



Window of Opportunity Towards Iranian Regime Closes for President Trump

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The switch from Deal A (prisoner and MIA exchange) to Deal B (nuclear) requires a methodical and conceptual continuum of dialogue, building trust and gradual structuring of a complex and challenging process to arrive at agreements.



At the beginning of COVID-19 crisis (March 2020) we expanded on the opportunity the crisis provided for the Trump administration to build a rolling strategic manoeuvre that begins with a US-Irani prisoner exchange as a stepping stone to build trust to arrive at agreements on various additional core issues (Nuclear, Persian Gulf, IRGC in Syria Iraq) that will position President Trump as the one who brought the Iranian regime to its knees and leveraged the American projection optimally. Had this been successful, it would have been considered as one of Trump biggest achievements in his first term in office and a part of his presidential legacy and would have had a positive impact on his declining approval rate.

In the field, the manoeuvre that started with release of several US citizens in the past few months has turned into a partial “desk clearing” of the prisoners and MIA issue and checking it off the US-Iran agenda. For example, on June 23rd, 2020, Qassem Haj al-Din, Hezbollah’s bagman who operated in the Morocco-Lebanon route, was released less than a year after being sentenced to five years by a Federal Court, following his conviction of money laundering for Hezbollah in Africa. it should be noted, the above served as complementary component to round trip transaction between the US, Iran and Hezbollah (on which we have reported in our previous publication) that started with the release of Amar al-Fakhouri from the Lebanese prison, continued with the release of the former USMC officer Michael White and the Iranian engineer Majid Tahari. On a similar note one should mention the administration’s efforts to bring to light and declassify, information held by the US authorities

and proves that Robert Levinson, the FBI agent missing since 2003, is among the dead (as per the Special Representative to Iran Brian Hook's statement in June 2020).

In our opinion, Mr. Hook's statement was meant on one hand to prepare the US public opinion on a sensitive issue – Levinson's fate – and on the other enable additional dialogue with Iran while chipping away at the Iranian resistance through their alleged exculpation from liability to Levinson's death. On the heels of the above, Mr. Hook's statement regarding the US wishes to move forward with the prisoner and MIA issue is noteworthy.

It seems that the pace and intensity of prisoners and MIA events on the US-Iran axis in recent months attest to the high degree of attention the Trump administration allocates to the issue, some six months before the November presidential elections. Yet, the slow progress of the negotiations, the clock that is running out on the elections, the economic challenge facing the president and the deteriorating internal situation in the US (COVID-19, civilian unrest in light of George Floyd's murder) and the declining approval rates are hurting a quick resolution of the prisoners and MIA issue to be followed by a dialogue and negotiation on the strategic core issues with an Iranian-US bilateral nuclear agreement, viewed by the president as one of core achievement of his first term foreign policy.

Alongside the above, the administration's defiant policy vis-a-vis Iran, both in public and in diplomatic channels, was another reason for preventing any additional understandings with Iran. Thus, the administration found itself returning to a collision course with the Ayatollahs regime – with the call of US Ambassador to the UN Kelly Kraft to the members of the UN Security Council to expand the arms embargo over Iran, in light of worrisome findings regarding the continuation of Irani arms shipments all across the Middle East and South America.

Yet, President Trump sees even these days, according to White House sources, a nuclear deal a central element of his legacy and encouragement to his voters towards November 2020. That said, the negative trend of the relationship and rhetoric vis-a-vis Iran are not conducive to achieve an improved nuclear agreement (with a limitation of ground missiles at its focus) and in fact closes the window of opportunity prior to the elections thus wasting the momentum achieved by the prisoners exchange deal.

In our opinion, in order to successfully finish a rolling negotiation manoeuvre gradually built one level at a time, dramatic events that cause detours off the planned route, stop the process and even reverse it. The president insistence that applying pressure after "Deal A" will close "Deal B" is

counter to any prevalent negotiation tactics dealing with building trust with the counterparty. Building a continuous and reliable dialogue (preferably clandestine) and leveraging “Deal A” to promote the more meaningful “Deal B” would have been a better path to follow. On the ground, the administration approach will likely regress any process related to the Levinson matter as well as others (US and other westerners) held prisoners in Iran and its proxies around the world.

In summation, the Trump administration has identified at the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic an opportunity to reverse the negative vector of its relationship with Iran (“Prisoners First”) and channel the new reality to arrive at a new and improved nuclear agreement. At the heart of this ambitious strategy, as drafted by the president, arriving at a new nuclear agreement with Iran without a real dialogue with the partners to the original agreement (JCPOA). Even without addressing the probability of arriving at a new agreement, the rigid approach taken by the administration, as aforementioned, closed the window of opportunity to reshape the Washington-Tehran relationship.

With the above, President Trump will conclude his term without a strategic achievement on the Iranian front and provide his opponents with ammunition for the charged November 2020 presidential elections campaign. Even so, yet again it has been proven that the prisoners and MIAs issue can provide the first step in introducing policy and strategy changes towards traditional and old adversary. At the heart of this first step, building trust and communication channels, providing benefits for concessions and forming an experience of success. In today’s Middle East, these characteristics are the key to successfully realize national interests on multiple levels.

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