Biden,” in *Biden and the Middle East. A Challenging Road Ahead*, ed. Z. Azzam and I.K. Harb (Washington DC: Arab Center Washington DC, 2021), 111–117.

²⁷ T.C. Wittes, “What to do – and what not to do – in the Middle East,” *Brookings Report*, January 25, 2021, accessed September 12, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/what-to-do-and-what-not-to-do-in-the-middle-east/>.

²⁸ Y. Munayyer, “Biden and Israel: The Constraints Are Plentiful,” in *Biden and the Middle East. A Challenging Road Ahead*, ed. Z. Azzam and I.K. Harb (Washington DC: Arab Center Washington DC, 2021), 79–84.

sub-region, the new president will certainly be in favour of agreements on establishing diplomatic relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco, which were signed at the end of Trump's term. However, as emphasised by Biden, such agreements are extremely valuable, but cannot be concluded at the cost of acceptance for human rights abuse (the assassination of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi) or pursuing particular interests by these states using hard power (Saudi Arabia and Yemen).²⁹ With this in mind, Joe Biden openly criticises Riyadh's policy focused on fuelling the war in Yemen at the expense of civilians and a humanitarian disaster, in order to win a proxy war against Iran in this state. Biden's disapproval of such Riyadh's policy was expressed in his decision made in early February 2021 to end American military support for the Saudi-led coalition's operations in Yemen.³⁰

The potential reset in the U.S.-Iran relations, together with a modification of the new administration's strategy towards Israel and Saudi Arabia, would therefore constitute an extremely important element of changes in the previous U.S. policy towards the Middle East. Such a modification and new accents in Biden's policy would fit into the new geopolitical quality in the region, which would certainly contribute to the strengthening of Iran's position. This is all the more important that Biden instructed to change geopolitical accents. For example, the Strait of Hormuz remains a key chokepoint for global oil and gas flows, but the U.S. Navy can control it from the outside in. The U.S. Fifth Fleet should be moved from Bahrain to a smaller base in Oman.³¹

To sum up, it should be stressed that the Biden administration will be committed to maintaining a balance of power in the Middle East. The new administration's decisions will not result from an emphasis on radical changes in his predecessor's strategy, while the rational and conciliatory approach, focused on the use of diplomatic means, will be predominant. However, the U.S. has not decided to abandon the tool of hard power it has at its disposal. It will use the instrument without hesitation to show American dominance and to prove that the Middle East remains an important area in the pursuit of American interests. This stance was best exemplified by one of Joe Biden's first military decisions concerning the Middle East, which was the airstrike on 25 February 2021 on facilities occupied by the Iranian-backed Shia militias in Syria – Kata'ib Hezbollah, which is one of the

²⁹ G. Shams, "The U.S. Presidential Election and the Impact of a Biden Administration on U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East," *Gulf Research Center*, November 15, 2020, accessed September 13, 2021, <https://www.grc.net/documents/601b9ae4784eeU.SPResidentialElection.pdf>.

³⁰ K.C. Ulrichsen, "The Biden Presidency and the Gulf Arab States," in *Biden and the Middle East. A Challenging Road Ahead*, ed. Z. Azzam and I.K. Harb (Washington DC: Arab Center Washington DC, 2021), 95–101.

³¹ U.S. Department of Defense, "Global Posture Review 2021: An Opportunity for Realism and Realignment," November 29, 2021, accessed December 30, 2021, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/global-posture-review-2021>.

most powerful paramilitary groups in Iraq and the Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada militia, active especially in Syria. The U.S. administration defined the attacks on the pro-Iranian militias as a military reaction to actions threatening the stabilisation of Iraq and Syria.³² It is apparent that this decision was a clear signal to Tehran that the new administration is open to dialogue, provided that the other party is also willing and stops actions which threaten U.S. interests in the region.³³ This thesis is confirmed by the words of the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken: "The talks with Iran about a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA have reached a decisive moment. If a deal is not reached in the next few weeks, Iran's ongoing nuclear advances will make it impossible to return to the JCPOA. But right now, there's still a window, a brief one, to bring those talks to a successful conclusion and address the remaining concerns of all sides. We didn't expect any major breakthroughs to happen today, but I believe we are now on a clearer path in terms of understanding each other's concerns, each other's positions."³⁴ Iran's stopping uranium enrichment and withdrawal from support for Shia militias in Iraq and Syria constitute to the Biden administration the *conditio sine qua non* of building a new quality in the U.S.-Iran relations at the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century.

Presidential election in Iran in 2021 and the future of the U.S.-Iran relations

The factor which undoubtedly hindered and withheld the return to the American-Iranian dialogue, despite the Biden administration's statement of good intent, was the presidential election in Iran scheduled for June 2021. Although the Iranian office of president is rather a façade than of any factual significance and it fits into the concept of hybrid theocracy, it is extremely important whether the person to hold this office is a supporter of closer relations with the West and dialogue on the return to the JCPOA, or rather a conservative closely related to the *Velayat-e Faqih* Ali Khamenei and the circle of radical Shia clergy.

Therefore, the election in Iran was currently an issue which determines, and even hindered the potential return to the American-Iranian dialogue on renegotiations of the JCPOA,³⁵ but also on other sensitive issues concerning the

³² S.Z. Mehdi, "Analysis – Is Biden following Trump's path on Iran?," March 4, 2021, accessed September 12, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/analysis-is-biden-following-trumps-path-on-iran/2164167>.

³³ The White House, "Statement by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan on Iranian Threats and Provocations Against American Citizens," January 9, 2022, accessed January 24, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/01/09/statement-by-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-on-iranian-threats-and-provocations-against-american-citizens/>.

³⁴ U.S. Department of State, "Remarks by Secretary Antony J. Blinken at a Press Availability," January 21, 2022, accessed January 24, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-a-press-availability-12/>.

³⁵ "Joint statement by PM Boris Johnson, President Macron, Chancellor Merkel and President Biden: 30 October 2021," October 30, 2021, accessed January 24, 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-by-pm-boris-johnson-president-macron-chancellor-merkel-and-president-biden-30-october-2021>.

bilateral relations, including stopping Iran's support for Shia and pro-Iranian militias in Syria and Iraq, and it will determine and hinder it for a few more months. The election was all the more important since the current president Hassan Rouhani, who is commonly believed to support peaceful and conciliatory policy in relations with the Western world and who signed the Iran Nuclear Deal of 2015, was just completing his second and last term. This in turn meant that a new chapter in Iran's foreign policy may be opened. The experience of the past three decades has shown that it is a matter of great significance – to American-Iranian dialogue, Tehran's perception of the West and potential openness to negotiations, and also to Iran's policy towards the states in the region – who will hold the office of the president of Iran: a politician like Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, or like Mohammad Khatami or Hassan Rouhani.

At the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century it remained an open question whether the increased social discontent, severe impact of international sanctions and disappointment with lack of improvement of the situation as a result of Trump's anti-Iranian policy, will be reflected in the election of a candidate from the strictly radical and ultraconservative circles and related to the Iranian religious leaders, for the office of the president of Iran.³⁶ It is worth pointing out that a similar situation arose as early as 2005, when a conservative politician, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became the president of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Based on the anti-Iranian course adopted by the George W. Bush administration, he intensified the anti-American and anti-Israeli course in Iran's foreign policy and considerably redefined Iran's security policy, officially emphasising the intensified work on acquiring weapons of mass destruction by Iran.³⁷ Trump's second term, with his confrontational rhetoric towards Iran could thus constitute a similar situation. It would certainly contribute to the victory of a supporter of confrontation with the West and the ultimate withdrawal from the JCPOA. Therefore, the disappointment of the ultraconservatives with Biden's victory and a chance for improved Iran-U.S. relations was even stronger.³⁸

Consequently, it could have been presumed that presidential election in Iran will imply actions by Iranian conservatives to stall Iran-U.S. negotiations, and the provocative actions by the pro-Iranian Shia militias in Iraq seem to be an effective tool. A rise in political tensions in Iran resulting from the retaliatory

³⁶ P. Wintour, "Biden policies the same as Trump's, says Iran's only presidential candidate," *The Guardian*, February 11, 2021, accessed September 19, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/11/biden-policies-trumpism-iran-presidential-candidate-hosseini-dehghan>.

³⁷ A.S. Hashim, "Civil-Military Relations in the Islamic Republic of Iran," in *Iran, Iraq, and the Arab Gulf States*, ed. J.A. Kechichian (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 37–50.

³⁸ S. Jafari, "Iran's hardliners think Biden might hurt their June presidential election strategy," *Atlantic Council*, January 25, 2021, accessed September 19, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/irans-hardliners-think-biden-might-hurt-their-june-presidential-election-strategy/>.

military actions undertaken by the Biden administration, and additionally the difficult domestic situation caused by American sanctions imposed during Trump's presidency, economy requiring immediate investments and modernisation, and, on top of that, the COVID-19 pandemic made it difficult for the proreform President Rouhani to take any conciliatory decisions concerning the U.S. at the end of his term. The pre-election pressure in Iran was also too strong for any of the candidates to show weakness by making pro-Western statements and thus risk a drop in support or even deprivation of a right to stand as a candidate.

During the election period particular attention was given to two candidates with the highest chance of winning. Importantly, both represent, to a greater or lesser extent, but still, a conservative party. The first, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, is the former Mayor of Tehran, member of the Majlis and a perennial candidate in the presidential elections, connected with Pasdaran. Before the presidential campaign, he used to be the commander of the IRGC Aerospace Force. The other candidate, Hossein Dehghan, is the former minister of defence, closely cooperating with Ali Khamenei and the Pasdaran. He was sanctioned by the U.S. due to his close relations with Hezbollah. He is famous for his criticism of Rouhani and the JCPOA. Therefore, it appears to be important that Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf's victory would give greater hope for dialogue with the U.S. and the West, as it was Qalibaf who has from time to time advocated for dialogue with the United States, although he simultaneously called for American influence to be eliminated from Iran and the entire Middle East. It was also Qalibaf who publicly welcomed Trump's defeat and stated that Joe Biden would turn maximum pressure into "smart pressure".³⁹

However, what is essential, the presidential election in Iran did not win any of the candidates mentioned above. The election won hard-line, ultraconservative, principlist politician Ebrahim Raisi, the Head of the Judiciary (Chief Justice), a career prosecutor, and a cleric who has never actually belonged to the IRGC. Raisi ran for president unsuccessfully in 2017. Some experts emphasize that Raisi, a member of the Assembly of Experts, is being groomed to succeed Khamenei as Supreme Leader.⁴⁰

Raisi officially took office on 3rd August 2021. During his inauguration speech, Raisi pointed that his government would seek to lift the sanctions on Iran imposed by the United States but underlined that it would not let foreigners dictate how

³⁹ A.B. Wolf, "The 2021 Iranian Presidential Election: A Preliminary Assessment," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy Note 97, February 23, 2021, accessed September 19, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/4304>.

⁴⁰ L. Zaccara, "Iran's presidential election 2021: what to expect from Ebrahim Raisi's first term," *ARI* 68/2021, accessed October 25, 2021, http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_en/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/ari68-2021-irans-presidential-election-2021-what-to-expect-from-ebrahim-raisis-first-term.

its economy is run.⁴¹ After the fall of Kabul to the Taliban, Raisi stated that the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan offered a chance for stabilizing the country, which Iran would support. In his speech to the high-level General Debate at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in September Raisi called for an end to United States sanctions against his country, describing them as a method of waging war.⁴² These official statements did not create a friendly atmosphere for dialogue between the US and Iran. And there is no indication that the new president will change the rhetoric towards the US. The confirmation of this thesis is, among other things, auctions at JCPOA, which took place after the presidential elections in June 2021. Even though the new president declared a return to talks held in Vienna at the end of November, their success is still dependent on the lifting of sanctions imposed on Iran.⁴³ Due to the conditional attitude of the US and Iran, the dialogue in Vienna may not end with the signification of a new agreement, and certainly not in the coming months.

Summing up the importance of the Iranian presidential election for the US policy towards this country, it should be emphasised that, it appears that the ideal situation, although presently a rather utopian one, is the situation where the Biden administration refrains from further use of military means against the provocative Shia militias in the territory of Iraq and Syria, and will show patience until the election in Iran. Such strategic patience may, in the long-term perspective, yield much more desired effects than military *ad hoc* responses, contributing to the strengthening of the conservative-radical wing in Iran. Therefore, it should be emphasised that only the victory of a candidate with moderate, and even proreform views, in the election held in Iran in June constitutes *conditio sine qua non* of the real normalisation in the Iran-West and Iran-U.S relations. Only such a situation as this could create a real platform for the dialogue of both the parties, and such dialogue and its benefits are equally necessary for the pursuit of American interests in the Middle East, the improvement of the economic and political situation in Iran, and even for the strengthening of its position in the region.⁴⁴ At the time of the victory of the ultraconservative candidate Raisi, the question of the possibility of normalizing relations between the US and Iran remains uncertain or even unfounded. In the case of the White House, this state of affairs can be reflected

⁴¹ M. Motaedi, "Ebrahim Raisi sworn in as Iran's eighth president," August 5, 2021, accessed September 21, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/5/irans-raisi-sends-message-of-strength-in-inauguration>.

⁴² "Sanctions are 'US way of war', Iranian President at UN," September 21, 2021, accessed September 25, 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1100572>.

⁴³ United Nations Headquarters, New York, "Remarks by President Biden Before the 76th Session of the United Nations General Assembly," New York, September 21, 2021, accessed January 3, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/09/21/remarks-by-president-biden-before-the-76th-session-of-the-united-nations-general-assembly/>.

⁴⁴ K. Katzman, "Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies," *Congressional Research Service Report*, January 11, 2021, accessed September 19, 2021, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44017.pdf>.

in the words of Biden's presidents: "Our relations with Iran have not yet normalized, and the process of implementing the agreements with Iran, dated January 19, 1981, is ongoing."⁴⁵ However, it is worth remembering that Iran's new president can be a little bit pragmatic in his foreign policy. In that way, he needs to reaffirm his possible candidacy to become the next leader and his international position as a legitimate president. In the perception of the American administration, such a situation is convenient. For example, Raisi is expected to continue with the negotiations started with Saudi Arabia to reduce bilateral tensions. Raisi stressed this idea at his first press conference, including a possible re-opening of embassies.

Moreover, Raisi, despite anti-American rhetoric, is interested in obtaining nuclear-related sanctions relief. However, it seems that reviving the JCPOA should not be as difficult as negotiating the new agreement. This situation is related to the hostile position of Israel towards the deal, which is taken into account by the U.S. administration. Iran's relationship with Israel will worsen, creating additional hindering factors for President Biden seeking better relations with Iran. It should be remembered that Israel Prime Minister Naftali Bennett implements the strategy known as the 'Octopus Doctrine'⁴⁶ to strike Iran directly, not just its allies like Hezbollah.

The challenge for the Biden administration in relations with Teheran is Iran's turn to the East, particularly its accelerated growing relationship with China. China has become a far more critical and reliable economic partner for Teheran than Europe. This trend will continue regardless of Iran's leadership.

To sum up, domestic political and structural constraints in Iran and the United States limit shift in US-Iranian relations. The legacy of the hostile Iranian rhetoric toward the United States and Israel reinforces existing biases among the American policymakers and society. What is essential is that U.S. administrations since 1979 have pointed to the containment of Iran as the American hostile. The same administrations have contemplated a strategic opening to Iran, but the strategic opening policy never won. The same is the case with the administration of Joe Biden. So, resetting relations with Iran is one of the most critical and complex challenges for the Biden administration in the U.S. policy towards the Middle East.

⁴⁵ The White House, "Letter to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President of the Senate on the Continuation of the National Emergency with Respect to Iran," November 9, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/11/09/letter-to-the-speaker-of-the-house-of-representatives-and-the-president-of-the-senate-on-the-continuation-of-the-national-emergency-with-respect-to-iran/>.

⁴⁶ H. Keinon, "Cyberwarfare and the 'Octopus Doctrine' – analysis," *The Jerusalem Post*, May 20, 2020, accessed February 14, 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/cyberwarfare-and-the-octopus-doctrine-analysis-628737>.

Conclusion

The research hypothesis of this article, contained in the assumption that Biden does not make radical changes in the American strategy towards Iran but rather makes some adjustments, was positively verified.

In conclusion, it should be stated that President Joe Biden cannot be expected to make radical changes in the American strategy in the Middle East. The U.S. leading interests and objectives as regards the region have remained unchanged for decades. Importantly, however, the new administration may make adjustments – introduce new accents – in these aspects of the policy towards the Middle East which in its view were addressed in an erroneous manner during Trump's presidency and were detrimental to American interests in the Middle East. Iran is undoubtedly one of the directions where new accents are especially noticeable.

The Biden administration, as opposed to his predecessor Trump, has prioritised efforts to thaw the U.S.-Iran relations. It was in the interests of the Trump administration to convince the other players in the international arena that Iran is a state which poses a threat to the regional and international security, creates a danger to the stable pursuit of interests and objectives of the U.S. policy in the region, as well as being a state whose objective is to destabilise American allies in the Middle East. Trump gave priority to strengthening of the position of Saudi Arabia and Israel in the region, at the expense of Iran. As such Trump's strategy provided an indisputable basis for even larger military presence of the United States in the region, effective political and military competitiveness against China penetrating this part of the world, maintaining close relations with Tehran, and also for the American sphere of influence over states which are afraid of the Shias strengthening their political influence.

Contrary to the above-presented perception of Iran by President Trump and his administration, Joe Biden has given priority to dialogue and diplomacy, although the dialogue is not unconditional and does not constitute a sum of compromises on the part of the United States. The two leading goals in the new administration's policy towards Tehran are to persuade Iran's authorities to return to compliance with the JCPOA, which would become a platform for negotiating a new nuclear agreement, and to stop Iran's support for Shia militias in Iraq and Syria. A new accent introduced in favour of Iran by Democrats consists in striving to maintain a balance of power in the region, particularly with Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel in mind, and not favouring one of them, which should also be enhanced by the new Iran nuclear deal. However, it should be kept in mind that the key factor which could determine the possibilities for improvement, the chances for both bilateral and multilateral dialogue and potential normalisation of the U.S.-Iran relations, was the presidential election in Iran. From the American perspective, victory of a candidate supporting reforms could create chances for the resumption of dialogue initiated by the Obama administration. Unfortunately, the victory of an

ultraconservative candidate associated with the Iranian clergy undoubtedly signifies a return to the policy of confrontation and the impediment of resuming the dialogue on JCPOA. It is worthy to note that the new President Ebrahim Raisi should be pragmatic in his foreign policy because he is pointed as the following religious Leader. So, on the one hand, essential and curious is that Raisi focuses on anti-American rhetoric. Still, on the other hand, he is interested in obtaining nuclear-related sanctions relief. The Joe Biden administration should use these circumstances if its real goal is to normalize relations with Iran.

Data availability

All data underlying the results are available as part of the article and no additional source data are required.