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THE 2003 BUSH'S REJECTION OF A "GRAND BARGAIN"
AND THE 2009 OBAMA'S OPENINGS
THE IRAN NUCLEAR DEAL AS A US FOREIGN POLICY CASE
STUDY

Tese no âmbito do Doutoramento em Relações Internacionais – Política Internacional e
Resolução de Conflitos orientada pela Professora Doutora Maria Raquel Freire e apresentada à
Faculdade de Economia da Universidade de Coimbra.

Dezembro de 2020

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grau de Doutor*

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Tese

To my father

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RESUMO

Esta tese centra-se na política dos EUA em relação à República Islâmica do Irão (RII) durante as administrações de G. W. Bush e Obama. Em particular, investiga o processo de tomada de decisão que levou à rejeição de uma solução abrangente para as negociações diplomáticas relativas ao programa nuclear iraniano em 2003, mas oferecendo depois uma abertura a Teerão em 2009. O acordo foi aceite pelo regime iraniano e negociado gradual e bilateralmente entre Teerão e Washington até novembro de 2012, altura em que passou a quadro diplomático multilateral, os chamados “Cinco mais Um”, composto por cinco membros permanentes do Conselho de Segurança das Nações Unidas mais os da União Europeia e da RII. Estas negociações diplomáticas levaram ao acordo final de julho de 2015, o “Plano de Ação Conjunta Global”. Esta investigação teve necessariamente em conta a história das relações Teerão-Washington, cuja natureza mudou durante a Administração Carter em consequência da transformação do Irão numa república islâmica. A documentação consultada revela que uma linha de comunicação secreta entre Washington e os novos governantes islâmicos existiu sempre desde a revolução de 1979, permitindo a ambos os países uma cooperação mutuamente benéfica no curto prazo. O argumento central desta tese é que, desde 2002, a forma como os EUA têm lidado com Teerão e com o seu programa nuclear se têm caracterizado por políticas de poder, mais do que por objetivos de resolução de conflitos. De facto, durante a administração Bush várias soluções possíveis para a resolução do impasse nuclear foram prejudicadas pela existência de uma facção dentro do Poder Executivo dos EUA convencida de que, para obtenção da supremacia americana na região do Médio Oriente – Golfo Pérsico, não se deveria conceder a Teerão a possibilidade de alcançar o estatuto de *player* regional. Em contrapartida, durante a administração Obama esse mesmo objetivo de longo prazo deu-se via o reforço e reconhecimento de um papel regional para os Iranianos. Desta forma, a disputa nuclear foi central para qualquer uma destas abordagens opostas das duas sucessivas administrações dos EUA. Em relação ao quadro teórico de análise, foram consideradas as Teorias de Política Externa, uma vez que esta abordagem teórica permite enquadrar a tomada de decisão de política externa, como um processo multicausal, num referencial de modelo burocrático de políticas. Relatos da política dos EUA em relação a Teerão, escritos por ex-funcionários, bem como documentos tornados públicos pelos meios de comunicação, nos anos de 2006-2007, dando conta da “grande negociação” que teria sido feita entre os EUA e a RII em 2003, forneceram uma riqueza de

fontes primárias. A presente investigação pretende trazer essencialmente duas contribuições. Em primeiro lugar, aumentar o conhecimento sobre a forma como as estratégias dos atores envolvidos, juntamente com outras variáveis estruturais internas e internacionais, interagem para produzir resultados na forma de políticas externas. Em segundo lugar, permitir uma melhor compreensão da influência dos grupos de interesse no processo de tomada de decisão da política externa dos Estados Unidos, em particular em relação à República Islâmica do Irão.

Palavras-chave: *Política externa dos EUA; Política dos EUA para o Irão; Acordo Nuclear com o Irão; grupos de interesse; modelo de política burocrática.*

ABSTRACT

This thesis primarily focuses on US policy towards the Islamic Republic of Iran during the G. W. Bush and Obama administrations. In particular, it investigates the decision-making process which led to reject a comprehensive solution to the diplomatic negotiations regarding the Iranian nuclear program – known as “Iran Nuclear Deal” – in 2003, whilst offering an opening to Tehran in 2009. The Deal was accepted by the Iranian regime and was negotiated gradually and bilaterally by Tehran and Washington until November 2012 when it turned into a multilateral diplomatic framework, the so-called “Five plus One”, consisting of five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus the European Union and the IRI. Such diplomatic negotiations led to the provisional agreement known as “Joint Plan of Action” in March 2013 and, then, to the final signature, the “Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action”, on July 15, 2015. This research has mandatorily handled the history of the Tehran-Washington relationship, whose nature changed during the Carter administration and the transformation of Iran into an Islamic republic ruled by a multi-layered religious-secular system of power. Documents reveal that, contrary to the prevailing view, a covert line of communication between Washington and the new Islamic rulers had existed since the 1979 revolution, allowing both countries mutually beneficial short-term cooperation. The core argument of this thesis is that since 2002 the US dealing with Tehran and its nuclear program has been characterized by power politics more than conflict resolution goals. During the Bush Administration, in fact, a number of possible solutions to the nuclear stalemate had been hindered by a faction inside the US executive branch which was convinced that, in order to pursue American supremacy in the Middle East-Persian Gulf region, the US could not allow Tehran to acquire regional player status. Contrarily, during the Obama Administration, that same long-term goal was considered achievable by means of an enhanced, acknowledged Iranian regional role. Thus, the nuclear dispute was central to any of these opposing approaches by the two successive US administrations. Regarding the theoretical apparatus applied to the thesis, middle-range foreign policies theories have been taken into consideration as such a theoretical approach frames foreign policy decision-making as a multi-causal process, in a referential context of bureaucratic politics model. Accounts of U.S. policy towards Tehran written by former officials, such as Zbigniew

Brzezinski, Lawrence Wilkerson, Flynt Leverett, and Ben Rhodes, as well as documents made public during the media campaign which in the years 2006-2007 unveiled the “grand bargain” between the U.S. and the IRI proposed in 2003 have provided a wealth of primary sources. This study intends to essentially make two contributions. Firstly, it enhances our knowledge about how actors’ strategies, together with other domestic and international structural variables, interact to produce outcomes in the form of foreign policies. Secondly, it provides a better understanding of the influence played by interest groups on the US foreign policy decision-making process, particularly that one regarding the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Keywords: *US foreign policy; US-Iran policy; Iran Nuclear Deal; interest groups; bureaucratic politics model.*

LIST OF ACRONYMS

AIPAC	America Israeli Public Affairs Committee
AIC	American Iranian Council
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
NCRI	National Council of Resistance of Iran
NIE	National Intelligence Estimate
NIAC	National Iranian American Council
CFR	Council of Foreign Relations
HAWK	Homing-All-The-Way-Killer (missiles)
HCFR	House Committee on Foreign Relations
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IND	Iran Nuclear Deal
INP	Iran Nuclear Program
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps
IRI	Islamic Republic of Iran
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action
JPOA	Joint Plan Of Action
MEK	Mojahedin-el Khalq
MNEs	Multi-National Enterprises
NIE	National Intelligence Estimate
NSC	National Security Council
OSP	Office for Special Plans
RBF	Rockefeller Brothers Fund
SCFR	Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
TOW	Tube-lunched Optical-Tracking Wire-Guided (anti-tank missiles)
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
WH	White House

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INTRODUCTION

Context and Subject

The “Iran Nuclear Deal” (IND) has been a nonlinear and rather discontinuous process of negotiation concerning the Iran Nuclear Program (INP), between the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) and the international community – more precisely, a variable group of countries consisting of the United States (US) together with, alternatively, some or all the five members of the United Nations Security Council, plus Germany and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). It started in August 2002, when, during a press conference in Washington, some members of the National Iranian Council for Resistance (NICR) – the political arm of an Iranian dissident group, the Mujahedin Ex-Kalq (MEK), – made some revelations about the existence of two undeclared nuclear facilities. Owing to them, as well as to other Iranian non-compliance with the IAEA’s quests for inspections, the international community through some United Nations’ resolutions¹, and, in particular, the US, through presidential executive orders and congressional legislation², imposed increasing economic and financial sanctions and diplomatic isolation on Tehran. A 2015 US Congress Research Report would indeed have defined such a regime of sanctions “arguably the most complex the United States and the International Community have ever imposed on a rogue state”

¹ As, for instance, the UNSC Resolution 1696 of July 2006, demanding Tehran to halt its nuclear program; the UNSC Resolution 1737 of December 2006, aimed to ban nuclear technology and material’s supply to the IRI and to freeze the assets of Iranian individuals and companies linked to the uranium enrichment program; the UNSC Resolution 1747, passed in March 2007, imposing an arms embargo and expanding the freeze on Iranian assets; and the UNSC Resolution 1929 of June 2010 which banned the IRI from participating in any activities related to ballistic missiles, tightened the arms embargo, froze the funds and assets of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and of the Iranian Shipping Lines. It also forbid the opening of Iranian banks on foreign territory and prevented non-Iranian financial institutions from opening offices and accounts in Iran. The European Union also imposed nuclear sanctions aimed basically to limit trade in “dual-use” equipment which could be used in the process for uranium enrichment, to freeze the asset of entities and individuals linked to the INP, and to ban transactions with Iranian banks and financial institutions as well as the purchase, import, and transport of Iranian crude oil and natural gas. Finally, European insurance companies were forbidden from insuring Iranian oil shipments.

² For example, the Iran Nuclear Proliferation Prevention Act of 2002 (INPPA); The Iran Freedom Support Act (IFSA) in 2006; the Iran Counter-Proliferation Act of 2007; the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, And Divestment Act of 2010 (CISADA); the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012 (ITRSHRA); the Iran Freedom and Counter-Proliferation Act of 2012 (IFCA). As a result, such sanctions prohibited any trade with Tehran, other than that ‘intended to benefit the Iranian people’, including limited export of medical and agricultural equipment, and humanitarian assistance. They banned also any kind of investment in Iranian markets, in particular in the financial, oil and petrochemical sectors. For a comprehensive description of American legislation and executive orders that are specific to the IRI as well as of their rationale, see Rennack, 2016.

(Rennack, 2016). The IND ended on November 24 2013, the day when the IRI signed the Joint Plan of Action's (JPOA) together with the so-called "group of 5+1" states (the US, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, France – i.e., the permanent members of the UN Security Council – and Germany, plus the European Union (EU)). The JPOA was an interim agreement which would lead to a final one. Basically, it consisted in a short-term freezing of portions of the IRI's nuclear program in exchange for lifting, gradually, the whole sanction system targeting Tehran. On 14 July 2015, after twenty-three months of further multilateral negotiations held in Geneva, the same states signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the final and programmatic document which represented the ultimate conclusion of the IND. For what concerns in particular the US, the JCPOA passed the Congress term for review on September 12, 2015 after two months of protracted tensions over the deal between the White House and Congress. Finally, the agreement was honoured on January 16, 2016 through the United Nations Security Council resolution no. 2231.

In the "Preface" to the JCPOA's text (European Parliament, 2015), the signers stated that the agreement

"will ensure that Iran's nuclear programme will be exclusively peaceful, and mark a fundamental shift in their approach to this issue. They anticipate that full implementation of this JCPOA will positively contribute to regional and international peace and security. Iran reaffirms that under no circumstances will Iran ever seek, develop or acquire any nuclear weapons."

And that,

the initial mutually determined limitations described in this JCPOA will be followed by a gradual evolution, at a reasonable pace, of Iran's peaceful nuclear programme, including its enrichment activities, to a commercial programme for exclusively peaceful purposes, consistent with international non-proliferation norms.

In a nutshell, under the JCPOA, Tehran was expected to eliminate its stockpile of medium-enriched uranium, cut its stockpile of low-enriched uranium by 98%, and reduce by two-thirds the number of its gas centrifuges within 13 years. Then, for the following 15 years, the IRI could enrich uranium up to 3.67% only, but it was not allowed to build any new heavy-water facility. Uranium-enrichment activities were to be limited to the facility located in Natanz using only first-generation centrifuges for 10 years. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) would have free and regular access to all Iranian nuclear facilities for monitoring and verifying Tehran's compliance with the plan. In return for verifiably abiding by its commitments and in relation to its nuclear program, the IRI would

gradually have its sanctions lifted by the US, the EU, and the United Nations Security Council. In other terms, through the deal and in exchange for allowing international control, Tehran finally was granted the right to fully develop the uranium enrichment process for civilian purposes, although in a limited and externally verifiable way. Additionally, it had its sanctions lifted, which had brought its economy and financial system on the brink of bankruptcy³.

On October 2017, the Trump Administration made public its opposition to the deal and, later, on May 8 2018, despite Tehran's verified compliance with it (IAEA, 2018), it officially declared the US' withdrawal from the JCPOA. That meant the re-imposition of the American regime's sanctions on Tehran, already existing before the JCPOA's signature, to which the Trump Administration added a further round of sanctions (BBC News, 2018; Sullivan, 2018)⁴. All the other signers of the JCPOA made statements supporting the deal (EUEAS, 2018; The Iran Project, 2018). However, because of the American intention to also impose sanctions on foreign firms doing business with Tehran those entities which had already signed contracts with Iranian authorities terminated them and started to disinvest from the country. As a consequence, in May 2019, Iranian President Rouhani affirmed that the IRI would stop the excess sales of enriched uranium and heavy water to other countries as dictated by the JCPOA. Moreover, the Iranian President declared that Tehran would resume uranium enrichment beyond 3.67 percent limit if the IRI was not able to benefit from the economic advantages of the JCPOA (Sharafedin, 2019). On January 3, 2020, as a reaction to the assassination of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards (IRG) General, Qassem Soleymani, by the US, the IRI also decided to conclusively withdraw from the JCPOA and, on January 5, 2020, its definitive withdrawal from its commitments under the 2015 JCPOA was officially announced (MEHR News Agency, 2020). By now it is not yet clear what the future of the JCPOA will be. However, it is important to note that such a deal was the first formal agreement between the US and the IRI since the birth of the Islamic Republic. In fact, the two states had not had any official diplomatic relationship since the 1979 Iranian revolution and the so-called "hostages' crisis" time (when the US embassy's personnel were held hostages by a group of revolutionaries for 444 days, from November 4, 1979 to January

³ In 2012, the year in which UN and EU sanctions against Tehran got full force, the annual change in Iranian real Gross Domestic Product was -6,5%. The 2013 was another year of economic contraction with -2% change in real GDP. (Source: World Bank, 2015). From August 2011 to September 2012 the Rial, the Iranian currency, had lost half of its value (Torbati, 2012).

⁴ See Rennack, 2019, for an updated comprehensive description of the US sanctions regime toward the IRI.

20, 1980). One year after the revolution, the IRI and neighboring Iraq started a war which would last for the following eight years. The US backed Baghdad and this fact deepened the fracture between Washington and Tehran. Although, as this thesis demonstrates, during the Reagan, G. W. H. Bush, Clinton and G.W. Bush administrations a back channel with the Iranian regime was maintained, the American attitude towards Tehran was hostile. The IRI, in fact, became the objective of a “containment” policy inaugurated by President Carter at the very final stage of his presidency. That strategy was continued by all the following presidents (Fayazmanesh, 2008; Murray, 2009; Seliktar, 2012) including President Obama (Fayazmanesh, 2013), although he also tried, at the same time, to reach out to Tehran diplomatically. Basically, the Iranian containment was aimed to prevent Tehran from securing a leading role for itself in the Middle East-Persian Gulf region. It was pursued through various means among which the most important ones were represented by increasing commercial, economic, financial, and diplomatic sanctions. Much to the point, relevant were those produced by the 1996 “Iran-Libya Sanctions Act”. The US support to Iraq in the Iraq-IRI war was also part of such a strategy. As a matter of fact, by providing Bagdad with arms and allowing it to use weapons of mass destruction against Iranian civil population, Washington succeeded in prolonging the war and, therefore, in making the IRI military and economically weaker. Hence, from this historical point of view, the long lasting nuclear dispute between Tehran and Washington appears to be consistent with US foreign policies adopted towards the IRI. In other terms, as the Carter doctrine made clear, since the end of World War II, the Persian Gulf region had always represented an area of vital interest for the US. Therefore, any attempts by Tehran to re-establish its role as a player with regional ambitions (as it had been Pahlavi’s Iran before) either by trying to export its political model to other Muslim states in the region, or by becoming a nuclear power, could not be accepted by Washington.

The Research Puzzle

According to former Italian Ambassador to Tehran, Roberto Toscano, the JPOA was very similar to a deal which could have been reached in 2003 (Toscano, 2014). Moreover, the 2003 deal would have been even more advantageous to the US. The deal that Toscano refers to was based on a proposal the Iranians offered the US through the Swiss Ambassador to

Teheran⁵. Throughout that proposal, the IRI was committing itself not only to freeze its nuclear program, but also to totally change its strategic posture in the Middle East-Gulf region and, particularly, towards Israel. In fact, it was ready to accept the “Two States” Saudi plan for Palestine and to stop supporting its foreign proxies in the Middle-East, i.e., *Hamas* in Palestine and *Hezbollah* in Lebanon. In addition, Tehran was ready to cooperate with the US on security matters both in the region and in Afghanistan. In exchange for that, the IRI asked for the recognition of its regional role in the wider Middle East-Persian Gulf area. For many years, the authenticity, the source and even the existence of such a document have been subject of disputes among practitioners, scholars and those politicians who played key roles in the Bush’s foreign policy team⁶. After the JPOA’s signature, the then-Secretary of State himself, John Kerry, made publicly references to that proposal (Kerry, 2013). That reference represented, indeed, a kind of legitimization for scientific research investigating such an Iranian proposal. Then, the research puzzle which this thesis intends to approach is *why* the 2003 proposal was rejected and *why*, some years later, a similar although less comprehensive deal was accepted. In addition, *who*, precisely, in 2003 made the US decline such an important deal which would cease more than twenty-three years of diplomatic hostilities and would eventually stabilize the ME-Persian Gulf region. Another feature which makes the IND worth being analyzed from US foreign policy’s point of view is the fact that the 2003 proposal was just one, although the most important and comprehensive one, among the many attempts the IRI made from 2002 onwards, to outreach the US. Moreover, such attempts were made by both the Iranian so-called “reformist” presidents (Hassan Rouhani, Mohammad Khatami) and the “conservative” one, Mahmud Ahmadinejad, who actually tried more than once to approach the US. This fact disproves another narrative, common in US official statements and also in political reports and scientific literature, according to which it was only with the election of Iranian President Rouhani in August 2013 that a window of opportunity to break the diplomatic stalemate was open for the US. Primary sources demonstrate indeed that this was not at all the case, and that Tehran – or, at least, a group of power from inside the Iranian ruling elites – tried many times to communicate directly with the White House in order to talk about ending the so-called “nuclear impasse” (Guldimann, 2007).

⁵ Since 1979 the US had not had any diplomatic representation in Iran and the Swiss Embassy represented the US interests there.

⁶ During our interview, Ambassador Toscano showed me an original copy of the proposal (reference under consented agreement from Ambassador Toscano).

To summarize, the scope of the dissertation is to answer the following research questions:

Who, how and why, within the Bush Administration, refused the deal offered by Tehran in 2003?

Who, how and why, within the Obama Administration, decided to reach out to Tehran in order to settle the nuclear dispute?

The State Of The Art

This literature review is devoted to relevant works dealing with the IND. Bibliographical references related to other important aspects of the US-Iran relationship, but different from the “nuclear diplomacy”, will be made throughout the thesis. Practitioners’ analyses as well as academic literature concerning the IND tend to focus mainly on the following aspects of the negotiations: the technical nuclear issues (as, for instance, Joshi, 2015; Patrikarakos, 2012; Hymans and Gratias, 2013; Homayounvash, 2016; Gaietta, 2016); the international law aspects (see, for example, Bali, 2012; Dalton et al. 2011; Joyner, 2016); the changing patterns of the negotiation process over time (EIBaradei, 2011 – former IAEA director reporting his frictions with the US administrations during the IND); Moussavian, 2006 – former Iranian nuclear negotiator whose report is particularly valuable because it presents the positions of all the actors involved, i.e. the IRI, the US, Russia, China, the IAEA and the EU, at that time; the actors involved in track I and II negotiations (Wright, 2012; Alcaro and Tabrizi, 2014). The theoretical prisms mainly used have primarily been the concepts of nuclear deterrence and coercive diplomacy, as in Sauer (2007), Erasto (2015), and Jenkins (2016b). Robert Jervis’s concepts of misperceptions and misbeliefs (Jervis, 1968, 1976) have been used by many authors for explaining the long duration of the nuclear impasse – see, for example, Maleki and Tirman (2014), Jervis, (2014, 2013a, 2013b). Some authors were able to place their analysis of the IND in the wider context of the US-Iran political relationships, as for example, Seliktar (2012), Limbert (2009), Vakil (2014), and Slavin (2007). In particular, the contributions of Yazdani and Hussain (2006), Barzegar (2014), Moshirzadeh (2007), and Ansari (2007), all Iran-born scholars, are interesting because they approach the IND from the other side of the coin, i.e. they illustrate the official Iranian discourse on the negotiations. Finally, Tarock (2016) conducts an analysis of the whole IND,

which looks at the JCPOA's other concerns rather than the nuclear ones, and is also prophetic of its possible dismissal by the following US administrations.

However, another group of authors approach the IND from a different angle, and their works are little more valuable to the discourse this thesis intends to develop. In fact, they dismantle the American political and diplomatic narratives, which so far have covered the proofs of the Iranian willingness to resolve the nuclear dispute, during both "reformist" and "conservative" Iranian presidencies. They are also among the few ones who have examined the IND by connecting the stalemate that the process has entailed to the role played by the US administration at the time. For example, Tarock (2003, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c) explains the poor results of the nuclear diplomacy with the Bush Administration's willingness to military intervention. Bayyat (2019) demonstrates how the US had the major share in prolonging – and finally settling, according to its needs, – the IND. Iran-born scholar Sasan Fayazmanesh (2008), in his analysis of the "containment" policy the US adopted against the IRI during the Clinton Administration until the end of the Bush Administration, points out the role played by lobby groups – with special regard to the Israeli one – in influencing the American foreign policy decision-making process towards Tehran. In his second book devoted to the IND (Fayazmanesh, 2013), he focuses on Obama's policy of "tough diplomacy" aimed basically at containing the IRI whilst pretending to engage it. His analysis of the Obama Administration's stances toward Tehran is detailed and well documented and therefore it is particularly valuable even if its argument is quite different from that one this thesis is developing. According to the thesis argument, in fact, President Obama was determined to strategically engage Tehran, although at the same time he maintained "all the options on the table". Such options basically consisted in a strategy of regime change through military ways to be implemented only in case other tools, such as coercive diplomacy jointly with cyber-attacks for slowing down the INP's development, would prove ineffective. Conversely, for Fayazmanesh, Obama's "policy of "tough diplomacy", designed mostly by those associated with the Israeli lobby groups, was intended to give an ultimatum to Tehran in some direct meetings, telling Iran to either accept the US-Israeli demands or face aggression" (Fayazmanesh, 2013: 3). Meanwhile, Kaussler (2014) proposes an argument close to that one of this thesis. According to Kaussler, in fact, with President Obama there was a change in the US strategic approach to the ME-Persian Gulf region which underpinned the US secret talks with Tehran from 2009 onwards. He affirms in fact that:

power politics not conflict resolution was the dominant mindset among American, Europeans, and Iranian statesmen. Beneath the veneer of Western diplomacy and the professed commitment to engage in a dialogue with Iran were realist motivations at maintaining the international order and the balance of power. (Kaussler, 2014: 2)

Unfortunately, the book went to press before the nuclear deal had been reached and sensitive information about the secret IRI-US communication channels were disclosed. Therefore, it could not verify the effective change in the US strategy towards the nuclear issue and the balance of power in the ME-Persian Gulf region after the JPOA's ratification. Another author belonging to this group is the Iranian-British scholar Ali Parchami (2014), who focuses on the G.W. Bush Administration and the impact it had on the internal politics of the IRI, as well as on the dynamics of Tehran's negotiation strategy along the whole deal. The author goes beyond the supposed "intractability" feature, most of the literature usually gave to the IND. In fact, he claims the existence of a causal relation between the Bush Administration and the protracted failure of the negotiation process, despite the repeated Iranian proposals to settle the dispute. Another important work for this thesis is the one written by former National Security Council (NSC) senior officers Flynt Leverett and Hillary Man Leverett (2013). As a matter of fact, it offers an insider's, well-informed account of the Bush Administration's internal struggle to define US Iran foreign policy and, especially, the events related to the 2003 "grand bargain" refusal. It is also an articulated criticism of the peculiar foreign policy decision-making process of that administration, as well as a description of the reasons for an American strategic engagement with Tehran. Another author writing about such events is the Iran-born scholar Trita Parsi, whose works (2007, 2012) deserve a detailed analysis. His first book deeply investigates into the driving forces behind the foreign policies of Tehran and Israel as from the 1960s till 2005 and the consequences on the US strategy towards the two states. It also deals with the Iranian nuclear stand-off. To write the book – which was his PhD dissertation under Francis Fukuyama's supervision at Johns Hopkins University – reportedly Parsi conducted extensive research, including more than 110 interviews with senior Israeli, American and Iranian officials. In his second book, the author describes the details of the US-IRI diplomatic encounters which took place during the first term of the Obama Administration. As the author writes, it is "predominantly based on primary sources, that is interviews with decision makers from the US, the EU and Iran, as well as Russia, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Japan, Brazil and Turkey [including] both top government officials as well as the actual negotiators" (Parsi, 2012: X). The reliability of his works is still a vexed question. However, given his unique access to

Iranian and American key-players and primary sources – both in English and Persian – his books can be a precious secondary source of info and data. It goes without saying that the information he offered in his works needed to be matched and verified with others concerning the same event and coming from other primary sources. Yet, this methodological disclaimer has been applied to all information offered by all the authors, especially those whose appurtenance is not of public dominion. Precious contributions are also those of Donette Murray (2009, 2010), in which she explores American-Iranian relations since the Islamic revolution and investigates why the following administrations, up to G. W. Bush, failed to successfully deal with Tehran. Apart from misunderstandings, she points out the negative role played by “intelligence failures, missing and poor information and flawed interpretation” (2010: 209). More importantly, she indicates that “[a]dministration tensions, varying levels of dysfunction and wider governmental conflict also affected policy formulation and execution by producing different agendas and occasionally, a range of different assessments of US policy” (2010: 209). This finding is very similar to the one this thesis unveils when investigating the Bush Administration. Although uninterested in the nuclear deal, Oren looks at the US-IRI relationship during G. W. Bush’s two terms and Obama’s first two years’ administration (2011). His contribution needs to be analyzed in detail for two reasons. Firstly, he uses a theoretical approach similar to the one used by this thesis, i.e. Graham Allison’s bureaucratic politics model. Secondly, by answering his research question – “why the US did not bomb Iran” – he throws light on the different actors inside the Bush and Obama White House who, by rejecting a military confrontation, supported the diplomatic option. According to him, it was Robert Gates, former Secretary of Defense under the Bush’s second term and Obama’s first one, who played the key-role. Secondary roles in preventing a military attack were played by former National Security Advisor (NSA), Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, and by the leaders of the intelligence community – above all, the CIA Director, Michael Hayden, and the Director of National Intelligence, Michael McConnell. In fact, in 2007, they leaked the rather reassuring conclusions of a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) devoted to the INP, making the military option an unlikely and politically costly choice. The State Department high-level bureaucrats – foremost the Deputy Secretary of State, William J. Burns – also played a crucial role in dismissing the military solution by acting both domestically and internationally. The “defense establishment”, in the persons of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of State, Admiral Michael Mullen and the Central Command (CENTCOM) Head Admiral William Fallon, was also important in discarding the war option by admitting the

high military risk of a similar choice. The literature devoted to the little-researched full-swap deal reached in 2010 by Iran with Turkey and Brazil (at that time, temporary members of the UN Security Council) deserves a specific yet brief review. Gürzel (2012), Santos Vieira de Jesus (2011) and Ozkan (2010) illustrate the importance of the deal reached and, at the same time, the US negative stances against the two deal brokers. In this regard, Esfendari (2015), by using van Dijk's critical discourse analytic approach, shows the strong bias against the deal throughout *The New York Time's* news coverage, which basically echoed, and then legitimized, the discursive practices of the US Obama Administration on that deal. The achievement of that deal shows the Iranian willingness to accept strict conditions on its nuclear program in order to reach a solution and have the sanctions lifted. The fact that the deal was shortly after derailed by the Obama Administration proves that the US wanted to be the ultimate decision-maker about the re-admission of the IRI within normalized international relations, the development of the INP, the conditions of the Iranian economy, and Tehran's role as a regional actor in the ME-Persian Gulf area. This thesis is grafted onto such works which go beyond the IND as a simple diplomatic negotiation to show its significance in terms of US foreign policy and aims to offer an original contribution from a number of points of view. Firstly, because by investigating deeply into the 2003 Iranian proposal, it gives a detailed and comprehensive account of the role played by the different actors involved within the Bush Administration. Secondly, it demonstrates that the Obama Administration was eager to reach out to Tehran, since its early beginning. Thirdly, the research considers also the so-called "third option" other than military action and diplomacy, which means the intelligence, which was used by the two administrations on dealing with the IRI and the INP. The thesis also compares the approaches followed by the Bush Administration on handling the Libyan and the Iranian nuclear programs. Furthermore, it enlightens the deep, complex entanglement existing between groups of interest and the epistemic community – another feature of the IND, not widely-reported.

The Theoretical Framework

From a theoretical point of view, finding an answer to the *who* question becomes possible provided the "unitary actor" and "rational actor" hypothesis are abandoned. Mid-range theories interested in dissecting foreign policy as a complex, multi-layered decision-making process have indeed the theoretical and practical tools for unpacking the "black box" of foreign policy-making. I choose middle-range foreign policy theories also because they appear as particularly appropriate for looking at foreign policy as a complex and layered

process of decision making (Snyder et al. 2002; Hagan, 2001; Renshon and Renshon, 2008; Mintz & DeRouen, 2010: 3-11). In addition, since the foreign policy decision making process is a multi-causal one (Rosenau, 2006; Hudson, 2005; Breuning, 2007: 168), I thought necessary that I should not to rely on just one theory, but on a range of them. The foreign policy theories I selected are described as follows.

First of all, the bureaucratic-governmental politics model, according to which states are not monolithic entities but, rather, sets of individuals and organizations competitively engaged in maximizing individual gains. The final output of such a process is the result of an internal, political bargaining and not necessarily the “best” possible outcome. Allison, in his seminal article (1969), describes what is the core of this approach:

the decisions and actions of governments are essentially intranational political outcomes. Outcomes in the sense that what happens is not chosen as a solution but rather results from compromise, coalition, competition, and confusion among government officials who see different faces of an issue; political in the sense that the activity from which the outcomes emerge is best described as bargaining. (Allison, 1969: 708)

Therefore, “[w]hat the nation does is sometimes the result of the triumph of one group over others” (1969: 707). It is such a continuous bargaining process which produces what we call government’s decisions: “[e]ach player pulls and hauls with the power at his discretion for outcomes that will advance his conception of national, organizational group, and personal interests” (Allison, 1971: 171). Other two proponents of the bureaucratic-governmental politics approach to foreign policy, Halperin and Clapp, summarize their model writing that “[t]he actions of the American government related to foreign policy result from the interests and behavior of many different groups and individuals in American society” (2007: 4). Moreover, they make clear that, in order to describe, for instance, the national security decision process, the basic questions to answer should be: “Who is involved? What interests they have? How do those interests affect their stands on particular issues?” (2007: 4). Rosati, in his systematization of the different contributions belonging to the bureaucratic-governmental politics model (1981), draws up four prepositions which comprise the essential elements. The first two belong to the structure of the FP decision making, whilst the other two represent the decision making process:

Proposition 1. For any single issue, the executive branch of the government is composed of numerous individuals and organizations, with various differences in goals and objectives. [...]
Proposition 2. No preponderant individual or organization exists; the President, if involved, is

merely one participant, although his influence may be the most powerful. [...] Proposition 3. The final decision is a “political resultant” – the outcome of bargaining and compromise among the various participants. [...]. Proposition 4. A considerable gap usually exists between the formulated decision and its implementation. (1981: 236-238)

By applying the bureaucratic-governmental model theoretical lens to the US dealing with the IND, some important features of this foreign policy decision-making process appear clear. For example, it emerged that it would be incorrect to say that the Bush Administration refused the Iranian offers, although this was exactly what happened at the end. Rather, the protracted rejection was just the final outcome of a dysfunctional decision-making process, whose different actors, within the Administration, played an individual game according to their own objectives, preferences, and personal estimates of gains and losses. Some of them, in particular the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, and the Vice-President, Richard Cheney, acted intentionally as if crucial foreign policy decisions could be made directly by them, bypassing the NSC procedures and sometimes even the President himself. On his side, G.W. Bush was the kind of leader who relied heavily on his collaborators’ judgment and actions. Moreover, within the White House, important divergences about how to deal with the IRI existed between the NSA, Condoleezza Rice, and the Secretary of State, Colin Powell, on the one side, and Rumsfeld, and Cheney on the other side. In other terms, the thesis clearly unveils that although the refusal of the 2003 Iranian offer was made in the name of a supposed US “national interest”, it was actually decided for personal reasons by some of the players involved, whose power within the administration was not equally distributed or balanced by appropriate Presidential oversight. Regarding the direct engagement with Tehran, which occurred during the Obama Administration, it would not be accurate to say that the US or the President or the “Obama’s foreign policy” team decided it. In fact, Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, did not share the President’s convictions of engaging with the IRI, whilst, her Deputy, William Burns – who had a bureaucratic and not political role within the Department of State – was very supportive of that idea, confirming what the governmental politics model predicts, i.e. the existence of diverging visions inside the same institution.

Other foreign policy theories, which I selected, emphasize the influence of the groups of interest. The starting point is Jacobs and Page (2005) where the two political scientists look for those who actually influence US foreign policy. To answer that question, they use extensive surveys data gathered over three decades and test the relative importance of

alternative possible influences. They found out that the “US foreign policy is most heavily and consistently influenced by internationally oriented business leaders, followed by experts (who, however, may themselves be influenced by business)” (Jacobs and Page, 2005: 107). The importance of such findings has been developed in particular by IR structural realist scholars such as Mearsheimer and Walt (2008). The two authors address in particular the lobby’s influence on US policy. They conclude their analysis claiming that:

the overall thrust of US policy in the [ME] region is due primarily to US domestic politics and especially to the activities of the “Israel lobby”. Other special-interest groups have managed to skew US foreign policy in directions they favoured, but no lobby has managed to divert US foreign policy as far from what the American national interest would otherwise suggest, while simultaneously convincing Americans that US and Israeli interests are essentially identical.

In the existing literature devoted to the IND, many authors point out the role played by specific groups of interests, like the Israel lobby (Parsi, 2012; Fayazmanesh, 2008, 2013), and the food and oil multinational companies (Fayazmanesh, 2008). The thesis analyzes the influence such groups of interest exerted over the US foreign policy toward Tehran. It also unveils the role played by the “Iranian lobby”.

The third foreign policy approach used in the thesis is the so-called “two level game” model proposed by Putnam (1988). Putnam claims that the unitary-actor assumption is “often radically misleading” and that the process of foreign policy decision-making is influenced and bound by two simultaneous constraints. The first one is represented by the national domain made up of public opinion and groups of interest – all trying to “pursue their interests by pressuring the government to adopt favorable policies” – the other branches of power, and electoral cycles. The second one is represented by the international context made up of states and international organizations, alliances, treaties and norms. “Neither of the two games can be ignored by central-makers, so long as their countries remain interdependent, yet sovereign” (Putnam, 1988: 434). The Putnam’s model helps to theoretically frame the influence played on Bush and Obama administrations’ Iran policies by the two, domestic and international, constraints. They consisted mainly, at the domestic level, of Congress’ opposition and the public opinion’s mistrust towards Tehran, as well as the various interest groups’ influence (Iranian and Israeli lobbies, the American corporates). Whilst, at the international level, they consisted mainly of the IAEA, the UN, the other IND players (China, Russia, Germany, the UK, France, the EU), the US allies in the region (Israel and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf).

A fourth group of foreign policy theories is represented by the so-called “psychological” and “decision-making” approaches (among many others: Hermann, 1984, 1999; Hermann et al., 2001; Winter, 2003; Preston, 2001; Cashman, 1993). Such group of theories “assumes that leaders matter in the explanation of foreign policy decisions by acting on their definitions of the situation in the domain of world politics” (Walker and Schafer, 2006). A second common basic assumption of the theories belonging to this group is the observation that “[a]t the apex of foreign policy making in all governments or ruling parties are actors with the ability to commit the resources of the government and the power to prevent other entities within the government from reversing their position” (Hermann and Hermann, 1989: 361). Such actors are defined as the “ultimate decision units”, and they can be made up of single groups (as the US NSC), single individuals (as the US president), or multiple autonomous actors (Hermann and Hermann, 1989). Hermann et al. (2001) describe some of the possible dynamics at work in groups, as unanimity, plurality, or group thinking. The latter is an important and common dynamic present in the decision-making process of groups’ units. It was originally defined by Janis (1982) in his analysis of the White House’s behaviour during the Cuban Missiles Crisis. According to him, “the members of a small cohesive group tend to maintain the team spirit by unconsciously developing a series of shared illusions and related norms which interfere with critical thought and reality validation” (1982: 35). In most cases, this tendency, which basically is a strive for consensus, produces ineffective and faulty decisions. As regards the thesis and its research questions, it is essential, first of all, to understand what actually the “ultimate decision units” were, i.e. whether the NSC, or some more restricted groups of people. Consequently, examination of their internal dynamics is required. When it comes to the role of single individual units, it is important to inspect how their personalities and leadership styles have influenced the decision-making process (Hermann, 1980). Yet, attention will be devoted to avoiding an overestimation of the importance of psychological theories. In fact, I agree with Larsen’s (1997) criticism regarding the need to frame the leaders in the broader context they play out. The central problem is to understand to what extent “the leaders at the top are not linked to a broader system of political beliefs which to a certain degree they also reflect” and “to ask whether there are structural situations in which individuals acting as leaders are submitted to so little political control—that their personal beliefs have a big impact on the general political life” (Larsen, 1997: 5). The unrestrained actions of Vice-President Cheney within an administration mainly consisting of neoconservative allies and a President who tends to

delegate decisions is, indeed, a case in point of a structure which allows a single agent to overreach.

Some authors have used the “marketing”, “framing”, and “spinning” conceptualizations, originally developed by social psychologists and communication scientists, for analyzing the process of foreign policy decision-making. Basically, those are strategies used by leaders to gain public support for their foreign policy choices, especially the most controversial ones, as it was the case for the JCPOA. Communication Sciences scholar Robert Entman has developed an effective analysis of the US foreign policy by applying those concepts (Entman, 2003; 2004; 2008). According to him (Entman, 1993: 52), “framing” is the promotion of “a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment condition”. The importance of frames and framing within the foreign policy decision-making process was already introduced by Allison (1971); further developments have been offered, among others, by Mintz and Redd (2003). The term “spinning” or “spin doctoring” is “commonly used to refer to campaigns and communications that are based on deception and manipulation. Governments, political actors, and corporations are using this technique to protect their image against criticism, to achieve consensus and public support and to sell their ideas and opinions” (Valentini, 2015: 1). Faizullaev and Cornut (2016: 3) define this behaviour as the “narrative management by politicians and diplomats”. Moreover, they state that “[n]arrative is instrumental for presenting a state’s case, achieving political goals, building coalitions and developing and maintaining relationships. Most importantly, narratives are used as instruments of political reasoning and persuasion” (Faizullaev and Cornut, 2016: 2). The production and “spinnig” of convenient narratives by US administrations to gain support for political choices has been analyzed in details by some authors (Maltese, 2000; Farnsworth, 2015; Krebs, 2015). The existence and importance of marketing, “spinning”, and framing effects upon the process of foreign policy shaping and making has been particularly emphasized by Pena (2003) and Mintz and DeRouen (2010). This thesis uses such concepts for analyzing the propaganda campaign the Obama Administration conducted after the JCPOA’s signature, when he feared the Congress could reject the deal. The thesis argues that such a campaign was framed and spinned by the administration – more precisely, by the Deputy NSA for Strategic Communication, Ben Rhodes – to make the American public opinion accept its breakthrough change in the US approach to the IRI. It tried also to influence the Congress’s approval of it. To summarize, the use of selected middle-range theories which approach foreign policy as a complex, multi-

causal, and multilayer process offers the thesis the appropriate tools for discovering the actors behind the 2003 rejection of the Iranian proposal and the 2009 decision to reach out to Tehran. The identification of the actors is the necessary starting point to answer the second main research question: *why* they acted in that way, i.e. what their ultimate motivations and aims were.

The theoretical framework also consists of selected IR classical realism conceptualizations. A first group of concepts is represented by “containment”, “balance of power” and “alliances”. Alliances are considered by realists as one of the two pillars (the other being military capabilities) upon which states can build up their security. Containment is the strategy all the American administrations have followed towards the IRI since its birth for limiting its possible economic growth and political role in the region (Murray, 2010; Fayazmanesh, 2008; 2012; Seliktar, 2012). The balance of power, realist key-concept, roughly refers to the distribution of power among the various countries within a given context, usually a geographical one. Such a distribution can be changed by both internal and external factors. For instance, a shift in the US alliances with the states of the ME-Persian Gulf region can change the regional balance of power. The thesis argues that this has been precisely the case with the JCPOA. Classical realism (i.e., Morgenthau, 1947, 1960, Niebhuhr, 1952 and the ancient Greek historian Thucydides, 1954, *in primis*) emphasizes the importance of alliances as well as of a concept like *hubris*, prudent self-restraint, and influence (as alternative to power). *Hubris*, “one of the self-destructive behavioural patterns described by Greek tragedy, is a widespread phenomenon. In our age, as in antiquity, powerful actors tend to become complacent about risk and put their trust in hope rather than reason and overvalue their ability to control their environment, other people, and the course of events” (Lebow, 2005: 554). Effective leaders can transform power – which is “always relative and situation-specific” (Lebow, 2007a: 66) – into long lasting political influence basically by means of non-manipulative persuasion based on honest dialogue (Lebow, 2005: 565-573) and justice. I think that such concepts, jointly with what Reinhold Niebuhr calls “thirst for power” (1952), represented the ideological determinants of the group of power which succeeded in shaping the US Iran foreign policy during the G. W. Bush Administration.

An additional concept has been herein adopted. It does not belong to the typical IR theoretical “toolbox”, but nevertheless appears as effective in understanding not only the US

foreign policy decision-making process in general, but also US policy towards Tehran in particular. It is the concept of “executive overreach” or “executive aggrandizement”, developed by political scientists and law scholars (Garber & Wimmer, 1987; Allen, 2007). McConnell, (2012) effectively summarizes the concept, writing that it is the administration’s “tendency to push unilateral executive power beyond constitutional and customary limits”, which relies on a presidential lack of “a proper respect for constitutional checks and balances”. He demonstrates that both the Bush and Obama administrations acted to gain “executive aggrandizement”. The concept has been effectively applied to the analysis of the US national security policy by Restad (2012) who uses it for understanding the apparently puzzling continuity in Bush’s and Obama’s decisions concerning the “war on terror”. This thesis, by comparing the Bush and Obama administrations’ approaches toward Tehran and its nuclear program, unexpectedly reaches similar conclusions in terms of “executive overreach”.

The Argument

Analyzing the Obama Administration’s dealing with the IRI, there emerges a kind of urgency characterizing its approach to resolve the nuclear dispute. A possible explanation could be that the 2009 attempts – differently from May 2003– were not a triumphant moment for the US in the ME and Gulf Region, because of a number of factors like the stalemate in Afghanistan, the Iraqi uprising, Al-Qaida’s resurgence, and the worsening war in Syria. The thesis argument is that President Obama wanted (or maybe even needed) Tehran’s support in the region, and searched for secret, bilateral talks with the Iranians behind the official, multilateral negotiations framework. Iranian sources (Kahalili, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d), revealed that in 2012 – US presidential election year – the US made clear to the Iranian counterpart they wanted to finalize the deal as soon as possible. Moreover, in order to strike the deal, the Obama Administration accepted to drop the previous conditions regarding other crucial issues such as, for example, the ballistic missile controversy, which in the past had slowed down the negotiations, as well as the Iranian support of proxy-groups like *Hezbollah*. Finally, the fact itself that with the JPOA Washington accepted, and made the international community accept it, what for 13 years it had strongly denied, i.e. the Iranian mastering of the entire uranium enrichment process, supports the possibility that the US wanted or needed to reach the deal for strategically engaging with Tehran and for that

goal it was ready to unprecedented concessions. As a partial proof of it, there is the evidence represented by the statement of a top EU IND negotiator⁷, whom I interviewed in 2016. In fact, he clearly stated that narrowing down the area of possible negotiations to just nuclear issues was the only way to achieve the deal with the IRI. Moreover, a recent in-depth analysis conducted of the previously classified American, Iranian and European documents demonstrated that “power politics, not conflict resolution was the dominant mindset among American, European and Iranian statesmen. [...] Engagement with Iran over the nuclear program [...] has essentially been Great Powers diplomacy, aiming to check Iranian capabilities rather than pursuing a political partnership based on justice and trust” (Kassler, 2014). Former Italian Ambassador to Tehran, Roberto Toscano – who had been personally engaged by the Iranians in their attempts to reach out to the US after their failed the 2003 “grand bargain” offer⁸ – wrote that, with the IND and its conclusion through the JCPOA, what was at stake went “much beyond the nuclear issue — an issue, incidentally, that has always been instrumentalised by both sides. We are talking about the regional role of Iran, the balance in the Gulf, the future of Iraq, the possibility of checking the onslaught of Sunni jihadists” (Toscano, 2014).

Considering such an argument, the thesis is going to demonstrate that during the whole negotiation process, the objective of the actors who succeeded in leading the Bush Administration’s foreign policy towards the IRI and the INP – the vice-President Cheney, the Secretary of Defense, Rumsfeld, and their neoconservative allies – was that of preventing Tehran from getting a recognized regional role. In order to pursue such an objective they made the administration reject the 2003 bargain as well as all the other possible diplomatic solutions to the nuclear stalemate. By contrast, the Obama Administration – particularly in the persons of President Obama, Secretary of State Kerry, and Deputy Secretary of State William Burns – accepted the acknowledgment of such a role together with the consequences, in terms of a deep change in the US’ alliances and in the balance of power in the ME-Persian Gulf region. The explanation for that change in the US strategy appears neither in any of the political and media narratives supporting the JPOA and JCPOA nor in the White House’s official speeches. This is obvious considering that the American traditional allies in the region, i.e. Israel and Saudi Arabia, did not agree on it. Conversely, that has been stated in some of the vehemently anti-deal critics, such as, for example, Fleitz

⁷ EU External Action Service diplomat Hugo Sobral.

⁸ Personal communication with the author.

(2016). According to him: “President Obama sought a nuclear agreement with Iran primarily to improve US-Iran relations and to make Iran a US partner for stability in the Middle East”. Yet, Obama himself did drop some hints about his change of strategy during an interview at the end of December 2014 (PBR, 2015), when he stated that, “you need to understand what their [of Iranians] legitimate needs and concerns are” adding that,

[t]hey [the Iranians] have a path to break through that isolation and they should seize it. Because if they do, there’s incredible talent and resources and sophistication inside of — inside of Iran, and it would be a very successful regional power that was also abiding by international norms and international rules, and that would be good for everybody. That would be good for the United States, that would be good for the region, and most of all, it would be good for the Iranian people. (PBR, 2014)

Moreover, on July 15, 2015, at the press conference celebrating the JCPOA’s signature, President Obama said that, “we are not going to solve the problems in Syria unless there’s buy-in from the Russians, Iranians, Turks and our Gulf partners”, *de facto* legitimizing the role of Tehran in the solution of that conflict. During that conference, interestingly President Obama also said, “ultimately, it is not the job of the President of the United States to solve every problem in the Middle East. The people of the Middle East are going to have to solve some of these problems themselves” (President Obama, 2015a) showing his administration’s intention of disengaging from the region, after having acknowledged the Iranian role there. After a few hours, during an interview, talking about the possible objections to the deal by the US allies in the region, he would go even further saying that, “the truth of the matter is that Iran will be and should be a regional power” (Friedman, 2015). In September 2014, Iranian President Rouhani reportedly said that, in their historic 2013 telephone call, he and President Obama had agreed that “in the future, the United States and Iran might cooperate in other areas”, once the nuclear deal was reached (Rozen, 2015). Also Secretary of State Kerry, shortly after the JCPOA’s signature, candidly mentioned the regional role the US expected Tehran to play once the sanctions and the international isolation would be lifted up. In fact, on April 7, 2016, during a meeting in Bahrain, before the Gulf States’ Foreign Ministers, Kerry urged Iran to help end the war in Yemen and Syria, “and help us to be able to change the dynamics of this region.” He also added that Iran should “prove to the world that it wants to be a constructive member of the international community and contribute to peace and stability” (Agence France Press, 2016). The fact that, immediately after the JCPOA’s signature, the US Department of State “expected” the IRI to be invited to the meetings in Vienna, aimed at resolving the Syrian conflict (Kirby, 2016; see also Harshad

and Murphy, 2015), looks like another confirmation of the Obama Administration strategic shift towards Tehran. Already during the long IND, part of US foreign policy and intelligence analysts had suggested a different approach to Tehran within a wider shift of the US foreign policy towards the Middle East and Afghanistan. Two of them were Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett (Leverett, 2006; Leverett and Leverett, 2006; Leverett and Leverett, 2013: in particular 1-11 and 387-395) who, from March 2002 to March 2003, served as senior directors for Middle East affairs within G. W. Bush's NSC. American strategic engagement with Tehran was also advocated to break the Iraqi stalemate by a bipartisan report, co-chaired by Lee Hamilton and James Baker (Hamilton, Baker, & Iraq Study Group, 2006). Some analysts contributed to it: they would later become key-actors in the Obama Administration, i.e. Denis McDonough, Obama's Chief-of-Staff; Leon Panetta, CIA's Director and later Secretary of Defense; Deputy NSA, Ben Rhodes. Other two crucial supporters of the US strategic engagement with Tehran were Robert Gates, who was confirmed as Secretary of Defense by President Obama in January 2009 and Zbigniew Brzezinski, who acted as Obama's *de facto* advisor for the ME-Persian Gulf region foreign policy during his presidential campaign, the transition period as well as, plausibly, the whole first term. In 2004, Brzezinski and Gates had indeed co-authored a Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) report which was a manifesto about the urgency and importance of an American strategic engagement with Tehran (Brzezinski et al., 2004). Further proofs of the Obama's strategic change which backed his willingness to conclude the IND could be inferred from the bitter reactions of Saudi Arabia and Israel – long-standing US allies in the region and IRI's main foes – to the announcement of the JCPOA's signature. For instance, Israeli's Prime Minister Netanyahu, in August 2015, made a speech to Congress against the possible JCPOA's ratification. Such reactions were not unexpected by the White House, as those, supposedly unsupportive, coming from American Congress and public opinion. This explains the strategy of secrecy maintained by the Obama Administration's negotiators from 2009 until November 2012, i.e. after the election which confirmed Obama as President. The same concerns justified the multilayer propaganda campaign the Deputy NSA for Strategic Communication, Ben Rhodes, put in place for "selling" the deal to Congress and American public (Wong De-Wei, 2016). In other terms, Putnam's (1988) "two level game" of the foreign policy making was by-passed by the Obama Administration through the implementation of, a "strategy of secrecy" before and, later, a sophisticated propaganda campaign.

The Methodology

This thesis is a qualitative *case-study* research consisting of two sub-cases, i.e. the Bush and Obama administrations' political and diplomatic responses to the (supposed) Iranian offers for talks to settle the nuclear dispute, respectively, in 2003 and in 2009. According to Bennet and George (2005a: 6) – two of the most prominent authors who have refined the case study approach in Social Sciences – “[t]he case study approach is the detailed explanation of an aspect of a historical episode to develop or test historical explanation that may be generalizable to other events”. As such, it appeared as the most suitable methodology for approaching two historically defined episodes of the American policy towards the same subject, i.e. the IRI and its nuclear program. More precisely, following Levy’s taxonomy (2008), the thesis provides a case-study analysis which is idiographic and theory-guided. In other terms, although its main objective is to describe and explain the above-mentioned cases, it also aims to interpret them by applying middle-range theories in order to make inferences beyond the selected data. As it has been noted “[b]y focusing on what Brady et al. (2004: 12) call ‘causal-process observations,’⁹ case study researchers get inside the ‘black box’ of decision making and explore the perceptions and expectations of actors, both to explain individual historical episodes and to suggest more generalizable causal hypothesis” (Levy 2008: 6). Therefore, using case study methodology is consistent with the choice of adopting middle range foreign policy theories to “unpack” the processes through which the final outcomes, i.e. the refusal/acceptance of the Iranian proposals, were determined by the two administrations.

An additional methodology is represented by the so-called “*circumstantial paradigm*”¹⁰ (Boniolo and Vidali, 1999; Di Nuoscio and Gervasoni, 2005; Van Dover, 1994; Canfora *et al.*, 1980) originally formulated by the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg (1978). He applied Pierce’s argument about abductive reasoning (McMullin, 1992; Aliseda, 2004; Paavola, 2005; Magnani, 2001) to historical researches on both micro and macro scales (Franzosi, 2006; de Souza Roque, et al., 2016). Such an approach owes most of its original development to fiction writers like Conan Doyle (see, among many others, Rehder, 1979; Truzzi, 1973), Edgar Allan Poe (Harrowitz, 1983), and Agatha Christie (Mead, 1987). In particular, the

⁹ Collier (2011: 823) “treats these methodological [process tracing and causal process observation] tools as two facets of the same research procedure” and he “refers to “process tracing” to avoid applying two labels to what is basically the same method.” Levy (2008), although without making it explicit, refers to process tracing and causal process observation as a unique methodological procedure.

¹⁰ Called also “indictary paradigm”.

authors whose works are included in Eco and Sebeok (1983) try to define such a paradigm by using a semiotic approach to Pierce's theory of abduction. Their objective is to contribute to the debate about the nature and the process of scientific discovery. The various contributions offer feasible models available to all social scientists, not only historians. The following explanation, which Italian epistemologist Bartocci (1995: 16), wrote for historians, can indeed be used by social scientists in general and, also therefore, by international relations scholars:

the task of the real historian [...] always remains that one of looking for the thin filament of the truth, considering *all* the signs coming from the past times, having as unique available tools his own free and independent *reasoning* as well as the principle of *likelihood*, the only ones which will allow him to identify the significant connections, underline the exceptional coincidences, establish a convergent texture of data on which to formulate some *hypothesis*, then to compare them, trying to determine their higher or lower probability. Therefore, the historian should match the methodic patience and the meticulous accuracy with which to undertake the preliminary researches in archives and libraries and to make interviews to people, with creative intuition, imagination, and ability in "abductive inference"¹¹.

To my knowledge, such an approach has been rarely applied to research in international relations. However, its heuristic potential is important. In fact, the abduction reasoning can make the analyst overcome the problems related to eventual shortage of evidences, in particular, documentation-which may occur when dealing with covert operations, diplomatic back channels and classified documents, as it is the case of this thesis.

A third methodological approach is represented by *process tracing*. The first political scholar who borrowed the term from cognitive psychology was Alexander L. George (1979) who used it for describing "the use of evidence from within case studies to make inferences about historical explanation" (2015: 5). Such a definition makes clear the functional relationship existing between case studies and process tracing methodologies. Hence, the development of this research – aimed to answer *who* refused Iranian openings in 2003, *who* initiated them in 2009, and *why* – will be conducted through three steps all of them connected to each other. The starting point is the choice of the case studies – in this case, the Bush Administration's refusal of talks with Tehran in 2003 and the Obama Administration's acceptance in 2009 – which available evidence needs to be chronologically ordered through process tracing (second step). Then, abductive reasoning, done according to the

¹¹ Translated from Italian by the author.

“circumstantial paradigm” allows to make general inferences from such evidence (third step). The close relationship between case-study and process tracing methodologies was indeed explained by George and Bennet in their 2005 article devoted to case study and theory development (George and Bennet, 2005b). In another essay, they underlined how “process tracing can perform a heuristic function as well generating new variables or hypotheses on the basis of sequences of events observed inductively in case studies” (2005a: 7). It is such a heuristic relation existing between case study approach, process tracing method and inductive reasoning (Pierce’s “abduction”) that led me to choose this set of tools for my research.

A further methodological option herein applied is historical contextualization. Much to the point, tracing back the historical background is mandatory in view of the many events occurred in the US-IRI relationship since the Second World War. In fact, as historian Charles Tilly (2006: 420) noted, “[n]ot only do all political processes occur in history and therefore call for knowledge of their historical contexts, but also where and when political processes occur influence *how* they occur. History thus become an essential element of sound explanation for political processes”.¹² Also, contextualization provides those small, but significant clues which the “circumstantial paradigm” and the abductive reasoning are based on: they definitely help get a more general explanation of the events. For this reason, I decided to historically contextualize the nuclear negotiation process within the very complex US-Iran relationship, in particular in the post-1979 Islamic revolution era. From this description it emerges that it has always existed a back channel from the US and the IRI, since the revolution in 1979. Another level of contextualization is the description of all the diplomatic openings – or, at least, all the ones which have become, so far, public domain – Tehran arranged for the US to put an end to the IND. From it, it appears that Iranian President Ahmadinejad proposed a number of diplomatic openings to the US and this throws light on his role within the IND, which is completely different from the versions that the official and academic narrative have reported.

To conclude, I think that the contemporary adoption of qualitative methodological tools – case study, process tracing, circumstantial paradigm and historical contextualization – together with the use of middle-range foreign policy theories reveal a suitable method for “unpacking” the US foreign policy decision-making process and identifying the actors

¹² Emphasis in the original.

directly involved in US-Iran foreign policy-making. Moreover, such a “toolbox” can offer useful insights that can help reflect on the motivations and the objectives lying behind the players’ actions.

Finally, as to the sources, primary importance has been given to first-hand sources, both American and Iranian – as far as linguistically possible – like, for instance, public and private documents as well as players’ accounts from interviews and memoirs although the latter can be self-serving and, consequently, misleading. In this case, cross-checking, whenever possible, was done to verify the reliability of the witnesses’ first-hand accounts. In this regard, I should mention the interviews I did with two players of the IND. The first one is with Tim Guldemann, the former Swiss Ambassador, who handed the 2003 Iranian proposal to the US. The interview was informal and conducted on the phone. That is because Guldemann, as he made adamantly clear, did not want to be longer involved in the matter (the JCPOA was signed some months before and Guldemann had started, shortly before, a political career in the Swiss Parliament). He answered my questions also indicating what in his view were the reliable second-hand sources on which I could expand my research. The second diplomat was Hugo Sobral, who, after having served in the EU External Action Service’s (EEAS) as Principal Advisor in the Americas Department, became a member of the Iran Task Force and as such was deeply involved, from 2012 to 2015, in the 5+1 negotiations with the IRI, leading to the JPOA’s and the JCPOA’s elaboration and signatures. The interview with Sobral, then-Head of the EEAS Iran Task Force, was formal, tape-recorded and was conducted in Sobral’s office, in Brussels, in July 2017. During the interview, he was eager to talk not only about the negotiations which led to the JCPOA, but also about the possible direction the Trump Administration would take regarding the JCPOA. Two months after the interview, he would be nominated as EEAS Deputy Managing Director of the Americas Department. Finally, I exchanged e-mails and conducted a formal interview with former Italian Ambassador to Tehran, Roberto Toscano, in Milan, at the High School for Economics and International Relations. Toscano, was personally asked by some Iranian political authorities to make Italy support their “grand bargain” shortly after the US had rejected it. During that interview he showed me the original copy of the proposal Iranians gave him. The interviews with both Toscano and Guldemann helped me to overcome the wariness I had about the whole “grand bargain” affair and, in particular, the existence of reliable documentation detailing the Iranian offer.

Regarding the second-hand sources, the academic literature devoted to the IND and the US-IRI relations as well as Washington correspondents' and investigative journalists' works were taken into due account. In fact, regarding back channels, covert operations as well as the White House day-by-day inner working, journalists' accounts – usually made by relying on insiders' leaks – can offer little but precious insights which academic works inevitably cannot. Finally, particular attention was devoted to include Iran-born scholars' works, like Ali Ansari's, Vali Nasr's, Arvand Abrahamian's, Trita Parsi's, and Mohammed Mousavian's, since they used direct Persian-written primary sources.

Relevance

The thesis seeks to make a contribution to US foreign policy studies. This has been made possible as by applying a theoretical framework based on foreign policy theories, it has identified the actors and the motivations which shaped the American policy towards Tehran and its nuclear program during both the Bush and Obama administrations. This is true in particular for the 2003 opening which, so far, has not yet received sufficient attention from academics. A reason could be the proposal reliability rather difficult to assess. In this sense, the interviews done by the author with Sobral, Guldemann, and Toscano should dispel any doubt about its existence and its actual acknowledgement for the Americans – a hotly debated point so far. The same can be stated for the analysis of the Obama Administration's attempts to reach out to Tehran in the years 2009-2012. In fact, the complex process through which the Washington-Tehran back channel was developed has not yet received the full attention it deserves. Partial coverage is found in Landler (2016) and in Salomon (2016), both Washington-based correspondents, and in Rodhes (2019) – a memoir of former Obama's Deputy NSA – and in Kerry (2019), the memoir of the second Obama's Secretary of State. Unfortunately the latter two books, like other similar works, are rather self-serving and tend to offer a partial and partisan account of the events. So far, to my knowledge, the only foreign policy analysis of the back channel – regarding, at least, its initial developments – was conducted by Parsi (2012) and Kausler (2014). In other terms, the thesis represents a novelty in the quite rich literature investigating the IND. This is because its methodology and theoretical framework, by lifting the “unitary actor” and “rational actor” hypothesis, allowed it to examine closely the behavior of the many actors at play who influenced the American foreign policy decision-making process during the Bush and Obama

administrations. Although Orin (2011) already used the “bureaucratic policy” paradigm for investigating the US-IRI relationship during the IND, he did it in order to answer a different research question, i.e. “why the US did not bomb the IRI”. Additionally, his analysis, although very valuable, is limited to the Bush Administration and to the Obama Administration’s first two years. Another feature which can make this thesis valuable for US foreign policy scholars is the validity of its argument: the US nuclear diplomacy with Tehran, during both administrations, did not aim at conflict resolution. There were indeed other objectives among which the following: the containment of the Iranian regional role before, and the Iranian engagement in stabilizing the Middle East-Persian Gulf region later. An interested audience would also be made up of diplomats and researchers involved in the practice or study of negotiation processes. Secret diplomacy researchers would be particularly interested in the account of the 2001-2003 and 2009-2012 back channels. In this regard, it is worth noting that the authors of a recent book devoted to understanding the role of secret diplomacy in shaping foreign policy, take for granted the late 2012, instead of the early 2009, as the beginning of the backchannel between Tehran and Washington (see the contributions of Murray, De Wong, and Jung in Bjola and Murray, 2016). This example illustrates the difficulty in doing research into secret diplomacy case-studies, and, at the same time, into the heuristic potentialities of the methodologies herein used, i.e. process-tracing and the “circumstantial paradigm”. Furthermore, the additional analysis of the post-JCPOA propaganda campaign undertaken by the Obama Administration may be significant for scholars interested in the “marketing” step (Mintz & DeRouen, 2010) in the foreign policy decision-making process. Meaningfully, it shows how centers of powers can play a deliberate role in constructing and diffusing manufactured narratives in order to successfully “sell” unpopular foreign policy choices to national audiences. Finally, since his election in November 2016, President Trump has been very critical of the deal and, in 2018, he made the US withdraw from the JCPOA, although claiming to be looking for another deal with Tehran. Hence, this thesis can be used jointly along with the growing literature devoted to the Trump Administration’s foreign policy to understand what lies behind the President’s stances and what his decisions meant for the US-IRI relationship and the American posture in the Middle East–Persian Gulf region.

Organization of the work

The thesis is organized as follows. In the Introduction, the argument and the theoretical and methodological frames are presented, as well as the relevant literature devoted to the nuclear deal. Concerning the former, particular attention has been devoted to middle-range theories of foreign policy belonging to the so-called “bureaucratic and governmental politics” group as well as those examining the role of groups of interest in the foreign policy decision-making process. Theories focused on the importance of leaders’ personality have also been analyzed. The methodological section is devoted to case-study, process-tracing, and “indictary paradigm” methods, coupled with abductive reasoning technique. As far as literature review is concerned, the-works specifically dealing with the IND have been examined, meanwhile the US-IRI relationship is analyzed in Chapter I. Chapter I offers a historical and political contextualization of the US-IRI relationship: the foreign policy strategies the US has adopted towards the IRI since 1979 have been analyzed as well as the development of the US doctrines regarding the Middle East and Persian Gulf region. Particular attention has been given to the collaborations (mostly unofficial) which occurred between the US and the IRI since the birth of the latter, in 1979, because they go beyond the mainstream narrative of the US and IRI as irreconcilable enemies. Chapter II presents the IRI’s various attempts to reach out to the US on nuclear matters (other than the 2003 one) and delves into the US reactions to them. This represents indeed a rather poorly researched issue about the IND and demonstrates how they were not only the so-called “reformist” Iranian Presidents (i.e., Khatami and Rouhani) who tried to approach Washington to break the nuclear stalemate. With this regard, light has been thrown on President Ahmadinejad, traditionally considered by analysts and scholars as a “hawkish” statesman, refusing diplomatic solutions. Chapter III explores deeply the US reactions to the 2003 Iranian diplomatic proposal to bring an end to the nuclear deal, the so-called “grand bargain”. By using foreign policy theories and the process-tracing and “indictary paradigm” methodological tools, it investigates the events and their chronology, the actors at play and their motivations and goals as well as their influence on Bush Administration’s Iranian foreign policy. Chapter IV analyses in detail the Obama Administration’s approach to Tehran and describes the construction of the back channel which led to the following multilateral negotiations ended up in the JPOA’s signature in April 2013. It also examines, firstly, how that administration was able to “sell”, through a controversial propaganda campaign, its breakthrough decision of engaging with Tehran, changing consequently its

traditional alliances in the ME-Persian Gulf region. Secondly, how the administration itself faced allies' and Congress's oppositions to such a strategic change in US foreign policy which also determined a change in the ME-Persian Gulf region's balance of power. Finally, the Conclusion sketches the path of the US foreign policy towards the IRI in the 13-year existence of the IND, summarizing its main players, as well as the motivations and the short- and long-term objectives lying behind them. Needless to say, it also suggests some new paths in further research.

CHAPTER I: THE CONTEXT

Introduction

The majority of historians' and IR scholars' works devoted to the post-1979 period describe the IRI-US relationship as marked by confrontation: see, for instance, Ansari, 2006; Murray, 2009; Tarock, 2003; Pollack, 2004; Beeman, 2008; Mousavian, 2014; Akbarzadeh and Conduit, 2016; Fayazmanesh, 2008; Bill, 1988; Cottam, 1989; Gasiorowski and Keddie 1992; Kurtzman, 2004; Buchan, 2012; Blaigh et al., 2012; Nasr and Takey, 2008, just to mention some of them. By contrast, pre-1979 Iran is pictured as a US' "client state" and a kind of US' pivot in the Persian Gulf and Central Asia regions. (Gasiorowski, 1991; Gasiorowski, 1996; Kamrouz, 1992; Bill, 1988; Everest, 2007; Alvandi, 2014; Castiglioni, 2005). Particularly during the Cold War, its geographical position made it a key-US ally for containing possible Soviet Union territorial and hegemonic ambitions. That is why, for instance, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), in collusion with British intelligence, organized a military coup which restored the Pahlavi rulers by defeating the democratically elected socialist President Mossadeq¹³ in 1953 (Kinzer, 2003; Gasiorowski and Byrne, 2004; Abrahamian, 2013). The revolution that erupted in 1979, although it was fought by all the groups opposing the Sha'a (i.e. socialists, communists, liberals, and religious leaders), ended up being an Islamist one (Abrahamian, 2018; Axworthy, 2001, Mohades, 2013) and, as a consequence, Iran became a self-proclaimed "Islamic Republic". From then on, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) would have been ruled in accordance with the "*Velayat-e faqih*" principle, under which all the institutions of the state are subordinated to the supreme Shia' religious leader (the *Rahbar*) (Akhavi, 1980; Salzani, 2004; Guolo, 2007; Macrì, 2010). According to the most common narrative, the deposal of Reza Pahlavi and the rejection of his American sponsors, together with the "hostages crisis" (during which all the members of the US embassy in Teheran had been kept hostages for 444 days by a group of young insurgents, since October 1979 to January 1981) changed the US-IRI relation forever. What the US believed as "unthinkable", had actually just happened (Kurtzman, 2004). Yet, some

¹³ Recently declassified documents show that the US and the clerics colluded already during that coup. See Byrne and Gasiorowski (2004; 2018).

authors have challenged such a narrative and offered a different reconstruction of the facts. Their works describe indeed the existence, since the early beginning of the popular uprisings, of a back channel between the Carter Administration and the clerics who would have run the future Islamic Republic. Most of them are memoirs of the 1979 turmoil, such as Sadr (1991), Rafizadeh (1987), Pahlavi, P. A. (1980), Pahlavi, M. R. (1980), whilst some other are investigative research, such as Dreyfuss and LeMarc (1980), Dreyfuss (2005). Some others claim that the Iranian Mullah were in contact also with the campaign team of Ronald Reagan and G.W.H. Bush during the revolution and after. The aim of the Reagan-Bush's supporters was that of organizing an "October Surprise" against the incumbent president by bargaining a delay in the release of the hostages. Some months later, by exploiting again their covert line with Tehran, that same people – placed in key-positions inside the Reagan's Administration – would have organized the "Iran-Contra" affair, a clandestine supply of arms to Tehran carried out with the Israeli intelligence's support. Some years later, the G.W. H. Bush Administration would have restored that back channel with Tehran for obtaining the release of American hostages kept by *Hezbollah*, the IRI-backed Lebanese Islamic militias which had kidnapped them. Picco (1999) – written by the Italian UN diplomat who acted as mediator during the Lebanon war – is a first-hand account of the quiet role the IRI played in the release of the US hostages. Later, the Clinton Administration tried to re-establish more open commercial, economic and diplomatic relations with Tehran. However, it had little success because of the Israel's and Israeli lobby's influence (Fayazmanesh, 2008). That administration also nurtured a cover relationship with the Mullah for supporting its plans in the Balkans during the Yugoslavian civil war. In fact, the back channel allowed the movement of Iranian fighters, managed by the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), to Bosnia where they fought against the armies of Yugoslavia, earlier, and Serbia, later, Russia's key-allies in Western Europe. Such a covert US-IRI relationship existing under the surface of confrontation has been overlooked by academic literature, in particular for what concerns the post-Cold War. The first section of this chapter will try to go behind its mere description to make sense of it in terms of American foreign policy.

Two other under-researched aspects of the US-IRI relationship which deserve to be investigated for fully contextualizing the IND concern the Iranian Nuclear Program (INP). The first one is represented by the relation existing between Tehran, the Pakistani scientist Dr. A. Q. Khan, and the American intelligence. In fact, from the late 1980s until October 2003, the INP was developed by means of Khan's supply of nuclear blueprints and raw

material, while at the same time, the CIA was closely monitoring Khan's activities and knew about his relation with Tehran. In other terms, it looks like if the Americans had quietly allowed the Iranians to develop their nuclear program. The second section of this chapter will try to make sense of such an apparent puzzle. The other aspect of the US-IRI relationship in that section is the entanglement allegedly existing between American intelligence and the *Moujahedin Ex-Kalq* (MEK) (the People's Mojahedin of Iran). The MEK is the Iranian dissident group which, by covering up the Iranian undeclared nuclear facilities in August 2002, during a press conference in Washington, made the IND officially start. Yet, at that time, the MEK was not only a group of Iranian dissidents in exile, but it was also enlisted as a "Terrorist Organization" (TO) by the Department of State. Since the evidences presented by the MEK were hard-to-find satellite images, some authors argued indeed that the MEK had obtained them from American intelligence agencies. In any case, since then on, a faction inside the Bush Administration would have tried to leverage the group against the Iranian regime. Both such events, the disclosure done by the MEK and the role played by the CIA in the "Khan affaire", show in a new light the US' dealing with Tehran and its nuclear program. They suggest also that Washington has used intelligence as a foreign policy tool during the whole IND. The consideration of the role of intelligence is a regrettably missing point in the foreign policy literature in general, and not only in that devoted to the US-IRI relationship. Yet, according to practitioners, covert operations and, more generally, intelligence, are effective and indispensable foreign policy instruments. For instance, for former CIA's operative Theodore Shackley, political and paramilitary cover action represent "the third option", which is even superior to diplomacy and war (1981). For Harry Rositzke (2019), former Director of CIA's secret operations, intelligence is a continuation of policy and diplomacy by secret means and represents the "third arm" of US foreign policy. Regarding in particular the Cold War period, he claims that cover operations have indeed played the most relevant role within the American strategy of containment of the Soviet Union. British intelligence scholar Roy Cormac states that seasoned observers understand that cover action is "the shadowy side of international relations" (2018: 1). Still despite this, IR and foreign policy scholars tend to downplay the role of intelligence and cover operations. Alternatively, they focus only on particular issues – as, for instance, the failure of intelligence (Jervis, 2012) and especially of covert operations (Betts, 1978; Vandenbrouke, 1993; Oppermann, & Spencer, 2016), the production of intelligence (Jervis, 1986; Lowenthal, 2019; Johnson & Wirtz, 2004), intelligence politicization (Hastedt, 2013; Rovner, 2011; Jeffrey-Jones, R. 2014; Bar-Joseph, 2013), the relationship between

intelligence and strategy (Rovner, 2011), as well as the description of selected cover/special operations – overlooking their importance as foreign policy instruments. Christopher and Dilks (1984:2) note an identical oversight in historical approaches to IR. In fact, they write that, “historians have a general tendency to pay too much attention to the evidence which survives, and to make too little allowance for what does not. Intel has become a “missing dimension” first and foremost because its written records are so difficult to come by” (Christopher and Dilks, 1984: 2). Yet, they continue, “the great danger of any missing historical dimension is that its absence may distort our understanding of accessible dimensions.” Similarly, foreign policy studies risk to distort the accessible dimensions of an event or a political choice because of this “absence of evidences”. Among the few scholars acknowledging the importance of intelligence and covert action are Jervis (1986, 2013) and Jervis and Rosati (2014). Yet, although they admit that “American policymakers have relied upon CIA covert action as a major US foreign policy instrument since World War II” (Jervis and Rosati, 2014: 222), they do not elaborate furtherly on this finding. Vanderbrouke is more generous and devotes the first chapter of his work (1993) to the significance of special operations in terms of US foreign policy-making. However, he limits his analysis to secret military and paramilitary strikes, which he defines as “strategic special operations” because of the importance of their objectives (Vanderbrouke, 1993: 4). The second section of this chapter is indeed devoted to the role played by the “third factor” in giving rise to that diplomatic conflict between Tehran and the international community known as IND. It will do it by applying the “indictary paradigm” methodology for avoiding the problems related to the “absence of evidences”. Its aim is that of demonstrating that, in its dealing with Tehran, Washington has deliberately used intelligence as a foreign policy tool.

This Chapter is organized as follows. The first section describes the back channels that some actors and groups of power within the Carter and Regan administrations established with the IRI since its birth. It delves also into the Clinton Administration’s collusion with the Iranian government during the Yugoslavian civil war. The second section focuses, firstly, on the relationship between the US, Dr. Khan, and Tehran. Secondly, on the entanglement existing between American intelligence and the MEK.

Chapter I. Section 1: Back Channels

Preamble

Regarding the role of Tehran during the Cold War, Iranian scholar Roham Alvandi claims that, “[t]he country’s geography, bordering both the USSR and the oil-rich Persian Gulf, meant that its territory and natural resources were of vital strategic importance in the ideological and material contest between the two superpowers” (Alvandi, 2014b). The Cold War context represents indeed the framework through which decoding the US relationship with Iran, early, and later the IRI. Contrary to conventional wisdom and most literature, the US relationship with Reza Pahlavi was never really smooth nor easy. This has extensively been demonstrated by Iranian-British scholar Babak Ganji, who analyzed previously classified documents seized by Iranian revolutionaries from the American Embassy in October 1979 (Ganji, 2012). In particular, the Sha tried to reduce his dependence on the US by exploring Moscow’s offer of a non-aggression treaty in 1958 (Alvandi, 2014a) and by diversifying his arms suppliers. The Sha’s diversification of Tehran’s military supply was indeed an indispensable measure for developing an independent foreign policy which would have led him to a “de facto non-alignment within the pro-Western alliance” (Chubin & Zabih, 1974). Unsurprisingly, this new policy caused a growing American distrust. So, for instance, on March 14, 1967, in front of the SFRC, Henry Kuss, deputy assistant secretary of defense, said that,

Iran has shifted the focus of its major concern from the threat of communism in the USSR in the north to Nasser and Arab nationalism in the south. [...] He [the Sha] has expressed his desire to meet his military requirements from the United States, but he has made it abundantly clear also that if the United States is unwilling or unable to meet his major military requirements, he is determined to go elsewhere to acquire what he needs. [...] The Shah’s purchasing from the Soviets seems to him, and I am reporting, seems to him, to be not without some value. (Kuss, 1967, 2004: 315-316)

The Sha’a also pursued a more independent policy in the exploitation of Iranian hydrocarbon reserves. For instance, in 1957, he reached a deal with the Italian public holding company, the National Hydrocarbon Authority (*Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi, ENI*) instead than with one of the seven American oil cartel members (Tremolada, 2010; Bucarelli,

2010)¹⁴. From then on, frictions between the Sha'a and Washington regarding the exploitation of the Iranian resources as well as the Iranian role within the OPEC would have intensified. For instance, Cooper (2012) describes the *de-facto* collusion made by the US with Saudi Arabia for weakening the Iranian OPEC leadership, in 1977. This collusion had two fundamental consequences. The first one was the change in the balance of power in the ME, because "the Saudi Arabia's House of Saud replaced Iran's Pahlavi king as Washington's indispensable ally in the Persian Gulf" (Cooper, 2012:7). Secondly, it undermined the Reza Pahlavi's grip on power because the fall of the oil price, obtained through a deliberate increase in Saudi oil supply, caused a sharp financial and fiscal crisis in Iran (Cooper, 2008; 2012). The Iranian military intervention in Oman (1972-75) to help Sultan Qabos quell a Marxist rebellion – made for reasons wholly related to Iran's regional security (Goode, 2014), but undertaken without any prior consultation with Washington – was another signal of the Reza Pahlavi's independent foreign policy, which could not be accepted by the US, not anymore. In fact, "[b]y the mid-1970s, some US officials were [...] pointing out that the Shah was becoming increasingly independent and that he would harness US strategy for his own purposes. The CIA was also becoming increasingly concerned about the Shah's policies" (Ganji, 2012: 13). During the Carter Administration, the disenchantment toward the Sha'a intensified. At the same time, a group of NSC's officials led by the NSA, Zibignew Brzezinski, became interested in the potential of political Islam as an instrument for containing and destabilizing the Soviet Union (Dreyfuss, 2005: 214-243). The American engagement with ethnic and religious groups for advancing foreign policy and geopolitical goals has received so far few attention from foreign policy scholars. Among some exceptions – as, for instance Niva (1998); Marsden (2012); *The Immanent Frame* (2013) – Gerges (1999) examines the strategies adopted towards Islamist groups by US administrations from Carter to Clinton, focusing in particular on the foreign policy elites' thinking. Although his contribution is valuable particularly because it distinguishes between the rhetoric (discourse) level from the policy (action) level, yet it misses – as the other quoted works – the *manipulative* nature of the American approach towards Islamist groups, parties and countries. Conversely, this has been the focus of investigative journalists and political analysts (Dreyfuss, 2005; Labevière, 2000; Napoleoni, 2013; Cooley, 1999; Rashid, 2002; Johnson, 2010; Barlett, 2003). American historian John Prados and political theorist

¹⁴ On the interconnection between hydrocarbons, international diplomacy and energy security, in particular during the Cold War, see the Introduction in Cantoni (2017). See also Doel (2013).

Timothy Mitchell (2011, 2002) have approached directly that issue in their researches (Prados, 1986; 2006; Mitchell, 2011, 2002). According to all these authors, the final goal of the American engagement with political Islam was the containment of the Soviet Union, earlier, and of Russia and China, more recently. This objective was pursued also by means of proxy military conflicts as that one in Afghanistan, fought by Islamist fighters against the Soviet troops (Coll, 2005; Crile, 2015). The American political actor who theorized and launched the systematic manipulation of Islamist groups and militias was indeed Zbigniew Brzezinski. His strategy would have been adopted in Afghanistan by both the Carter and Regan administrations. At a later date, it would have been used again by the Clinton Administration. Brzezinski, by developing McKinder's (1904) and Spykman's (1944) conceptualization of the Eurasian continental territory as a "Mainland/Rimland" of ultimate strategic importance, defined the Persian Gulf-Central Asia regions as an "Arc of crisis"¹⁵ inside the "Mainland/Rimland". Moreover, he claimed that the US, for achieving and maintaining global supremacy, should had to pursue the "balkanization" of that area by means of resurgent Islamic minorities. Its final objective was that of weakening and ultimately disintegrating the Soviet Union. Brzezinski was the mastermind behind the American exploitation of Muslim fighters in Afghanistan which was initiated *before* the Soviet invasion, as he himself admitted (Jauvert, 1998). During his tenure as NSA, Brzezinski also developed the so-called "Carter doctrine", the Carter's Administration's foreign policy which was publically disclosed through the presidential "State of the Union Address" of January 1980:

The region which is now threatened by Soviet troops in Afghanistan is of great strategic importance: It contains more than two-thirds of the world's exportable oil. The Soviet effort to dominate Afghanistan has brought Soviet military forces to within 300 miles of the Indian Ocean and close to the Straits of Hormuz, a waterway through which most of the world's oil must flow. The Soviet Union is now attempting to consolidate a strategic position, therefore, that poses a grave threat to the free movement of Middle East oil. [...] Meeting this challenge will take national will, diplomatic and political wisdom, economic sacrifice, and, of course, military capability. We must call on the best that is in us to preserve the security of this crucial region. Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of

¹⁵ The first time Brzezinski used publically the term was in a 1978 speech, during his tenure as Carter's NSA (Trenta, 2018).

America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.
(President Carter, 1980)

In his memoir, Brzezinski states that he wrote the last sentence and insisted it was included in the speech “to make it very clear that the Soviets should stay away from the Persian Gulf” (Brzezinski, 1983: 444). US foreign policy scholars have demonstrated how, consistently with this declaration, the Carter Administration began to build up the Rapid Deployment Force, which would have become CENTCOM, and expanded the US naval presence in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean (Herring, 2008; Patterson, 2005; Jones, 2012, 2017; Morrissey, 2009; Morrissey, 2017). Yet, two additional features of the Carter/Brzezinski doctrine have gone so far rather underestimated. The first one is its linkage with the American exploitation of political Islam in the Persian Gulf and Central Asia regions. The second aspect – actually a postulate of the first one – is the relation existing between that doctrine and the American cover channel with the Iranian Mullah initiated at the early beginnings of the 1979 revolution and fully exploited during it.

I.1.A Carter Administration’s back channel with Iranian clerics before and during the 1979 revolution

Many authors have argued that, during the Iranian turmoil in 1979, Brzezinski used the Islamist clerics against both the Sha’a and the other, mainly Marxist, revolutionary groups (Engdahl, 1992; Evans, 2009; Cuddy, 2009; Dreyfuss, 2005; Dreyfuss and La Lavée, 1981; Dale Scott; 2007:80-92). Former Carter’s White House staffer, Henry Precht – who opposed the Sha’a and supported the attempts of establishing good relations with the new Iranian rulers – unveiled the following during an interview:

After the revolution, we still considered Iran to be terribly important to US interests. At one point [assistant secretary of state for Near East affairs] Hal Sanders went to the White House for a meeting, and when he came back he told me, “You’ll be very pleased. We are going to try to develop new relations with Iran.” There was this idea that the Islamic forces could be used against the Soviet Union. The theory was, there was an arc of crisis, and so an arc of Islam could be mobilized to contain the Soviets. It was a Brezinski concept. (quoted in Dreyfuss, 2005: 241):

According to Cottam¹⁶ (1990: 276-278), Brzezinski chose a “de facto alliance with the forces of Islamic resurgence and with the regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran” adding that, “stability was not even implicitly his objective. His primary concern was to form an effective anti-Soviet alliance in the region he described as an “arc of crisis”. By the summer of 1979 Brzezinski was convinced of Khomeini’ fierce anti-communism. Brzezinski himself wrote: “by late 1978, I began to press the ‘arc of crisis’ thesis [arguing] for a new ‘security framework’ to reassert US power and influence in the region” (Brzezinski, 1983: 446-447). Brzezinski together with George Ball, head of the White House’s Iran Special Task Force, led a group of administration’s officials advising Carter that the Islamists’ surge was more in the American interests than the maintenance of power by the Sha’a (Dreyfuss, 2005: 240-242). According to Engdahal,

Ball recommended that Washington drop support for the Shah of Iran and support the fundamentalist Islamic opposition of Ayatollah Khomeini. Robert Bowie from the CIA was one of the lead ‘case officers’ in the new CIA-led coup [...]. Their scheme was based on a detailed study of the phenomenon of Islamic fundamentalism, as presented by British Islamic expert, Dr. Bernard Lewis¹⁷ [...]. Lewis’s scheme [...] endorsed the radical Muslim Brotherhood movement behind Khomeini, in order to promote balkanization of the entire Muslim Near East along tribal and religious lines. Lewis argued that the West should encourage autonomous groups such as the Kurds, Armenians, Lebanese Maronites, Ethiopian Copts, Azerbaijani Turks, and so forth. The chaos would spread in what he termed an ‘Arc of Crisis,’ which would spill over into Muslim regions of the Soviet Union. [...] Carter’s security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and secretary of state, Cyrus Vance, implemented their ‘Arc of Crisis’ policy, spreading the instability of the Iranian revolution throughout the perimeter around the Soviet Union. (Engdahal, 1992: 174).

Reza Pahalavi himself was aware of the clerics’ endorsement by the Administration, and in his memoir wrote that at a point, he understood that the Americans wanted him out, that nobody had made him know about a fracture inside the Carter Administration, and that some US officials believed in the value of an “Islamic Republic” as a bulwark against the Communism (Pahlavi, 1980). Recently declassified documents show that the US Ambassador in Tehran had secretly met with Ayatollah Khomeini’s envois for negotiating

¹⁶ Iran scholar Richard Cottam had served as CIA’s agent and Political officer at the American embassy in Tehran during 1956-1958. In 1979 he conducted a mission to Tehran to try to get the American hostages released. He consulted with the State Department throughout the 1980s (Akhavi, 1997).

¹⁷ According to Dreyfuss (2005), Kalinovsky (2015) and Ganji (2012:133), they were instead the works of Russian social scientist Alexandre Bennigsen (Bennigsen, & Lemercier-Quelquejey, 1967; Bennigsen and Lemercier-Quelquejey, 1961; Bennigsen & Broxup, 1983) which had shaped Brzezinski’s strategic thought about the destabilizing potential of Muslim resurgence in Central Asia against the Soviet Union. Brzezinski and Bennigsen would have also collaborated to a book devoted to nationalities in the Soviet Union (Allworth et al. 1971). [N.o.t.A.]

his return (Cooper, 2015). Other previously classified documents which were accessed by the BBC alone in 2016¹⁸ (Fattay, 2016) confirm that not only the US had extensive contacts with Khomeini before the revolution, but the Carter Administration also facilitated the success of the revolution – and, therefore, Khomeini’s return – by refraining the Iranian Army from doing a military coup¹⁹. In addition, they confirm that, during the revolution, the US had maintained a covert communication line with Khomeini, who at the time was in Paris, which allowed him to send his personal messages to Washington. According to the BBC’s journalist who accessed the documents:

[t]he Carter administration wanted to know about the future of US core interests in Iran: American investments, oil flow, political-military relations, and views on the Soviet Union. Khomeini answered the questions in writing the next day a message - sent back with Yazdi [Khomeini’s trusted envoy, later IRI’s foreign minister]. It was an artfully-crafted portrait of an Islamic Republic, mirroring what Carter had sketched at a conference of world leaders on Guadeloupe Island earlier that month: an Iran free of Soviet domination, neutral, if not friendly to America, one that would not export revolution, or cut oil flow to the West. “We will sell our oil to whoever purchases it at a just price” Khomeini wrote. “The oil flow will continue after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, except for two countries: South Africa and Israel,” he added. To develop the country, Iran needed the assistance of others, “in particular the Americans”, Khomeini wrote. As for foreign investments, the US was likely to have a role. He implied that the Islamic Republic would be interested in buying tractors, not tanks, making it also clear that he had no “particular affinity” for the Russians. “The Russian government is atheistic and anti-religion. We will definitely find it more difficult to have a deep understanding with the Russians,” Yazdi added to Zimmermann as he delivered the answers. “You are Christians and believe in God and they don’t. We feel it easier to be closer to you than to Russians,” Yazdi said. Khomeini also vowed not to destabilise the region. “Non-interference in other people’s affairs”, he wrote, would be the policy of the future government. (Fattay, 2016)

To sum up, recently declassified documents confirm what some scholars had already disclosed, i.e. that the Carter Administration had established a covert communication line with the Iranian clerics before the 1979 and maintained it during the revolution. The

¹⁸ The BBC made them only partially publically available. One of them is a declassified 1980 CIA analysis titled “Islam in Iran” which shows that Khomeini tried to reach out to the US already in 1963. In the message he had personally sent to the US government (the Kennedy Administration), Khomeini explained that, “he was not opposed to American interests in Iran. On the contrary, he thought the American presence was necessary as a counterbalance to Soviet and, possibly, British influence” (Fattay, 2016).

¹⁹ The documents confirm what had already stated by the former chief of French intelligence, Alexandre de Marenches, in 1986: “The Carter administration, in its idiotic desire to change Iran’s political system, had put pressure on the Shah who, weakened, ordered his armed forces not to respond. Better yet, the unspeakable Carter dispatched General Huysse to Iran, who while making the rounds, told the Iranian Armed forces, entirely outfitted with American material, that they would not see any more spare parts if they chose to respond; thus, they put Khomeini in power and started the Shiite revolution” (De Marenchs, 1986).

engagement with the Mullah, planned by the NSA, was aimed at the containment of the Soviet Union (Dreyfuss & LeMarc, 1980; Dreyfuss, 2005: 214-243). Such a back channel was not shut down because of the seizure of the US embassy. On the contrary, as it will be described later, that event offered an opportunity for further American-Iranian collusions.

I.1 B The “Cyclone Operation”

The CIA’s “Cyclone Operation” was initiated by a Carter’s Presidential Directive signed on July 3, 1979, following a Brzezinski’s note. Undertaken with the crucial collaboration of the Pakistani President, General Zia ul-Haq, and his Inter-Service-Intelligence (Kiessling, 2016), it consisted of huge supplies of arms, training and funds to the *mujahideen* fighting against the Moscow-backed Afghani government early, and later the Soviet troops. As described above, the final objective of the Brzezinski’s plan was not only that of containing the Soviet Union, but also that one of destabilizing it by spreading Islamist revival into Central Asia (Prados, 2002; Dreyfuss, 2005). After the end of the Carter’s Administration, that plan was endorsed by the new administration and the operation became crucial within the “Reagan doctrine” aimed to support anti-Soviet movements worldwide²⁰. The “Operation Cyclone” has been described by a number of scholars and practitioners (among others: Coll, 2004, 1992; Cooley, 1999; Crile, 2003; Riedel, 2014) and confirmed by the American officials who planned or were involved in it, as Brzezinski (NSA, 1997; Jauvert, 1998), Gates (2007: 142; 144-145; 149) and Tomsen (2001). This section, by analyzing the role of Tehran within the *jihad* against the Afghani President Daud and the Soviet troops, investigates the existence of possible linkages between Tehran and the “Operation Cyclone”.

Some authors did extensive research on the Tehran’s links with Afghani Shia communities (Hazari) and *mujahidin* during the Afghan-Soviet war (Milani, 2006; Harpviken, 1998; Ibrahimi, 2006; Amstutz, 1994: 108-110. Ruttig, 2007²¹). Contrary to what is stated by Parker (2009: 94-95), i.e. that Tehran did not put many resources for aiding

²⁰ For Pach, (2006: 175) the Reagan’s doctrine can be summarized by a sentence of his State of the Union Address of February, 1985: “We must not break faith with those who are risking their lives – on every continent from Afghanistan to Nicaragua - to defy Soviet-supported aggression and secure rights which have been ours from birth” (President Reagan, 1985a). The same concept would have been echoed in another Reagan’s speech, pronounced few days later: President Ronald Reagan (1985b). On the Reagan Doctrine and its focus on defeating communism and Soviet Union-backed actors, see also Carpenter (1986); Lagon (1994); and Scott (1996a, 1996b).

²¹ Ruttig’s contribution is particularly valuable because it describes the so-called “Tehran Eight”, that is the political union of Shi’a Afghan Mujahideen, mainly belonging to the Hazara ethnic group, supported by the IRI and headquartered in Tehran.

Afghani *mujahidin*, the IRI, consistently with its original foreign policy plan of exporting its political model (Emadi, 1995; Ram, 2007; Hunter, 1988), sent arms, trainers, and fighters into the Afghani territory. For instance, Cooley (2000:169) points out that the then-Iranian foreign minister, Sadegh Ghotbzadeh, denounced the Soviet invasion of December 1979 and asked for help for the Afghani resistance. Canadian journalist and Ghotbzadeh's confidant, Carole Jerome, wrote that at a meeting of the Islamic Conference in Islamabad in 1980, Ghotbzadeh arrived together with members of the Afghani resistance, officially indicated as members of the Iranian delegation. Moreover, he made the Conference unanimously approve a resolution condemning both the American "military aggression" against Tehran and the Soviet one against Afghanistan. He obtained also a pan-Islamic statement against the "unfaithful" Soviets (Jerome 1987: 2010-2013). Yet, no scholar has investigated about the possible existence of a *de-facto* collaboration between Washington and Tehran for supporting the Afghani guerrilla. Few hints about it are offered by an Israeli journalist, Samuel Segev (1987). According to him, Tehran tried to obtain American arms for Afghani jihadists through an Israeli emissary, shortly after the 1979 revolution. Then, reportedly, Robert McFarlane – the Reagan's NSA who pressed the Administration to tilt towards Tehran during the Iran-Iraq war and was a key-player of the "Iran-Contra" scheme²² – would have met some American military complex's representatives to satisfy the Iran quest. Segev claims also that during one of the "Iran-Contra" cover meetings between Oliver North and Iranian officials, the latter informed the former that they were training and arming Iranian volunteers who would have participated at the *Jihad* in Afghanistan²³. North and his Iranian counterpart reportedly agreed that for each 1,000 of American TOW missiles delivered to Tehran within the "Iran-Contra" scheme, 200 would have been passed to Afghani rebels (Segev, 1987: 275). The Iran-Contra affair was indeed a plan of a Reagan Administration's faction for re-establishing with Tehran an anti-Soviet Union alliance (Dreyuss, 2005: 292-302) to which the Mullah's anti-communist and anti-Soviet stances would have been functional. The case of Vladimir Kuzichkin, former head of the KGB station in Tehran, demonstrates indeed the existence of such a tactical cooperation. According to Bill (1988), after having defected to UK in 1982, Kuzichkin supplied the M16 (the British intelligence) with "a list of several hundred Soviet agents operating in Iran" together with detailed

²² See later in this section.

²³ Tehran at that time was already supporting the Central Asian "Islamic renaissance" against the Soviet Union by secretly supplying the Islamic population of the Soviet Central Asia Republics of thousands of copies of the Koran

information about the Iranian communist, Moscow-baked, *Tudeh* party's members²⁴. Shortly after, those data were shared by M16 and the CIA²⁵ with Iranian intelligence, which arrested "over 1,000 *Tudeh* party members [...] Those arrested included Nureddin Kianuri [the *Tudeh* leader, who admitted] that he had maintained contact with Soviet agents since 1945. This dramatic destruction of the *Tudeh* party in 1983 completed the dismantling of the Iranian left"²⁶ (Bill, 1988: 273).

To sum up, under a surface of confrontation the Iranian clerics and the US (or, at least, a faction inside both the Carter and the Reagan administrations) were eager to maintain that covert collaboration which had been established during the last times of the Sha. The two groups, in fact, had a common enemy, i.e. the Soviet Union and the Moscow-backed communist groups inside the IRI as well as in the region, whose defeat was worth a tactical collusion with each other. The fact that Iranian revolutionaries had seized the American embassy and held its personnel captive for 444 days did not represent an obstacle for it. On the contrary, it would have offered the pretext for developing a vehement anti-Iranian rhetoric in Washington whilst another, anti-American one was developed in Tehran, which could effectively cover the existence of the back channel.

I.1. C Regan-Bush's campaign team's "October surprise"

On January 20, 1981, few minutes after President Ronald Regan had taken office, the 52 American hostages who had been kept as hostages by Iranian revolutionaries for 444 days since the US embassy took-over on November 4, 1979, were finally released. Therefore, Regan could take all the credit for the positive conclusion of the long abduction. Ten years later, in 1991, an op-ed written by former NSC's Middle East Advisor in the Ford, Carter and Regan administrations, Gary Sick, (1991a)²⁷, and a TV documentary (PBS, 1991), offered circumstantial evidences that the Regan-Bush's campaign team had managed to delay the release of the hostages. According to him, they did it during some secret meetings with Iranian officials held in European cities throughout 1980, *in return for promises of*

²⁴ On the relations between the *Tudeh* party and the Soviet Union, see Chaqueri (1999). On the role of left-wing groups, especially the *Tudeh* party and the *Mojahedin-e Khalq* (MEK), in the 1979 revolution, see Baktiari (1989).

²⁵ The former CIA analyst in charge of analyzing the Soviet policy in the Third World, in a personal interview with the investigative journalist and Islamist fundamentalism expert, Richard Dreyfuss, confirmed that the CIA was part of the Kuzichkin-M16 connection to Tehran (Dreyfuss, 2005: 296).

²⁶ It is of note that Kuzichkin stated in his memoir that Moscow never had any contact with the Islamic-Marxist groups Kuzichkin (1990: 200-201), whose most important representatives were the *Mojahedin-e Khalq* (MEK).

²⁷ Sick's first disclosure, was then developed in a book-length version (Sick 1991b).

military equipment to the new Islamic Republic's rulers. The aim of the collusion was that of negatively affecting the incumbent President Carter's campaign for re-election. In 1992, the House of Representatives' Foreign Relations Committee (HRFRC) instituted a task force to examine the PBS' and Sick's allegations. Its final report, released in January 1993, dismissed all the allegations (Task Force to Investigate Certain Allegations Concerning the Holding of American Hostages by Iran in 1980, 1993: 7-11). Yet, already in 1987, Mansur Rafizadeh, the former chief of the Pahlavi's Secret Police and CIA asset, had claimed that the CIA had endorsed the Regan-Bush campaign team's efforts to delay the hostages' release²⁸. In 1988, journalists Hoffman and Silvers asked former president Carter what he thought about the rumors concerning some Regan Administration members' collusion with Iranian officials occurred *before* the Iran-Contra affair. Carter answered as following:

We have had reports since late summer 1980 about Reagan campaign officials dealing with Iranians concerning delayed release of the American hostages. I chose to ignore the reports. Later, as you know, former Iranian president Bani-Sadr has given several interviews stating that such an agreement was made involving Bud McFarlane, George Bush and perhaps Bill Casey. By this time, the elections were over and the results could not be changed. I have never tried to obtain any evidence about these allegations but have trusted that investigations and historical records would someday let the truth be known. (Hoffman and Silvers, 1988)

Like the Carter's account, all the enquires which would have followed the original Sicks' and PBS' allegations (Curtis, 1991; Honneger, 1989; Unger; 1991; Parry²⁹, 1995a, 1995b, 1999; Leoni von Dohnanyi, 2017)³⁰ described Robert McFarlane, George Bush, and William Casey as the actors personally involved in the collusion. McFarlane, Bush, and Casey would have become, respectively, NSA, Vice-President and CIA's Director³¹ in the Reagan Administration. Hoffmann and Silver interviewed also the former Iranian President, Abolhasan Bani-Sadr³² on the supposed covert contacts between Iranian officials and

²⁸ He wrote that, "George Bush had been director of the CIA during the Nixon administration and still had friends in the Agency. When the Republican party nominated the Reagan-Bush ticket, it was supported by the CIA. [...] Therefore, some CIA agents [...] were briefed by Agency officers to persuade Khomeini not to release his prisoners until Ronald Regan was sworn in. The CIA, consistently hostile to Carter, told Khomeini not to bother giving Carter the credit when he would no longer have any power. Then the CIA [...] sentenced the American hostages to seventy-six more day of imprisonment." (Rafizadeh, 1987:346-347).

²⁹ Some of the Parry's works are available at the Consortium News' online archives (See: Consortium News-Robert Parry).

³⁰ The media coverage of the case up to 1992 is listed and available online at the Congress' site (US Congress-October Surprise archive: https://fas.org/irp/congress/1992_cr/h920205-october-clips.htm).

³¹ According to Hersh (2019), Casey, a former businessman, was "controversially appointed" as CIA's Director by Reagan as the reward for having managed his presidential campaign.

³² "Abolhasan Bani-Sadr, [...] Iranian economist and politician who in 1980 was elected the first president of the Islamic Republic of Iran. He was dismissed from office in 1981 after being impeached for incompetence. [...] As president, Bani-Sadr struggled against enemies in the clergy, such as Ali Akbar Hashemi

Americans. Reportedly, the reconstruction of the events Bani-Sadr gave them was based on photocopies of secret Islamic Revolutionary Party's documents which friends and loyalists from the Iranian military had sent him. The following is an excerpt of the journalists' report:

Bani-Sadr first learned that the ayatollah was considering a secret deal with the Reagan-Bush campaign in late September 1980. Hashemi Rafsanjani³³, one of Khomeini's key advisors, was sending a secret emissary to the United States to assess the political situation and try to arrange a more lucrative settlement than the one the White House was offering him. It was that emissary, Bani-Sadr claims, who contacted McFarlane and later met Allen and Silberman [Reagan's senior advisors] in Washington. [...] They agreed in principle that the hostages would be liberated after the election,' says Bani-Sadr, 'and that, 'if elected, Reagan would provide significantly more arms than Carter was offering. For Khomeini, working with Reagan was preferable for several reasons,' [...] Bani-Sadr maintains that with the election drawing near, the Reagan-Bush team was eager to finalize a deal. (Hoffman and Silvers, 1988)³⁴.

From the Bani-Sadr's account, two significant things emerge. Firstly, that the Carter's White House had quietly contacted Rafsanjani to arrange the liberation of the hostages. In other terms, there were two Washington-Tehran back channels: one managed by the Carter WH³⁵ and another one run by the Reagan-Bush campaign team. Secondly, that through both the channels, the Iranians were assured they would have received arms in return for their collaboration. In 1992, the Task Force investigating about the Sick's allegations asked Col. Sergei V. Stepashin, then-Supreme Soviet's Committee on Defense and Security Issues' chairman, for information. Stepashin answered by sending a memo that the Soviet intelligence had compiled at the end of 1980. The document described in detail the cover meetings the vice-president candidate, George Bush, and the then-CIA's Director of the Strategic Evaluation Center, Robert Gates, had had in Paris with Iranian officials (Parry, 1995b; 1999). In 1992, former Israeli Mossad's Agent Ari Ben-Menashe unveiled that the Reagan-Bush campaign team's deal with Iranians had been carried out with the Israeli secret service's key-support (Ben-Menashe, 1992). In fact, shortly after Reagan took office, the

Rafsanjani and Ali Khamenei — who sought to reduce him to a figurehead — and against inexperienced departmental executives. [...] On October 31 [1979], Bani-Sadr wrote a letter to Khomeini complaining that incompetent ministers were a greater danger to the country's security than was Iraqi aggression. He also noted in this missive that his warnings of a worsening economy and his insistence on the need to reorganize the armed forces were being ignored. The letter, as well as Bani-Sadr's opposition to Iran's holding American hostages taken from the U.S. embassy in Tehrān some time earlier, angered members of the Majles (parliament), who impeached him on June 21, 1981." (Source: Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abolhasan-Bani-Sadr>).

³³ Hashemi Rafsanjani would have played a key-role also in the "Iran-Contra" affair.

³⁴ Three years later, Bani-Sadr would have told the details of the secret deal in his memoir (Bani-Sadr, 1991).

³⁵ The existence of a Carter Administration's deal, consisting of 150 million \$ of frozen military assets, would have been confirmed by Carter himself in 1991. See Hersh (1991).

arms promised were delivered to Tehran by Israeli intelligence, initiating that cover supply of American weapons later incorrectly defined as the “Iran-Contra” affair. The main players of the “Iran-Contra” affair would have indeed been the same ones of the “October Surprise”, i.e. Bush, Casey, MacFarlane, and Gates (Parry & Kornbluh, 1988; Prados, 1996, 2009). In other term, the “October surprise” was just the initial step of a back channel between the Regan Administration and the rulers of the new Islamic Republic which would have fueled American weapons to Tehran from 1981 until, at least, 1986. Such a constant supply of arms was established in return for short-term objectives, as the embassy hostages’ postponed release and, later, supposedly, for the liberation of the Americans kept by Hezbollah in Lebanon. The next section will show what were its long-term objectives.

I.1. D The “Iran-Contra” affair

Differently from the “October surprise” affair, whose existence is still debated (see, for example, Ottolenghi, 2012), the “Iran-Contra” scandal has been investigated – at least in its main aspects – by a commission appointed by President Reagan himself³⁶, by a Congressional committee³⁷, and by an independent commission³⁸. It has been analyzed also by many scholars who, from the first disclosure in November 1986 by the Lebanese magazine *Ash-Shiraa* on, could rely also on a growing number of declassified documents obtained through the Freedom Of Information Act³⁹. Among them, particularly valuable are: Parry & Kornbluh (1988); Mayer and McManus (1988); Koh (1990); Walsh (1998); Blyght et al. (2012); Byrne (2017); Kornbluhn and Byrne (1993); Prados (1996, 2009); Armstrong et al. (1987); Draper (1991); and Hersh (1991). Basically, the Iran-Contra affair consisted of covert arms sales to Tehran made by circumventing the UN’ embargo and the Congress’ oversight from 1980 to November 1986, during the IRI-Iraq war. They were carried out with the logistic assistance of Israeli intelligence. From 1985 on, the arms sale’s revenues were used for funding Nicaragua’s militias (the so-called “Contra” rebels) against the Sandinista

³⁶ The commission was led by Senator John Tower and would have released its final report in 1987 (*The Tower Commission Report, 1987*).

³⁷ Whose final result were published in 1987 (*Report of the Congressional Committee’s investigation the Iran-Contra Affair, 1987*).

³⁸ Walsh (1993a, 1993b, 1993c) are the three volumes of its final report. The independent counsel, judge Lawrence E. Walsh, later on, would have told that experience in Walsh (1998).

³⁹ In particular, the Georgetown University’s National Security Archive has been requiring, collecting and digitalizing many important documents regarding the Iran-Contra affair. See in particular, NSA (2016).

government⁴⁰. The independent investigation led by judge Lawrence Walsh claimed that the highest levels of the Reagan Administration were fully aware of the operations, and documents later declassified confirmed this. Byrne (2017), for instance, demonstrates that President Reagan and Vice-President Bush were both fully informed of the details of the operation⁴¹. However, this paragraph goes behind the description of the operations and the actors involved in the Iran-Contra affair for showing its significance in terms of US Iran foreign policy. In order to do this, it has to be considered that the “Iran-Contra” was not “some strange aberration, but simply an extension of a preexisting relationship that dated back to 1979” (Dreyfuss, 2005: 297). In other terms, the same people who had managed with the Iranians the “October surprise”, fulfilled its promise by secretly supplying arms to Tehran in 1981. Yet, they continued to nurture the pipeline at least until the operation’s cover up, in November 1986⁴². At that point, the administration claimed that the arms supply had been done for the role played by Tehran in the liberation of the American militaries kidnapped by Hezbollah in Lebanon in 1982. The prisoners’ liberation was indeed an excuse. In fact, the first arms sale was concluded in 1981, before any American soldier was captured, and, at the end, by 1986, only one hostage would have been released (Hersh, 1991). In any case, the supply of arms to the IRI had such dimensions⁴³ and lasted for so long that it seems very implausible that the one reason behind it was the promise made in 1980 in return for the delay in the hostages’ release. The bureaucratic politics model is the theoretical tool for solving such a puzzle. In fact, the arms supply had been kept hidden not only for bypassing the UN’ embargo against the sale of arms to the IRI and the eventual very likely Congress’ and public opinion’s opposition. It was indeed kept undercover also for circumventing the resistance coming *from within the administration* itself. In fact, the official administration’s policy was that one of backing Iraq by maintaining an arms embargo against Tehran decided by President Carter at the beginning of the IRI-Iraq war, in 1980. Yet, on July 21, 1981, the

⁴⁰ According to the *Tower Commission Report* (1987), the money’s diversion toward the Contras occurred *only from late 1985 on*. Therefore, in a technical way, only the cover operations undertaken in that period should go under the “Iran-Contra” definition.

⁴¹ Yet, both Bush and Reagan exploited the “plausible deniability” scheme and did not took responsibility for the operations. Moreover, Bush became President, he pardoned the few officials sentenced guilty. (Prados, 2009)

⁴² According to Bergman, it continued also for at least three months after (Bergman, 2007: 110-111).

⁴³ Precise estimations are not available. However, former Israeli and American intelligence officers quoted by Seymour Hersh, “acknowledged that weapons, spare parts and ammunitions worth several billion dollars flowed to Iran each year during the early 1980s” (Hersh, 1991). Moreover, according some other former Israeli intelligence officials, “[a]mong these weapons were some of the most advanced arms in the American arsenal, including Hawk anti-aircraft missiles, Lance surface-to-surface missiles, TOW anti-tank missiles and armor-piercing shells.” (Hersh, 1991)

Administration's Senior Interdepartmental Group, after having secretly conducted a study for the production of a National Security Defense Directive (NSDD), met and concluded that the US arms embargo against Tehran was ineffective⁴⁴. In fact, the Soviet Union, this was the NSDD's argument, could have been eager to replace the US in supplying weapons and spare parts to Tehran, bringing it under its sphere of influence (Kornbluh and Byrne, 1993: 213). According to Dreyfuss (2005: 298), three years later, in 1984, Robert McFarlane would have ordered a NSC's re-evaluation of the US Iran policy. Then, a group of officials began to lobby for shifting US policy in favor of Tehran. They were the then-NSC's Director for the Near East and South Asia and Senior Director for Political-Military Affairs, Howard Teicher⁴⁵, and the then-Principal Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, Donald Fortier, together with the then-CIA's National Intelligence Officer for Near East and South Asia, Graham Fuller (the main strategist of the "Operation Cyclone", who would have become National Intelligence Council's vice-chairman in 1986⁴⁶). Reportedly, they produced a Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) in 1985, calling for the US to provide arms to the Iranian rulers (Dreyfuss, 2005: 298). They prepared also a draft policy paper according to which the US should have encouraged "Western allies and friends to help Iranian meet its important requirements [...] including provision of selected military equipment" (Tower Commission, Final Report: 21). The plan was opposed by the then-Secretary of State, George Shultz, and the then-Secretary of Defense, Caspar Weinberg, but was supported by Casey. The proposed tilt toward Tehran was based on two assumptions: the first one was that the arms were going to some moderates inside the Tehran's executive eager to make a deal with Washington (plausibly the same ones who agreed to postpone the hostages' release). The second one, very similar to the 1981 NSDD's argument, was that without American military supply, the IRI would have asked Moscow the arms it needed and, consequently, it would had fallen under the Soviet Union's influence (Dreyfuss, 2005: 298-301; Tower Commission, Final Report: 115). According to Teicher, McFarlane agreed with Fuller's SNIE and asked him and Fortier, "to draft a NSDD. The NSDD was based on Fuller's analysis [and it] argued that [...] the United States should establish a dialogue with

⁴⁴ A record of the meeting has been only partially declassified (in a sanitized version). A copy of it is available at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP84B00049R000400760004-6.pdf>.

⁴⁵ In his memoir, Teicher wrote that at the beginning of the Iraq-IRI war, in 1980, whilst "[t]he Arabists in the US government saw the Iraqi invasion as an opportunity to eliminate the growing threat of Iranian-sponsored Islamic fundamentalism", he renewed his "campaign against the nascent tilt toward Iraq" inside the Reagan Administration. (Teicher & Teicher, 1993: 102-103).

⁴⁶ In 2006 Fuller published a book devoted to the political Islam, where he stated "Islamists strongly oppose Marxist interpretation of society [...] Islamists have always powerfully objected to socialism and communism." (Fuller, 2006: 26)

Iranian leaders. The proposal included the provision of selected military equipment to Iran as determined on a case-by-case basis” (Teicher & Teicher, 1993: 331-332). Such a proposed change in US foreign policy was supported by only a faction inside the administration which consisted of Fuller, Fortier, Casey, and McFarlane together with two of his staffers, Teicher and Oliver North, meanwhile Shultz, Weinberger and the then-Assistant Secretary of State, Richard Murphy, were “strong proponents of supporting Iraq in its war with Iran” (Waas and Unger, 1992). Consequently, the tilt toward Tehran could not take place. Yet, it can be that an informal, covert version of it was implemented by its supporters through the back channel which had been already used to settle the “October Surprise” debt with the Iranians. This appears the most plausible explanation of that huge, long-lasting supply of arms incorrectly defined as “Iran-Contra” affair.

Amiram Nir, Israeli Prime Minister’s counterterrorism adviser and a key-player of the “Iran-Contra” affair, in a “Top secret, sensitive, eyes only” memorandum written for the then-Israeli Prime Minister, Simon Peres, summarized the US’ and Israel’s interests in that cover operation.

Basically, the Americans are interested in opening channels for contacts with Iranian factors who are already in, or have good prospects for reaching, position of power in Iran, because of Iran’s strategic importance and before possible changes in its path and its leadership. [...] At a certain stage, the Americans were ready for the opening of a “dialogue of gestures” with the supply of American weapons by Israel proving the “seriousness of intent” of the United States to Iran, and the release of the hostages in Lebanon, through Iranian influence, proving the seriousness of Iran’s intentions to the Americans. All this would be a prelude to the opening of a political and strategic dialogue. (Quoted in Bergman, 2007: 117)

In other words, according to Nir, the whole operation was a series of confidence-building measures for establishing a strategic political dialogue between Washington and Tehran. This means that the US deal with Tehran reductively defined as “the Iran-Contra” affair was much more than an arms-for-hostages/money swap. For a Reagan Administration’s faction, “it had a much broader purpose, namely an attempt to reengage with Iran, in direct opposition to the official US policy of supporting Iraq in its resistance to Iranian expansionism” (Dreyfuss, 2005: 298). Very plausibly, the rapprochement sought by the “Iran-Contra” operation’s architects as well as by the supporters of the tilt towards Tehran during the IRI-Iraq war, had as long-term objective that of containing the Soviet Union, i.e. the same one for which Brzezinski had established secret contacts with the Iranian clerics opposing the Sha before and during the 1979 revolution. Marshall, Scott and Hunter (1987) had indeed

showed that the “Reagan doctrine”, with its focus on Soviet Union’s rollback, represented the ideological core of the Iran-Contra affair. At this regard, it is significant what an “Iran-Contra” key-player⁴⁷, former Major General Maj Richard Secord, stated in his memoir. In fact, he wrote that for the American officials involved in the “Iran-Contra” affair, as American representatives, the first objective was that one of preserving Iran as a bulwark against the Soviet expansionism towards the Gulf’s oil fields (Secord & Wurts, 1992).

To sum up, many authors have enlightened that the “Iran-Contra” affair had important national policy’s features – such as the unchecked abuse of executive power (Byrne, 2017), the related insufficient presidential accountability (Starr-Deelen, 2014; Schlesinger, 2004), the problem of an (in)effective Congressional oversight (Welsh, 1994), the existence of a parallel political apparatus working inside the American official structure of power (Scott, 2017), and the emergence of a pattern of “executive initiative, congressional acquiescence, and judicial tolerance” in foreign affairs (Koh, 1990: 5). However, the collusion between the highest levels of the Reagan Administration with Iranian ruling clerics is significant also from a foreign policy’s point of view. In fact, it demonstrated that an important faction inside the Reagan Administration was eager to re-engage with Tehran and to leverage such relationship for US long-terms objectives. Among them, the most important one was the containment of the Soviet Union, i.e. the same aim which had pushed the Washington-Tehran alliance before the Islamic revolution. Finally, it is worth noting that many players of the “October surprise” and the “Iran-Contra” affairs would have resurfaced in further, important moments of the tortured IRI-US relationship. On the American side, Robert Gates⁴⁸. On the Iranian side, they were Ali Akbar Rafsanjani (Gwertzman, 1987; Kornbluh, & Byrne, 1993:249) and his *protégé*, Hassain Rouhani (Blake I. and Dehghan, S.K., 2013), both of whom, once become Presidents, would have tried, with few result the former whilst great success the latter, to reach out to Washington for re-setting the US-IRI relationship.

I.1. E. The Clinton Administration’s collusion with Tehran

⁴⁷ He had run the “Enterprise”, a CIA front corporation which managed a number of cover companies operating from Switzerland and receiving the money Tehran payed for the arms supplied by the US through Israeli intelligence (*Tower Report*, 1987; Walsh,1987a)

⁴⁸ See Chapter III and IV.

The Clinton Administration has pursued a policy of “dual containment” towards Iraq and the IRI (Ansari, 2006: 135-137; Feyazmanesh, 2008; Daniel, 2001: 232-233; Pollack, 2004: 259; Murray, 2010). Yet it tried also a kind of détente with Tehran during both the Rafsanjani’s and Khatami’s presidency (Riedel, 2010, Seliktar, 2012: 105-119, Freedman, 1999). The speech of Secretary of State Albright at the American Iranian Council (AIC)⁴⁹, on March 1997 (Secretary of State Albright, 2000), represented indeed a step in the administration’s attempts of rapprochement. In it, she apologized for the role played by the CIA in the coup that overthrew the Mossadegh’s democratically elected government and restored the Pahlavi’s dynasty, in 1953. Additionally, she announced a lifting of sanctions on import of some Iranian products as well as the approval for export of spare parts of Iranian Boeing aircraft. Promisingly, Albright also offered to settle the legal claims on important Iranian assets which had remained frozen in US bank accounts since 1979. According to Fayazmanesh (2008), such a new course in US Iran policy was eminently influenced by American multinational enterprises interested in getting lucrative deals with Tehran⁵⁰, as that one reached by CONOCO (Salpukas, 1995) in 1995⁵¹. The Clinton Administration was accused by the then-FBI Director, Louis J. Freeh, of defending its tilt towards Tehran notwithstanding evidences of Iranian support for the terrorist attacks occurred in Saudi Arabia on June 25, 1996. In that bombing, carried out by *al-Hejaz*, the Saudi branch of Hezbollah, nineteen American military personnel were killed (Pearsons, 2011). According to Freeh, the evidences collected by the FBI showed “almost beyond a doubt” that, “the Khobar Tower attacks had been sanctioned, funded, and directed by senior officials of the government of Iran.” (Freeh, 2005: 29). Reportedly, they were the State Department and the White House – especially the President himself and the then-NSA, Sandy Berger – which tried to obstruct the FBI proceedings (Freeh, 2005: 20-30). Relying on his administration sources, journalist James Risen claims that, after the attacks, to the CIA’s Iran Task Force appeared that, “the Clinton administration was cutting a secret deal with Tehran” (Risen, 2006: 213). However, the administration’s collusion with Tehran went indeed far behind such a supposed obstruction of justice. In fact, during the Yugoslavian civil war, a special

⁴⁹ On the AIC, see Chapter III.

⁵⁰ On the Clinton Administration’s internal debate about how to deal with Tehran and the pressure on it exercised by US oil corporates, see also Morgan and Ottaway (1998).

⁵¹ That contract, however, would have been canceled by the administration (Southerl and Devroy, 1995) under the Israeli lobby’s pressure shortly after (Dreyfuss, 2011a: 5-6). One year later the Israeli lobby would have succeeded also in making Congress approve trade sanctions against the IRI through the “*H.R.3107 - Iran and Libya Sanctions Act of 1996*”. (Dreyfuss, 2011a: 5-6).

cover operation was put in motion by the administration jointly with the Iranian regime. This was the so-called “Muslims pipeline” going from Tehran to Bosnia (earlier through Croatia, and, later, directly to Bosnia). According to the terrorist expert Loretta Napoleoni in 1991 the Pentagon had made a secret alliance with the Yugoslavian fundamentalist Islamist groups (Napoleoni, 2008: 159). Shortly thereafter, American counter-intelligence, jointly with Turkish and Iranian secret services, organized a “Croatian pipeline” to bring Turkish and Iranian arms to Croatia on “Iran Air” flies capable of avoiding the UN’ embargo⁵² (later on, they would have been carried on by American Hercules C-130 flies). Later, Iranian *mujahidin*, VEVAK’s agents⁵³ and Islamic Guards of the Revolution⁵⁴ also would have reached Bosnia by using those flights (Napoleoni, 2008: 160). Apparently, some administration officials were even involved in the operations of inspection of the Iranian missiles to be sent through the “Croatian pipeline” (Napoleoni, 2008: 160). Reportedly, three years later, in April 1994, following a suggestion by the then-NSA, Anthony Lake, and the then-Deputy Secretary of State, Strobe Talbott, President Clinton personally endorsed the US-IRI collaboration and approved cover Iranian arms shipments into Bosnia-Herzegovina (Risen and McManus, 1996b). According to investigative journalists Risen and McManus, Ambassador Charles Redman and American Ambassador to Lubijana, Peter Galbraith,

acting on instructions from the White House and the State Department, told Croatian President Franjo Tudjman in early 1994 that the United States would not object to the creation of an arms pipeline that would channel the weapons through Croatia and into Bosnia for the Muslim forces fighting in the bloody civil war. [...] Specifically, the US officials were told to say they had “no instructions” concerning Iranian arms shipments – a diplomatic way of saying the United States would not object. (Risen and McManus, 1996a)

Reportedly, State Department officials and even the chief negotiator for Bosnia-Herzegovina, Richard Holbrooke, had suggested other viable alternatives for arming the Bosnian Muslims instead of colluding with Tehran. Yet, Lake and the then-Secretary of

⁵² According to UN’ official Cees Wiebes, quoted in Aldrich (2002), it was a secret apparatus inside the US Department of Defense which was able to make the flies carrying on the arms bypass the radars which checked the embargo’s effectiveness.

⁵³ *Vezerat-e Ettela’at va Amniat-e Keshvar* (VEVAK) is the former name of the IRI’s Ministry of Intelligence and Security (Federal Research Division, 2012).

⁵⁴ “The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was created after the 1979 revolution to enforce Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s concept of an Islamic state ruled by a *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist). The Guards played a crucial role not only in crushing early opposition to Khomeini’s vision, but also in repelling Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Iran in 1980. Since then, the Guards have functioned as both the primary internal and external security force. The IRGC has now eclipsed the Artesh, or conventional forces. It operates substantial and independent land, sea and air forces. It commands burgeoning missile forces. It runs asymmetric warfare through the elite Qud Force and proxy groups, such as Hezbollah” (Nader, 2010).

State, Warren Christopher, refused such options (Risen and McManus, 1996b). According to Schindler (2012: 137-140) inside the Administration there was a rift between two factions. On the one hand, there was the intelligence, which was concerned about the consequences of a collaboration with Tehran and its Muslim fighters. On the other hand, there were the WH and the State Department which fought for imposing their agenda consisting of supporting the Yugoslavian Islamist militants. Aldrich (2002) claims that James Wolsley, CIA's Director until May 1995, was continuously at odds with President Clinton on this issue. At the end, the pro-collusion faction won and the IRGC sent thousand tons of arms to the Bosnian Muslims (O'Hern, 2012: 82; Risen, 1996a). According to Curtis (2016), they were between 5,000 to 14,000 tons, in twenty months, i.e., from May 1994 to January 1996. Moreover, the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence's *mujahidin* units trained some Bosnian army units (Bennet, 2012: 54). According to intelligence scholar Bergman,

some two hundred advisers from the Iranian Republican Guard were in Bosnia during that period, and from 1000 to 3,000 volunteers – including some from Hezbollah – came to help the Muslims. At first, they fought as disorganized militias; but soon a special unit was established for the volunteers: the al-Mujahid Brigade, part of the 7th Division of the Bosnian army's Third Corps. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards took it upon themselves to train these recruits. [Bosnia's President] Izetbegovic named himself an honorary commander of the brigade. (Bergman, 2011: 228)

The Iranian support devoted to strength the intelligence capabilities of the Bosnian fighters had the most enduring consequences. In fact, the IRGC supplied trainers and advisers for both the Bosnian military and the intelligence service (O'Hern, 2012:82; Risen and McManus, 1996b) and many Iranian intelligence experts belonging to the IRGC joined the Bosnian Muslim intelligence agency (Shay, 2017: 94). From CIA's classified evidences obtained by Congress in 1996⁵⁵, it appeared that the Clinton Administration had systematically downplayed both the amount of weapons supplied and, moreover, that CIA analysts believed that then-Bosnia's President Izetbegovic had been "co-opted by the Iranians" and he was "literally on their payroll" (Risen, 1996). Additionally, some NSA analysts reported that, despite of the peace accords reached in 1995 in Dayton, IRGC' personnel had remained active throughout Bosnia (Risen, 1996). Yet, despite all such

⁵⁵ In fact, in April 23, 1996, three weeks after the publication of their quoted article by Risen and McManus (1996a) the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence initiated an investigation into "those aspects of the transfer of arms to Bosnia that fall within the Committee's responsibilities to conduct oversight of the intelligence activities of the United States Government." (House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 1998). The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence also initiated a similar investigation (Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 1996).

evidences and the Congressional inquiries, at the end of December 1996 President Clinton agreed to release an additional package of \$100 million worth of US military aid to Bosnia (Risen, 1996). Three years later, the Clinton Administration would have been blamed by the Republican Committee of the Senate for the deal it had made also with the Muslim Kosovo Liberation Army (MKLA) – at that time enlisted by the Department of State as a terrorist organization – meanwhile the MKLA was receiving money and training from Tehran (US Senate, Republican Party Committee, 1999)⁵⁶. It is worth noting that such a collusion with Tehran was carried out whilst, at the same time, officially demonizing it as sponsor of terrorism⁵⁷. The long-term consequences of the Clinton Administration's support to Muslim foreign fighters during the Yugoslavian civil war were many. One of them was the formation of Jihadist enclaves and Al-Qaida bases in the Balkans, especially in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in Kosovo (Fulton, 2010; Neacsu, 2004; Nava, 2001; Pyes et al. 2001; Deliso, 2007; Giacalone, 2016; Bianchi Cagliesi and Biloslavo, 2017; BBC News, 2015).⁵⁸ Another one was the penetration of Tehran's influence into the Balkans, particularly in Kosovo and in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Kathab, 2019; Risen, 1996; Bergman, 2012; 2011: 228).

US foreign policy in the Balkans was led by its aim of global hegemony, especially against Russia and its friend states, as Yugoslavia and Serbia (Sherman, 1997; 2000). The fact that such a goal was pursued by means of a cover collusion with Tehran sponsored by a high-level faction inside the administration (consisting of the president, the NSA, the Secretary of State and the Deputy Secretary of State) demonstrates two things. Firstly, that Tehran continued quietly to be a partner for American plans of Russia's containment and American supremacy even after the Islamic revolution. Secondly, that also during the

⁵⁶ According to *Washington Post* journalist Pomfret, the Clinton Administration, although had knew the activities of the Third World Relief Agency (TWRA), an Islamic charity involved in the international funding and arming of the Bosnia Islamic fighters since 1993, yet, took no action to stop it. He quoted a senior Western diplomat in the region saying that the choice was due “in large part because of the administration's sympathy for the Muslim government and ambivalence about maintaining the arms embargo. [...] We were told [by Washington] to watch them but not interfere. Bosnia was trying to get weapons from anybody, and we weren't helping much. The least we could do is back off. So we backed off.” (Pomfret, 1996).

⁵⁷ The first time the IRI was labelled as a “rogue” state was in 1994 during the Clinton administration, in a speech by NSA Antony Lake (1994), the same administration's official who planned the US-IRI “Croatian pipeline”. For a detailed description of the evolution of American narrative on the IRI, see Homolar (2011).

⁵⁸ According to Trifkovic, it would have contributed also to the formation of the so-called “Green Corridor” i.e., “the long- term Islamist goal of creating a geographically contiguous chain of Muslim-majority or Muslim-dominated polities extending from Turkey in the southeast to the northwestern-most point of Bosnia [...] as a means of attaining wider geostrategic objectives” (2011:187). In an Italian intelligence report quoted in Saranzini (2011), the “Green Corridor” is defined as “the project of Islamic colonization of the Balkans that aims at the gradual establishment of a green corridor to include all regions in which predominantly Muslim ethnic groups prevail.” According to Iucci (2003), US policy would have favored, “by design or default, the aspirations of various Muslim communities in the Balkans along the geographic line extending from Turkey to Central Europe” during the Eighties and the Nineties.

Clinton Administration, as it had happened already during the Carter and Reagan administrations, inside both the American and the Iranian executives there were constituencies eager to establish contact with each other.

Conclusion

This section has demonstrated three things. Firstly, that behind the rhetoric cultivated by the two states, it has always existed a faction inside both the US and the IRI looking for communication and strategic engagement. This confirms what was claimed by an Italian Iran expert, Nicola Pedde, according to whom, “[t]raditionally considered and publically presented as a sponsor of terrorism, a source of instability and, in general, as one of the three ‘axis-of-evil’ states, yet, the communication line between Iran and the US has always remained open, although not directly and officially, producing questionable results for the interests of both of them” (Pedde, 2006: 33). Yet, few US foreign policy scholars had acknowledged it. Secondly, that the US, or, more precisely, one of its foreign policy establishment’s constituencies, for achieving global supremacy, never hesitated to covertly ally with Tehran whilst, at the same time, officially demonizing and isolating it. Thirdly, that from the times of Brzezinski’s tenure as Carter’s NSA on, regardless of the president and the party on power, political Islam and Islamist fighters have been continuously exploited as a foreign policy instrument against US antagonists (the Soviet Union early, later Russia). In this regard, former Deputy Director of the National Intelligence Council, Graham Fuller, a supporter of American engagement with Tehran during the IRI-Iraq war, is said to have admitted, “[t]he [American] policy of guiding the evolution of Islam and of helping them against our adversaries worked marvelously well in Afghanistan against the Red Army. The same doctrines can still be used to destabilize what remains of Russian power, and especially, to counter the Chinese influence in Central Asia” (quoted in Edmonds, 2012). Finally, from a theoretical point of view, the bureaucratic politics model, with its focus on the existence of various group of powers with contrasting agendas within the executives, has proved to be appropriate for understanding the real nature of the US-IRI relation under its deceptive official surface.

Chapter I. Section 2: The US and the INP

Preamble

Academic literature devoted to the INP and to the IND is rich and detailed. Yet, it tends to leave out two significant features of them. The first one is the fact that the INP was developed thanks to the Pakistani Dr. Khan's supply of nuclear material and blueprints to Tehran. The American intelligence had known about Khan's illicit activities already in 1975 (Collins and Frantz, 2011) and was aware of his relationship with Tehran – as well as with Libya and North Korea – since 1987 (Bergman, 2008: 329). However, the CIA did not take any action against him until October 2003. At that time, in fact, the US deliberately covered up a transaction between Khan and Tripoli to make Qaddafi agree on the disbanding of its nuclear program (Burns, 2019: 192-193). Yet, in the meantime, the IRI had got from Khan centrifuges design as well as raw material for building its nuclear facilities and starting the development of the uranium enrichment process. The second under-researched aspect of the IND is represented by the actors who unveiled the Iranian undeclared nuclear facilities in August 2002, i.e. the representatives of the Iranian dissident group MEK and their relationship with American intelligence. In fact, most of the scholars have taken for granted that the MEK, at that time enlisted by the State Department as a terrorist organization, had obtained by itself information and satellite documentations regarding the Iranian undeclared plants. Additionally, that the National Council Resistance of Iran (NCRI, the MEK's political arm) decided, by itself, to give a press conference to publically disclose them and make the IAEA start an investigation⁵⁹. In other terms, the agency behind that sudden disclosure and the beginning of the IND has been questioned only by very few authors and even they did not elaborate furtherly. This section will dig deeply into the entanglement existing between the MEK and American intelligence as well as into the US' management of the "Khan affair". Its aim is that of demonstrating that not only the US had known about the INP since its early beginning, but that it used intelligence as a foreign policy tool in dealing with Tehran and its nuclear program.

⁵⁹ According to the MEK itself, those revelations were based "on information based on the social network of the "People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran". See the NCRI's website at: <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/non-nuclear-iran/>.

I.2.A The US, the “Islamic bomb”, and the IRI

Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan is a Pakistani metallurgical engineer. During his stay in the Netherlands in the 1970s, he was able to copy from an European consortium (the URENCO) the blueprints of the machinery plants producing the complete nuclear cycle through centrifuges technology⁶⁰. Moreover, he came into possession also of the list of the suppliers of the material needed to produce the centrifuges. Once returned to Islamabad, with that technology and Pakistani political authorities' unlimited support, he developed the Pakistani nuclear arsenal. At the same time, he built a personal, parallel, clandestine market for selling nuclear material, centrifuges, and bomb designs by managing a complex network of European and American firms whose contacts he had got from URENCO. Among his clients there were North Korea, Libya and the IRI itself. According to Collins & Frantz (2011: 7), the first time the US knew about Khan's spying actions was from Dutch intelligence, in 1975. From then on, increasing evidences on his illicit activities were collected by various intelligence agencies and shared with the CIA. According to Levy & Scott-Clark (2007), even the US Ministry of Treasury's intelligence did it. However, the US did not take action to stop him until October 2003. Political considerations and conveniences were the reasons behind such an inaction. In fact, at the beginning, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979, the Carter Administration had turned a blind eye on Pakistan's nuclear program because of Islamabad's support to the Washington-backed Afghani insurgence against Soviet troops⁶¹. The following American presidents would have continued that “benign neglect” policy not only because of the role played by Islamabad in Afghanistan but also in the context of the US “war on terror” (Armstrong and Trento, 2007; Collins & Frantz, 2011; Levy & Scott-Clark, 2007). The story of Dr. Khan and how he built the Pakistani nuclear program and his international supply network has been described by some investigative journalists, such as Corera (2009), Levy & Scott-Clark (2007a), Collins & Frantz (2011; 2007), Broad & Sanger (2004), Armstrong and Trento (2007), as well as by a former IAEA Action Team's expert, David Albright (2010). By relying on their findings, this section intends to show, firstly, that American intelligence knew the Khan network's

⁶⁰ A chronology and a collection of many of the media articles devoted to A. Q. Khan and his network is available on History Commons at the following link: http://historycommons.org/timeline.jsp?timeline=aq_khan_nuclear_network_tmln.

⁶¹ At this regard, a NSA Brzezinski's secret memo to President Carter on December 26, 1979, just few hours after the Soviet invasion, is paradigmatic. In it, Brzezinski wrote that to make money and arms shipments to Afghani rebels continue, “require[s] a review of our policy toward Pakistan, more guarantees to it, more arms aid, and, alas, a decision that our security policy toward Pakistan cannot be dictated by our nonproliferation policy” (Quoted in Ostermann and Munteanu, 2012).

relationship with Tehran since its beginning and did not adopt any measure to stop it. Secondly, that the G. W. Bush Administration chose a way of dealing with Tehran and its nuclear program totally different from that it would have used with another Khan's "rogue" client, i.e. Libya. Finally, by comparing the two cases, it offers some explanations of those different foreign policies.

According to the "affidavit" given by Pakistani nuclear scientist and defector, Iftikhar Khan Chaudhr, to the FBI on June 1998, it was in May 1997 that at the "Dr. A. Q. Khan Research Laboratory" in Pakistan, "Iranian scientists were introduced to the method in which uranium is processed for the purpose of creating a nuclear bomb" (quoted in Bergman, 2008: 328-329). However, already in 1987, a German middleman belonging to the Khan's supply network, Gotthard Lerch⁶², had discussed with Masoud Naraghi, an emissary of Hashemi Rafsanjani – then-Iranian *Majil's* (Parliament) Speaker and Assembly of Experts' member – the eventuality of a nuclear equipment supply. In 1989, after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini who had banned the development of nuclear weapons, Rafsanjani became President of the IRI. At that point, Naraghi and Lerch could agree for a deal and Tehran got the P-1 centrifuges' blueprints as well as a list of components suppliers (Bergman 2008: 328-329). German authorities had been keeping the US informed about Lerch's connections with Khan and Tehran⁶³, but Washington did not take any action against neither Lerch nor Khan. When Naraghi, Rafsanjani's emissary and Iranian enrichment project's head defected to the US in 1993, he brought with him information about the INP as well as on its dependence on Khan's supply network. Yet, the US did not even then stop Khan's illicit traffics (Bergman 2008: 329-330; Levy And Scott-Clark, 2007: 41, 467). It should be noted that, from the 1990s to June 2003, one of the key-members of the Khan's network had been a firm owned by the Swiss family Tinner, whose three components turned CIA assets in 2000-2001 (Albright and Rietz, 2012; Albright and Brannan, 2010a, 2010b; Collins & Frantz, 2011: 3-15)⁶⁴. Accordingly, it is very plausible they informed American

⁶² The "Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms" offers an updated list of all the suppliers who have contributed to the Iranian nuclear facilities' establishment. See its website at: <https://www.iranwatch.org/suppliers>.

⁶³ Gotthard Lerch had been under suspicion since the 1980s for "misappropriating" blueprints from the same consortium which was deprived by Khan (DW Staff, 2008). At a later date, it was discovered he had sold Khan equipment worth DM 1.3 million, but he was not convicted of any charges in Germany (Levy And Scott-Clark, 2007a: 41, 467).

⁶⁴ When exactly at least one of the Tinner family's members turned CIA's informer is not yet clear. There was a trial against them in Switzerland which high-level Bush Administration officials tried in many ways to impede. Additionally, they asked the Swiss Federal Court to destroy *by means of pulverization* all the classified documents related to the Tinner's relationship with American intelligence. See Broad & Sanger (2010); Albright and Rietz (2012); Albright and Brannan, (2010a, 2010b). The Swiss Parliamentary Intelligence Oversight Committee lists a host of relevant official documents and reports as well as its own reports on the

intelligence about Khan's business and clients. Already in the late 1980s, a CIA analyst, Richard Barlow, had discovered that Pakistan, through Khan, had bought restricted nuclear technology-related items in the US. More importantly, he had unveiled also an attempt by the American intelligence community to lie to Congress about it (Edmonds & Weaver, 2006). He had even found that "senior officials in government [...] were breaking US and international non-proliferation protocols to shelter Pakistan's ambitions and even sell it banned WMD technology" (Levy & Scott-Clark, 2007b)⁶⁵. From all such evidences emerges that, firstly, the Khan's supply of nuclear components, blueprints and nuclear bombs' designs to the "rogue states" was known by the US. Secondly, that the Reagan, Bush G. W. H., Clinton, and Bush G. W. administrations, very plausibly for the political considerations described above, preferred not to intervene against Khan. Then, apparently all at once, on October 4, 2003, a joint CIA-M16 operation at the Italian port of Taranto covered up a Gaddafi's purchase of thousands of centrifuges from a Khan's supplier and ended abruptly Khan's traffics (Broad & Sanger, 2004; Corera, 2009: IX-X; Fizzarotti, 2004; Maurizi, 2009; Gellman and Linzer, 2004). According to William Burns, then-Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, that operation was orchestrated to derail the development of the Libyan nuclear program, which "the US intelligence had been following closely since the 1970s" (Burns, 2019: 191). Moreover, according to him, the US could succeed in making Qaddafi give up his nuclear ambitions thanks to three conditions. Firstly, "Qaddafi was feeling the pressure of concerted US and international sanctions". Secondly, the US had "established a reliable diplomatic channel with serious Libyan counterparts, well connected to Qaddafi". Thirdly, the US "could rely on the credible threat of force in the event that diplomacy failed, reinforced by the examples of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003". Finally, the US could also "rely on excellent intelligence coordination with our CIA and M16 colleagues" (Burns 2019: 191-193). Regarding in particular the latter, Burns revealed that the US had

tracked the [...] evidence of persistent Libyan efforts to expand their chemical and nuclear weapons programs, which featured contacts with former Soviet Scientists as well as the A. Q. Khan network in Pakistan. US intelligence helped interdict a shipment of uranium enrichment technology from A. Q. Khan to Tripoli in the fall of 2003 [diverting it to the port of Taranto on

Tinner case at the following web address: <http://www.parlament.ch/e/organe-mitglieder/delegationen/geschaeftspruefungsdelegation/falltinner/pages/default.aspx>.

⁶⁵Seymour Hersh wrote that the interviews he did with many Barlow's former C.I.A. and State Department colleagues had "confirmed his [Barlow's] essential allegation — that the full story of the Pakistani purchases was deliberately withheld from Congress, for fear of provoking a cutoff in military and economic aid that would adversely affect the prosecution of the war in Afghanistan" (Hersh, 1993).

October 4]. *That played a crucial role in persuading Qaddafi to finally give up his WMD programs and realize he could no longer deceive us.* (Burns, 2019: 192)⁶⁶

In fact, already in March 2003, Gaddafi's son and some Libyan intelligence officers had met M16 and CIA officers to discuss Libyan chemical and nuclear weapons programs. (Burns 2019; 2003; 2004a; 2004b; Gelmann and Linzer, 2004). These talks got a definitive push thanks to the October 4 intelligence operation. Shortly after, in fact, American and British negotiators confronted Gaddafi who, in few days, allowed British and American nuclear experts enter into Libya. Flynt Leverett, then-NSC's Director for Middle East affairs, reportedly said that American and British officials offered Libya an "explicit *quid pro quo*. If Libya relinquished its weapons programs, the United States would lift its sanctions and allow the UN sanctions permanently to lapse. That would open the door to lucrative oil deals for both countries" (Gelmann and Linzer, 2004). According to Libyan nuclear program expert, Braut-Hegghammer (2016, 2018), Gaddafi (as well as Saddam Hussein) failed in his pursuit of a nuclear weapons program because of his personality's traits and his autocratic leadership which made him unable to monitor effectively the program. Yet, it seems that were indeed intelligence and coercive diplomacy, as claimed by Jakobsen (2012) and Stevens (2017), and demonstrated by Burns, not personality's traits which stopped the development of the Libyan nuclear program. It goes behind the aims of this section to dig deeply into the Khan affair and the consequences of the October 2003 operation. What has to be noted here is the fact that coercive diplomacy coordinated with intelligence could have been used as a foreign policy tool for disbanding the INP also. In fact, all the conditions listed by Burns as necessary for successfully dealing with Tripoli existed in the Iranian case too. However, a similar attempt was not tried by the US with Tehran. The reasons can be many. For instance, the existence, inside the Iranian multilayered power system, of various groups with different agendas competing against each other (Moslem, 2002). This would have made a cover deal much more difficult to be managed than it had been with Libya. Secondly, the availability of Iranian dissident groups, as the *Jundullah* and the MEK, through which a Bush Administration's faction intended to leverage a regime change operation instead of trying diplomatic arrangements⁶⁷. Thirdly, the NSA's choice for a different intelligence approach (the so-called "Merlin Operation"⁶⁸). Given the few

⁶⁶ Emphasis added.

⁶⁷ See Chapter III.

⁶⁸ The CIA's covert "operation Merlin", was undertaken by means of a Russian nuclear scientist turned CIA's asset, and "was supposed to stunt the development of Tehran's nuclear program by sending Iran's weapons

documents and evidence so far available, it is impossible to say which if one of such reasons prevented a joint diplomacy-intelligence operation similar to that one carried out with Tripoli.

I.2.B The disclosure of Iranian undeclared nuclear facilities in 2002

The MEK⁶⁹ is a “crypto-Shiite Communist group” (Tabatabai, 2014) which opposed the Sha⁷⁰ and was deeply involved in the Revolution. When the Mullah took power, the MEK was prosecuted because of its attempt to subvert the “*Velayat-e faqih*” principle on which the government of the Islamic Republic was based on. Consequently, the MEK became a clandestine group, relocated to Iraq and sided with Saddam Hussein during the Iraq-IRI war (Abrahamian, 1998). Since the end of that war, the MEK has continued to carry out terrorist operations inside the Iranian territory (State Department, 2011) until recently (Tabatabai, 2018). Along the years, the MEK has evolved and turned to behave as a cult-like group (Rubin, 2003). At the same time, it became also a competent “public opinion manipulator” (Goulka, 2009) or, as Khodabandeh (2015: 173) puts it, a “belligerent entity that exploits to the maximum a range of propaganda methods and outlets in the West to project itself in the international community as a constructive, almost benign, force”. Such competences have been successful, for instance, in making US Congress remove it from the State Department’s list of terrorist organizations, in 2012 (McGreal, 2012). During that lobbying campaign, 37 leading Iranian scholars, including the Iranian-American historian Ervand Abrahamian – the first to have researched on the MEK’s origins – undersigned an open letter in which they made Congress aware of the group’s main features, i.e. its cult-like behavior, its terrorist past and the Iranians’ disregard towards it (contrary to what it is claimed by the MEK itself)

experts down the wrong technical path” (Risen, 2006: 209). On the use made by CIA and NSA Rice see Chapter III.

⁶⁹ On the MEK, its origins and ideology, the basic reference is Abrahamian (1998), by a leading Iranian-American historian of Iran and the IRI. In 1994, the State Department had produced a report on the MEK (US State Department, 1994). Then, more recently, the group has been the object a *New York Times Magazine*’s detailed first-hand report by Elizabeth Rubin (2003), of a Rand’s report (Goulka et al, 2009) as well as of a CFR one (Master, 2014). On the relationship between Saddam Hussein and the MEK see Singleton (2003) and Cohen, 2018. On the MEK’s cult-like behavior and its abuse of human rights with its member, see the 2005 Human Rights Watch Report (HRW, 2005). On the relationship between the MEK and the Clinton and Bush Administrations, see Fayazmanesh (2008), Kempster (1997) and Bahgat (2004). On the evolving relationship between the MEK and American Congress’ members, see in particular Rubin(2011), McGrel (2012) and Hasan (2017). On the MEK’s huge financial resources see Heirannia, J. (2018) who claims they come from Tehran’s regional rivals. For a totally different narrative about all such issues, see Piazza (1994) and, moreover, the NCRI’s statements at its website: <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/>.

⁷⁰ Before the 1979 revolution, the MEK had killed a number of US military officers and citizens (State Department, Country Report 2011).

(Abrahamian et al., 2011)⁷¹. Through its propaganda campaigns the MEK has aimed basically at two political objectives. Firstly, to dismantle the INP, and, secondly, to present the NCRI (the MEK's political arm) as the only viable political option for a democratic Iran (Goulka et al, 2009; Fayazmanesh, 2008: 79-81)⁷². Regarding the former, the MEK supposedly collected information and satellite images of two Iranian undeclared nuclear underground facilities, located one in Arak and the other one in Natanz, and made them of public domain during a press conference in Washington, in August 2002. That conference represented the official start of the IND because it brought about an IAEA's investigation against Tehran (Gerami & Goldschmidt, 2012). Yet, some authors have questioned the origins of those evidences. For instance, Lewis (2015) suggests that both the IAEA and the US could have already known about the undeclared plants, then "[a]n intelligence agency simply may have laundered the information through NCRI". Others identify Israeli intelligence as the agent who fed the MEK with the information for laundering it (Porter, 2014), plausibly with American intelligence's collaboration (Fayazmanesh, 2008). Former Deputy Secretary of State, William Burns, in his memoir wrote indeed that the 2002 discovery was made by American intelligence which, already in late 2001, had "began to track two clandestine nuclear sites in Iran: a uranium enrichment plant at Natanz and a facility in Arak that could eventually produce weapons-grade plutonium" (Burns, 2019: 338). It seems likely that American intelligence had learned about the Natanz and Arak plants by monitoring Dr. Khan's supplies to Tehran. Then, for some reasons, it decided that August 2002 was the right time to cover up them. Consequently, it passed the satellite images to the MEK and together they planned the public disclosure.

⁷¹ In the letter, the signers wrote that the MEK issues "false claims to be "Iran's main opposition" with a base of popular support in Iran. The MEK has no political base inside Iran and no genuine support among the Iranian population. [...] Widespread Iranian distaste for the MEK has been cemented by its numerous terrorist attacks against innocent Iranian civilians" (Abrahamian, E. et al., 2011). A 2013 Survey of Iranian Americans conducted by the George Mason University Center for Social Science Research (CSSR) for the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans (PAAIA), found that 85% of them did not support any Iranian Opposition groups or figures. 15% did and of that, only 5% supported the MEK. (Source: <https://paaia.org/CMS/paaia-releases-2013-national-survey-of-iranian-americans-2.aspx>.)

⁷² The 36 signers of the mentioned letter against the de-listing of the MEK as terrorist organizations, wrote about the MEK's behavior during the contested 2009 Iranian presidential election in these terms: "When Iran's post-election turbulence commenced in 2009, the MEK quickly sought to associate itself with the wave of popular opposition inside Iran. By attempting to claim credit for Iran's democracy movement, the MEK has aided the Iranian government's attempts to discredit the Green Movement and justify its crackdown on peaceful protesters by associating them with this widely detested group. When the MEK began its efforts to claim the mantle of being "Iran's main opposition," genuine Iranian opposition leaders such as Mehdi Karroubi and Zahra Rahnavard immediately pushed back. Karroubi pointedly said, "The Iranian Government is trying to connect those who truly love their country (the Green Movement) with the MEK to revive this hypocritical dead organization" (Abrahamian, E. et al., 2011).

It is worth comparing how the US used its knowledge of Tripoli's nuclear program with how it managed that one about the INP. As described above, regarding Libya, Washington decided to quietly engage with Qaddafi to make him relinquish its nuclear program. On the other hand, with Tehran, the US decided to make its information become of public domain, plausibly to justify international pressure and further sanctions against it. For implementing its plan, the Bush Administration exploited its covert alliance with the MEK-NCRI because they claimed to represent the only Iranian political alternative to the theocratic regime in Tehran and its nuclear ambitions ⁷³. Therefore, the fact that the MEK, with information supplied by American intelligence, publically disclosed the existence of undeclared Iranian nuclear plants does not appear casual. It seems indeed belonging to a wider foreign policy strategy aimed to regime change in Tehran. It goes behind the aims of this section to dig deeply into the relationship existing between the MEK, however, Chapter III will describe the MEK's exploitation by a Bush Administration's faction for its regime change agenda and the MEK's role as a bargain chip in the 2001-2003 US-IRI secret bilateral talks.

Conclusions

This section has demonstrated that, since the late 1980s, the US had known about the INP and its dependence on the Kahn's nuclear black market, but it did not take any action to stop it because of the role played by Pakistan in the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan early and in the "war on terror" later. However, in 2003, the US used its knowledge regarding Khan's network's activities for a cover operation which, together with sanctions and threats of force, succeeded in disbanding the Libyan nuclear program. Conversely, the US had exploited the MEK, a dissident Iranian group enlisted by the State Department as a terrorist organization, to publically unveil the Iranian undeclared nuclear facilities in 2002 and put Tehran under further international pressure. It seems likely that this was done also for laying the groundwork to an eventual regime change operation to be undertaken with the MEK itself, whose political arm, the NCRI, has always presented itself as the only viable political alternative to the Mullah's regime. This section has also demonstrated that intelligence has been an important component of the US foreign policy towards the IRI since its birth and particularly during the IND.

⁷³ For instance, Miriam Rajavi, the self-declared President-elect of the NCRI, in her "Ten Points Plan for Future Iran" confirmed: "We want a non-nuclear Iran, free of weapons of mass destruction." See the NCRI's website at: <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/maryam-rajavis-ten-point-plan-for-future-iran/>.

Chapter Conclusions

This chapter has demonstrated that since the early beginnings of the 1979 revolution, under the official surface of bitter confrontation, back channels between the US administrations and the Mullah have existed. Such communication lines lasted for long, regardless of the presidents and the party in power. They were also very effective. For instance, through the so-called “Iran-Contra” pipeline, advanced American weapons worth billions of dollars had been provided to Tehran each year from 1980 to 1986. The two countries were able to implement also some forms of tactical cooperation, as in Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion and, at a later date, in Bosnia, during the Yugoslavian civil war. For understanding such a “hidden” side of the IRI-US relationship is helpful the framework proposed by Iranian-American scholar Ali Ansari (2007). He claims that beyond the narrative of confrontation which has permeated the popular imagination and driven the elites’ behavior in foreign policy attitude towards each other, these are two countries whose politics are rather similar because of “the sense of mission”, their imperial traits, a “deep sense of religious purpose”, and the fact that they are dominated by bureaucracies (Ansari 2007: 233-235). It seems indeed likely that they were their common tendency toward imperial dominance – in world affairs Washington, in a regional context Tehran – and the presence of complex bureaucracies that made the existence of backchannels between the two countries possible. From a theoretical point of view the findings of this chapter confirm the validity of the bureaucratic politics model which explains foreign policy choices as outcomes of internal bargaining processes within the executives. Regarding in particular the US, in the Carter Administration the people eager to reaching out the Mullah were the NSA, Zbigniew Brzezinski and George Ball, head of the White House’s Iran Special Task Force. The Reagan Administration’s pro-engagement faction consisted of the NSA, Robert McFarlane, the CIA’s Director, William Casey, NSC’s Director for the Near East and South Asia, Howard Teicher, NSC’s Senior Director for Political-Military Affairs and Principal Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, Donald Fortier, together with CIA’s Officer for Near East and South Asia, Graham Fuller. In the Clinton Administration, it consisted of President Clinton himself, the NSA, Anthony Lake, the Secretaries of State Warren Christopher and Madelaine Albright, together with some State Department’s high-rank officials. When the supporters of the engagement with Tehran could not succeed in imposing their agenda, they recurred to the covert channel, as in the Regan Administration case and

the “Iran-Contra” affair. It has to be noted indeed that the back channels built with Tehran have been an effective way to insulate some foreign policy choices regarding the IRI from the influence of opposing domestic and international factors, i.e. Congressional oversight, public opinion, lobbies, allies, UN resolutions, international law, as well as antagonistic groups of power inside the administration. Finally, this Chapter has demonstrated also that the use of intelligence and cover operations, even when they were not military or paramilitary, has represented for the US a major foreign policy instrument in its relationship with the IRI.

The covert Washington-Tehran collusions described above lead to a final reflection which can prompt further research. It concerns the existence of a systematic and institutional intersection of “US military and intelligence practices with a wide variety of extra-legal non-state actors, such as [...] terrorist networks, organized criminal syndicates, drugs and arms trafficking groups” (Ahmed, 2016: 51). A similar line of thought has been that followed by former diplomat Peter Dale Scott in examining the whole post-Second World War American foreign policy (Scott, 2014). To conduct his analysis, Scott used the concept of “deep state”. This is a slight variation of Morgenthau’s concept of “dual state” which he coined in 1955 to describe the work of an “extra-constitutional influence” he discovered by analyzing the Department of State’s procedures for officers’ selection (Morgenthau, 1955). Roughly speaking, the “deep/dual state” is that combination of power groups inside state’s bureaucracies, belonging to the political, military, diplomatic, judicial, economic, financial domains able to influence, for their own interests, a political process or, even, a country’s institutional system. Such a concept has been adopted by some authors to understand the national security and foreign policies of some modern states, as, for instance, Canada (MacGregor, 2016), Russia (Sakwa, 2010), Italy (Preparata, 2016; Ganser, 2009), Sweden (Tunander, 2016), Turkey (Tas, 2014). Daniele Ganser (2016), in particular, has used it for demonstrating how the Bush Administration’s foreign policy towards the Middle East-Persian Gulf region – and the 2003 invasion of Iraq in particular – was related to the US dependence on oil import and was deeply influenced by the American “deep state”. Meanwhile, Glennon (2014) used the similar “double government” concept – developed by the British constitutional scholar Walter Bagehot in 1867 – to demonstrate the apparently inexplicable continuity in the Bush and Obama Administrations’ national security policies. The possible existence of such a parallel structure of power within the American state would

throw light on the entire US foreign policy, not only that one towards Tehran, and it is therefore worthy of being investigated in future research.

CHAPTER II. TEHRAN'S OPENINGS

Introduction

This chapter introduces all the diplomatic openings Tehran proposed to the US to settle the IND, except for the one the Iranians made in 2003, the so-called “grand bargain”, which is specially dealt with in Chapter III. In fact, during the long “nuclear impasse” (Guldemann, 2007) there were various Iranian attempts at opening a direct communication channel with the US aiming to settle the nuclear issue. It also shows that most of the Iranian attempts were made by Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad belonging to the so-called “conservative” faction of the Iranian political establishment. Such evidence disproves the Obama Administration’s narrative according to which it was only with “reformist” President Rouhani’s election in 2013 that a window of opportunity was finally opened. The Iranian proposals, all ignored by the US, prove that Tehran was eager to reach out to the US, contrary to what diplomatic and political narratives have claimed. Moreover, this chapter confirms that for the US the IND was more an exercise of great power politics than a diplomatic negotiation aimed to conflict resolution (Kaussler, 2013). Before describing the Iranian offers, a preamble is definitely required. During the whole IND, uranium enrichment represented the most controversial issue. The Iranians insisted that their nuclear program should have pacific goals (medical treatments and energy production) and, therefore, under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) signed in 1970, they had the right to develop a full uranium enrichment process. The US has never acknowledged that the INP had peaceful goals, claiming that Iranian nuclear facilities had been built for military purposes. Therefore, they never recognized the IRI’s right to uranium enrichment. The denial was publicly dropped for the first time by Senator John Kerry, then Senate Committee for Foreign Affairs’ (SFRC) chairman, during an interview, in 2009: Iranian right to uranium enrichment under IAEA’s strict controls would be the core issue of the 2013 JPOA.

The Chapter is organized as follows: Section I summarizes the Iranian willingness to collaborate with the US during Khatami’s and Ahmadinejad’s presidencies and investigates deeply into the Bush Administration’s reactions to the offers president Ahmadinejad made. Section II illustrates the comprehensive deal reached in May 2010 in Teheran by the IRI and

the then-two non-permanent members of the UN Security Council, Brazil and Turkey. It also analyzes the Obama Administration's bitter rejection of it.

II.1: President Khatami's and President Ahmadinejad's attempts

Preamble

Since the end of the Iran–Iraq War in 1988 and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, Iranian foreign policy has increasingly been characterized by “prudent pragmatism” (Byman, Chubin, Ehteshami, & Green, 2001: 3; Shaffer, 2006; Milani, 1996; Hunter, 2003) instead of ideological and religious stances. Moreover, since the fall of the Soviet Union, geopolitical factors more than ideological ones have backed the Iranian international posture (Barzegar, 2009; Kayhan, 2009). Akbarzadeh (2014: 66) notes that, even in those cases when the two collided (as during the Russia's war in Chechnya, the Tajikistan civil war and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict), Tehran preferred material objectives rather than the cultural and religious determinants of its state identity and foreign policy (consisting of Islamic solidarity, defense and leadership of Shi'ism, and Persian cultural heritage. See Akbarzadeh, Shahram, & Barry, 2016). In particular, under President Khatami there was what Alam called a “changing paradigm in the Iranian foreign policy”, which moved from confrontation to conciliation (2000: 1629). Moreover, “Khatami Administration's unique foreign policy” (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2008) started to strategically make use of John Nye's conceptualization of “soft” power (1990). In fact, in direct opposition to Huntington's “clash of civilizations” (1993), Khatami promoted a “dialogue among civilizations” approach to international politics (Khatami, 1998, 2000)⁷⁴. It is significant that at the beginning of his presidency, in January 1998, during an interview with the CNN, Khatami called for “American foreign policy [to] abandon its instrumental rationality and stop considering

⁷⁴ According to Petito (2004: 26), “[t]he reason that explains why from rather convergent empirical considerations and analyses, the supporters of the dialogue strategy reach very different conclusions from Huntington has to do [...] with the very different notion of (international) politics these two positions assume: where Huntington subscribes to a realist political framework, the dialogue strategy is committed to a more idealist framework closer to the notion of politics implicit in the end of history thesis. In the first case, struggle for power is perceived to be the unavoidable necessity of politics and this condemn international politics to be the realm of conflict recurrence and repetition that can only be partially mitigated by a consequentialist ethics of statecraft based on non-interference. In the second case, an idealist commitment to politics as a search for justice and for mutual understanding through conversation prevails, and as consequence, international politics is perceived as a realm where progress, however difficult, is nonetheless possible on the base of an ethics of ends.”

others as objects [and instead] respect the rights of others and adopt an approach based on communicative rationality” (Amanpour, 1998).

The “conservative” President Mahmud Ahmadinejad did not interrupt the efforts undertaken by his predecessor, “reformist” President Khatami, to reach out to the US and settle the nuclear dispute. On the contrary, Ahmadinejad was the protagonist of repeated openings towards Washington. However, most of them were overlooked not only by the then-current media debate, but also by the IND scholars. One of Ahmadinejad’s offers was presented by himself during his speech at the UN General Assembly, in September 2005. Then, in May 2006, Ahmadinejad wrote a personal letter to President Bush, and by doing so he actually became the first Iranian President to reach out to his American counterpart after the 1979 revolution. Basically such offers highlight the protracted Iranian willingness to talk with the US in order to negotiate a nuclear deal *regardless of the president in office*. At the same time, it disproves the political, diplomatic and academic narratives about the supposed “intractability” of the IND, as well as those portraying Ahmadinejad as a statesman against any diplomatic solution to it (see, for instance, among many others: Ansari, 2017; Warnaar, 2017; Alexander & Hoenig, 2008).

II.1.A Khatami’s openings

It was during Khatami’s presidency that, in May 2003, the so-called “grand bargain” was offered to the US through the Swiss Ambassador. As the next Chapter demonstrates, although inside the Bush Administration there was a deep fracture on how to deal with it, the proposal was rejected. However, less than two years later, Khatami backed two further attempts to conclude the deal. By now the details of the first one have been rather unknown. In his memoir, former Iranian negotiator Seyed Hossein Mousavian wrote that, early in 2005, the IRI proposed a mechanism of control whose appropriate “objective guarantees” were to be suggested by the IAEA. The mechanism envisioned was reportedly put apart because of the US opposition, although the then-French president, Jacques Chirac, agreed on the IAEA’s prerogative to define such mechanism of control (Mousavian, 2012: 164). Regrettably, except for a reference made by the then-UN Iranian Ambassador (Zarif, 2006), Mousavian’s account is the only one available for consultation about such an Iranian offer and the American dismissal. Under Khatami a second, comprehensive offer was presented to the European negotiators in March 2005. At that time, in fact, France, the United Kingdom and Germany were negotiating the nuclear deal with Tehran (the so-called “Iran–EU3”

diplomatic framework which lasted through 2005). As former Iranian negotiator Seyed H. Mousavian summarized,

Iran's March 2005 offer to the EU3 expressed a readiness to (1) cap enrichment at the 5 percent level; (2) export all low-enriched uranium (LEU) beyond domestic needs or fabricate it into fuel rods; (3) commit to the Additional Protocol and Subsidiary Arrangement Code 3.1 of its safeguards agreement; (4) allow the IAEA to make unannounced and intrusive inspections of undeclared facilities; and (5) engage in no reprocessing of plutonium from the Arak heavy water reactor. (Mousavian and Mousavian, 2018: 172)

Hassen Rouhani, then-Iranian Chief Nuclear Negotiator, in his memoirs (Rouhani, 2011) states that the US had an important role in pushing the Europeans to decline the offer. His claim is confirmed by Dalton et al. (2011), Toscano (2016), and Jenkins (2016a), all former EU ambassadors to Tehran or IND negotiators. In particular, Jenkins points out the role of some American high-ranked officials in making the European diplomats reject the Iranian proposal. According to Toscano, then-Italian Ambassador to Tehran, "a solution [of the IND] would have already been possible in 2005 under the reformist Khatami presidency when the Iranians – but not the Americans and the Europeans – were willing to accept an agreement not so different from the one reached last summer [the JCPOA]" (Toscano, 2016: 1). Despite the repeated American denials, under the following president, Mahmud Ahmadinejad, the IRI tried again to reach out to the US, confirming the Iranian willingness to diplomatically resolve the dispute.

II.1.B Ahmadinejad's openings

President Ahmadinejad made his first offer on September 17, 2005, during his speech at the United Nations. Given the fact that it has gone almost unreported, its relevant parts are hereby reproduced. It began by criticizing how nuclear proliferation issues had been dealt by hegemonic powers. In fact, he said,

Some powerful states practice a discriminatory approach against access of NPT members to material, equipment, and peaceful nuclear technology, and by doing so, intend to impose a nuclear apartheid.[...] Those hegemonic powers, who consider scientific and technological progress of independent and free nations as a challenge to their monopoly on these important instruments of power and who do not want to see such achievements in other countries, have misrepresented Iran's healthy and fully safeguarded technological endeavors in the nuclear field as pursuit of nuclear weapons. This is nothing but a propaganda ploy. (Ahmadinejad, 2005)

Then, it described the main features of the INP and proposed new confidence building measures by claiming,

the Islamic Republic of Iran is prepared to engage in serious partnership with private and public sectors of other countries in the implementation of uranium enrichment program in Iran. This represents the most far reaching step, outside all requirements of the NPT, being proposed by Iran as a further confidence building measure. [...] In keeping with Iran's inalienable right to have access to a nuclear fuel cycle, continued interaction and technical and legal cooperation with the IAEA will be the centerpiece of our nuclear policy. Initiation and continuation of negotiations with other countries will be carried out in the context of Iran's interaction with the Agency. [...] In its negotiations with the EU3, Iran has tried in earnest to prove the solid and rightful foundations of its nuclear activity in the context of the NPT, and to establish mutual trust. The selection of our negotiating partners and the continuation of negotiations with the EU3 will be commensurate with the requirements of our cooperation with the Agency regarding non-diversion of the process of uranium enrichment to non-peaceful purposes in the framework of the provisions of the NPT. In this context, several proposals have been presented which can be considered in the context of negotiations. (Ahmadinejad, 2005)

In other terms, Ahmadinejad reaffirmed the Iranian right to uranium enrichment whilst allowing an international consortium to manage it. According to Osborne and Morrison (2013b: 55),

Ahmadinejad's suggestion was based on the recommendations of an IAEA expert group, headed by Bruno Pellaud, the former head of IAEA safeguards. The group was set up to recommend measures that would be useful in giving reassurances that nuclear facilities for civil purposes, for example, facilities for uranium enrichment, which a state has the right under the NPT, would not be used for weapons development. Its report, "Multilateral Approaches to the Nuclear Fuel Cycle", published in February 2005 (see <http://www.iaea.org/NewsCenter/News/2005/fuelcycycle.html>) contained five proposals, two of which were based on the notion of shared ownership or control.

De facto the Iranian acceptance of the IAEA's recommendations represented further confidence building initiative which could have facilitated the way towards a solution to the nuclear stalemate. Nevertheless, Ahmadinejad's suggestions were not taken into consideration by the Bush Administration. In truth, his speech was received with skepticism and ended up being completely ignored (Brinkley, 2005). In a second attempt to come into contact with Washington, Ahmadinejad wrote a letter (Ahmadinejad, 2006)⁷⁵ directly to President Bush, probably to circumvent those factions inside the Administration, which had

⁷⁵ The full text of the letter (in its English translation) can be found in the Annexes.

already sabotaged the “grand bargain” proposal in May 2003⁷⁶. His letter was submitted to the President on May 8, 2006, via the Swiss Embassy in Tehran, and arrived at the White House just a few hours before the foreign ministers of the US, Russia, China, UK, Germany and France met for talks on the IND at the UN Security Council. In that missive, the Iranian President proposed religiously motivated avenues to the resolution of conflicts and common concerns, one of which was indicated in the nuclear stalemate. For the Iranian political authorities, the letter envisaged “new ways” of solving common problems. For instance, Ali Larijani – then-IRI’s chief nuclear negotiator – reportedly said that in that letter President Ahmadinejad proposed new solutions to international problems, adding that the same letter could create a diplomatic opening (Yan, 2006a).

II.1.C The Bush Administration’s reactions

Concerning Ahmadinejad’s speech at the UN General Assembly, *The New York Times* correspondent’s report effectively described the context of American mistrust and unwillingness in which the opening was received:

During Mr. Ahmadinejad’s address, the American delegation chairs were empty except for one person who was there to take notes. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice scheduled meetings in New York with the Japanese and South Korean foreign ministers during his talk. More than an hour after his address, she said in a statement that she had not been able to hear it because she was in meetings, but added, “Iran’s behavior in the past” has “left the world with a lack of confidence on Iran’s willingness to live up to its obligations.”

No other available accounts are in receipt of the Administration, apart from similar dismissing comments made personally by the administration’s officers. Regarding the letter, the same day it arrived at the White House, the then-Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, appeared as absolutely opposed to it. In fact, during an interview, she stated

the first read of it, there is nothing in this letter that in any way addresses any of the issues really that are on the table in the international community -- the nuclear program -- in a straightforward way -- the terrorism issue. I think it would be best to say it's broadly philosophical in its character; it's 17 or 18 pages, I think. And it is most assuredly not a proposal. Let me be very clear about that. And so we'll do further examination of it, but there is nothing in here that would suggest that we're on any different course than we were before we got the letter. [...] But it's not concrete in any way and it does not engage the issues. It's broadly philosophical, a little bit historical and

⁷⁶ See Chapter III.

it isn't something that you can sit and say, oh, well, here's what they're trying to tell us. (Secretary of State C. Rice, 2006b)

When asked: “[i]s it an opening, though?” She answered: “I don’t see it that way.” Then, to the demand: “[w]hat is to prevent the United States from taking up -- if there’s an offer, however vague or general, to enter into talks, what is the down side for us” she responded: “[l]et me just be very clear. This letter isn’t it. This letter is not the place that one would find an opening to engage on the nuclear issue or anything of that regard” (Secretary of State C. Rice, 2006). Significantly, a BBC report claimed that, few hours after the letter had been sent, “Ms. Rice held an inconclusive meeting with her UN Security Council counterparts and the German foreign minister on what action to take over Iran. [...] far from drawing the key powers at the UN towards agreement on the issue, the meeting seems to have exposed the scale of division” (BBC, 2006). In other words, Ahmadinejad’s attempt made the already existing divisions even deeper between the American and the European diplomats on how to deal with Tehran. A few days before, the president’s spokesperson was asked why the US did not want to hold direct talks with Tehran although many world leaders, as the then-German Chancellor, Angela Merkel and the then-UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, had called for the US. He answered,

it’s not a bilateral issue between the United States and Iran. It’s a problem that Iran has with the world. **This is a regime that is a threat to the region by its own actions and its own behavior.** [...] In terms of Iran and why no direct talks, it’s for the reasons I just stated. It’s not a bilateral issue. This is an issue that the regime has with the world. It’s a concern that the world has about the regime’s behavior and its continued pursuit of nuclear weapons. This is a regime that says they are developing nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. But their actions only suggest that they are developing nuclear weapons under the cover of a civilian program. (The Bush White House’s Press Secretary, 2006).⁷⁷

In such a political narrative, the fact that Tehran was already involved in multilateral talks is used as a pretext for the US not to engage bilaterally with it. Yet, the importance of the bilateral dimension in solving the IND had been indeed proved by the 2001-2003 US-IRI backchannel which led to the 2003 “grand bargain”. At a later date, it would also be confirmed by the 2009-2012 US-IRI backchannel, which paved the way for the JPOA’s signature. On May 25, during a press conference, President Bush, asked about Ahmadinejad’s letter said,

⁷⁷ Emphasis in the original.

[w]e spent a great deal of time talking about the Iranian issue, and one of the goals that Tony [Hadley, then-NSA] and I had was to convince others in the world that Iran, with a nuclear weapon, would be very dangerous, and therefore, we do have a common goal. And the fundamental question is, how do you achieve that goal, obviously. We want to do it diplomatically. Right now, we, as a matter of fact, spent a lot of time upstairs talking about how to convince the Iranians that this coalition we put together is very serious. One option, of course, is through the United Nations Security Council. And we strategized about how do we convince other partners that the Security Council is the way to go if the Iranians won't suspend like the EU3 has asked them to do. The Iranians walked away from the table. They're the ones who made the decision, and the choice is theirs. Now, if they would like to see an enhanced package, the first thing they've got to do is suspend their operations, for the good of the world. It's incredibly dangerous to think of an Iran with a nuclear weapon. And therefore, Steve, to answer your questions, of course, we'll look at all options, but it's their choice right now. They're the folks who walked away from the table. They're the ones who said that, your demands don't mean anything to us. Now, in terms of -- you said back channels [...] Well, I read the letter of the President and I thought it was interesting. It was, like, 16 or 17 single-spaced typed pages of -- but he didn't address the issue of whether or not they're going to continue to press for a nuclear weapon. That's the issue at hand. (President G. W. Bush, 2006)

The President's words appear indeed as a non-answer. In fact, he insisted on stating that Tehran refused to negotiate, whilst the letter was precisely a proof of its willingness to negotiate. Four days after the arrival of the letter, even the then-UN President appealed to the administration by reportedly saying that Iranians would not seriously negotiate if Washington were not involved in talks. He also urged "all sides to lower the rhetoric and intensify diplomatic efforts to find a solution" (RFE/RL, 2006). During an interview, former NSA, Zbigniew Brzezinski, a supporter of direct talks with Tehran⁷⁸, made a comparison with the Bush administration's willingness to engage in multilateral talks with Pyongyang⁷⁹ saying "[t]he argument that the administration makes is that we can't negotiate with Iran because it will legitimate them. Well, we're legitimating North Korea, so what's the big deal?". He significantly added, "[t]he fact is there are serious differences between the United States and Iran, conflicts over security issues, over financial problems, claims and counterclaims. We need to talk to each other to create a measure of security and to be engaged" (CNN, 2006). The American intelligence think-tank *Stratfor* highlighted the letter's most important feature, writing,

⁷⁸ See Chapter IV.

⁷⁹ On the Bush Administration's different approaches toward the IRI and North Korea, see Chapter III.

[e]mbedded in passages that would seem to be completely unobjectionable to any audiences at home [in Iran] can be found key phrases and hints, letting the other side know that one is ready to make concessions in exchange for reciprocity. Thus, tensions can be defused without anyone actually appearing to be compromised. (Quoted in Symonds, 2007)

In other terms, Ahmadinejad had tried to reach out directly to the President to bypass *American constituencies* opposed to the opening whilst writing in a way that could protect the opening from *Iranian constituencies* opposed to it. In any case, as the above first-hand accounts prove, the Secretary of State, the NSA, and the President were aware of the letter and all of them decided to ignore it. Moreover, the NSC's spokesman reportedly told that there would not be a written response, adding that the letter had been dismissed by US officials "as a ploy which contributed nothing towards helping resolve the stand-off over Iran's nuclear programme" (BBC, 2006). This means that the decision of ignoring Ahmadinejad's opening was taken through the conventional NSC process and that the administration was united in its approach towards Tehran.

At this point, it is important to carry on the analysis away from this line of investigation in order to consider some reports about Iranian covert attempts at reaching out to the US occurred *shortly before Ahmadinejad's letter*. According to the Indian political analyst, Praful Bidway, on April 28 2006 – i.e. ten days before the arrival of the letter – the IRI was ready to strike a deal. In fact, he wrote,

[t]he Iranian government is sending out signals that it is keen to reach a deal or compromise on the nuclear issue. Dr. Hasan Rowhani, [...] has said that Iran is prepared to suspend its uranium enrichment for a short time. Iranian officials are also working diplomatic channels to let it be known that Tehran wants talks which will lead to a peaceful resolution of the nuclear issue. [...] A likely compromise, say insiders who insist on anonymity, would involve temporary suspension of uranium enrichment by Iran and a possible joint venture with Russia (and some other states like South Africa) to take Iran's uranium hexafluoride gas out of the country and enrich it elsewhere. Iranian scientists would have access to the relevant facilities and technologies in the joint effort. Iran would stick to its NPT commitments and ratify the tough IAEA 'additional protocol.'⁸⁰ In return, the West would recognize Iran as a 'normal' state⁸¹, and give it security guarantees and a 'package' of economic incentives, including access to enhanced gas and oil production technologies.

The fact that according to Rouhani, then-Iranian Chief Nuclear Negotiator and Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, Tehran was ready to temporarily suspend

⁸⁰ Such conditions represent exactly what was agreed through the JCPOA. See Chapter IV.

⁸¹ The same quest was done in the 2003 "grand bargain" proposal. See Chapter III.

its uranium enrichment appears as a valuable confidence building measure aimed to end the nuclear stalemate. Another report (Alexandrovna, 2006a), published on April 20 2006, i.e., 17 seventeen days before the date of the letter sheds further light not only on the Iranian attempts to approach—the US, but also on the person who, within the administration, was deliberately obstructing them. In fact, she wrote:

The Department of Defense and Vice President Dick Cheney have retained the services of Iran-Contra arms dealer and discredited intelligence asset Manucher Ghorbanifar as their ‘man on the ground,’ in order to report on any interaction and attempts at negotiations between Iranian officials and US ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, current and former intelligence officials say. Speaking on condition of anonymity, three intelligence sources identified the Iran-Contra middleman as having been put back on the payroll, acting as a human intelligence asset and monitoring any movement in discussions about Iran’s alleged burgeoning nuclear weapons program. ‘Khalilzad has been authorized to enter into discussions with the Iranians over the issue of stability inside Iraq,’ one former intelligence source said. These discussions, however, are now on hold for unspecified reasons. Sources close to the UN Security Council and a former high ranking intelligence official say that this latest failed attempt to bring Iran to the table is part of an ongoing attempt by Cheney and Rumsfeld to squash diplomatic activities.

Two weeks before, on April, 5, Javad Zarif – then Iranian Ambassador to the UN – had written an op-ed in *The New York Times* (Zarif, 2006) where he underlined the Iranian willingness to break the nuclear stalemate under the international acknowledgment of its right to uranium enrichment. Indeed, he wrote,

[t]here need not be a crisis. A solution to the situation is possible and eminently within reach. [...] Iran is ready for negotiations. Since October 2003, Iran has done its utmost to sustain and even resuscitate negotiations with Britain, France and Germany, the three European countries responsible for negotiating with us. Since August 2004, Iran has made eight far-reaching proposals. What’s more, Iran throughout this period adopted extensive and costly confidence- building measures, including a voluntary suspension of its rightful enrichment activities for two years, to ensure the success of negotiations. [...] Iran has recently suggested the establishment of regional consortiums on fuel-cycle development that would be jointly owned and operated by countries possessing the technology and placed under atomic agency safeguards. Iran has declared its eagerness to find a negotiated solution – one that would protect its rights while ensuring that its nuclear program would remain exclusively peaceful. Pressure and threats do not resolve problems. Finding solutions requires political will and a readiness to engage in serious negotiations. Iran is ready. (Zarif, J., 2006)

To conclude, it appears that Ahmadinejad wrote his letter in a moment when Iran repeatedly and unsuccessfully attempted to reach out to the US. Worthy of note is the fact that the missive was handed in just few hours before a UN Security Council meeting about the IND. This fact seems as if the Iranian President was looking for a way to directly contact Bush, by-passing the obstructive maneuvering of the faction opposed to the opening, and supposedly embodied by Cheney and Rumsfeld. Yet, even this “last resort” attempt did not produce any constructive result.

Conclusions

President Khatami tried to go beyond the politics of confrontation which had marked since its beginning the US-IRI relationship (Ganji, 2006; Ansari, 2007) by proposing mutual respectful engagement based on a framework of “dialogue of civilizations”. Consistently with this program, he made three diplomatic openings to Washington which were ignored. Although abandoning Khatami’s ideological position, nevertheless President Ahmadinejad continued making his attempts to reach out to the US. Actually, under his presidency, Iranian diplomats had a number of approaches and he personally tried twice to reach out directly to the US for talks addressing the nuclear stalemate. As the next section shows, he also accepted the deal proposed by Turkey and Brazil in 2012⁸². The Bush Administration rejected Ahmadinejad’s openings despite the appeal of the UN President. This section demonstrates three things: firstly, the Bush Administration had not yet accepted that Tehran could have access to uranium enrichment by the time the letter had arrived, at least until May 2006; secondly, the Iranian highest political authorities were eager to resolve the IND, regardless of the president and the political faction in power; thirdly, American diplomatic and political narratives were accordingly managed to portray Tehran as refusing any diplomatic solution to the IND. The vitriolic Ahmadinejad’s rhetoric served the purpose perfectly. Finally, it is worth noting that Condoleezza Rice, whilst during the 2003 “grand bargain” affaire was not aligned with the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons in opposing talks with Tehran, she rejected Ahmadinejad’s approaches in 2005 and 2006 like the rest of the Bush Administration. Yet, two years later, in 2008, it would be Rice herself, convinced by Bill Burns, her career deputy, who succeeded in making the President back the State Department’s plans for an attempt to

⁸² Chapter IV will demonstrate also that, at a later date, it was under his presidency that the window of opportunity leading to the JPOA would have been open.

reach out to the Iranians (Burns, 2020: 341-343). Plans that, however, turned out to be unsuccessful.

III.2 The 2012 Brazil-Turkey-IRI deal

Preamble

A further proof of President Ahmadinejad's willingness to find a solution to the nuclear stalemate is represented by the fact that he promptly accepted the Brazilian-Turkish proposal (Brazil and Turkey at that time were the two non-permanent members of the UN Security Council) made plausibly in July-August 2009 to negotiate. The negotiations were successful and a deal was signed in Tehran, by President Ahmadinejad, Brazilian President Lula da Silva, and Turkish President Erdogan on May 17, 2010 and was later known as the "Tehran deal". Shortly after the deal had been struck, the Obama's Administration bitterly rejected it and made the UN Security Council and US Congress adopt further, tougher sanctions against Tehran. Yet, as this section is going to demonstrate, it had been President Obama himself who personally asked Brazilian and Turkish presidents to negotiate a deal with the Iranian president. Moreover, even the conditions of the deal had been dictated to Lula and Erdogan by Obama himself.

II.2. A The "Tehran deal"

The "Tehran deal" provided for Tehran the transfer to Turkey of 1,200kg low-enriched (under 5%) uranium stocks within one month. In return, Tehran would have received more highly enriched fuel rods for its ageing medical-research reactor within a year. However, since Turkey was not equipped to enrich the Iranian uranium to the required level, Russia and France were expected to do the job (Seale, 2010). Iranian leaders also agreed to inform the IAEA about the plan within a week, whilst they could continue to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes. By concluding the deal, both Lula and Erdogan indicated that they acknowledged Tehran's right to atomic energy⁸³. In fact, at the end of the joint Brazil-

⁸³ Reportedly, already in 2007, during an interview, Lula had gone so far to say that, "if Iran wants to enrich uranium, if it wants to handle to nuclear issue in a peaceful way like Brazil does, it is its right", adding however that it is subject to UN regulations, as all the countries (Reuters staff, 2007).

Turkey-IRI declaration, it is clearly stated that Tehran “appreciated the constructive efforts of the friendly countries Turkey and Brazil in creating the conducive environment for realization of Iran’s nuclear right” (Borger, 2010). The IAEA’s then-Director, ElBaradei, and Turkey’s Foreign Minister, Davutoglu, underlined the “confidence-building” nature of the deal (ElBaradei, 2010). In particular, ElBaradei noted that the “Tehran deal” showed the Iranian willingness to accept strict conditions on its nuclear program once they had been allowed to pursue the uranium enrichment acknowledged by the NPT. For the then-UN General Secretary, Ban Ki-Moon, the deal was “an important initiative in resolving international tensions over Iran’s nuclear programme by peaceful means” (Butler, 2010).

II.2.B The Obama Administration’s reactions

The Obama White House was very critical of the deal. The same day of the deal’s signature, the White House press secretary said that,

the proposal does not appear to address Tehran’s recent announcement of increasing its enrichment to 20 percent, a justification that -- the research reactor was used as the direct justification for doing so. That, in and of itself, would make them non-compliant with their obligations and responsibilities. First and foremost, this proposal should be submitted directly to the IAEA to evaluate, fine print and all, so that the international community can take a look. But it does not change the steps that we are taking to hold Iran responsible for its obligations, and those -- including sanctions. (The Obama White House’s Press Secretary, 2010)

In addition, on the day after the deal’s announcement, Secretary of State Clinton declared that the Security Council agreed to a draft resolution for sanctions against the IRI presented by the US. As a matter of fact, the Obama administration had asked for further UN sanctions despite the fact that the Iranian willingness to solve the nuclear stalemate had become evident since the negotiations with Turkey and Brazil. On June 9, 2010, following the American draft, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1929, which significantly extended the sanctions against the IRI as well. It tightened proliferation-related sanctions, banned the IRI from carrying out nuclear-capable ballistic missile tests, and imposed an arms embargo on the transfer of major weapons systems. Two weeks later, on June 24, US Congress adopted the “*Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act*” which strengthened the existing American sanctions against firms investing in the Iranian energy sector, extended them until 2016, and imposed new sanctions on companies selling refined

petroleum to the IRI (Arms Control, 2015)⁸⁴ . On June 3, 2010, ElBaradei, underlined the Iranian willingness to conclude the IND and was critical of the American quest for new sanctions (ElBaradei, 2010)⁸⁵. Lula and Erdogan, disappointed by the White House's reaction, despite the fact that the deal complied with the conditions set out by the President, decided to leak a letter from which it emerges clearly that it was Obama himself who asked them to negotiate with the Iranians. Obama's quest to Lula had been already told by a journalist reporting on the G8 meeting held in Italy in July 2009 (Fornara, 2009). At a later date, in 2012, a Brazilian journalist, Clovis Rossi (Rossi, 2012)-would describe that in detail. In an article published on January 2020, shortly after Iranian General Qassem Solimany's assassination by an American drone's strike, Brazilian former President Lula and foreign minister Amorim confirmed they had negotiated with Tehran together with Erdogan "following a request by Barack Obama himself, made at the margins of the G8 summit in 2009 in Italy" (Lula Da Silva and Amorim, 2020). Obama's leaked letter, written on April 20, 2010⁸⁶, gave Lula precise instructions about what the deal should consist of and its essential requirements. Among them, Obama emphasized in particular a condition. In fact, he wrote,

[t]here is a potentially important compromise that has already been offered. Last November, the IAEA conveyed to Iran our offer to allow Iran to ship its 1,200 kg of LEU to a third country — specifically Turkey — at the outset of the process to be held "in escrow" as a guarantee during the fuel production process that Iran would get back its uranium if we failed to deliver the fuel. Iran has never pursued the "escrow" compromise and has provided no credible explanation for its rejection. I believe that this raises real questions about Iran's nuclear intentions, if Iran is unwilling to accept an offer to demonstrate that its LEU is for peaceful, civilian purposes. I would urge Brazil to impress upon Iran the opportunity presented by this offer to "escrow" its uranium in Turkey while the nuclear fuel is being produced. (CASMI, 2010)

The "Tehran deal" consisted precisely of such conditions and at its core there was the swap Obama considered fundamental, i.e., the transfer, within 30 days, of 1,200 kilograms of low-enriched uranium to Turkey in exchange for the same quantity of higher-enriched uranium for medical purpose within a year. Secretary of State Clinton, three days before the

⁸⁴ Two days later, "[t]he EU agrees to further sanctions against Iran. A statement issued by EU member state foreign ministers refers to the new sanctions as a comprehensive and robust package of measures in the areas of trade, financial services, energy, [and] transport, as well as additional designations for [a] visa ban and asset freeze" (Arms Control, 2015).

⁸⁵ In an interview, ElBaradei said that "I was frankly not surprised that the offer came through, I was surprised at the reaction that some countries would continue to say that they want to apply sanctions, because, the Iranian issue, if you remove over half of the material that Iran has to Turkey, that is clearly a confidence-building measure regarding concerns about Iran's future intentions" (ElBaradei, 2010).

⁸⁶ (CASMI, 2010) The full text of the letter is in the Annexes.

deal was struck in Tehran, publicly predicted that Brazil's mediation effort would fail. In particular, she said, "every step along the way has demonstrated clearly to the world that Iran is not participating in the international arena in the way that we had asked them to do and that they continue to pursue their nuclear program" (Secretary of State Clinton, 2010). She also added that the only way for Tehran to prove the peaceful goals of its nuclear program was a new round of tougher UN sanctions. The day before, Assistant Secretary of State Philip Crowley had told the press that Secretary Clinton had spoken with Davutoglu stressing,

in our view, Iran's recent diplomacy was an attempt to stop Security Council action without actually taking steps to address international concerns about its nuclear program. There's nothing new and nothing encouraging in Iran's recent statements. It has failed to demonstrate good faith and build confidence with the international community, which was the original intent of the Tehran research reactor proposal. It has yet to formally respond to the IAEA. She [Clinton] stressed that the burden is with Iran and its lack of seriousness about engagement requires us to intensify efforts to apply greater pressure on Iran. (Assistant Secretary of State Crowley, 2010)

A viable explanation for Clinton's hard stances against the Brazil-Turkey's diplomatic mission is offered by the bureaucratic politics model. In other terms, it may be that her agenda was divergent from the President's. Regarding Obama, who endorsed the Brazil-Turkey's diplomatic mission, plausibly he did so as a way for testing the Iranian willingness to accept particular conditions, like, for instance, the IAEA's strict and reiterated controls. Whilst Obama's final rejection of the deal may be seen as a way to reaffirm US' supremacy in any decision concerning the INP.

Conclusion

President Obama personally asked Brazilian and Turkish presidents to negotiate a deal with the Iranian president Ahmadinejad whose conditions had been dictated by Obama himself. Yet, after the "Tehran Deal" had been struck, on May 17, 2010, his administration bitterly rejected it and made the UN Security Council and US Congress adopt further, tougher sanctions against Tehran. The deal was rejected by the same administration which meanwhile was supporting a back-channel with Tehran which would lead to an agreement with conditions similar to the ones indicated under the "Tehran Deal"⁸⁷. The most plausible explanation of such an apparently inconsistent behavior is that the US wanted to be the ultimate decision-maker on the normalization of the IRI's international relations, its nuclear

⁸⁷ See Chapter IV.

program, the possible recovery of its economy, and its role as a regional actor. Moreover, the Obama WH wanted to prolong the IRI's containment whilst continuing to "squeeze" the Iranian economy for eventually getting better conditions, as argued by Fayazmanesh (2012). It could also have been a kind of "diplomatic test". In other terms, the WH, through Brazil's and Turkey's efforts, intended to check the Iranian – and in particular the Supreme Leader's – willingness to conclude a deal, maintaining for itself the privilege of definitely striking it. In truth, the US direct participation in a deal would give it the opportunity of adding further requirements – even others than the nuclear ones – tailored on specific American needs. Finally, it may have been that the WH did not expect such a rapid and successful conclusion of the Brazilian-Turkish negotiation⁸⁸ and was caught off guard (according to Erdogan, the agreement was hammered out in 18 hours of negotiations. See Hafezi, 2010).

Chapter Conclusion

Both the Bush and Obama Administrations rejected openings coming from both "reformist" and "conservative" Iranian presidents. They did it by contesting the peaceful nature of the INP, and dismissing the confidence-building nature of the measures proposed by the Iranians. For Porter (2014) and Shashank (2012) this was a politicized interpretation of the NPT. The American signature, at a later date, of the JPOA – which recognized the Iranian right to uranium enrichment – supports indeed such an interpretation of the two administrations' rejections. In other words, the key-feature of the US-IRI negotiations was a political one, whilst "[the nuclear issue] it has always been instrumentalised for both sides" (Toscano, 2014). Parsi states a similar concept by writing that the US–Iran conflict "has been a strategic and not an ideological one, as it has indeed been opportunistically framed by both of the players" (Parsi, 2007: 2012). This Chapter has indeed demonstrated that there were not conflict resolution objectives at stake in the US diplomatic management of the IND negotiation process⁸⁹. Rather, as Kaussler suggests (2014: 2), it was power politics

⁸⁸ Obama reportedly did the first quest to President Lula in the middle of July 2019 (Franzosi, 2009; Rossi, 2012; Lula and Amorino, 2020), i.e. just ten months before the Tehran deal's signature.

⁸⁹ For example, in the 33.1 article of the VI Chapter of the United Nations Charter, negotiation is mentioned as the most prominent among other ways for pacific settlement of disputes whose continuance is "likely to endanger the maintenance of international peace and security". Moreover, in the preamble of the United Nations General Assembly Resolution no. 53/101 (<https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication>), the preamble stresses "the important role constructive and effective negotiations can play in attaining the purpose of the Charter by contributing to the management of international relations". See also Meerts (2014).

aimed to contain the Iranian military, economic and political role in the region. Therefore, although misunderstanding, misperceptions and mistrust could have played a role in prolonging the “nuclear impasse” (Maleki and Tirman, 2014; Jervis, 2014, 2013a, 2013b), they were neither the only nor the main reason for the negotiations’ failures and stalemates. On the contrary, failures and stalemates were a goal pursued by the American Administrations in order that they could use coercive diplomacy and push the international community into isolating Tehran. Similarly, the American political and diplomatic narratives about the IRI – portrayed as a regime which repudiates to close the deal diplomatically – and the IND – defined as an intractable conflict – did not rise spontaneously as a certain kind of constructivist approach would suggest⁹⁰. Instead, they had been “opportunistically managed” (Faizzulaev and Cornut, 2016: 3)⁹¹ by both the Bush’s and Obama’s WH as foreign policy instruments for building the international sanctions regime against it.

⁹⁰ The constructivist approach referred to is the one which tends to neglect the relation between meaning/knowledge and power (Guzzini, 2000: 150).

⁹¹ “A narrative is instrumental for presenting a state’s case, achieving political goals, building coalitions and developing and maintaining relationships. Most importantly, narratives are used as instruments of political reasoning and persuasion” (Faizzullaev and Cornut, 2016: 2).

CHAPTER III

THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION AND THE 2003 “GRAND BARGAIN”

Introduction

According to Parchami (2014), the Bush Administration is fully responsible for the protracted failures of the IND despite of repeated Iranian openings. Yet, his analysis, by maintaining the unitary actor model, misses the actors actually involved in that policy. Murray (2009, 2010) explores the reasons why successive administrations were not able to develop a consistent and effective Iran’s strategy, and points at the negative role played by “intelligence failures, missing and poor information and flawed interpretation” (Murray, 2009: 209). Moreover, she indicates that “[a]dministration tensions, varying levels of dysfunction and wider governmental conflict also affected policy formulation and execution by producing different agendas and, occasionally, a range of different assessments of US policy” (Murray, 2009: 209). This chapter builds on her analysis to discover the actors involved in such a dysfunctional process. Many authors have described the direct influence of neocon ideology on the Bush Administration’s foreign policy (among others: Ryan, 2010; Buckley and Singh, 2006; Halper and Clarke, 2004; Ahmad, 2014; Bacevich, 2007, 2008; Vaisse, J. 2010). Yet, consistently with the approach adopted in this thesis which denies the unitary actor model, the administration’s foreign policy is not monolithically defined as “neocon”. Instead, this research focuses on bureaucracies and groups of power within the administration competing to assert their different agendas. Among such groups, the most powerful was indeed represented by the neocons, who were able to take key positions within the G. W. Bush’s executive, particularly in the Department of Defense. According to Mann (2004), the neocon members of the Bush Administration’s foreign policy team had indeed “already worked closely alongside one another in previous administrations, and the ties among them were close, intricate and overlapping” (Mann, 2004: X). Vice-President Cheney and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld never expressed a truly neocon ideology in their long political careers. Yet, Cheney and Rumsfeld associated with the neocons for influencing US foreign policy and achieving both American supremacy and personal power goals. Regarding the Secretary of State, Colin Powell, and the NSA, later Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, it is true that they shared with the neoconservatives the choice of military

action over diplomacy on Iraq. Therefore, in that case, like the neocons, Cheney and Rumsfeld, they replaced strategies of containment and deterrence with preventive war aimed to regime change (Mann, 2004). However, as this chapter will show, in dealing with the IRI Powell and Rice tried a different approach⁹². In fact, Rice applied the so-called “third pillar”, based on cover intelligence operations instead of military threats and actions, whilst Powell pursued diplomatic negotiations despite the neocons’ opposition. In other terms, to label the Bush Administration’s Iran foreign policy as a neocon one, is rather superficial because other approaches were experimented by the State Department and the NSA. At the end, Powell and Rice were defeated by the neocons allied with Cheney and Rumsfeld. However, as this thesis aims to demonstrate, their attempts paved the way to the 2009 President Obama’s opening⁹³. To get its objectives, the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons group many times bypassed the standard interagency process codified by the 1947 National Security Act. By doing so, they avoided power accountability while, at the same time, achieved executive aggrandizement (Goldstein, 2010). As former Powell’s Chief of Staff, Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson, effectively said: “some of the most important decisions about US national security [...] were made by a secretive, little know cabal. It was made up of a very small group of people led by Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld” (Wilkerson, 2005b). The rejection, in 2003, of the State Department’s opening with Tehran represents indeed a textbook case of such practices of power management. This chapter also argues that they weren’t a novelty for the group, but were rooted in the 1976 so-called “Team B experiment”, whose players, Douglas Feith, Cheney, and Rumsfeld, later played key-roles in the G. W. Bush Administration’s foreign policy-making. The experiment had been initiated by the then-CIA director, George H. W. Bush. Its final goals were those of weakening the intelligence community, overestimating the Soviet threat, and calling for a long-lasting increase in US military expenditures (Hessing Cahn, 1993). During the G. W. Bush Administration, a similar “intelligence politicization” was conducted by the same actors for overestimating the Iranian regime’s weakness and calling for regime change operations against it.

-Dunnes (2005) argues that the Bush’s approach to Tehran was one which categorized the Islamic Republic as a first-order threat because the administration had conceived its post-

⁹² This chapter will show that they tried an alternative approach than the neocons’ one also with Libya and North Korea.

⁹³ Former Deputy Secretary of State Bill Burns claimed in his memoir, that “[w]e [Secretary of State Rice and Burns] had, however, laid some of the groundwork for Barack Obama’s much more active and imaginative approach to the Iranian nuclear dilemma” (Burns, 2020: 345).

9/11 military reaction as a “war on terrorism.” Yet, this was true only for the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocon faction inside the Administration. In other terms, the “rogue country” and “axis of evil” definitions were the way through which that group framed the IRI in order to justify the implementation of their regime change agenda. As Miles summarizes, “the rogue state doctrine satisfied both domestic and international goals in the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations, underpinning efforts to maintain US leadership and hegemony” (Miles, 2012). Behind their narratives of democracy promotion and “war on terror”, the neocon’s ultimate goal was American supremacy in Eurasia for political, security, and economic reasons. The State Department and the NSA had the same objective, but they remained at odds with the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons group regarding the means through which gaining it. In fact, the State Department, supported by the “traditional” intelligence community – the CIA, the FBI, and the State Department intelligence – intended to achieve it by means of a strategic engagement with Tehran. Whilst the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons group wanted to gain it through regime change. The description of the 2003 “grand bargain” is indeed the illustration of the battle within the administration between these two groups of power and their visions about Tehran’s role in assuring American primacy in the ME-Persian Gulf region. In fact, from September 2001 until May 2003 the State Department was involved in constructive talks regarding Afghanistan and Al Qaida with Iranian high-rank officials. The talks envisioned even an Iranian collaboration with the US on Iraq. Such talks paved the way to the May 2003 “grand bargain”, which actually was an Iranian *and* American proposal for a diplomatic US-IRI rapprochement. However, the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons group was able to totally derail it. Wilkerson reportedly confirmed that the “State Department tried to build a proactive policy toward Iran, but faced “ferocious” opposition from Cheney, then Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his deputies, particularly Paul Wolfowitz” (quoted in Slavin, 2007: 196). The absence of an administration’s official Iran strategy was a consequence and, at the same time, a cause of such a turf battle. Yet, the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons group did not succeed in making the Administration fully and definitively implement its regime-change agenda, notwithstanding the strong Israeli support to it. As a consequence of the administration’s inconsistent Iran policy, not only the Iranian regime was still in office, in 2009. It had also gained time to improve its nuclear capacities as well as its influence in the region, mainly in Iraq.

The Chapter is organized as follow. The first sections is a reconstruction, through process tracing methodology, of the appearance, in May 2003, at the State Department, of a

comprehensive Iranian proposal for solving the IND and restarting diplomatic relations with Washington. The second one describe the role played by the State Department in this attempted rapprochement. The last section illustrates how the Rumsfeld-Cheney-neocons group succeeded in making the administration reject it and implement its plans for a regime-change “from within” by exploiting Iranian dissident groups.

III.1 The so-called Iranian “grand bargain”

Preamble

The so-called “grand bargain” refers to the supposedly Iranian comprehensive offer for solving the nuclear dispute faxed to the Department of State, with a cover letter, by the Swiss Ambassador, Tim Guldemann, on May 4, 2003. As reported two years later by the *Washington Post* journalist who made public the offer, “an unusual two-page document spewed out of a fax machine at the Near East bureau of the State Department. It was a proposal from Iran for a broad dialogue with the United States, and the fax suggested everything was on the table” (Kessler, 2006). In 2007, during a private conversation, former Bush’s NSC Senior Director, Flynt Leverett, said that, “about 90% of what is available on the internet and in the press about the “content” of the Iranian proposal is correct – but there is another 10% that has not been disclosed and that is critical for understanding the seriousness and consequential nature of what Iran put forward” (Clemons, 2007b). So far, it is not yet totally clear who were the actors behind the appearance of that document, which occurred in a moment of tense relations between Washington and Tehran. A copy of the offer, titled “roadmap”, was published in June 2006 (Kessler, 2006), and a copy of the Swiss Ambassador’s cover letter in February 2007 (Kessler, 2007a) by journalist Glenn Kessler. According to him “[t]he cover letter, which had not been previously disclosed, was provided by a source who felt its contents were mischaracterized by State Department officials” (Kessler, 2007a). Plausibly, the source was Ambassador Guldemann himself who, at that time, was no longer in Tehran⁹⁴. So far, it is still dubious who, actually, started the openings, if Tehran or Washington. All the available first-hand accounts about who, in 2003, saw or knew about the “roadmap” are presented and cross-compared in this section. By carefully

⁹⁴ In an article of February 15, 2007, the author wrote: “Stung by the criticisms, Ambassador Tim Guldemann provided the *Washington Post* with details of his involvement” (Symonds, 2007).

applying the process tracing methodology to them, it appears that the contradictions, dismissals, and silences of the actors involved are hints calling for a change of paradigm in analyzing the “grand bargain” affair. In fact, as Evangelista makes clear in his work on process tracing techniques, “the absence of evidence does not necessarily mean the evidence of absence” (Evangelista, 2015: 168). An alternative explanation of the whole affair built precisely on such only apparent contradictions will be presented in the second section.

III.1.A An offer or an answer?

Unfortunately, academic literature devoted to the IND rarely mentions the 2003 “grand bargain”. When it does, it takes for granted the Kessler’s narrative about it, i.e. that the Iranians sent an offer to the Bush Administration which ignored it. Iranian scholar Trita Parsi, in a book published in 2007 – reportedly based on a great number of first-hand interviews with Iranian high-level decision makers – gave raise to doubts about the provenience of the “roadmap” by defining it as an “Original US Draft Negotiation Proposal” (Parsi, 2007: 343). He also wrote that, “[a]ccording to the Iranian version, Tehran didn’t initiate the proposal but rather responded to an American proposal. In the Iranian response, changes were made only to the section describing the Iranian aims with the negotiations, while the US aims were left untouched” (Parsi, 2007: 343). It seems indeed not implausible that, in 2002-2003, the US had quietly reached out Tehran, and that the Iranians, afraid of a possible American military invasion, had answered with an offer which put “everything on the table”. Iranian concerns about it emerge clearly from a speech delivered by Hasein Rouhani, then-Supreme National Security Council Secretary to the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council in 2005. In particular, the end of 2002 and the beginning of 2003 was the most worrisome period. Rouhani, in fact, said that:

Starting in Khordad [May/June], when America’s victory in Iraq became evident [...] They started to think that conditions were right for them to raise the issue of Iran at the meeting of the IAEA Board of Governors and to pave the way for sending the case to the UN Security Council. The idea was to plan sanctions or even military operations against Iran, or at least put political and economic pressure on this country. It was then that we felt a threat, a sense of danger in the country. We thought that we might be facing a plot against Iran and that we might encounter some problems. (Rohuani, 2005: 3)

According to Seliktar (2012: 130), a formal proposal for reaching out the IRI was indeed drafted by Flynt Leverett, likely during his tenure at the State Department. More precisely, according to Porter, the proposal was in the form of a draft National Security

Presidential Memorandum (Porter, 2014: 137) and it was calling for a *strategic engagement with the IRI*. Yet, the neocon Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Douglas Feith,

felt that Leverett overstated the power of [Iranian President] Khatami and for that reason asked Michael Rubin, then Country Director for Iran and Iraq in the Pentagon, to write an alternative draft. Rubin contended that neither Khatami nor the rest of the ruling elite had sufficient legitimacy and implied that Iran was ripe for regime change, possibly facilitated by a covert plan of destabilization. (Seliktar, 2012: 130)

In other terms, Feith wanted to derail the State Department/Leverett's plans in order to impose his group's regime-change agenda. Reportedly, according to both Leverett and Wilkerson, when the Feith's staff presented its alternative version of the draft, "[t]he engagement group wanted Rice to hold an interagency meeting and force the issue, but she failed to do it" (Porter, 2006: 3). These facts are consistent with the Iranian-American historian, Ervand Abrahamian's description of the Bush Administration's internal division on how to deal with Tehran. In fact, according to him, the neocons inside the Pentagon and, to a lesser extent, the White House wanted to impose their plans for regime change, whilst the conservatives in the Department of State, and, to a lesser extent, the CIA, proposed a policy of engagement (Abrahamian, 2004: 68-69).

III.1.B The content of the "roadmap"⁹⁵

Basically, the roadmap was an agenda for the process of normalization of American-Iranian diplomatic relations whose focus was on a security guarantee. In fact, the United States were asked "a dialogue with mutual respect" and "refrains from supporting change of the political system by direct interference from outside" with "recognition of Iran's legitimate security interests in the region according with defense capacity". Tehran asked also the US "action against MKO and affiliated organizations in the US" as well as, in Iraq, "pursuit of MKO" and "support of repatriation of MKO-members." The content of the "roadmap" also involved crucial issues of mutual national security interests, as terrorism and

⁹⁵ The texts of the cover letter and of the roadmap are available at: <https://it.scribd.com/document/170613340/2003-US-Iran-Roadmap-proposal>. A copy of them is in the Annexes. It is worth noting that they were sent over by Ambassador Guldemann as an "unclassified fax" which was never classified by the US. This fact allowed their publication in the media at a later date. However, it gives rise to speculation about the actors who made such a choice as well as their reasons behind it. It seems likely that by avoiding to classify the fax, both Guldemann and the NSC and State Department officials who received it (among them, as the next paragraphs will demonstrate, there were Hillary Mann and Ryan Crocker) intended to maintain the option to reveal its content or part of it to the media, at a convenient time.

the situation in Iraq. In this respect, the IRI was ready to make “decisive action against any terrorists (above all Al Qaida) on Iranian territory, full cooperation and exchange of all relevant information.” Regarding Iraq, the Iranians offered “coordination of Iranian influence for actively supporting political stabilization and the establishment of democratic institutions and a democratic government representing all ethnic and religious groups in Iraq.” About the Middle East, the IRI promised an “Iranian statement that it supports a peaceful solution in the Middle East, that it accepts a solution which is accepted by the Palestinians and that it follows with interest the discussion on the Road map, presented by the Quartet”.⁹⁶ Tehran also committed itself to the following actions: “1. Stop of any material support to Palestinian opposition groups (Hamas, Jihad, etc.) from Iranian territory, pressure on these organizations to stop violent action against civilians within borders of 1967. 2. Action on Hisbollah [sic] to become an exclusively political and social organization within Lebanon. 3. Acceptance of the two-states approach.” Moreover, the proposal envisioned three contemporary working groups devoted to negotiate roadmaps on the following security issues: regional security and terrorism; economic cooperation (for the abolishment of sanctions and the solution of Iranian frozen assets); disarmament (in particular weapons of mass destruction). It must be stressed that in the roadmap the IND does not appear as the main concern and that it is acknowledged the Iranian “access to peaceful nuclear technology” as well as to “biotechnology and chemical technology”.

To sum up, the “road-map” envisioned the steps to be taken by both sides for opening a new era in the US-IRI diplomatic relations in which Tehran would have returned to represent for the US that strategic ally it had been during the Pahlavis’ times. The IRI would have also been an important American partner for the stabilization of the region, in particular in Iraq. It goes without saying that such a rapprochement implied a reset of the American system of alliances in the Middle East-Persian Gulf region, as well as in that regional balance of power.

III.1.C The middlemen

According to Parsi (2007)⁹⁷, the Iranian political authorities’ main problem was how to make Powell and, eventually, President Bush, receive the road-map. Since the 1979

⁹⁶ The so-called “Two States Saudi plan” for the Palestine. See Rod-Larsen et al. (2014: 484).

⁹⁷ Before proceeding, it must be noted that Parsi has been Congressman Bob Ney’s foreign policy advisor for the Middle East from 2001 to 2005 (Parsi, 2007: 335). At the time of the “grand bargain”, he was also the President of the “National Iranian American Council” (NIAC), a component of the Iranian lobby in Washington. On the NIAC, see the next section.

revolution, the Swiss embassy has been acting as the diplomatic channel between Tehran and Washington. At that time, the Swiss Ambassador in Tehran was Tim Guldemann. According to Parsi, it was Guldemann himself who had the unconventional idea of handling the document to Farsi-speaker Republican Representative Bob Ney (Parsi, 2007: 247)⁹⁸. Reportedly, Guldemann also faxed the road-map to the State Department on May 4, 2003, together with a one-page cover letter giving details about the document's genesis. In particular, the cover described the involvement of the Iranian Ambassador in Paris in the elaboration of the proposal and offered assurances on the authenticity of it. Few days later, according to Parsi,

Guldemann visited Washington and briefed Ney personally on the proposal. The Swiss diplomat gave the congressman a copy of the two-pages proposal, which included an outline of Iranian and American aims and a proposed procedure on how to advance the negotiations, as well as an eleven-page account by Guldemann of his conversations with Iranian officials. (Parsi, 2007: 247)

Parsi also claims that another copy of the proposal was sent by Guldemann to the US Ambassador at the UN in Geneva, Kevin Moley (Parsi, 2007: 247). Parsi writes also that Nye “promptly sent a staffer [plausibly, Parsi himself] to hand-deliver the document to Karl Rove, the president's senior adviser [...]. Within a few hours, Rove called Nye to verify the authenticity of the proposal, assuring [Nye] that he would deliver the “intriguing” document directly to the president” (Parsi, 2007: 247). Further info about the copy that Nye sent to Rove does not surface in any other account of the “grand bargain”, also the third copy supposedly sent to Moley has been mentioned only by Parsi. Therefore, it is not methodologically correct to relay on such reconstruction of the events. In fact, according to Bennett and Checkel (2015), in order to make the existence of an event reliable, at least two mentions by two different actors are needed. Regarding the faxed copy sent to the State Department, its existence is admitted by a number of Bush Administration insiders. Then, it is correct to elaborate on that.

III.1.D Inside the State Department and the White House

On February 7, 2007, former NSA, Condolezza Rice, in front of the House Foreign Affairs Committee reportedly said about the proposal:

⁹⁸ According to Parsi, that was because he knew Nye was the only Persian-speaking member of Congress and particularly interested in Iran (Porter, 2007). Yet, it seems more plausible that Guldemann decided – or was suggested by Iranians – to handle the document to Nye because at that time Parsi was working with him.

I have read about this so-called proposal from Iran. We had people who said, ‘The Iranians want to talk to you,’ lots of people who said, ‘The Iranians want to talk to you.’ But I think I would have noticed if the Iranians had said, ‘We’re ready to recognize Israel.’ . . . I just don’t remember ever seeing any such thing. (Kessler, 2007c)

During the hearing, Democratic Representative Robert Wessler, by referring to former NSC Director Leverett, asked Rice why the administration decided not to engage with Tehran although some of his officials had argued it was worth to do⁹⁹. Rice dismissed Leverett’s claims saying that, “[f]irst of all, I don’t know what Flynt Leverett’s talking about, quite frankly. Maybe I should ask him when he came to me and said, ‘We have a proposal from Iran and we really ought to take it’” (Kessler, 2007c). Yet, one year before, in June 2006, Rice had admitted the arrival of the proposal, arguing that,

[w]hat the Iranians wanted earlier was to be one-on-one with the United States so that this could be about the United States and Iran. Now it is Iran and the international community, and Iran has to answer to the international community. I think that’s the strongest possible position to be in. (Keleman, NPR, 2006)

Nevertheless, at a later date, asked about the offer by the *USA Today*’s journalist and Iran expert, Barbara Slavin, Rice answered: “I honestly don’t remember seeing it” (Slavin, 2007: 205). In October 2010, Stephen Hadley, former Rice’s deputy, admitted he had known about the arrival of the roadmap, but dismissed its value saying that, “[i]n 2003, a fax purportedly from Iranian sources offering a diplomatic breakthrough arrived on a State Department fax machine. It was later determined to be the result of freelancing by a Swiss diplomat hoping to be the one to make peace between Iran and the United States” (Hadley, 2010: 143). In 2007, Tom Casey, former State Department’s spoke-person, argued that the document “did not come through official channels but rather was a creative exercise on the part of the Swiss ambassador” (Kessler, 2007b). In a 2007 article, former NSC officer Michael Rubin wrote that the proposal “was not an Iranian *ouverture* but the work of a disgruntled Swiss diplomat, Tim Guldumann” (Rubin, 2007). According to Guldumann, it was former Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, neocon John Bolton who, together with others personalities close to the White House, who had manufactured a narrative according to which Guldumann had “imagined” the “grand bargain” and, for this reason, the State Department had rebuked him (Guldumann and Reichmuth, 2015: 127)¹⁰⁰. Bolton represented indeed another component of the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons “parallel policy apparatus”

⁹⁹ The year before, in fact, Leverett had claimed that the roadmap was reliable and the Bush Administration was wrong in rejecting such an opportunity (Leverett, 2006; Gwertzman, 2006; Leverett and Mann, 2006).

¹⁰⁰ Translated from the French by the author.

(Lobe, 2003) inside the administration which managed to circumvent the NSC process of inter-agencies meetings to derail any US opening towards Tehran. On his part, in 2007, Bolton had said:

I was aware of the proposal. I spoke to Secretary Powell about it. I thought it was a bad idea and I told him so...I thought it was a fantasy. I don't think Iran is ever going to give up its nuclear weapons capability voluntarily. [...] I think they have used diplomacy as a cover very effectively, and I think they'd love to find ways to engage us in further discussions to buy more time [for expanding their scientific and technological mastery over virtually every element of the nuclear fuel cycle]. (PBS, 2007a)

In his cover, Guldemann clearly explained that the first draft of the roadmap had been developed during his meeting with Sadeq Kharrazi, then-Iranian Ambassador in Paris, nephew of the then-Iranian Foreign Minister and brother-in-law of the Supreme Guide's son¹⁰¹. He added also that the roadmap had been reviewed and approved by then-President Mohammad Khatami and then-Foreign Minister, Kamal Kharrazi, and that the Iranian Supreme Guide, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, had agreed "with 85%-90% of the paper." He concluded his cover writing that, "I got the clear impression that there is a strong will of the regime to tackle the problem with the US now and to try it with this initiative". In 2007, during an interview, former Carter's and Reagan's White House aide for Iran, Gary Sick, claimed he had "talked to the people who drafted it [the roadmap], and there is no question that this was carefully considered, it was drafted and the content was revised twice, and it was then presented to all the key leaders in the country for approval before it was sent to the United States." (PBS, 2007a). A further proof of the roadmap's authenticity is that offered by former Italian Ambassador to Tehran, Roberto Toscano. During a personal conversation with the author, Toscano claimed that after the unsuccessful handling of the roadmap in Washington in May 2003, a high-rank Iranian official approached him with a copy of it, asking to make Italy – which had always maintained excellent relationship with the IRI since its birth – go-between Tehran and Washington for demonstrating Iranian goodwill for rapprochement¹⁰². It is worth noting that one of the only two journalists who had reported about the "roadmap" shortly after its arrival, wrote that according an administration source

¹⁰¹ In 2006, Kharrazi himself said to American journalist, Barbara Slavin, that by ignoring the 2003 roadmap, "[t]he American government missed a golden opportunity" (Slavin, 2007: 205).

¹⁰² Toscano had that original copy with him and showed it. He added that, after the Iranian official had given him the roadmap, he sent it to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Yet, the then-Foreign Minister (Silvio Berlusconi) answered that he was not interested in lobbying the US for the IRI. Interestingly, some years later, when Berlusconi became Prime Minister, supported his Foreign Minister's good offices with Tehran required at that time by the Obama Administration. See the next chapter.

“[t]he Bush administration did not question the authenticity of the proposal” (Dinmore, 2004). He added also that, “[t]he offer was said to come from a senior Iranian official designated two years ago [i.e., in 2002] by Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader, to co-ordinate a special committee on US relations.” Very plausibly, that Iranian official was Deputy Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, who, in 2002, after having attended with American negotiators the “Six plus One” talks devoted to Afghanistan¹⁰³, had been designated as Ambassador to the UN. In 2007, during an interview, Richard Armitage, former Powell’s Deputy, said that the State Department did not give the fax much weight since at the time there were no other consistent signals from the Iranian government:

It had been our view that the Swiss ambassador in Tehran was so intent — and I mean this positively — but he was so intent on bettering relations between “the Great Satan,” the United States, and Iran that we came to have some questions about where the Iranian message ended and the Swiss message may begin. I remember talking with people from our Near East division about a fax that came in from the Swiss ambassador, and I think our general feeling was that he had perhaps added a little bit to it because it wasn’t in consonance with the state of our relations. And we had had some discussions ... particularly through intelligence channels with high-ranking Iranian intelligence people, and nothing that we were seeing in this fax was in consonance with what we were hearing face to face. So we didn’t give it much weight... If there had been a desire on the Iranian side to seek a better relationship, it would have been an ideal time afterward to send that signal, and we got no such signal to my knowledge. (PBS, 2007b)

Armitage said also that he did not think the documents were genuine because they were neither signed nor written on official letterhead. However, as Leverett and his wife, former NSC Director for Persian Gulf and Iran, Hillary Mann, would have noted, that was precisely “the defining feature of non-papers, the format for most government-to-government communications between the United States and the Islamic Republic” (Leverett and Mann Leverett, 2013: 124).¹⁰⁴ They also unveiled that,

Flynt Leverett – who had just resigned from the CIA [in May 2003] after leaving the White House two months before that – met with Mohsen Rezae, a former Revolutionary Guards commander and incumbent secretary-general of the Expediency Council. In their conversation, Rezae confirmed that Tehran was interested in strategic realignment with Washington. He noted, though, that it needed clarity as to the United States’ intentions. (Leverett and Mann Leverett, 2013: 351)

¹⁰³ See the next section.

¹⁰⁴ They pointed out also that, for example, “neither Clinton’s 1999 message to Khatami about the Khobar Towers bombing nor the Iranian response was signed or presented on official, “letterhead” stationery” (Leverett and Mann Leverett, 2013: 424).

Armitage, asked whether the White House was aware of the faxed roadmap and cover letter, answered: “[a]t some level. I can’t say the president saw it, but *I know it was sent over by Ambassador Burns, Bill Burns, who was our assistant secretary for NEA* [Near Eastern Affairs]. We didn’t play hide the sausage with the National Security Council at all” (PBS, 2007b).¹⁰⁵ At the NSC, the Advisor on Middle East policy was the hawkish and neocon official Elliot Abrams, who had been installed at the NSC by neocon Undersecretary of Defense, Paul Wolfowitz¹⁰⁶. It is very plausible that, once arrived at the NSC, the fax was downplayed by Abrams, if not even hidden to Rice (Clemons, 2007a). On January 2007, Wilkerson reportedly said that, “Vice-President Cheney’s office rejected the plan” and added that, “[w]e [Wilkerson and Powell] thought it was a very propitious moment to do that [accepting the proposal]. But as soon as it got to the White House, the old mantra of “We don’t talk to evil”...reasserted itself” (BBC, 2007). According to journalist Porter, shortly after the arrival of the road-map, “[t]he outcome of discussion among principals – Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Powell – was that State [Department] was instructed to ignore the proposal and to reprimand Guldemann for having passed it on” (Porter, 2006: 5). In 2007, Hillary Mann told *Esquire* journalist, John Richardson, that after having seen the fax of the “roadmap” arriving at the State Department, immediately sent her boss, Deputy Secretary of State, Richard Haas, a memo about it. According to Mann, the memo was seen also by Powell himself, who later on, during an informal gathering, told her that he “couldn’t sell it at the White House.” Before publishing his article, Richardson had asked Powell about it. Yet, as he wrote,

on the subject of the peace offer, though, Powell was defensive. “I talked to all of my key assistants since Flynt started talking about an Iranian grand bargain, but none of us recall seeing this initiative as a grand bargain.” On the general subject of negotiations with Iran, he responded with pointed politesse. “We talked to the Iranians quietly up until 2003. The president chose not to continue that channel.” (Richardson, 2007)

Yet, Powell didn’t elaborate on why Bush chose not to continue the back channel. According to Mann and Leverett it was the Rumsfeld-Cheney-neocons group which imposed its will within the administration:

¹⁰⁵ Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁶ He had been one of the neocon authors of the “Project for the New American Century” calling for an American right to re-shape the ME according to Israeli and Washington’s interests. (See later in this section) During the Obama Administration, Abrams vehemently opposed any diplomatic overture with Tehran (Abrams, 2013, 2014, 2015), and, instead, called for American military actions against the IRI (Abrams, 2011; Beauchamp, 2012).

by May 2003, when the Roadmap arrived in Washington, enough Bush administration heavyweights had decided they didn't want rapprochement with the Islamic republic, even if it was possible. In a sense, these players – Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Libby, their subordinates in government and their supporters outside it, and the president himself – understood that the United States could not simultaneously realign relations with Iran and pursue hegemony in the Middle East.[...] And Powell, the one person in the Administration who might have been able to articulate an alternative framework for post 9/11 policy making – and gets the president's attention – lacked the political wherewithal to pull it off. (Leverett and Mann Leverett, 2013: 352)

In other terms, according to them, the President, Rumsfeld, Cheney and the neocons considered American hegemony in the ME and rapprochement with Tehran as two mutually exclusive options. By contrast, for the State Department, the latter would have been instrumental to the former. Yet, its approach was the loser one, at least within the Bush Administration.

III.1.E The Secretary of State's choice

In May 2006, Flynt Leverett told Gareth Porter that the “roadmap” was a “respectable effort” for providing a basis for negotiations, yet there was no interagency meeting to discuss it. He added that, “[t]he State Department knew it had no chance at the interagency level of arguing the case for it successfully. They weren't going to waste Powell's rapidly diminishing capital on something that unlikely” (Porter, 2006: 5). Hillary Mann claims she had sent her memo to Powell, together with a copy of the “roadmap” and Leverett's memo on his meeting with Mohsen Rezae¹⁰⁷ during which Rezae had confirmed the Iranian will to “strategic rapprochement”¹⁰⁸. Then, during an informal setting, Powell told her he had tried “to sell” it at the White House without success (Leverett and Mann Leverett, 2013: 351). At a later date, Wilkerson told her that “Powell had, in effect, made a trade whereby he would refrain from pushing for engagement with Iran – to which both the White House and the vice president were, by this point, irrevocably opposed – in exchange for greater maneuvering room in the United States' ongoing nuclear diplomacy with North Korea” (Leverett and Mann Leverett, 2013: 352). This is an important point to be noted. In fact, precisely while

¹⁰⁷ Former Revolutionary Guards commander and then-incumbent secretary-general of the Expediency Council.

¹⁰⁸ This version of what she did shortly after having seen the proposal is slightly different from the one, mentioned above, she gave to Richardson (2015).

the “roadmap” arrived at the State Department, the US was making an opening towards North Korea. Kessler wrote about it on May 7, 2003, saying that,

[t]he Bush Administration plans to adjust its policy toward North Korea by adopting a two-track approach that would combine new talks with pressure [...] The emerging consensus, which will be refined today [May, 7, 2003] at a meeting of President Bush’s top foreign policy advisers, would bridge a gap that has emerged within the administration since North Korea declared it possesses nuclear weapons [in April 2003]. Administration officials have sought to resolve their policy differences, which pit those pushing for confrontation with the Pyongyang government against those advocating further talks. [...] The continue talks were sought by the state Department, while increasing pressure on Ponyang was a key objective of the Defense Department and other administration advocates of a tougher approach. (Kessler, 2003).

Building on these evidences, it is possible to compare the different policies implemented by the Bush Administration towards three “rogue states” which at that time were developing nuclear programs. As seen in Chapter I, the US with Libya opted for a policy of coercive diplomacy plus secret arrangements made possible by the timing disclosure of Libyan import of nuclear technology from Dr. Khan. Concerning North Korea, although the Bush administration was deeply divided, nevertheless it chose a policy of diplomatic talks (Kessler, 2003; Sanger, 2003; Horowitz et al., 2007: 167-173)¹⁰⁹. Despite the fact that inside the executive a similar fracture also existed on how to deal with Tehran, the (quite possible) diplomatic rapprochement with it was rejected. Moreover, later the administration chose to implement plans for a regime change¹¹⁰. As seen above, such a choice was influenced by Cheney, Rumsfeld and their neocon allies interested in reshaping the region. Yet, it was also the result of Powell’s decision of abandoning the State Department’s plans for engagement with Tehran in change for being allowed to deal with Pyongyang. Then, the crucial question becomes: why did Powell chose so. The possible answers are the following ones. Firstly, North Korea’s nuclear capabilities were considered more advanced than the Iranian ones and as such required a quick diplomatic solution. This argument is supported by the fact that, reportedly, according to Haas, “Iran was less of a bureaucratic battleground than other issues, such as North Korea, Iraq, and the Arab-Israeli dispute” (Slavin, 2007: 196). Secondly, the Iranian nuclear threat could have opportunistically been exploited by the US for imposing its plans in the ME and in Europe. In fact, in the ME, the Iranian nuclear threat represented a justification for huge American arms deals with Israel, Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf

¹⁰⁹ Yet, at a later date, the Powell approach with Korea was derailed by the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons group. See McDonald (2003).

¹¹⁰ See section 3.

monarchies (Perlo-Freeman, 2009; Reid, 2008). In Europe, it served as an excuse to install missile defense bases in Poland, as Putin himself said to then-Secretary of State, Rice, and then-Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, in 2007 (AP, 2007). A third explanation has to do with Rumsfeld's, Cheney's, and their neocon allies' objectives. The IRI, in fact, had some dissident groups the US could leverage to change the Mullah's regime from within, whilst North Korea and Libya did not have any. Among such groups, the MEK was particularly powerful and it was already based at the Iraqi-Iranian border. This appears indeed as the main reason why the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons network imposed their regime-change agenda on Tehran to the administration and accepted the State Department's approach towards North Korea and Libya. In fact, Dinmore wrote in March 2004, that according to administration officials, "[a] bargain can be struck with Muammar Gaddafi of Libya or Kim Jong-II of North Korea because there is no internal opposition or alternative" adding that "in Iran, US hardliners see an alternative to bargaining: a mass of discontented people who sought change. The neo-conservatives believe the Iranian regime will collapse sooner rather than later. The realists [Powell, Armitage, Rice, and NSC strategic planner for the ME, Robert Blackwill] are not so sure" (Dinmore, 2004). Similarly, one year later, by relying on administration sources, he wrote that,

although the US is seeking a dialogue with North Korea [...] and is engaged in talks with other "rogue states", such as Libya and Syria, US officials say there is little appetite for negotiations with Iran. "We are not reaching out at this point," said a state Department official, adding that the matter was still under review. Within the Bush administration, officials advocate "regime change" as its Iran policy, while a minority proposes engagement. (Dinmore, 2003)

According to Slavin, within the administration there was a strenuous battle over the MEK. She quotes Armitage, as saying that, "[s]ome of us took the view that the MEK was a terrorist organization, and others, in the Pentagon, wanted to use the MEK against Iran" adding that NSA Rice considered the MEK as a terrorist group, whilst Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith thought the MEK could prove useful against the IRI (Slavin, 2007: 206). In another interview, Armitage said that,

[w]e had discussed the MEK more pointedly after the invasion. And there were some in the administration who wanted to use the Mujahideen-e Khalq as a pressure point against Iran, and I can remember the national security adviser, [Condoleezza Rice], being very specific about it, saying no, a terrorist group is a terrorist group. That was exactly the point of view of the State Department as well. We wanted the US military to disarm the MEK and contain them. (PBS, 2007c)

In a 2007 interview, Wilkerson underlined the crucial importance Tehran had given to the MEK's disbanding and repatriation (BBC, 2007). In fact, the Iranians were afraid not only of an American invasion aimed to regime change, as the above quoted Rouhani's speech unveiled. They worried also that such a change would have been executed with the MEK's support – as it had happened in Iraq with the Chalabi's Iraq National Council (Ahmed, 2014). The Pentagon's Country Director for Iran and Iraq, Michael Rubin, had indeed envisioned such a strategy in his policy report alternative to the Leverett's one. Moreover, although at that time the MEK was listed as a terrorist organization by the State Department, the Pentagon had refused to disband it and, as the occupying military force in Iraq, had even given it "*protected status*" under the Geneva Convention (Al Jazeera, 2004). The Iranian concerns were so deep that, as Hillary Mann recalls, during a meeting at the beginning of 2003,

[Then-Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs] Ryan Crocker assured [the Iranians] that the MEK was a group that we had on our list,... and the Iranians didn't need to worry about that. And I remember the senior Iranian who had joined the talks was concerned that they'd been hearing mixed messages...He said that he had heard of others in the administration, particularly from the Pentagon and from the vice president's office, who did not see the MEK as a terrorist organization and in fact could see the MEK as an organization that, after Iraq was liberated, could then move on and liberate Iran or help be part of an invasion force into Iran. And so he was very concerned about that, and we try allay his concerns. (PBS, 2007c)

The third section will show that the Defense Undersecretary, Douglas Feith, had indeed been planning a regime-change operation to be undertaken by means of the MEK since June 2001.

Conclusion

Within the Bush Administration there has been a long bargaining between, on the one side, the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons group, willing to change the regime in Tehran, and, on the other side, the NSA and the State Department, intentioned to pursue strategic engagement with Tehran. The hawkish faction won the turf battle also because the Secretary of State traded the State Department's efforts with room to maneuver with North Korea (and plausibly with Libya also). Hence, the administration rejected the openings which Tehran had demonstrated to have accepted by sending back to the State Department the roadmap. In fact, the "grand bargain" was neither an offer nor totally Iranian and the next section will furtherly demonstrate that it was not a sudden Iranian initiative conceived in few weeks

under the threat of an American invasion. On the contrary, it was the final result of reiterated cover contacts between, on one side, Iranian high-rank Foreign Ministry's officers and, on the other side, State Department Near East Affairs Bureau's and NSC's officials, held from September 2001 until May 2003. Regarding Ambassador Guldemann, as representative of the US in Tehran he has been quietly acting with both Iranian and American officials during those months of intense gatherings. Indeed, at the end of his tenure as Swiss Ambassador taking care also of American interests, he received a letter of deep appreciation for his service from Secretary Powell himself (Guldemann and Reichmuth, 2015: 128).

III.2 The State Department's Agenda: Tehran's engagement

Preamble

In 2009, the National Iranian American Council (NIAC) and its president, Iran scholar Trita Parsi, filed a defamation lawsuit against Hassan Dailoslam, an Iranian-American political analyst (Lake, 2009). The lawsuit, which Parsi and the NIAC lost, came after Dailoslam had claimed it existed a relationship between the Iranian regime, the NIAC's founder and president, Trita Parsi, and former Congressmen Robert Nye. In 2017, Dailoslam wrote an article (Dailoslam, 2017) illustrating the documents released during that lawsuit. They prove the Tehran's role in, firstly, creating the two main aims of the so-called "Iranian lobby" in Washington, i.e. the American Iranian Council (AIC) and the NIAC. Secondly, in manufacturing the media narrative about the "grand bargain" affair. In fact, it emerges that it was the then-Iranian Ambassador to the U.N., Javad Zarif who had given a copy of the roadmap to Parsi who later released it to the press for building a pro-Tehran media campaign (Dailoslam, 2017: 5-6). In August 2013, in a speech to the Iranian Parliament, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif unveiled that meanwhile he was in Washington as Ambassador to the UN – i.e. at the time of the roadmap's disclosure by Kessler – he exploited the division existing in the American political environment for pushing Tehran's agenda. In fact, reportedly, he said he had "the approval of the regime's highest authorities and established contacts with anti-Bush politicians within the US to attempt to cause a division amongst the decision makers and neutralize the White House's bellicose policy towards Iran" (Dailoslam, 2017: 5). It seems likely that a component of the Zarif's strategy of causing divisions inside the decision-makers was the release of the roadmap to the *Washington Post*

directly or through Parsi. One year after his roadmap disclosure, the same journalist made the Guldemann's cover letter public (Kessler, 2007a), another revelation that looks like belonging to the Zarif's strategy. The day before the cover's publication, the then-New American Foundation's Director, Steve Clemons – very plausibly by relying on insiders' revelations – in his blog wrote that he “had reason to suspect that the initiative [the “grand bargain”] was not only quite authentic by Iran, but was actually a response to a previously undisclosed secret initiative by some State Department officials – that was ‘cloaked in deniability’” (Clemons, 2007a). It seems very likely that those officials were from the State Department Bureau of Near East Affairs: the then-Assistant to Secretary of State, Ambassador William Burns, and his Deputy, Ambassador Ryan Crocker. Slavin had indeed written that, “a diplomat involved in Iran matters said that the State Department Near East Affairs Bureau lobbied throughout the summer of 2003 for talks with the Iranians on Iraq but faced opposition elsewhere in the administration”¹¹¹ (Slavin, 2007: 206). Moreover, Armitage himself had said: “I remember talking with people from our Near East division about a fax that came in from the Swiss ambassador. [...] I know it was sent over by Ambassador Burns, Bill Burns, who was our assistant secretary for NEA [Near Eastern Affairs]” (PBS, 2007b). This section, by relying on first-hand accounts of some cover meetings held from 2001 until May 2003 between Iranian and American officials, together with documents made available during the April-May 2007 Zarif's media campaign, will demonstrate that the roadmap was precisely as such. In other terms, it was the Iranian response to a “secret initiative by some State Department officials that was ‘cloaked in deniability’” (Clemons, 2007a). The deniability scheme was intended to face the Vice-President's and Pentagon's opposition to the rapprochement. Consistently with it, Rice, Armitage, and Powell, although favorable to the openings, when, at a later date, the cover attempts were covered up, had to support a narrative of not having seen the “Iranian proposal”, or/and having judged it as not sufficiently endorsed by Iranian political authorities. Concerning in particular Rice, who, as herself admitted, was familiar with the content of the “Iranian proposal”, an additional hypothesis has to be considered. That is that she was plausibly thinking to have another card to play against the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons group willing to implement a regime-change agenda against Tehran. That card was the CIA covert “Operation Merlin”. In fact, during a completely-off-the-records meeting with the CIA's Director and James Risen, the journalist who had revealed the operation, held

¹¹¹ Emphasis added.

in May 2003 - *i.e. the same period of the rejection of the roadmap* – Rice claimed adamantly clear that the operation represented an alternative to a full-scale invasion of Iran. In fact, she reportedly told Risen: “You criticize us for going to war for weapons of mass destruction. Well, this is what we can do instead” (Risen, 2018). Moreover, in the “talking points” Rice had prepared for that meeting¹¹², she had defined the “Merlin Operation” as “one of the most sensitive and important programs this country has”. In the next sections the deniability scheme will be adopted as a prism through which re-interpreting the events which led to the apparently unexplainable appearance of the roadmap in a State Department’s fax machine on May 4, 2003.

III.2.A A methodological disclaimer

The starting point for deconstructing the Parsi’s-Guldimann’s-*Washington Post* narrative about the “grand bargain” and building another reconstruction of the facts is that of taking into consideration the documents posted in his blog by *The New York Times*’ correspondent, Nicholas Kristoff, in April 2007. It is plausible that also this publication was a component of the Zarif’s plans to cause divisions inside the administration. Yet, so far, as it is happened for the roadmap and its cover, no anti-defamation lawsuit has been ruled against neither Kristof nor his source. However, first-hand accounts jointly with some second-hands accounts based on administration sources have been used for cross-checking the reliability of the facts described in such documents. So far, no mention has been made to them in academic literature since their appearance on the web. To the best of my knowledge, this thesis is the first work which has elaborated on them.

III.2.B The role of the American Iranian Council

The author who wrote the documents published by Kristoff is Hooshang Amirahmad, the Iranian-American President of the American Iranian Council (AIC), an advocacy group he founded in 1997 (Daiopleslam, 2017). The AIC, in its website, claims to be an organization

¹¹² In fact, although the meeting was completely off-the-records, years later, when Rice testified in the trail initiated by the US against the Risen’s CIA source, a copy of the “talking points” was de-classified and entered into evidence. A copy is in the Annexes. It is also available at: <https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/4341655/Condirisendocompressed.pdf>. See also Central Intelligence Agency (2015a, 2015b) for a more complete account of the Risen-CIA-NSA contacts at the time of the planned publication of the Risen’s article disclosing the operation in April 2003.

that “provides for a sustainable dialogue and a more comprehensive understanding of US-Iran relations. The AIC organizes and promotes the Iranian-American community and encourages its participation in the efforts for a more democratic, transparent, mutually respectful, and sustainable relationship between the two countries.”¹¹³ Amirahmadi, whilst resident in the US, had been a presidential candidate for the Iranian election and has collaborated officially with the Iranian Foreign Ministry (Daiouleslam, 2007: 2). On March 17, 2000, the then-Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, delivered a key-note address at an AIC conference¹¹⁴. The year after, the then-Chairman of the Senate Committee for Foreign Relation (SCFR), Senator Joe Biden, attended an AIC conference and made a speech on the need to improve US-Iran relations¹¹⁵. According to Lopez (2009: 5-10), Fayazmanesh (2008: 88-89), and Daiouleslam, (2007: 1; 2017: 1) – the few scholars who have researched about the AIC’s origins and its role in influencing US Iran foreign policy– the AIC was founded at the end of the Nineties by US oil multinational enterprises (MNEs) eager to do business with Tehran¹¹⁶. The composition of the AIC’s Board of Directors supports indeed this argument. For instance, there were, among others, Richard Matzke, former Vice Chairman of the Chevron Texaco Corporation, and Michael Stinson, former Conoco Philips Company’s Senior Vice President. Interestingly, other prominent Board’s members were former senior State Department officials, as, for instance, the Ambassadors Charles Freeman, Lowell Bruce Laingen, William G. Miller, William Luers¹¹⁷, and Thomas Pickering¹¹⁸. However, the AIC also was the Iranian regime’s main lobbying entity in Washington¹¹⁹ (Daiouleslam, 2007: 1). In fact, the AIC had been founded under the Iranian government’s “Supreme Council for Iranians Living Abroad” whose specific object was that of “establishing specialized groups and non-governmental bodies among Iranians living

¹¹³ Source: AIC’s website (<http://www.us-iran.org/mission-vision>).

¹¹⁴ During the conference, “she expressed regret and apologized for 1953 coup and past US policy mistakes, lifted sanctions on carpets and food items, and offered Iran a global settlement”. Source: AIC’s website (<http://www.us-iran.org/news/2016/6/13/aic-accomplishments-in-thought-leadership>).

¹¹⁵ Source: AIC’s website (<http://www.us-iran.org/news/2015/6/16/2002-senator-joe-biden-argues-for-better-us-iran-relations-at-aic-conference?rq=joe%20biden>).

¹¹⁶ At that time, the Clinton Administration appeared as willing to re-open economic ties with Tehran. Hence, American big companies – in particular oil, aerospace and agriculture MNEs – started to pressure the administration for lifting sanctions to get lucrative deals with the IRI (Fayazmanesh, 2008: 85-87). See also Chapter I, Section 1.

¹¹⁷ Later, William Luers, as President of the United Nations Association of USA will be a key player of a “Track II” diplomacy which will pave the way to the Obama’s openings in 2009-2013 and to the JPOA. See the next chapter, Section 1.

¹¹⁸ Pickering had served also as Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs from May 1997 until the end of 2000.

¹¹⁹ At a later date, it would have been replaced, as main Tehran’s arm, by the National Iranian American Council (NIAC) which had the advantage, to Tehran’s eyes, to have grass-roots features. On NIAC and the role it has played during the Obama Administration’s rapprochement with the IRI, see Chapter IV.

abroad” (Lopez, 2009: 3). Reportedly, in interviews with government press in Iran, Amirahmadi defined the AIC as the IRI’s “prominent lobby in the US that strives to defend the interests of Iran and oppose the pro-Israeli lobby AIPAC” (Daiouleslam, 2007: 1). Hence, it seems that the AIC’s long-term objectives lying behind its declared goal of normalizing diplomatic relations between Washington and Tehran were many. First of all, the Iranian regime’s interest in political survival, an aim achievable through the maintenance of the *status quo*¹²⁰. Secondly, the Iranian governmental-industrial circles’ interests in getting American technology and investments which could increase the value of their financial and industrial assets. Thirdly, the American MNEs’ interests in having access to the huge IRI’s oil and gas reserves as well as to its large markets for industrial components and final products. In its website, the AIC claims to have contributed to the “grand bargain”¹²¹. From the documents that plausibly Amirahmadi gave to Kristoff (the latter did not offer any explanation about how he got them) are three confidential memos¹²² (called “Memo to myself”). The first one, dated October 2002 (Amirahmadi, 2002a), is entitled “*A Proposal for US-Iran Cooperation against Saddam Hussein*” and summarizes the reasons why it was in the American and Iranian interest to overthrow Saddam Hussein. The second one, dated November 2002 (Amirahmadi, 2002b), is titled “*Meetings with Dr. Zarif and Dr. Kharrazi, and in NSC and State Department*” and describes various gatherings attended by Amirahmadi at the NSC and at the State Department. The third report, dated June 2004 (Amirahmadi, 2004), is titled “*The Chronology of the Grand Bargain Initiative (2001-2004)*”. A note states that it was prepared on the basis of the notes Amirahmadi took “throughout the 2001-2004 when a group of us at AIC were heavily involved in establishing dialogue and improving relations between the US and Iran”.

This paragraph examines the two memos concerning the “grand bargain” (Amirahmadi, 2004; 2002b). In them, two events happened in 2002 are considered as windows of opportunities for normalizing the US-IRI relations. The first one is the appointment of Javad Zarif as Iranian Ambassador to the UN. Zarif, in fact, was known and appreciated by American diplomats who had worked with him at the Bonn conference for the formation of

¹²⁰ Reportedly, the Iranian regime’s interests were candidly revealed by the AIC’s president himself during a meeting with the then-NSC Senior Director, Zalmeh Khalilzad, and Hillary Mann, in September 2002. In fact, according to his account, he “begged them to make sure that no compromise is made with Iran over political reform and human rights. I made them know that these two issues were central to AIC’s concern in any negotiations between the two governments” (Amirahmadi, 2002b: 4).

¹²¹ See at its website, at the following links: <http://www.us-iran.org/news/2016/6/13/aic-accomplishments-in-thought-leadership?rq=grand%20bargain> and <http://www.us-iran.org/history?rq=grand%20bargain>.

¹²² All the “Memos” are in the Annexes.

the post-Taliban government in Afghanistan (Dobbins, 2005; 2007). The second one is represented by the growing tensions between Iraq and the US. During a meeting held in September 2002 at the Iranian UN Ambassador's residence between some AIC's Directors and Javad Zarif, the latter said the formers that he was "ready to take steps that can be sustained toward an eventual dialogue" (Amirahmadi, 2002b: 2). At that same meeting, Ambassador Pickering told the group that, before arriving to the gathering, he had spoken "to the State Department and was told that the US is prepared to normalize [relations with Iran] and discuss ways of arriving at such an eventuality"¹²³. Then, he asked Zarif whether the IRI was ready to normalize its relations with the US. Zarif answered by saying that "no decision has been made to normalize relations with the US but added empathically that Iran has not also made a decision not to have normal relations with the US" (Amirahmadi, 2002b: 2). Then, from such notes, it appears that *the quest for rapprochement was originally done by the US*. More precisely, *the State Department, by exploiting Pickering's unofficial role, communicated to Iranian political authorities its will to normalize the IRI-US diplomatic relations*. According to the memo, that same night a proposal for the normalization of US-IRI relations was put on the table by Amirahmadi together with Pickering (Amirahmadi, 2002b: 2). The proposal identified three preliminary conditions for a possible rapprochement: "one, they [US and IRI] must accept and decide to normalize relations (political will); two, they must find the right approach to come together; and three, they must focus on substantive issues requiring immediate attention. Political will, a road map, and a prioritized list of key issues" (Amirahmadi, 2002b: 2). Zarif is said to have affirmed that in order to get the first requirement, the US should have shown good intentions (Amirahmadi, 2002b: 2). Therefore, it was agreed that the AIC would have organized a conference where Americans and Iranians would have announced simultaneously their intention to normalize

¹²³ It is of note that, in February 2012, Pickering, together with another former Ambassador and AIC's member, William Luers, wrote an op-ed for the *New York Times*, envisioning a possible deal with Iran. In it, the two ambassadors, plausibly by relying on their past experience of quiet engagement with the IRI, warn that "Iranian leader must be approached directly, but discreetly, by someone who conveys assurances from President Obama that covert operations and public pressure have been demonstrably reduced." However, what is more interesting in that article is the "skeleton" depicted for a "final agreement", made up by a group of assumptions that, taken together, look very much like the 2003 roadmap. In fact, they state: "Iran wants recognition of its revolution; an accepted role in its region; a nuclear program; the departure of the United States from the Middle East; and the lifting of sanctions. The United States wants Iran not to have nuclear weapons; security for Israel; a democratic evolution of Arab countries; the end of terrorism; and world access to the region's oil and gas. Both Iran and the United States want stability in the region – particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan; the end of terrorism from Al Qaeda and the Taliban; the reincorporation of Iran into the international community; and no war" (Luers and Pickering, 2012). This article represents a further proof, if needed, of Pickering's involvement into the AIC's lobbying effort as well as his devotion to the cause of a diplomatic solution of the conflict between the US and the IRI.

relations (Amirahmadi, 2004: 1). At the end of that meeting it was decided also “to continue the discussion while Iran and the US will use their other channels (including the Swiss Embassy in Tehran) to communicate and send messages back and forth” (Amirahmadi, 2002b: 3). According to the memo, another important AIC gathering took place at the Iranian UN Ambassador’s residence in that same month. This time, the participants were: Amirahmadi, Pickering, Platt, Wisner and Miller, plus Senators Joe Biden (then-SFRC’s Chairman) and Chuck Hagel, together with Zarif and Kamal Karrahazi, then-Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs (Amirahmadi, 2002b: 3). In that occasion, Karrahazi claimed that the IRI was ready to normalize the relations with the US, but added that Tehran needed confidence-building gesture by the US. Then, that same night, Amirahmadi, Zarif, and Kharrazi began to formulate a proposal which was later improved by Amirahmadi and Zarif. It was decided also to hold an AIC conference during which the two sides would have read a coordinated statement expressing the two governments’ wishes to normalize relations and establish diplomatic ties for resolving their disputes. Few days later, Amirahmadi shared that plan with Pickering who made some suggestions and corrections. Then, that same week, Amirahmadi took the proposal to Khalilzad in his NSC office, together with the plan for a joint conference and a copy of a “Proposal on US-Iran Cooperation on Iraq”. Whilst “Pickering took the proposal to his contact in the State Department, Ambassador Bill Burns”¹²⁴ (Amirahmadi, 2002b: 3; 2004: 2). Then, in September and October, Amirahmadi and Pickering “met and spoke by telephone to coordinate various messages. In the process the State Department proposed that the US and Iran cooperate on Iraq but that US-Iran issues be also included” (Amirahmadi, 2004: 2). Between September and October, Amirahmadi met with Ambassador Ryan Crocker “and others in the State Department” (Amirahmadi, 2004: 2) for exchanging views and information about what could have been made to engage the two sides. During another meeting between Amirahmadi and Zarif, it was agreed that, “[n]o specific public statement will be made on the nature of the cooperation over Iraq, which shall remain low profile due to sensitivities involved” (Amirahmadi, 2002b: 4). During that gathering, Zarif accepted the proposal but warned that his approval was “conditioned on official acceptance by Tehran” (Amirahmadi, 2002b: 4). In those months, Amirahmadi met Khalilzad and Mann at the NSC (Amirahmadi, 2002b: 4). Reportedly, they discussed about the meetings Amirahmadi have had with Zarif and Kharrazi, and the planned joint conference expressing the US-IRI intentions to normalize relations. At the Khalilzad’s

¹²⁴ See above the Armitage’s words about the role of the State Department Bureau for Near East Affaires, and in particular, of Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Ambassador William Burns, in the “grand bargain” affair.

question on whether the Supreme Leader had approved the plans for normalization, Amirahmadi answered negatively, adding that it was an AIC proposal prepared with the consent of Zarif and his direct boss, Kharrazi. Khalilzad told Amirahmadi that in principle there was no problem with the proposal, but that he had to consult with his superiors before giving a definitive answer (Amirahmadi, 2002b: 4). In other terms, *for the US, as well as for the IRI, the proposal was “cloaked in deniability”*, with some high-rank officials involved in it, but without an official recognition of the process in progress. Depending on which faction would have won inside each country – whether the pro-engagement or the anti-engagement one – the proposal could have easily been dismissed without any diplomatic and political public consequence. In the US, Congress and the public opinion would have remained completely unaware of the attempts of rapprochement. As it is known, no joint conference took place. According to Amirahmadi, Zarif said to have received a copy of the proposal from the State Department on May 1, meanwhile he was in Tehran, and that he took the opportunity to modify the Iranian side of it (Amirahmadi, 2004: 2).¹²⁵ Then, plausibly, the amended copy of the proposal was given to Guldemann who faxed it to the State Department. In Washington the map was ignored because of the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons group’s opposition to any rapprochement with Tehran. Thanks to the deniability scheme, the players of the opening, i.e., Burns, Cocker, Khalilzad, Leverett and Mann for the US, Zarif and Kharrazi for the IRI, remained in the shadows and did not suffer any consequences for its failure. Powell, Haas, Armitage and Rice – who, plausibly, knew about it – could easily deny to have seen or knew about the proposal. In this way, they avoided the problems which would have arisen not only within the administration but also with Congress and the public opinion in case their involvement in the openings would have gone on the surface. Mann and Leverett shortly after the fax’s appearance resigned from their positions inside the administration (or were obliged to). However, one year later Leverett became Senator Kerry’s foreign policy advisor during his presidential campaign.

III.2.C The State Department’s talks with Tehran

¹²⁵ This detail would explain the circulation on the web of three versions of the “roadmap” since the Kessler’s disclosure in 2006. One appears as being the original copy received by Zarif and presumably developed by Khalilzad and Burns from the proposal given to them by, respectively, Amirahmadi and Pickering. The second one seems the copy amended (in red ink) by Zarif in Tehran. The third one could be the final version including the Zarif’s corrections, which plausibly was faxed to the State Department by the Swiss Ambassador. Then, in the first half of 2006, plausibly Zarif leaked the three copies to Kessler by means of Parsi in order to exploit the division existing within the administration and boost a public debate about it. From then on, the *Washington Post*-Guldemann’s narrative gained traction and became the accepted version of the “grand bargain” affair.

The “grand bargain” affair occurred in a context of cover and frequent direct talks between Iranian Foreign Ministry officials and the State Department Near East Affairs Bureau’s officials, sometimes together with high-rank NSC officials. The US Special Afghanistan envoy also, James Dobbins, participated at some of the gatherings. Such talks, which occurred since the end of 2001 up to May 2003 behind the so-called Paris-Geneva “Six plus One” diplomatic framework¹²⁶, were the official context in which Iranian and American intentions for a rapprochement were discussed. Former American Israel Public Affairs Committee’s (AIPAC) Director of Foreign Policy Issues, Steven Rosen, in his effort to destroy what he defines the “grand bargain myth”, offers a detailed summary of them (Rosen, 2008). His account is confirmed by some administration sources, as Hillary Mann (Richardson, 2007), Flynt Leverett (2006), Dobbins (2007, 2015), and Ryan Crocker (Filkins, 2013), as well as by Iranian official sources quoted in Slavin (2007). Also two AIC’s documents (Amirahmadi, 2002b, 2004) describe some of the gatherings. The following is a reconstruction of the meetings based on the above mentioned primary and secondary sources.

According to Leverett,

[w]ell before President Bush took office in January 2001, the United States had joined the United Nations “6+2” framework for Afghanistan. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the Bush administration used the cover of the “6+2” process to stand up what was effectively a freestanding bilateral channel with Iran, with regular (for the most part, monthly) meetings between US and Iranian diplomats. (Leverett, 2006: 11)

It was only in February 2002, after the January “State of the Union Address” labelling the IRI, Iraq and North Korea as components of an “axis of evil” (President George W. Bush, 2002), that the Iranians skipped their monthly meeting in Geneva. However, they participated again in March and continued every month for another year (Richardson, 2007: 10). According to Rosen (2008), in the period considered there were more than 28 separate meetings with American officials of ambassadorial rank. Concerning the Iranian participants, almost no info is available. In fact, Hillary Mann, who participated at some of the gatherings, said that,

[a]s far as they [the Iranians] are concerned, the whole idea that there were talks is something I shouldn’t even be talking about. They don’t want there to be anything about the level of the talks

¹²⁶ The “Six plus Two” arrangement included Afghanistan’s six neighbors – Iran, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China – plus the United States and Russia.

or who was involved. They won't even let us say something like "senior" or "important", "high-ranking" or "high-level". (Richardson, 2007: 9)

In particular, from November 2001 through December 2002, "more than sixteen meetings were held in Geneva and Paris [...] between Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Ryan Crocker (who was also serving as the interim envoy to Afghanistan) and senior Iranian Foreign Ministry officials" (Rosen, 2008)¹²⁷. It was presumably during one of them that an important verbal exchange occurred between Crocker and the Iranian negotiators' leader. It was told by Crocker himself to a journalist and it is worth being quoted because it represents the only admission made, so far, by a Bush Administration's official involved in the talks according to which *the US asked the IRI about a possible, although only tactical, cooperation on Iraq*:

Before the meetings fell apart, Crocker talked with the lead negotiator about the possibility of war in Iraq. "Look," Crocker said, "I don't know what's going to happen, but I do have some responsibility for Iraq—it's my portfolio—and I can read the signs, and I think we're going to go in." He saw an enormous opportunity. The Iranians despised Saddam, and Crocker figured that they would be willing to work with the US "I was not a fan of the invasion¹²⁸," he told me. "But I was thinking, If we're going to do it, let's see if we can flip an enemy into a friend—at least tactically for this, and then let's see where we can take it." The negotiator indicated that the Iranians were willing to talk, and that Iraq, like Afghanistan, was part of [the IRGC' commander, Qassem] Suleimani's brief: "It's one guy running both shows. (Filkins, 2013)

In November-December 2001, James Dobbins negotiated with Zarif (then-Deputy Iranian Foreign Minister) the Bonn Agreement on Afghanistan (Dobbins, 2007; 2010). According to Crocker, who attended the talks, "[t]he formation of the governing council was in its essence a negotiation between Tehran and Washington" (Filkins, 2013). In March 2002, Iranian and American negotiators met in Geneva for a meeting devoted to the future of the Afghan National Army. Dobbins, who attended it, wrote that,

[t]he Iranian delegation included a uniformed general who had been the commander of security assistance to the Northern Alliance throughout its insurgency campaign against the Taliban. The general said that Tehran was prepared to participate in an American-led program to raise and train a new Afghan national army. As part of this effort, he explained, Iran was prepared to house,

¹²⁷ According to Crocker himself, in some of those meetings the Iranian delegation was led by the IRGC' Commander, General Qassem Suleimani (Filkins, 2013). Crocker added that Soleimani sometimes passed messages to him, but avoided to putting anything in writing: "Haji Qassem's way too smart for that. He's not going to leave paper trails for the Americans" (Filkins, 2013).

¹²⁸ It is worth noting that, in mid July 2002, Crocker and Burns, together with Ambassador David Pearce, wrote a memo - "The Perfect Storm" - warning Powell about the risks of an American invasion of Iraq and the post-Saddam problems. (DeYoung, 2007; Burns, 2020). [N.o.t.A.]

pay, clothe, arm and train up to 20,000 Afghan troops in a broader program under American leadership. (Dobbins, 2015: 3)

According to Dobbins, the offer was briefly considered by Powell, Rumsfeld and Rice, yet “no positive decision was made, and the Iranians never received a response” (Dobbins, 2015: 3). According to Rosen, in January 2003, the then-acting US Ambassador to Iraq, Khalilzad, and Zarif assumed control over the negotiations and met in Paris (Rosen, 2008: 4). According to the AIC’s president, it was indeed during one of these meetings in Paris that Zarif met Crocker and together discussed ways through which the two governments could cooperate over Iraq (Amirahmadi, 2004: 2). In March 2003, Khalilzad and Crocker had a second meeting with Zarif in Geneva (Rosen, 2008: 4). According to Amirahmadi, during it, Khalilzad, Crocker, and Zarif discussed again a possible cooperation on Iraq (Amirahmadi, 2004: 2). It was apparently in this occasion that Zarif explained Khalilzad what could have happened in Iraq after the American invasion (Amirahmadi, 2004: 2). Khalilzad, Crocker, and Zarif had two more meetings in Geneva, one in April and in one in May (Rosen, 2008: 4-5). It was during this last gathering that Zarif was asked information by Khalilzad on a bombing attack planned in the Persian Gulf region about whom the US intelligence had received some hints about. Khalilzad wanted Tehran utilize Al Qaeda detainees in its prisons for getting some information which would help the US to prevent it (Slavin, 2003b, 2007:203). However, the IRI did not take the quest seriously (Amirahmadi, 2004: 3). The Americans did not get the information they had asked for and, shortly after the bombing occurred in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on May 12, they started to blame the Iranians for the bombing accusing them of complicity with the terrorists (Slavin, 2003b, 2007: 203-204; Amirahmadi, 2004). The next meeting between Iranian and American officials, scheduled for the 24-25 of May, was cancelled. For Flynt Leverett, it was the US administration which decided to close the back channel because of “unproven and never pursued allegations of the involvement of Iran-based Al Qaeda figures on the May 12, 2003 bomb attacks in Riyadh” (Leverett, 2006: 12). Paul Pillar, then-Chief Middle East expert on the National Intelligence Council, in 2007, reportedly said that there was no proof of Iranian complicity in the Riyadh bombings (Slavin, 2007, 2014). According to Amirahmadi (2004: 3), “the planned meeting [on May 24, 2003] between Zarif and Khalilzad did not take place. Zarif went to Geneva for the meeting but Khalilzad did not show up”. He added that, “in Zarif’s view, the neocons have orchestrated the accusation against Iran so that they could

derail Zarif-Khalilzad negotiations.”¹²⁹ It is almost impossible to know all the issues discussed by Americans and Iranians through that back channel’s. According to a diplomat involved in the meetings, the American diplomats who took part neither took notes nor prepared written cables on the talks “because the Bush administration was paranoid about leaks” adding that, “Cheney’s office and the civilian leadership of the Defense Department were vehemently opposed to the meetings” (Slavin, 2007: 203). According to Mann, the Iranians agreed to talk unconditionally:

They [the Iranians] specifically told me time and again that they were doing this because they understood the impact of this attack [the 9/11] on the US, and they thought that if they helped us unconditionally, that would be the way to change the dynamic for the first time in twenty-five years. (Richardson, 2007: 9)

Although the focus was on Afghanistan, issues related to Al Qaida were also debated. In fact, an American diplomat told Slavin that, in a December 2001 meeting,

Ryan Crocker, [...] who led the US delegation, gave the Iranians a list of five names of al-Qaeda leaders who had disappeared on the battlefield and who might have sought refuge in Iran. [...] the Iranians deported two of them to Afghanistan, and in January 2002, delivered to the United Nations copies of two hundred passports of Arabs caught fleeing Afghanistan whom the Iranians had deported or said they would deport to their home countries. (Slavin, 2007: 199)

The US interactions with the IRI about Al Qaeda were indeed rather rich and complex. Hillary Mann has offered a description of them (Katcher, B., 2009), whose main points deserve to be reported. For instance, confirming what Slavin wrote, she says that, after 9/11 and the Afghanistan’s invasion, “Tehran detained literally hundreds of suspected Al Qaida operatives seeking to flee Afghanistan into Iran. Iran repatriated at least 200 of these individuals to the new Karzai government, to Saudi Arabia, and to other countries”, adding that “[t]he Iranian government documented these actions to the United Nations and to the United States in February 2002, including by providing copies of each repatriated individual’s passport.” However, the IRI could not repatriate those individuals whose countries of origin did not have diplomatic relations with the IRI. Additionally, the Iranians negotiators told the American delegation that,

Osama bin Ladin’s son, Saad, had tried to enter Iran and that Iranian security forces had turned him away. However, these Iranian diplomats expressed concern that, if Saad bin Ladin managed

¹²⁹ This last sentence looks like one of the amendment Zarif reportedly made to the AIC’s documents, plausibly in his attempt to deepen the existing divisions within the Administration. In “The Chronology of the Grand Bargain Initiative (2001-2004)” it is indeed written a note which reads: “Certain items were included in the memo most recently after extensive discussions with a high-ranking Iranian official.” (Amirahmadi, 2004: 1)

to penetrate the porous Iranian-Afghan border and enter Iranian territory—as he apparently did in 2003, after the Bush Administration had unilaterally cut off our dialogue with Iran regarding Afghanistan and Al Qaida — Tehran would encounter difficulty repatriating him to Saudi Arabia, which had already made clear it was not interested in taking either Saad bin Ladin or his father. Instead of working to establish a framework within which Tehran could have made Al Qaida operatives detained in Iran available to US interrogators — as our Iranian interlocutors requested — the Bush Administration insisted that Iran detain and deport all the Al Qaida figures we believed might be in Iran, without any assistance from or reciprocal understandings with the United States. (From the Bush Administration’s perspective, this was meant to be a “test” of Iranian intentions.) (Katcher, B., 2009)

Shortly after the fall of Baghdad, Tehran also made a proposal for an Al Qaida’s and MEK’s members swap. However, as it will be described later, the administration rejected it because of the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons’ opposition, who wanted to leverage the MEK for their regime-change plans. When the existence of the back channel was disclosed - by an article of Barbara Slavin, on May 11, 2003, (Slavin, 2003a) – both Rice and Powell downplayed its importance, plausibly as a way to protect it against the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons’ attacks. Powell went even so far to say that “[t]he issue of diplomatic relations is not on the table right now for either side” (Slavin, 2007: 203). The terroristic bombings in Riyadh offered the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons group the perfect opportunity to definitively derail the talks and reject the roadmap which, in the meantime, had arrived at the State Department. No further meeting took place between Iranian and American officials for possible collaborations on Al Qaida and Iraq.

III.2.D “Proposal for Us-Iran cooperation against Saddam Hussein”

According to IR scholar Achcar (2020), not only the post-invasion Iraq has been beneficial for Tehran, but “[t]he US and Iran have *de facto* collaborated in and over Iraq for decades.” The evidences available don’t support such a claim. The IRI and the US did not cooperate in Iraq neither during the invasion nor later on, although it would have been mutually beneficial and, as seen above, this possibility was indeed considered by both of them. According to the AIC’s documents, a cooperation on Iraq was envisioned by Tehran and Washington already at the end of 2001, as part of a wider plan of normalization of their relations. In October -November 2001, “the US proposes to Iran that they should directly negotiate over Iraq within the Committee set out for Afghanistan” and the proposal “was received through the Swiss Embassy or during the negotiations over Afghanistan within the Afghan Committee [the “Six plus One” cover]” (Amirahmadi, 2004: 1). Then, in February

2002, Tehran made a “counterproposal for direct negotiations over Iraq within the framework of 5+6 (Five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council plus Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan and Syria)” that was sent to the State Department via Kofi Annan, then-UN Secretary General. Yet, “[t]he US rejected the idea because they did not want to involve Russia and China in the negotiations” (Amirahmadi, 2004: 1). They were Pickering and former NSA, Brent Scowcroft, who “had tried to convince Ambassador Javad Zarif to prepare Iran for the American proposal” (Amirahmadi, 2004: 1)¹³⁰. In October 2002, it was Amirahmadi himself who conveyed the “*Proposal for cooperation on Iraq*” to Khalilzad. Then, in January 2003,

Ambassador Zarif meets Ambassador Ryan Crocker (of the State Department) in Paris. They discuss ways that the two governments could cooperate over Iraq. AIC had already prepared a proposal for US-Iran cooperation (see Proposal on US-Iran Cooperation on Iraq). Meanwhile, the US was preparing for the war against Saddam Hussein. (Amirahmadi, 2004: 2).

Zarif would have met again Crocker, together with Khalilzad, in Geneva in March: “[t]hey discuss cooperation on Iraq. The US is now very close to invading Iraq. Dr. Zarif had tried to explain to Ambassador Khalilzad what could happen after the US invades Iraq (warned him of the post-Saddam problems)” (Amirahmadi, 2004: 2). This last point is confirmed by Slavin, according to whom an Iranian diplomat who attended the 2003 Geneva-Paris talks devoted to Afghanistan, told her that Zarif, during one of the meetings,

expressed support for a US attack on Iraq so long as it was not intended as a launching pad against Iran. He also warned that Iraqi military commanders had been instructed to use chemical weapons against US troops. Zarif talked “about Iraqi society, how the United States was unfamiliar with that society and unprepared for what would happen”. [...] Zarif warned against trying to install a new government in Baghdad, and cautioned that “Iraqis will take matters into their own hands. This will happen and you will accuse Iran of being behind it. (Slavin, 2007: 202)

On May 12, 2003 – i.e. when there was supposedly still hope for an American positive response to the roadmap – Zarif publically offered the Iranian support for stabilizing the post-Saddam Iraq by means of a commentary in the *New York Times*. In it, Zarif stated that the Iraq’s reconstruction should have been undertaken with UN legitimacy and blamed the American policy of containment against Tehran which had turned to benefit Saddam. He claimed also that the Saddam’s removal represented, for both Tehran and Washington, an

¹³⁰ This means that Pickering played a key-role not only in the “grand bargain” affair but also in paving the way for an eventual American-Iranian cooperation in Iraq.

opportunity “to replace mistrust and the arms race with mutual security and transparency.” In addition, Zarif criticized the regime change policy the US had implemented in Bagdad (and the Iranians were fearing it could have also been implemented in Tehran). Finally, he made crystal clear that,

Iran is prepared to fully support and contribute to any genuine process by the Iraqi people in this direction [stabilization and reconstruction], a process that should also enjoy the legitimacy of the United Nations. We do not seek to interfere or impose any type of government on the Iraqi people, and believe all should refrain from doing so. (Zarif, 2003)

Two days after the publication of the commentary, the anti-engagement faction within the administration took advantage of the bombings in Riyadh to blame Tehran and sabotage any attempt of rapprochement. Nevertheless, it is worth analyzing the content of the AIC’s “Proposal for Iran-US cooperation against Saddam Hussein” (Amirahmadi, 2002a), which Amirahmadi claims to have conveyed to Khalilzad in October 2002. It consisted of a preamble and two lists, the first entitled “*Things Iran should do for the United States*” and the second “*Things the United States should do for Iran*”. The preamble stated that Saddam was an enemy of both Tehran and Washington and a cooperation in the incipient war was not only possible but also in the best interest of both of them. It also claimed that the US and the IRI had got neither a consensus on assessing Iraqi threats nor an agreement on how to deal with Saddam because of “a lack of direct and authoritative communication between Washington and Tehran.” The proposed collaboration was indeed “intended as another window of opportunity for official interactions toward mending Iran-US relations” and should have been constructed in such a way that “would not close after the Iraqi crisis is over”, differently for what had happened with the US-IRI collaboration on Afghanistan. The preamble added that, “[t]he Islamic Republic has expressed its receptiveness to coordinate measures to abate the costs and risks of counteracting with Iraqi threats and of the post Saddam Hussein situation. The Bush administration has also indicated interest”, confirming the Americans’ contacts for a possible cooperation on Iraq. The document also made clear that the real obstacles for an US-IRI cooperation in Iraq were not those related to the 1979 revolution, such as mutual mistrust, misperception and perceived threats. The real problem was actually represented by some factions and their interests within both the two countries and in the region: “extremists in Tehran want to join forces with Iraq to prevent their anticipated harm by the United States. Opposed to US-Iran cooperation are also powerful

interests in Washington, the Middle East, and beyond.”¹³¹ Therefore, the proposal suggested gradualness and UN’ involvement as measures to overcome the influence of such opposing groups. Additionally, it proposed that the war against Iraq should have taken place “with the UN consent, involving no direct Israeli intervention, must change the current Iraqi regime, and establish a more representative government in Baghdad.” Then, it listed the Iranian duties which consisted mainly in humanitarian assistance to refugees and to American warplanes crew trans-passing the Iranian air space. Tehran was committed also to refrain from using oil as a weapon and from cooperating with Iraq, as well as to close the Iranian borders to fleeing Iraqi Ba’ath Party members and military personnel or terrorists. The list of duties encompassed also the post-invasion period. First of all, it said that “Iran will provide evidence for charging Saddam Hussein and members of his inner circle with crimes against humanity in case he is toppled”. In addition, Tehran would have assisted “the United States in forming a representative and stable post-Saddam Hussein government” and would not have cooperated “with anti-American military forces after the war” but helped “to destroy them.” Moreover, it would have used “the cooperation over Iraq to engage with the US for more open direct bilateral talks to address US’ broader concerns with terrorism, proliferation of WMD, Middle East peace, and human rights”. This last point appears as an anticipation of the Iranian commitment contained in the roadmap which circulated between Iranian and State Department officials some months later. Regarding the American “duties”, the first ones were the lift of sanctions and the end of its opposition to Iranian WTO membership as well as to WB and IMF loans applications. Secondly, the acknowledgment of Tehran’s role in the region and of its security concerns. Thirdly, Washington should have expressed its will of normalizing relations. Finally, the extension to Tehran of “the same protection given to other regional allies against possible Iraqi biological and chemical attacks” as well as guarantees on Iranian territorial integrity and sovereignty. This last point appears as a precautionary measure needed by Tehran, which was aware of the division existing within the administration and feared to be the next country to be invaded by American troops after Iraq.

By rejecting the roadmap, the administration derailed whatever deal with Tehran, including the possibility of a tactical, if not strategic, cooperation on Iraq. From May 2003 on, after the rejection of its proposals, Tehran started to build a network of confidants and

¹³¹ This mention too looks like another Zarif’s amendment.

operative agents aimed to take control of the Iraqi institutions and territory¹³². For many policy-makers and analysts, it was indeed the 2003 invasion of Iraq which “delivered that country into Iran’s sphere of influence” (Rudd, 2020)¹³³. By April 2006, according to intelligence sources quoted by Alexandrovna (2006b), Khalilzad was authorized to enter into discussions with the Iranians on Iraq’s stability. However, such discussions were aborted because of a deliberate plan by Cheney and Rumsfeld “to squash diplomatic activities.” In fact, the Pentagon and Cheney had “retained the services of Iran-Contra arms dealer and discredited intelligence asset Manucher Ghorbanifar as their “man on the ground,” in order to report on any interaction and attempts at negotiations between Iranian officials and US ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad”¹³⁴ (Alexandrovna, 2006b). One year later, the administration authorized Cooker (at that time US Ambassador to Iraq) to meet his Iranian counterpart in Baghdad for negotiating on Iraq. Yet, the talks, held in May, June and August 2007, were almost totally unproductive (Dobbins, 2015). In 2015, Dobbins affirmed that for preventing the complete disintegration of Iraq, “some level of agreement between Washington and Tehran will be essential” (Dobbins, 2015: 5). He expressed also the hope that the then-ongoing talks could go beyond the INP for including issues as Syria, Afghanistan, the Islamic State and Iraq. As the next chapter will argue, this was indeed the Obama Administration’s intention with its openings.

Conclusion

From 2001 to May 2003, American State Department Near East Bureau’s and NSC senior officers had been quietly meeting with Iranian negotiators behind the “Six-plus-One” diplomatic framework for discussing a number of issues. Among them, particular relevant were the post-invasion Afghanistan and Al Qaida. A possible cooperation on Iraq was also envisioned. Reportedly, the Iranians were willing to talks unconditionally. In those same years, a parallel public diplomacy aimed to normalize US-IRI relations was carried out in Washington by an organization, the AIC, sponsoring oil MNE’ and Iranian regime’s interest. Reportedly, it was able to organize quite meetings between NSC’s and State Department’s senior officers with the Iranian then-Ambassador to the UN, Javad Zarif, and the then-

¹³² The leaked files coming from the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs’ intelligence show the extent and the effectiveness of such a penetration (Schail and Hussain, 2019; Risen et al., 2019).

¹³³ According to other analysts, as Ambassador Crocker himself, that process had started far before, shortly after the Iranian Revolution (NPR, 2020).

¹³⁴ On Manucher Ghorbanifar, see also the next paragraph.

Foreign Minister, Kharrazi. Within such contacts a key-role was played by former Ambassador and AIC's Director, Thomas Pickering. These joint efforts produced a roadmap for the normalization of the diplomatic relations which was faxed in May 2003 to the State Department by the Swiss Ambassador to Tehran, as well as a proposal for US-IRI collaboration on Iraq. The roadmap, later known as "grand bargain", was a comprehensive offer which addressed all the disputes existing at that time between Washington and Tehran, and not only the nuclear one. Yet, both the openings were rejected by the administration because the internal turf battle between the supporters (the State Department, some NSC senior officials) and the opponents (Cheney, Rumsfeld and the neocons) of Tehran's engagement was won by the latter. As a consequence, Tehran and Washington remained enemy for the following 12 years. In other terms, the administration, led by one of its faction, chose to prolong the American opposition to the Iranian regime instead of making a strategic alliance with it. Yet, by remaining enemies, the IRI and the US exploited also the advantages of the "nuclear impasse": for the US, huge arms deals in the region with IRI's foes, whilst, for Tehran, an increased political role in the region, particularly in Iraq (Achcar, 2020; Abid, 2020). The American oil lobby, which through the AIC aspired to normalize the US-IRI relations for getting lucrative deals with Tehran, did not attain its objective. Nevertheless, shortly after, it initiated to develop another "public diplomacy" which would have paved the way to the Obama Administration's successful engagement with Tehran (within which a key-role was played, once again, by Ambassador Bill Burns).

III.3 The Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons' agenda: regime change

Preamble

Many authors have enlightened the influence played by the neocons and their ideology on Bush Administration's foreign policy thanks also to their deep entanglement with the Israel lobby in Washington (Parmar, 2008; Bynander, 2013; Grondin, 2006; Ryan, 2010; Buckley and Singh, 2006; Halper and Clarke, 2004; Ahmad, 2014; Fukuyama, 2006; Ikenberry, 2004; Vaïsse, J. 2010, Flibbert, 2006, among others). As Ryan summarizes, the neocons network lobbying "was aimed primarily at two elite groups: first, the Congressional Republican Party (so as to purge it of balance-of-power realism and incipient isolationism); and, second, in a

broader sense, the Washington, D.C.-based foreign policy establishment” (Ryan, 2010: 7). Anthropologist Janine Wedel pointed out that, although the neoconservative is an ideological movement, however “it is best described as an extended family based largely on the informal social networks” (Wedel 2009: 147). The neocons had indeed been able to patiently build, over time, a network of ideologists and policymakers who, since the 1970s, had gained access to key-positions within the epistemic community and the foreign policy establishment. Within the G. W. Bush Administration, for instance, L. “Scooter” Libby was Vice-President Cheney’s Chief-of-staff; Paul Wolfowitz was Deputy Secretary of Defense; Richard Perle was the Chairman of the Defense Policy Board; Zalmay Khalilzad was NSC Senior Director, special envoy to the Middle East and, then, Ambassador to Iraq; Elliott Abrams was National Security Council Senior Advisor for Middle East policy and, during the second term, Deputy National Security Advisor; Douglas Feith was Under Secretary of Defense for policy; John Bolton was Under Secretary of State for arms control and international security and, during the second term, Ambassador to the United Nations; Eliot Cohen was a member of the defense policy board; and, finally, the Vice-President’s daughter, Elizabeth Cheney, was employed at the State Department. Most of the Bush’s foreign policy team members “had already worked closely alongside one another in previous administrations, and the ties among them were close, intricate and overlapping” (Mann, 2004: X). Parmar described the neocons’ vast network inside the Bush Administration, focusing in particular on the members of a neocons’ think-tank, the “Project for a New American Century” (PNAC). He wrote that, “the PNAC’s 33 leaders were highly connected with the American state – displaying 115 such connections: 27 with the Department of Defense, 13 with State, 12 with the White House, 10 with the National Security Council, and 23 with Congress”, adding that the PNAC could be “considered strongly integrated into the political and administrative machinery of US power; certainly, it is not an outsider institution in this regard” (Parmar 2008: 46) In particular, during the Bush’s first term, when Rumsfeld was acting as Secretary of Defense, “[c]hampioned by Cheney and enabled by Rumsfeld, led by outside advisor Richard Perle and Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, the neocons turned the Pentagon into their policy sanctuary” (Risen, 2006: 221). The basic tenets of the neo-conservative doctrine in foreign policy can be summarized as follows: military preemption, regime change, the obligation and the merit of exporting democracy, and a vision of the US power that is “fully engaged and never apologetic” (Halper and Clarke, 2004: 206). Another important concept of the neoconservative ideology, translated from Leo Strauss’ philosophical thought (Dury, 1999), is that one which assumes the absolute validity

and primacy of American liberal values and of democracy in particular. As a consequence, all the people in the world, regardless of their historical and social context, are assumed as aspiring to such values whose achievement, in undemocratic states, is forbidden by who hold political power. This is particularly the case of the ME, with the exception of Israel. Therefore, the US has the moral duty to support the ME people to become rid of their tyrants and get American values and democracy. So, for the neoconservatives, the ultimate goal of regime change in Iraq was a whole democratic ME achieved by a kind of domino effect initiated in Baghdad. In their vision, the Iranians also would have been freed from their oppressive regime as a consequence of the American invasion of Iraq and the supposed democratization of its political and civil system. Talking to Slavin in 2006, Condoleezza Rice recalled indeed “discussions of the potential effect on Iran of Najaf [the Iraqi Shiite holy city] becoming dominant over Qom [the Iranian counter-part]”. Armitage confirmed Slavin that the Bush Administration “viewed Iran through the prism of a successful war in Iraq” (Slavin, 2007: 211). In particular, they were the neocons inside the Pentagon, as Wolfowitz and Feith, that believed an American victory in Iraq would have weakened the Iranian theocracy and that the US “could use Iraqi bases to pressurize Iran” (Slavin, 2007: 211). Eventually, in case the domino effect wouldn’t had worked spontaneously, the US would have accelerated the “democratization process” in Tehran by undertaking military actions and/or by supporting internal uprisings. In fact, the former Israeli Mossad’s director of intelligence, Uzi Arad, and Prime Minister Netanyahu's foreign-policy adviser, reportedly made this observation:

If you look at President Bush’s axis of evil’ list, all of us said North Korea and Iran are more urgent, Iraq was already semi-controlled because there were sanctions. It was outlawed. Sometimes the answer [from the neocons] was “Let’s do first things first. Once we do Iraq, we’ll have a military presence in Iraq, which would enable us to handle the Iranians from closer quarters, would give us more leverage”. (Unger, 2007)

Shortly after the invasion of Iraq, the neocons started a campaign for making the IRI became the next target of the US’ military campaign in the Middle East (Ryan, 2004). For instance, Perle is said as stating that, “we could deliver a short message, a two-word message: “You [IRI] are the next” (Renwick, 2006). Rumsfeld, who increasingly aligned his agenda along the neocons’ one, sentenced that, “[e]veryone wants to go to Baghdad. Real men want to go to Tehran” (Renwick, 2006). After the invasion of Iraq, the fact that it didn’t produce the expected domino-effect did not make the neocons more cautious. On the contrary. Neocon ideologist Meyrav Wurmser, a co-author of the “*A Clean Break. A New Strategy for*

Securing the Realm” (IASPS, 1996) told journalist Unger in March 2007: “[i]t’s a mess [the situation in Iraq after the 2003 invasion], isn’t it? My argument has always been that this war is senseless if you don’t give it a regional context” (Unger, 2007a). Wurmser was referring to the “Clean Break” strategy of waging American-led wars against Iraq, Syria and Lebanon for stabilizing the ME. That report was one of the three studies the neocons had produced for influencing US foreign policy establishment. Two of them – “*Rebuilding America’s Defense*” (Project for a New American Century, 2000)¹³⁵ and the above mentioned “*A Clean Break*” (IASPS, 1996)¹³⁶ – has been widely discussed by academic literature (Bölsche, 2003; Abelson, 2006; Dale Scott, 2008; Afsah, 2003; Ryan, 2010; Ahmad, 2014; Halper and Clarke, 2004; Grondin, 2005, among others). A third document, the “1992 Defense Planning Guidance for the Fiscal Years 1994-1999” (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1992)¹³⁷, has received less attention by scholars. Yet, it deserves a closer analysis because of its legacy on the Bush Administration’s foreign policy. It was published in February 1992 by the neocon then-Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, Paul Wolfowitz, and his deputy, L. Lewis “Scooter” Libby, for the then-Secretary of Defense, Dick Cheney. According to Mann (2004: 210) it was written by some neocon Pentagon’s analysts as Zhalmay Khalilzad and Richard Perle as well as neocon ideologue Albert Wholstetter. In other terms, it was an internal elaboration within the G. W. H. Bush Administration by neocons who had taken crucial positions inside the US foreign policy establishment. It called for establishing and maintaining America’s primacy over Eurasia as well as preventing the rise of any hostile power able to challenge it. It proposed also a policy of preventive disarmament of any rogue state which, by acquiring weapons of mass destruction, would have obstructed such primacy arguing that the US should have aimed “to address sources of regional conflict and instability” (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1992). At the time of its elaboration, the guidance could not be translated into a policy document because Bush was defeated for re-election. Ten years later, its authors gained key-positions inside the Bush Administration: Wolfowitz became Deputy Secretary of Defense, Libby Vice President Cheney’s Chief of Staff, Khalilzad NSC’s Senior Director, and Perle Defense Policy Board’s Chairman. Therefore, they could inflate the Bush Administration’s

¹³⁵ Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Richard Perle, were three of the founders of that think-tank. Paul Wolfowitz was the “ideological father of the group” (Pitt, 2003: 2).

¹³⁶It is worth noting here that, among others “Clean Break” plan’s authors there were Richard Perle, Douglas Feith and David Wurmser, who later would have become Vice-President’s Cheney Middle East advisor.

¹³⁷ For a comparison between the original leaked version and the official (censored) released one, see The National Security Archive (2008) as well as Tyler (1992) and Armstrong (2003).

foreign policy with the basic tenets of that guidance. In fact, its legacy was present, although expressed under an ideological surface, in two documents elaborated by the Bush Administration (PBS, 2003). The first of one is “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America” (The Bush White House, 2002) released in September 2002, which advocated, first of all, for a strategy of regime change towards “rogue states” aimed to promote democracy. Secondly, it reinforced the concept of US military supremacy. Thirdly, it stated the American right of conducting preventive wars in order to protect US national interests. The second document is “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America” of March 2006, which reaffirmed a similar approach by stating that the US government has the duty to “anticipate and counter threats, using all elements of national power, before the threats can do grave damage. The greater the threat, the greater the risk of inaction – and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves” (The Bush White House, 2006: 18). The importance of the principles expressed by the 1992 defense guidance for decoding the G. W. Bush Administration’s foreign policy towards Tehran has gone so far under-estimated (apart from some notable exceptions: PBS, 2003; Tyler, 1992; Armstrong, 2003; The National Security Archive, 2008). Yet, it was consistently with those principles that Cheney, Rumsfeld and their neocon allies – from both inside and outside the administration – called for regime change in Tehran. For instance, in January 2005, Dick Cheney said that “given the fact that Iran has a stated policy and that their objective is the destruction of Israel, the Israelis might well decide to act first, and to let the rest of the world worry about the cleaning up the diplomatic mess afterwards” (quoted in *Foreign Policy Bulletin*, 2006: 36). At the end of 2006, Joshua Muravchik, a neocon ideologist, wrote that “President Bush will need to bomb Iran’s nuclear facilities before leaving office. [...] Nothing will embolden terrorists and jihadists more than a nuclear-armed Iran” (Muravchik J., 2006).

For fully grasping the role played by the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons group inside the Bush administration, it is important to consider also the ways through which they imposed their foreign policy agenda. For instance, Undersecretary of Defense Feith was able to circumvent the NSC decision-making process and initiating a regime-change plan in Tehran. The group used to work also in a rather bullying way, especially against the intelligence community (Dreyfuss, 2002; Weisman, 2005). Their repeated attacks against the intelligence community were aimed to eliminate even the preliminary elaboration of an engagement with the IRI (McGovern, 2016; Porter, 2014; Ryan, 2010; Hasting Dunn, 2007; Richardson,

2007)¹³⁸. The 2007 National Intelligence Estimate claiming the non-existence of an immediate Iranian nuclear threat (IC and NIC, 2007) can indeed be interpreted as the final outcome of the turf war engaged by the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons group against the intelligence community. The fact that the group had meantime lost one of its pillars – Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, who had been replaced by Robert Gates, a supporter of diplomatic engagement with Tehran¹³⁹ – was crucial in determining the failure of the group’s plans (Oren, 2011). The influence played by the group on the administration’s foreign policy-making was very likely a consequence of the role Cheney had been able to build for himself. In fact,

Cheney first assembled a mini-NSC staff in his own office, then pressed hard – and ultimately unsuccessfully – to chair the PC [Presidential Cabinet], and then ensconced himself on that committee and salted the other interagency groups with members of his staff. Moreover, he worked closely with ally Don Rumsfeld to press their more assertive position (as well as to undermine Powell), ignoring Rice’s attempts at control. Both Cheney and Rumsfeld conducted significant portions of their foreign policy discussions and advising outside the structures of the NSC system, making it even more difficult for Rice. (Rosati and Scott, 2007: 123)

Moreover, according to Mann,

When it came to military and intelligence issues, Cheney, as a former defense secretary and member of the House Intelligence Committee, wielded extraordinary influence in the administration’s back room decision making. He had his own staff and an extensive network of former aides throughout the foreign policy apparatus. (Mann, 2004: 370).

Cheney managed also to have a full intelligence briefing early each morning which worked as a run-through for the later presidential briefing. Thus prepared, Cheney could join Bush at the president’s session, during which Cheney asked questions to be sure the President was briefed in those areas he reputed important (Hayes, 2007) – and, plausibly, asked no question about areas he did not want Bush was briefed in. The final result was the NSA’s inability to make the NSC the place where national security and foreign policy choices were taken (Elliott and Calabresi, 2004).¹⁴⁰

This section is organized as follows. The first paragraph, devoted to the so-called “Team B Experiment” undertaken in 1992 by Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Feith, helps to understand the

¹³⁸ Hersh (2003a) and Risen (2006) described how a similar conflict between the Bush Administration and the intelligence community marred the reporting on Iraq’s weapons.

¹³⁹ See the next Chapter.

¹⁴⁰ Mayer (2006), claims that the Cheney’s Chief of Staff, and his longtime principal legal adviser, David S. Addington “created a system to ensure that virtually all important documents relating to national-security matters were seen by the Vice-President’s office” already during the transition period.

practices of intelligence politicization¹⁴¹ and militarization Feith carried out during the Bush Administration as Undersecretary of Defense. The second one delves into the cover operation made up by Feith through his “Special Plans Office” (SPO) for legitimizing the MEK and overthrowing the Iranian regime. The third paragraph explains how the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons group, by circumventing the NSC process, succeeded in derailing the 2001-2003 IRI-State Department backchannel. Finally, the last paragraph describes the supposed Israeli lobby’s refusal to play a role the SPO’s attempts to manufacture its regime change plan.

III.3.A The “Team B Experiment”, institutionalized

On November 2, 1975, overnight, nine key-figures of the Ford Administration were fired by the president or had their position changed (King, 2012). Rumsfeld and Cheney were among the winners (Blumenthal, 2005) of that kind of *coup* inside the Republican Party. In fact, it allowed Rumsfeld and his young *protégé* Cheney – who few months before had been appointed as, respectively, Chief of State and Deputy Chief of State – to become Secretary of Defense, the former, and Chief of Staff, the latter. According to Scott, “[t]here is no doubt that by the end of 1976 both man had emerged as foes of détente and of congressional oversight of foreign policy” (P.D. Scott, 2007: 53). Less than one year later, Rumsfeld together with, among others, Feith¹⁴² and Paul Wolfowitz, then-Director of Foreign Policy Planning at the State Department, were involved in the so-called “Team B experiment” (CIA, 1976). It had been orchestrated by the then-CIA’s Director, George H.W. Bush and the neocon ideologist, Albert Wohlstetter. It was intended to produce, leak, and spin a report accusing the CIA – supposedly the “Team A” – of consistently underestimating the Soviet threat (P. D. Scott, 2007: 50-61; Demac, 1984; Parry, 1993, 2004). According to former Defense Department official, Ann Hessing Cahn, “[w]hen, then Ronald Reagan got elected, Team B became, in essence, the “A Team.” For more than a third of a century, perceptions about US national security were colored by the view that the Soviet Union was on the road to military superiority over the United States.” Such a re-assessment of the “Soviet threat” – which later was proved to be false and misleading – contributed to weaken President Carter

¹⁴¹ “Politicization is the manipulation of intelligence estimates to reflect policy preferences” (Rovner, 2013: 55). On the comparison between different US Administrations’ experience of intelligence politicization and its consequences in terms of foreign policy, see Hastedt, (2013). For a former Bush Administration insider’s view on the risks of intelligence politicization, see Pillar, 2010.

¹⁴² At that time, Feith was a Harvard University postgraduate student of the neocon ideologist Richard Pipes.

and represented the main justification for a huge and continuous increase in the defense budget (Hessing Cahn, 1993; Demac, 1984; Parry, 1993). Moreover, it initiated a serpentine sabotage of the 1947 National Security Act which, with the CIA's establishment, had envisioned a system in which the US intelligence had to be truly and totally independent from the Department of Defense. Later, during the Bush G. W. Administration, the same actors who had implemented the "Team B experiment", i.e. Rumsfeld, Cheney, Feith and Wolfowitz, furtherly undermined the NSC system by increasing intelligence's militarization and politicization. For instance, in 2002, Feith, fearing the Leverett's opening towards Tehran, repeated precisely what the "Team B" experiment was about, i.e., asked Pentagon's neocon Rubin to write an alternative report which dismissed the value and the possibilities of an American engagement with Tehran (Seliktar, 2012: 130). Feith created also two offices within the Pentagon - the Office for Strategic Influence (OSI) and the Office for Special Plans (OSP) – which played critical roles in the Bush Administration's ME foreign policy (Sevastopulo, 2005; Ahmad, 2014: 139. In particular, the OSP's aim was

to avoid established vetting procedures that requires rigorous scrutiny of intelligence before it reaches higher authorities. Instead, the unit would channel the intelligence directly to top officials. Coordinating closely with the OVP [Cheney's Office of the Vice President] and the DPB [Perle's Defense Policy Board], the unit was able to circumvent the intelligence community. (Ahmad, 2014: 139)

Moreover, the OSP

used an informal network across various departments and agencies to bypass official channels. At the State Department, instead of working with the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, [or] the Near Eastern Affairs bureau [...], it liaised directly with allies such as Bolton, Wurmser [one of the neocon "Clean Break" plan's author] and Elizabeth Cheney [Dick Cheney's daughter]. At the NSC, it liaised with Hadley and Abrams. (Ahmad, 2014: 139)

In February 2007, the Department of Defense Office of Inspector General stated that the OSP did not provide "the most accurate analysis of intelligence to senior decision-makers" because of "an expanded role and mission [...] from policy formulation to alternative intelligence analysis and dissemination" (Department of Defense Office of Inspector General, 2007, pag. 2 of the Executive Summary). Since 2001 through 2003, Feith's OSP, with the silent approval of Rice's deputy, had also manufactured a plan for regime change in Tehran.

III.3.B Supporting regime change from within

The Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons group was sure the Iranian regime could have been easily removed by giving support to the various Iranian dissident groups existing inside the IRI and near its borders. So, for instance, according to Abrahamian, they supported the Maoist fighters who, in 1981, had initiated a guerrilla in the forests around the Caspian Sea; the monarchists trying to restore the Pahlavi dynasty; the Azeri separatists who wanted to be part of the Republic of Azerbaijan; and finally, even the dissident nephew of the Ayatollah Roullah Khomeini, Hussein Khomeini (Abrahamian, 2004: 68-69). However, their most ambitious plan for creating a political alternative to the Iranian theocratic regime was implemented by the Feith's OSP under the direction of neocon Abram Shulsky¹⁴³ from December 2001 to June 2003. It consisted, basically, in empowering the MEK, although it was then considered a terroristic organization by the State Department. This section is the description of that cover plan. It is based on the few second-hand accounts devoted to it (all based on administration sources) as well as the report elaborated in 2008 by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on the activities of the OSP.

Reportedly, two OSP Farsi-speaker officials, Harold Rhode and Larry Franklin, met the Iranian Iran-Contra player and arms dealer, Manucher Ghorbanifar, together with some Iranian dissidents, during three secret meetings. The middle man who arranged the gatherings was Michael Ledeen¹⁴⁴ belonging to the neocon think-tank American Enterprise Institute. For a while, during the Bush Administration, Ledeen was Feith's consultant and, at the same time, the foreign policy advisor of Karl Rove, President Bush's Senior Advisor (Lobe, 2003a). Reportedly, Ledeen had told Pentagon's officials that some Iranian defectors owned important information about Tehran's involvement in Afghan terrorism (Risen, 2003). The first secret meeting was held in November 2001 in Rome, between Ledeen, the OSP's men, and some MEK's members. It was aimed to derail the US-IRI back channel which, at that time, was exploited by State Department officials behind the "Six plus Two" talks (Lobe, 2003b; Ahmed, 2014: 144, Marshall et al., 2004). In December 2002, Ghorbanifar reportedly told *Newsweek* journalist, Hosenball, that "one of the things he

¹⁴³ On the entanglement between Shulsky, Wolfowitz, and Feith, see S. Hersh (2003a).

¹⁴⁴ It was Ledeen that, during the Reagan Administration introduced Manucher Ghorbanifar to Colonel Oliver North, initiating the so-called "Iran-Contra" affair. As Risen (2003) notes, Ghorbanifar had been long considered an untrustworthy individual by the CIA which, according to a 1987 Congressional report on the Iran-Contra affair, issued a "Fabricator Notice" warning that he "should be regarded as "an intelligence fabricator and nuisance". See also Bergman (2008: 214).

discussed with Defense officials Harold Rhode and Larry Franklin at meetings in Rome in December 2001 (and in Paris last June [2002] with only Rhode) was regime change in Iran” (Hosenball, 2003). One of the participants, according to sources familiar with the meeting “was a former senior member of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard who claimed to have information about dissident ranks within the Iranian security service” (Marshall et al., 2004). After the gathering, Rhode sent a classified cable to the Pentagon reporting that they had “made contact with Iranian intelligence officers who anticipate possible regime change in Iran and want to establish contact with the United States government” (Rozen, 2006¹⁴⁵). The Italian military intelligence, SISMI (*Servizio di Intelligence e Spionaggio Militare Italiano*) – a Ledeen’s old acquaintance¹⁴⁶ – had contributed to the organization of the meeting and, according to US government sources quoted by Marshall (Marshall et al., 2004), both the then-SISMI’s head, General Nicolò Pollari,¹⁴⁷ and the then-Italian Minister of Defense, Antonio Martino, would have attended the gathering (Marshall et al., 2004) in a SISMI’s apartment in central Rome (Rozen, 2006; Bonini, 2006b). Franklin and Rhode did not notify the US Embassy in Rome nor the CIA station chief there. The latter knew about the gathering by chance from the Italian Minister, only at a later date and by chance, from Martino (Marshall et al., 2004). Therefore, the State Department and the CIA brought the matter to the attention of Rice’s deputy, Stephen Hadley. Reportedly, Hadley warned Franklin and Rhode to stop their secret meetings (Marshall et al., 2004). However, a second meeting took place in Rome, likely in June 2002, reportedly with the participation of a high-rank US official together with Rhode and Franklin (Marshall et al., 2004). In June 2003, in Paris, Franklin and Rhode secretly met again with Ghorbanifar. When the meetings were covered up, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence started to investigate although

¹⁴⁵ Rozen quoted Warren P. Strobel of the Knight Ridder’s Washington Bureau.

¹⁴⁶ In 1978, Ledeen was a kind of shadow “consultant” for the Italian Government during the abduction (and, later, the murder) of the then-Italian Prime Minister, Aldo Moro, by the left-wing terrorist organization “Brigate Rosse” (Red Brigades) (Cucchiarelli, 2018: 2020). During his stay in Rome, Ledeen collaborated also with the SISMI for which he helped to manufacture two black propaganda operations: one aimed to discredit president Jimmy Carter, the other finalised to “sell” the thesis, later discredited, of the KGB behind the Pope John Paul II’s assassination attempt (Cucchiarelli, 2020; Lobe, 2003a). Once returned to the US, in 1981, Ledeen joined the Reagan administration as Secretary of State Haaig’s Advisor on terrorism and then worked, together with Douglas Feith, at the NSC. Bonini and D’Avanzo (2006) have demonstrated that in 2002-2003 Ledeen collaborated again with the SISMI in producing the forged documents regarding a supposed Iraq’s purchase of uranium oxide from Niger on which the Bush Administration would have built its argument for the invasion of Iraq.

¹⁴⁷ Later, General Pollari was investigated by an Italian penal court for the secret meeting (Bonini, 2006a). According to the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence’s findings, the SISMI would have helped Ledeen to organize the meetings in change of oil and gas deals for some Italian hydrocarbons MNEs (presumably the state owned ENI, *Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi*) See Bonini, 2006b.

Rumsfeld and a Senior pentagon's official had dismissed the importance of the first meeting and insisted that the second one happened just by chance (Marshall et al., 2004). In 2003, some administration sources revealed that Hadley had knowledge of the meetings since their very beginning and that he "expressed no reservations" about them (Risen, 2003). The Senate Committee discovered indeed that the secret gatherings continued with Hadley's clearance. When, on June 5, 2008, the Committee's report was made public, its press release stated that,

[t]he report found that the clandestine meetings between Pentagon officials and Iranians in Rome and Paris were inappropriate and mishandled from beginning to end. Deputy National Security Advisor Steve Hadley and Deputy Secretary Paul Wolfowitz failed to keep the Intelligence Community and the State Department appropriately informed about the meetings. The involvement of Manucher Ghobanifer and Michael Ledeen in the meetings was inappropriate. Potentially important information collected during the meetings was withheld from intelligence agencies by Pentagon officials. Finally, senior Defense Department officials cut short internal investigations of the meetings and failed to implement the recommendations of their own counterintelligence experts. (Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2008)

At the time of the cover up, the Rhode's and Franklin's meetings raised the possibility "that a rogue faction at the Pentagon was trying to work outside normal US foreign policy channels to advance a 'regime-change' agenda not approved by the president's foreign policy principals or even the president himself" (Marshall et al., 2004). This was precisely what the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons group was doing through the OSP activities. It is confirmed, firstly, by the presence of MEK members at the meetings. Secondly, by the Pentagon's opposition to disbanding the MEK, a measure called for not only by Tehran, but also by the State Department and the NSA. Writing on May 8, 2003, Slavin quoted a former CIA Director of counterterrorism according to whom the CIA and the State Department had killed a number of plans by hard-liners in the Pentagon and Vice President Cheney's office to use the MEK as a US military surrogate after Saddam's fall. He added that there was "an ongoing debate about them between the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the State Department", saying also that there was "no question that we have not disbanded them". The MEK, in fact, had been allowed by the US forces to resume broadcasting propaganda into Iranian territory and to keep its light weapons. In addition, the MEK "retained access to its heavy weapons – which are under US guard – to maintain them" (Slavin, 2003). As Risen wrote,

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Deputy Secretary Paul Wolfowitz seemed to think that the MEK could be useful in a future war with Iran, and so they appeared eager to keep the group in place inside Iraq. [...] At the White House, officials soon learned that the Pentagon was dreaming up excuses to avoid following through on any further actions to rein in the MEK. [...] The Pentagon basically told the White House that “we will get to it [the MEK’s dismantling] when we get around to it,” noted one former Bush administration official. “And they got away with it.” (Risen, 2006: 216)

The American forces had signed a truce with the MEK and were very slow in disarming them, because, according to Wilkerson, Rumsfeld pretended not to have enough troops for doing it (Slavin, 2007: 202). Three years after the last OSP’s secret meeting, in April 2006, some American intelligence sources unveiled to journalist Larisa Alexandrovna that the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons group was still thinking of the MEK as a tool for regime change in Tehran. In particular, one of the sources told her that after the US army had seized a MEK facility 60 miles northwest of Baghdad shortly after the 2003 invasion¹⁴⁸,

they did not secure the MEK and let them basically because Wolfowitz was thinking ahead to Iran. [...] We [the US] disarmed [the MEK] of major weapons but not small arms. Rumsfeld was pushing to use them as a military special ops team, but policy infighting between their camp and [the NSA] Condi, she was able to fight them off for a while. (Alexandrovna, 2006).

Another source confirmed her that, in 2005, Rumsfeld, under Cheney’s pressure, proposed a plan to “convert” the MEK by having them simply quit their organization, adding that, “[t]hese guys are nuts. [Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence] Cambone and those guys made MEK members swear an oath to democracy and resign from the MEK and then our guys incorporated them into their unit and trained them” (Alexandrovna, 2006). According to all her three intelligence sources, “military and intelligence officials alike were alarmed that instead of securing a known terrorist organization Rumsfeld under instructions from Cheney, began using the group on special ops missions into Iran to pave the way for a potential Iran strike” (Alexandrovna, 2006). A UN’s official close to the Security Council added crucial details to the story by explaining that, “the newly renamed MEK soldiers were being run instead of military advance teams, committing acts of violence in hopes of staging an insurgency of the Iranian Sunni population.” He added also that a “clandestine war had

¹⁴⁸ A MEK’s basis different from the Iraqi Camp Ashraf, MEK’s main location, at about 60 miles west of the Iranian border, where since the beginning of the invasion US troops had detained as many as 3,500 members of MEK including the highest level ranking leaders (Alexandrovna, 2006).

been going on for roughly a year [i.e. from around April 2005] and included unmanned drones run jointly by several agencies” (Alexandrovna, 2006).

The Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons’ regime-change plans did not indeed consist only of the MEK’s exploitation. In fact, reportedly the Pentagon organized also secret reconnaissance missions inside Iranian territory, some of which undertaken with the cooperation of Pakistan (in exchange for a promise not to prosecute Doctor Khan and his Pakistani partners in the nuclear black market¹⁴⁹) (Hersh, 2005). Moreover, according to a source quoted by Hersh, “the Defense Department civilians, under the leadership of Douglas Feith” would have been working “with Israeli planners and consultants to develop and refine potential nuclear, chemical-weapons, and missile targets inside Iran” (Hersh, 2005). In 2006, the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons group succeeded in making the Administration invest heavily for promoting democracy in the IRI as an attempt of weakening the regime from within¹⁵⁰ (Dinmore, 2006a; 2006d), a plan criticized by both European diplomats and Iranian human rights activists (Dinmore, 2006c). Moreover, there were suspicions the American financial support would have gone to support the MEK (LaFranchi, 2006). In particular, it was the State Department’s Iran-Syria Group which had the task of overseeing a \$85 million program finalized to produce anti-regime propaganda and support dissident groups (Dinmore, 2006b). The group, supervised by Elizabeth Cheney, the Vice-President’s daughter, had been created in that same year with the goal of plotting a strategy for “democratizing” Syria and the IRI. The administration, under the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons’ pressure, undertook also other covert actions as “cultivating proxies among the Kurds and some of Iran’s ethnic tribes to gather intelligence in the border regions of Iran” (Rozen, 2006). In April 2006, Hersh described a situation of pre-war in Washington, claiming that, at that time, President Bush had already “quietly initiated a series of talks on plans for Iran with a few key senators and members of Congress” (Hersh, 2006). Some months before, the Pentagon had presented to the White House various option plans, one of which was calling for “the use of a bunker-buster tactical nuclear weapon [...] against underground nuclear sites” (Hersh, 2006). Hersh wrote also that according to American intelligence and military sources, US troops were already on the Iranian ground, negotiating as much alliances as possible with separatist

¹⁴⁹ See Chapter 1.

¹⁵⁰ The plan was approved and financed by Congress through the bill “HR 6198: Iran Freedom Support Act” (Congress, 2006), enacted on September 30, 2006 which authorized the president “to provide financial and political assistance to foreign and domestic individuals, organizations, and entities that support democracy and the promotion of democracy in Iran. According to Barry (2006) it was heavily backed by the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee.

groups: the Azeri in the north, at the border with Azerbaijan for the Baluchi in the Southeast, near Pakistan, and, finally, the Kurds in the Northwest, near Turkey (Hersh, 2006). One year later, in May 2007, according to intelligence sources, President Bush gave the CIA a “Presidential Finding”, that is an official authorization for mounting a covert “black” operation aimed to destabilize and, eventually, topple the Iranian government (quoted in Ross and Esposito, 2007 and Shipman, 2007). The plan consisted in a propaganda and disinformation campaign in addition to cover actions for manipulating the Ryal (the Iranian currency) as well as all the IRI’s official financial transactions. It is plausible that such a plan was considered as a more viable option than the military one. In fact, a former Senior CIA official reportedly said that, “Vice-President Cheney helped to lead the side favoring a military strike, but I think they have concluded that a military strike has more downsides than upsides” (Shipman, 2007). According to Hersh the cover activities allowed by the May 2007 “Presidential Finding” involved also the support of the Ahwazi Arab and Baluchi minorities as well as of other dissident group as the *Jundullah*, a Sunni militant organization (Hersh 2008: 1). Reportedly, the *Jundullah* had been conducting lethal attacks inside Iranian territory from bases located within the porous Iran-Pakistan-Afghanistan “tri-borders region” since 2005 supported by the CIA and a FBI counterterrorism task-force (O’Carrol, 2007; Sahimi, 2009; Haider, 2007; Bhadrakumar, 2007; Lowther, 2007; Risen and Apuzzo, 2014; BBC News, 2010)¹⁵¹.

Supposedly, the Pentagon’s, CIA’s and FBI’s use of the MEK and *Jundullah* for regime change was part of a wider plan of Islamist terrorist groups’ exploitation in the Caucasus-Persian Gulf-Central Asia area, as some analysts claim (Secker, 2013). Yet, few hints are so far available to support such a hypothesis. This is because the Bush Administration prevailed in invoking the state secrets privilege against the source who unveiled some details about it, i.e., the former FBI translator, Sibel Edmonds¹⁵² (Rapa, 2006). Therefore, so far, no document related to her allegations is available to be checked¹⁵³. The plan was defined by

¹⁵¹ In 2010 the Obama Administration, plausibly as a confidence building measure towards Tehran, enlisted the *Jundullah* as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) (CNN, 2010).

¹⁵² “Ms. Edmonds worked as a language specialist for the FBI’s Washington Field Office. During her work with the bureau, she discovered and reported serious acts of security breaches, cover-ups, and intentional blocking of intelligence that had national security implications. After she had reported these acts to FBI management, she was retaliated against and ultimately fired in March 2002. Since that time, court proceedings on her issues have been blocked by the assertion of “State Secrets Privilege” by Attorney General Ashcroft, and the Congress of the United States has been gagged and prevented from any discussion of her case through retroactive re-classification issued by the Department of Justice.” Source: National Whistleblowers Center. On the Edmonds case, see Giraldi, 2008; 2012.

¹⁵³ For a summary of them, see Friedman, 2010.

Edmonds as the “Gladio B” operation (Edmonds, 2012). It is supposed to be a repetition of the so-called “Gladio-Stay Behind” covert operation – which Edmonds re-labelled as “Gladio A” – in the Caucasus-Persian Gulf-Central Asia regions. The “Gladio-A” plan had been implemented by CIA’s and NATO’s high-rank officials jointly with members of NATO countries’ governments to counteract a possible Soviet invasion during the Cold War. One of the tactical means envisioned by the “Gladio A” operation was the exploitation of extremist political groups in terroristic attacks in Western Europe and Turkey (Ganser, 2005). The existence of the “Gladio A” operation was covered up by the then-Italian Prime Minister, in 1990¹⁵⁴. Supposedly, as a consequence of the revelation, the CIA’s, Pentagon’s, and NATO’s senior officials in charge of the “Gladio A” operation decided to develop an alternative plan, the “Gladio B”. Its objective was that of containing and weakening Russia’s and, eventually, China’s growing influence, not in Europe, but in the Caucasus-Persian Gulf-Central Asia regions. The manipulation of terrorist groups was maintained as an operative tactical tool, but, instead of using right- and left-wing terrorists for creating chaos and fear among the populations, it was decided to exploit Islamist terrorist groups (Edmonds, 2012). The final aim of the “Gladio-B” plan was that of “projecting US power in the former Soviet sphere of influence to access previously untapped strategic energy and mineral reserves for US and European companies; pushing back Russian and Chinese power; and expanding the scope of lucrative criminal activities, particularly illegal arms and drugs trafficking” (Ahmed, 2013). When Edmonds made some revelations on the actors behind the “Gladio-B” plan, she mentioned Richard Perle, Douglas Feith, Paul Wolfowitz, and neocon former Under Secretary of State for Policy Planning, Marc Grossman, as well as two members of the Feith’s OSP, i.e., Mayor Doug Dickerson and Larry Franklin himself (Friedman, 2010; Giraldi, 2008, Ahmed, 2013; Gourlay et al, 2008). Therefore, it seems likely that the MEK’s and *Jundullah*’s manipulation belonged to the “Gladio B” plan for American supremacy and China’s and Russia’s containment in Eurasia. It would have indeed been consequential and consistent with the Wolfowitz’s 1992 “National Defense Guidance” long-term objective.

¹⁵⁴ In 1996, the Turkish so-called “Susurluk scandal” contributed to the revelation. See the Second Chapter (“Susurluk Scandal: Counter-guerilla Affairs”) and “The Susurluk Report by the Prime Ministry Inspection Board” contained in the annexes of Human Rights Foundation of Turkey, 2000. See also Unver, 2009.

III.3.C “We don’t talk to evil”

According to Porter, in December 2002, the so-called “deputies committee”, made up of neocon Stephen Hadley (the Chairman), Richard Armitage, and Pentagon’s and CIA’s deputies, decided that to engage with states sponsor of terrorism was a reward for bad behavior. The “Hadley rules” stated that for dealing with the IRI and Syria “there could be no sharing of intelligence information or any other cooperation on Al Qaeda, although the states in question could be asked to provide information or other cooperation unilaterally” (Porter, 2006: 3). As seen above, with his National Presidential Directive draft, Flynt Leverett tried to develop a formal, official Iran policy which could overcome the “Hadley rules”. In addition, some NSC’s and State Department’s officials covertly bypassed such rules by addressing issues of mutual concerns with Iranian counterparts through the “Six plus Two” backchannel. Moreover, at the same time, inside the State Department’s Near East Affairs Bureau, Ambassador Burns, and his deputy, Ryan Crocker, quietly built a diplomatic opening with Tehran. Yet, the “Hadley rules” continued to influence all the official contacts between Tehran and Washington. Behind the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons’ hard stances there were three beliefs. Firstly, that the Iranian regime was on the verge of collapse. Secondly, that there was no substantial difference between the Iranian so-called “reformists” and “conservatives”, President Khatami being just a more human facade than Khomeini and Khamenei (Abrahamian, 2004: 68). Thirdly, that whatever official opening would have legitimized the Iranian government. Dinmore wrote in 2004 that,

[i]n May [2003] Mr. Rumsfeld responded to Iran’s overtures by fighting for regime change to be made official US policy, though not necessarily through military means. He attacked Iran publicly, accusing it of being unhelpful over Iraq. He told the Council on Foreign Relations that getting into a close, intimate relationship with Iran would give its clerics the legitimacy they craved and discourage Iranians who sought change. (Dinmore, 2004).

Richard Haas said adamantly that the 2003 openings were swiftly rejected because, in the administration, “the bias was toward a policy of regime change. [...] I did not share the assessment of many in the administration that the Iranian regime was on the brink” (Kessler, 2006). Wilkerson reportedly said that the State Department faced “ferocious” opposition from Cheney, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz. He added that, “[t]he press missed how vicious the fight was in the internal decision-making process. You always got the feeling that Cheney was setting in the back-ground laughing his ass off because he has succeeded in stopping the statutory process, and what he wanted was no talks with “evil”” (Slavin, 2007: 196). As

seen above, the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons opposed the cover talks behind the “Six plus One” diplomatic framework. Reportedly, according to an American diplomat who participated at most of them, the group’s attitude was “[w]e didn’t need the Iranians; we can do it alone. It was important in the post 9/11 environment to demonstrate that we were tough and invincible. To work with a terrorist state would be a victory for al-Qaeda” adding that the Bush administration “didn’t want to be in a position where we were grateful to the Iranians or owed them anything” (Slavin, 2007: 203). In November 2001, the Department of State’s Office of Policy Planning, under the direction of Richard Haas, had written a paper arguing that the US had a real opportunity to work very closely with the IRI about Al Qaeda. The paper, supported by the White House coordinator on counterterrorism, Wayne Downing, proposed tactical intelligence engagements as information exchanges and coordinated border sweeps (Porter, 2006: 2). Yet, the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons’ group countered also such tactical engagements. For instance, after the Iranians had communicated their will for cooperating with the US in Iraq, “Bush administration hard-liners made coordination on Iraq depending on Tehran’s finding, arresting, and deporting a number of specific Al Qaida figures [...] who, Washington claimed, had fled Afghanistan into lawless areas of Iran’s Sistan-Baluchistan province in 2002” (Leverett and Mann, 2013: 120). In return, the Iranians asked the US not to use the MEK against them. They proposed also a prisoners swap: the Al Qaida members wanted by the US would have been handled in change of some MEK commanders based in Iraq, “with treatment of the latter to be monitored by the International Committee for the Red Cross and a commitment not to apply the death penalty to anyone prosecuted”¹⁵⁵ (Leverett and Mann, 2013: 120-121). The fight between the faction opposing the swap – i.e., the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocon group – and that one supporting it – i.e., the State Department, the NSA and the CIA – was strenuous. According to Leverett and Mann, some officials who had participated at a NSC meeting on the Post-Saddam Iraq, in May 2003, told them that Bush’s initial response to the proposed prisoners swap was positive (Leverett and Mann, 2013: 424). According to Porter, during that meeting the hard-liners sought to make the MEK as different from Al Qaida members. Yet, reportedly Bush responded that “[b]ut we say there is no such things as a good terrorist”. Hence, he approved the disarming of the MEK and allowed the State Department to continue the cover talks in

¹⁵⁵ It is of note that, plausibly for making the swap, president Khatami, in April-May 2003, ordered his intelligence minister, Ali Yunesi, to arrest them. Yet, both al-Zawahiri and al-Adel managed to get away reportedly with the help of the Revolutionary Guards (Bergman, 2008: 233). Such a fact, if true, shows not only the complexity of the Iranian government’s system but also to what degree a component of such apparatus could be against and contrast another one.

Geneva (Porter, 2006: 5). Reportedly, Powell, seeing a possibility in the President's words, became personally involved in the disarming of the MEK and in avoiding the group's exploitation against Tehran. Reportedly, according to Wilkerson, he pursued the issue on a number of occasions with both Rice and Rumsfeld (Porter, 2006: 5). Nevertheless, despite the President's positive response and Powell's efforts, the swap did not take place because the neocons blamed the Iranians for not having collaborated in avoiding the Al Qaida's bombing in Riyadh and accused Tehran to have backed it. To sum up, the "Hadley rules" were the blueprint for the official administration's dealing with Tehran: no strategic but only tactical collaboration, no real cooperation but only unilateral (American) exploitation. Yet, even such possibility of limited engagement was derailed by the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons group.

III.3.D The role of Israel and of the Israeli lobby

Some authors claim that Israel and the Israeli lobby in Washington heavily influenced the Bush Administration's foreign policy towards Tehran during the whole IND (Barry, 2006; Ansari, 2007; Fayazmaneh, 2007; Porter, 2014; Unger 2007a, 2007b; Mousavian, 2014; Mearsheimer and Walt, 2008; Ryan, 20010). The joint Israeli-American "Olympic Games Operation" made up of cyberattacks against Iranian nuclear centrifuges¹⁵⁶ is indeed an

¹⁵⁶ The covert operation, code name "Olympic Games", was a joint American and Israeli campaign of sabotage by means of cyber disruption – using the "Stuxnet" computer malicious worm – against some Iranian nuclear plants, in particular centrifuges, undertaken from 2006 on, at least until 2012¹⁵⁶ (Sanger, 2012a, 2012b). The operation has never been acknowledged by American and Israeli intelligence nor by the IRI (Sanger, 2012a). For Kamiski (2020: 63), the operation was a tool deliberately used by the American intelligence for counter-acting the IRI's development of its nuclear program. For Weber (2018), who interprets the use of cyber-attacks as a component of the US grand strategy's deployment, one of the strategic effect of the operation was that, "it weakened the Iranian negotiating position during the nuclear talks. Stuxnet specifically impacted the cost-benefit calculation of constructing a nuclear weapon" (2018: 245). Some years after the cover up of the "Olympic Games" operation, documentary film director and producer, Alex Gibney, during the researches and the interviews he did with CIA's and National Security Agency's sources for the making of one of his documentary, "Zero Days" (Gibney, 2016), he went to know classified information about a wider campaign of sabotage by cyber disruption targeting Iranian nuclear facilities. It would have been developed through an even wider and more effective strategy of computer-attack, code named "Nitro Zeus". The "Olympic Games" operation would have indeed been a component of the "Nitro Zeus" cyber warfare campaign. That campaign would have disrupted and degraded Iranian communications, power grid, and other vital systems by electronic implants deceptively installed in Iranian computer networks. Reportedly, the project was intended as a more viable alternative than a full-scale war (Szoldra, 2016; Sanger and Mazzetti, 2016; Gibney, 2016). Then, after the JCPOA's signature, the "Nitro Zeus" plan was shelved "at least for the foreseeable future" (Sanger and Mazzetti, 2016). Sanger– who could rely on a number of interviews with then-current and former American, European and Israeli officials involved in the planning of the operation – wrote that in 2006, the American officials' interest in making Israeli intelligence join the US in the operation was that of dissuading the Israelis "from carrying out their own pre-emptive strike against the Iranian nuclear facilities" (Sanger, 2012a). Sanger also demonstrated that the "Olympic Games" operation – although initiated during the Bush Administration – was furtherly encouraged by President Obama as a "targeted force" to ensure American long-term objectives and national security interests whilst avoiding "the kind of messy ground wars and lengthy occupations that

evidence of the Israeli direct involvement in the coercive American foreign policy towards Tehran. Yet, as Parsi has demonstrated, a number of high-rank officials from the Israeli military and intelligence community opposed military actions against Tehran. Instead, the Likud party, once in power, tried to push the US to intervene militarily (Parsi, 2007). Regarding the supposed role played by Israel and the Israeli lobby in making the Bush Administration adopt a regime-change agenda, Porter (2014) and Fayazmanesh (2007) present important evidences supporting such a claim. However, concerning specifically the rejection of the 2003 roadmap it must be noted that neither Israel nor its lobby seem to have played a direct role in it. Regarding the role played by the AIPAC – the most powerful entity the Israeli lobby in Washington consist of (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2008) – in the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons group’s attempts to implement regime change through Iranian dissident groups, it is remained rather under-investigated. In order to know it, it is worth analyzing a series of interviews offered in 2011 by AIPAC’s Keith Weissman (Dreyfuss, 2011a, 2011b)¹⁵⁷. At that time, perceiving that the IRI-US relationship was rapidly deteriorating, Weissman asked the investigative journalist and Iran expert, Richard Dreyfuss, to be interviewed. Then, he told him his story about the role played by the AIPAC and by himself in influencing the US Iran foreign policy¹⁵⁸. For instance, he described how the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) – the first important packet of American sanctions against Tehran decided by Congress during the second Clinton’s term – had been formulated by the AIPAC. He claimed also that the AIPAC was able to convince President Clinton to cancel the deal the American MNE Conoco had struck with Tehran and which the then-Iranian president Rafsanjani had personally backed (Dreyfuss, 2011a: 5). Additionally, Weismann described how the AIPAC had facilitated the approval of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyahan (BTC) oil pipeline,

have drained America’s treasury and spirit for the past decades” (Sanger, 2012b: xiv). Although it is still debated whether the operation can be defined as an act of war (Jansons, 2017), nevertheless it can be seen as an act belonging to a hybrid conflict (Farwell & Rohozinski, 2012), taken in mind that already in 2010, the then-Deputy Secretary of Defense, William J. Lynn, made clear that “the Pentagon has formally recognized cyberspace as a new domain of warfare. Although cyberspace is a man-made domain, it has become just as critical to military operations as land, sea, air, and space. As such, the military must be able to defend and operate within it” (Lynn, 2010). According to Richard Sale (2012), the human agents used for inserting the Stuxnet malware into Natanz centrifuges and then carry out the “Operation Olympic Games” may have been belonging to the MEK.

¹⁵⁷ Weismann had worked at AIPAC from 1993 up to 2005, mostly as Deputy Director for foreign policy. In 2009, he was indicted – together with other AIPAC and Pentagon members, as Michael Rubin and Larry Franklin – on charges of illegally conspiring to collect and disseminate classified secrets to journalists and to Israeli diplomats and intelligence. However, in 2009, the Justice Department withdrew all charges against Weismann, whilst Franklin was sentenced twelve years in jail.

¹⁵⁸ In those interviews Weismann explains that, “[t]he pro-Israel bloc in Congress has nothing to do with parties. It has do to with friendship and loyalty. [...] This is the secret of AIPAC’s power, its ability to fund campaigns. When people got together, they’d find ways, even if they’d given a ton of money to AIPA, they’d still find ways to get money to candidates, Republican or Democrat” (Dreyfuss, 2001a: 4).

originally designed, according to him, as an anti-Iranian and anti-Russian project (Dreyfuss, 2011a: 6). Concerning the Bush Administration's regime change plan, from the Weismann's account it seems that the causal relationship between the Israeli lobby and the administration was opposite to that one described by literature (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2008). In fact, reportedly, it was not the AIPAC trying to influence the administration, but OSP' Larry Franklin trying "to get the support of AIPAC and a handful of neoconservative outsiders for the Pentagon's battle with the State Department over policy towards Iran" (Dreyfuss, 2011b: 1). In fact, according to Weissman,

one of the thing that Larry [Franklin] came to realize, during the wars between the Pentagon and the CIA [related to the intelligence justification for the American-led invasion of Iraq], was that they [the Pentagon] were the only ones who wanted to go after Iran. The Pentagon viewed the State Department [as] panty-waists who were gonna appease [Iran], always trying to undercut whatever the Pentagon did. Larry [Franklin] got the idea that he would bring AIPAC into that, trying to enlist AIPAC's help in support of a much tougher policy toward Iran that the administration was pursuing at that time. (Dreyfuss, 2011b: 3)

Then,

Larry [Franklin] thought he needed more ammunition in his holster, in his belt, to move the administration away from Powell and closer to Rumsfeld-Cheney. And he must have thought that AIPAC could help because of our power in Congress. So he sought us out. He pushed for the meeting and he asked a mutual friend of ours to set it up. (Dreyfuss, 2011b: 4).

The mutual friend who then arranged the gathering was neocon Michael Makovsky, who, at that time, was working in the Pentagon. During that meeting, it was clear that,

[H]e [Franklin] wanted us to push for a creation of a document that would become US policy. The Pentagon was writing a draft of it. The State Department was writing a draft of it. The State Department finished its draft in the summer of '02. The Pentagon was still writing its draft in the spring of '03, right around the time of Iraq, and they were using Iran and Iraq as part of their ideological bombardment against what Powell wanted. (Dreyfuss, 2011b: 4)

According to Weissman, Franklin's plan consisted of a wide regime change strategy. In fact,

[i]t included lots of different parts, like broadcasts, giving money to groups that would conduct sabotage, it included bringing the Mojahedin [e-Khalgh, i.e. the MEK], bringing them out of Iraq and letting them go back to Iran to carry out missions for the United States. Harold Rode¹⁵⁹ backed this....There were all this guys, Michael Ledeen, "Next stop Tehran, next stop Damascus." (Dreyfuss, 2011b: 5)

¹⁵⁹ The second OSP's official involved in the secret meetings with the MEK in Rome and Paris from 2001 to 2003. [N.o.t.A.]

There was another meeting with Franklin¹⁶⁰ to which participated, together with Weissman, also Steve Rosen, then-AIPAC's Director for Foreign Policy Issues. According to Weissman, in response to the various Franklin's quests, neither him nor the AIPAC gave any help, although many people within the AIPAC – in particular among its lay leadership and greatest donors – strongly backed regime change in Tehran. To Franklin's quest for help, “[w]e didn't do anything. We chose not to do anything. I told Rosen it was a terrible idea, and it wouldn't work, and all it would do would be to make more trouble” (Dreyfuss, 2011b: 5). So far, neither documents nor evidences disconfirming the Weissman's statement have appeared. Hence, it seems that the regime change plans were pursued by the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons group against the State Department, the NSA and the CIA, without external support from the Israeli lobby. These findings call for a more nuanced assessment of the Israel's and Israeli lobby's role in influencing the US foreign policy towards the IRI, as Parsi (2007, 2014) claims.

Conclusions

According to Ryan (2010: 8), with the Cold War's end the neo-conservatism turned to be not just “a strategy for the Middle East, but purported to be a strategy for *global* dominance through striving to maintain the US position as the single pole of power in *every* region of the world.” In other terms, the post-Cold War absence of physical and ideological constraints unleashed the neocons *hubris* which made them see the world as they wanted it should have been instead of as it was, and acted by consequence (Bachevich, 2008). This explains why they were blind in front of both the deterioration of the situation in Iraq and the advantages of an eventual strategic cooperation with Tehran in the region. For them, “any negotiations that might succeed in shutting down Iran's nuclear program would also serve to strengthen and legitimize Iran's government; it is [was], therefore, worth the risk of a nuclear Iran to continue working towards “regime change” in that nation” (Scoblic, 2008: 247). Their basic argument, deliberately overstated, was that the IRI, differently from other “rogue states” as Libya and North Korea, had some dissident groups which, conveniently supported by the US, could overthrow the regime. By politicizing the intelligence, the neocons exaggerated

¹⁶⁰ It should have occurred at the beginning of May 2003 because, interestingly, Weissman said that “[t]he second time we met Larry Franklin, Rosen and I had to cut the lunch a little short *because we were meeting with the Swiss ambassador, who was bringing the Kharrazi initiative with him*” (Dreyfuss, 2011b: 4). Emphasis added.

the Iranians' disaffection with their government and the dissident groups' strength, in particular of two organizations: the MEK and the *Jundullah*. The handover of the MEK represented indeed the key-Iranian quest contained in the 2003 "roadmap" for normalizing the US-IRI relations. Yet, through its men in the Pentagon, the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons group avoided the MEK's disbanding and re-location – as required by Tehran, the Department of State and the NSA – and maintained it as an "operational asset". At the same time, the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons group systematically weakened the NSC inter-agencies foreign policy decision-making process to keep at bay the supporters of strategic collaboration with Tehran on Afghanistan, Al Qaida and Iraq. The final result was a decision-making process totally "dysfunctional" (Wilkerson, 2005b) which made the administration replace the NSC's and State Department's efforts to engage Tehran with the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons' regime-change plans.

Chapter Conclusion

The analysis developed in this chapter confirms Guzzini's argument (2002) according to which the fundamental trait of the Bush Administration was an approach to world politics based on the dismissal of diplomacy. Tarock (2003, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c) explained the poor results of the US nuclear diplomacy as a result of the Bush Administration's willingness to military intervention. Yet, concerning specifically the refusal of the 2003 opening, the final judgment about that administration's approach towards Tehran should be more nuanced because the bargaining process which led to it was a diversified one. As predicted by the bureaucratic politics model, the rejection of the rapprochement with Tehran was indeed an "intra-national political outcome" (Allison, 1969: 707). In fact, the administration was divided between a faction, consisting of the State Department and some senior NSC officials, which pursued engagement with Tehran, and the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons group which opposed it whilst, at the same time, working for regime change. This confirms what Mann wrote (2004: 274-5), i.e., that, "[t]he appointments to the new [G. W. Bush] administration, both at the top and at the secondary levels, created a situation in which [...] the State Department and the Defense Department would be almost continually at odds with each other." Yet, the absence of a unitary and consistent administration's Iran foreign policy was not the result only of such a fracture. It was indeed the consequence of three contemporary facts. The first one was the President's inexperience in foreign issues (Wilkerson, 2005a, 2005b). Because of the Bush's so limited experience, "he was obliged to rely to an

extraordinary extent on his advisers for ideas and for information” (Mann, 2004: XVIII). Bush himself is said to have told Cheney: “I don’t know what’s going to come on my desk, but I’m going to need somebody who’s seen things before, who can give me advice to make good decisions” (Draper, 2007: 89). The second one was the NSA’s inexperience *vis-à-vis* the Secretary of Defense and the Vice-President, not just in strategy and foreign policy planning but especially in bureaucratic maneuvering and fighting, abilities in which Cheney and Rumsfeld were real champions (Kessler, 2007; Kessler and Ricks, 2004). For instance, Cheney’s main asset was the cover use of his web of friends – not necessarily at high level – within the administration for controlling and getting information through informal meetings (Gelmann, 2008). The third one was the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons group’ deliberate plans for sabotaging the NSC decision-making process and the president’s supervision. For instance, when, in April-May 2003, Tehran faxed the “roadmap”, there was no inter-agency meeting and the group could easily derail the State Department’s opening. Moreover, in that way, it could impose its regime-change agenda. In other terms, the final administration’s Iran policy was not the product of smart “policy entrepreneurs” (David, 2015: 163), but the outcome of a *manipulated* process of foreign policy-making. This chapter’s findings confirm in fact what some authors have pointed out about that administration, i.e. that debates concerning crucial foreign policy matters were never resolved, as it is expected by institutional procedures, through the NSC process (Kessler and Ricks, 2004). As noted by Pfiffner by analyzing the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons’ behavior, the pattern that emerges “is one of secrecy, top-down control, tightly held information, disregard for the judgments of career professionals, and the exclusion from deliberation of qualified executive branch experts who might have disagreed with those who initially framed the decisions” (Pfiffner, 2009: 363). Condoleezza Rice, although had a deep personal relationship with the president, was not able to limit the Cheney’s and Rumsfeld’s influence on national security issues. This occurred not because of group thinking’s pressure, as some authors argued (Eder, 2017; Mintz and Wayne, 2016) or because of organization and management problems, as it happened in other national security cases (Burke, 2005). Neither was it the consequence of the pressure of a group polarization effect on the reluctant NSA and Secretary of State, similar to that one at work during the decision-making process on Iraq (Mintz and De Rouen, 2010: 53). It was indeed the result of a distorted foreign policy decision-making process. According to former Powell’s Chief of Staff, Lawrence Wilkerson, in fact, it was a case “of aberrations, bastardizations, perturbations, changes to the national security decision-making process”. He also added that the Rumsfeld-Cheney

“cabal” “made decisions that the bureaucracy did not know were being made” and when those decisions were passed to the bureaucracy, “it was presented in such a disjointed, incredible way that the bureaucracy often did not know what it was doing as it moved to carry them out” (Wilkerson, 2005b). President Bush’s organization of the decision-making process, based on consensus, personality factors, and delegation of responsibility – in particular to his deputy – instead of procedures and processes (Dolan & Cohen, 2006: 30) contributed to create such a dysfunctional context. In fact, contrary to conventional wisdom and literature according to which vice-presidents rarely and because of unusual situations exercise any power, within that distorted decision-making process Cheney could play a very crucial role. Warshaw defined the Bush-Cheney a “co-presidency” (Warshaw, 2009), whilst other analysts have written about an “imperial vice presidency” (Blumenthal, 2007; Montgomery, 2009). According to Rosati and Scott, Cheney’s behavior made questions arise about “the tensions between national security needs and the rule of law” (Rosati and Scott, 2007: 124). For Goldestein, at the beginning of the Vice President’s empowerment there were the 9/11 events that,

helped relax traditional checks on the power of the executive branch, allowing the president to exercise greater power than under normal circumstances. They also were associated with a second, closely related, institutional development: an enormous and unprecedented rise in the power of the vice presidency, or at least of its occupant during the Bush two terms: Dick Cheney. [...] These two developments were reciprocally related: Vice President Cheney worked to stretch executive power, and the growth of executive power expanded his own domain and influence. (Goldestein, 2010: 103)

However,

both developments would have transpired, no doubt differently and in less robust ways, independent of the war on terror. From the outset, the expansion of presidential powers was a fundamental objective of the Bush presidency, its prominent place on the agenda traceable to Cheney’s influence. Well before the hijacked planes [...] Cheney was at the forefront of an effort to assert presidential powers and to elevate the presidency at the expense of Congress. [...] The Cheney vice presidency avoided many of the constraints that presidential leadership and the political system normally imposed. It reflected a culture of political unaccountability that transcended the separation of powers debates regarding presidential power. Cheney helped engineer the erosion of these restraints with the actual or tacit support of President Bush. These factors, in addition to the Bush-Cheney views on presidential power, influenced the nature and content of policy making during the Bush administration. (Goldestein, 2010: 134)

For elaborating on the supposed neocons' influence on the Bush Administration's Iran foreign policy, it is helpful to consider Arendt's thought, in particular her opposition to all forms of "hubristic radicalism" (Owens, 2007: 269) and her claim that "ideological thinking ruins all relationships with reality" (Owens, 2007: 282). In fact, it was their "hubristic radicalism" which precluded the Bush administration's neocons from seeing the advantages a strategic engagement with Tehran would have offered in terms of their own long-term objective, i.e., American supremacy in ME and Eurasia. Tehran, in fact – as its negotiators time and again made clear – could have been a key-ally not only in fighting Al Qaeda and stabilizing Afghanistan. Its cooperation would have been strategic also for the invasion of Iraq and, moreover, for the post-Saddam stabilization and reconstruction. Tehran could have indeed even been an American "pivot in the Muslim world" (Maloney, 2008) and could have played a crucial role within the neocon strategy of Russia's and China's containment in Eurasia envisioned in the 1992 National Defense Guidance. It would have done it, firstly, by means of its huge hydrocarbons reserves exploitable as weapon against other producers, *in primis* Russia. Secondly, because of its strategic position: in front of the Street of Hormuz, a kind of sea terminal for the land-locked Central Asian countries and the Western, industrialized part of China. In other terms, *an alliance and not a confrontation* with Tehran would have granted the neocons that global dominance which, behind ideological rhetoric, represented indeed their real long-term goal (Ryan, 2010). In addition to Arendt's "hubristic radicalism", Reinhold Niebuhr's reflections also appear fitted for interpreting the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons actions. In fact, according to Morgenthau (1962), Niebuhr's first political lesson is that the "thirst for power" is an innate feature of human nature. However, because the fight for power have negative connotations in our society, who looks for power – that is, for Niebuhr, who is engaged in politics – has to pretend that what he fights for is not power, but something that deserves moral acceptance. In the neocons' case, such a cover was represented by their ideological apology for democracy and American values. Niebuhr is clear about ideologies' role: they are tools that politicians adopt in their fight for power (Morgenthau, 1962). The Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons' "thirst for power" was unlimited and they managed to cover it with ideological rhetoric. Such an unrestrained desire was basically aimed to overreach executive power whilst, at the same time, avoiding accountability. The engagement's supporters within the administration, being politicians, were looking for power too. In fact, the "plausible deniability" scheme adopted in the opening with Tehran was a way for them (Rice, Powell and their deputies) to maintain their power in case of failure and cover up, whilst blaming career officers (Burns and Crocker). Yet, they were able

to contain their ambition, or, in Niebuhr's terms, to self-impose a limit. This is shown, for instance, by the Powell's decision of trading the Tehran's engagement with diplomatic talks with Pyongyang instead of insisting on imposing his will on both cases. Rice, who knew she could not win the turf war, did not overtly oppose the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons group, but acted to bypass it by means of the "Operation Merlin". That was also a way for avoiding another war in the ME – potentially ruinous not only for the US, but also for the administration's survival. In this way, she did not lose the President's favors and was confirmed in the second term as Secretary of State (and, as such, in 2008 she would have followed her deputy, William Burns, suggestions to try another opening with Tehran. See Burns, 2020: 342-343). Powell, who fought against the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons "parallel political apparatus" (Loebe, 2005) on many fronts, was forced to leave (DeYoung, 2007).

Before concluding, another argument can be drawn from the analysis undertaken in this Chapter. That is that, as Iranian-British scholar, Ali Ansari (2007), claims, behind the appearances the US and the IRI have many traits in common. Concerning the power system, a common trait is the existence of complex bureaucracies having parallel groups of power inside them. Another one is the tendency to hegemony in regional (the IRI) and world (the US) affairs in their ruling elites. Former Reagan and Carter White House aide for Iran, Gary Sick, commenting the roadmap's rejection, said that,

both Iran and the United States have very serious domestic constituencies that are opposed to any kind of opening to each other. Iranians have their hard-liners, who really want to maintain the status quo and are very concerned that any change would undermine their own power in the system, and would in many cases, upset some of the really cozy financial deals that they've got. In the US, you have people who are basically ideologically committed to regime change in Iran and feel that nothing can be done with Iran except to overthrow the regime, one way or the other, either by encouraging dissent and rebellion in Iran, or by doing it militarily... Those two constituencies on either side basically prevent any kind of understanding between the two sides and in many cases willfully increase the misunderstandings that exist... And thus far, they've been extremely successful, both sides, in terms of their domestic influence on the foreign policy-making on either side... So the Iranians prove they can't deal with us, and we prove that we can't deal with the Iranians, and, as a result, nothing happens, but the factions in either of these countries who really would like to see more open political relations between them tend to get drowned out in the noise of the hardliners on both sides touting their particular views. (PBS 2007a)

The maintenance of the *status quo* bore indeed its advantages for the hardliner groups in both countries. On the Iranian side, the advantages were represented by the survival of the regime and the maintenance of its control not only on the political and social systems but

also on the financial and industrial ones. On the American side, it meant allegiance and lucrative arms deals with those neighboring states which were, or perceived to be, menaced by the IRI. The Iranian nuclear threat allowed the US room for maneuver in other geopolitical contexts also. For instance, in Europe, it represented the justification for installing NATO ballistic missiles capacities very close to the Russian border. That's why, at the end, Sick's definition of "willful misunderstanding on both sides" (PBS, 2007a) summarizes effectively the US-IRI interactions occurred between 2001 and 2003.

CHAPTER IV

THE 2009 OBAMA ADMINISTRATION'S OPENINGS

Introduction

The American-Iranian covert negotiations which paved the way for the later “5+1” official diplomacy leading to the JPOA started through a back channel built up by American negotiators and Omani emissaries in 2009. Academic literature takes for granted that it was Tehran which tried to reach out to Washington for lifting the sanctions that had brought Iranian economy on the brink of a collapse. Such a narrative is instrumental for confirming the effectiveness of international – and American, in particular – coercive diplomacy. Moreover, according to such an accepted version of the facts, the beginning of the secret negotiations was only in July 2013, when a window of opportunity was opened by the reformist Hassan Rouhani’s election as Iranian President (Rodhes, 2016). Then, for instance, the unprecedented historical phone call between Obama and Rouhani – held on September 27, 2013, behind the works of the UN General Assembly – has been considered as the official beginning of the American-Iranian rapprochement¹⁶¹. This chapter goes against such manufactured narratives. As a matter of fact, it examines *The New York Times* revelation that already in May 2009, Tehran approached Washington with a comprehensive offer to solve the IND through an Omani envoy (Landler, 2016a, 2016b). However, contrary to Landler’s explanation, it argues that the opening was not an Iranian original move, but an *answer* to Obama’s reiterated quests for talks. Such an initiative resulted in a complete change in the paradigm of the IND. In fact, as described in the previous chapters, it had been always Tehran managing to reach out to Washington, with the only notable exception of Secretary of State Rice and her Deputy, William Burns, trying unsuccessfully to contact the Iranians in 2007 and 2008 (Burns, 2020: 338-345)¹⁶². According to Iranian sources quoted by former IRGC’ commander and CIA’s agent, Reza Khalili (2013), it was indeed Washington and not Tehran looking for negotiations. Kirdo (2015) mentioned an Iranian

¹⁶¹Told as a last-minute decision (see, for example Carter, 2013), it had actually been well-orchestrated long time before (Solomon and Lee, 2013).

¹⁶² On that new course in US foreign policy toward Tehran, see also Secretary of State Rice (2006b) and Under Secretary Burns, N. (2007).

official who revealed, at the end of June 2015, more than Tehran, it was the US in need of an agreement. The Iranian argument is based on the supposed WH's will to avoid a military confrontation with Tehran. The WH's opposition to another war in the ME is indeed confirmed by former Secretary of State's Clinton special advisor for the PG, Dennis Ross. In truth, after his resignation, he wrote that, during the first year of the administration, "[Defense Secretary] Gates and Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, made it clear that we were in two wars in the region and that was quite enough" adding that "Gates and Mullen periodically spoke of the terrible costs of an attack on Iran – whether by us or the Israelis" whilst Clinton, Donilon, Deputy Secretary of State Steinberg and Ross himself had a different opinion (Ross, 2015). The Pentagon's contrariety is confirmed also by Oren (2011). All of the Obama's official pronouncements about the JCPOA would define the deal as the only alternative to another war in the ME. Plausibly, Tehran perceived that fracture inside the administration and understood the US would not attack them. Therefore, the Iranian version of the early opening as an American, not Iranian move, appears as reliable and deserves a deeper investigation, which will be conducted in this chapter. According to another manufactured narrative accepted by academic literature, the US-IRI secret negotiations were limited to nuclear issues. Yet, this chapter will show that by carefully analyzing some Ahmadinejad's and Obama's statements it can reasonably be inferred that discussions *on other issues were also among the covert contact goals*. Former Ambassador James Dobbins claims indeed that, although the IRI-US talks were officially limited to the INP, yet quite some other conversations actually took place about cooperation on other issues, like, for instance, Afghanistan and Iraq (Dobbins, 2015: 6). Another feature of the 2009-2012 back channel, still to be thoroughly researched, is the fact that it was simultaneously exploited by the WH and the then-Senate Foreign Relations Committee's (SFRC) chairman, John Kerry. To what extent the two branches of power, the legislative and the executive, were aware of one another's efforts is not clear. Neither is sure how much the Senate knew about Kerry's covert missions. The few hints available about them have come, so far, only from the Iranian side, through the then-Iranian Foreign Minister and Chief negotiator's revelations, Ali Akbar Salehi. He reportedly stated that still "[a]s a Senator, Kerry had been appointed by Obama to be in charge of handling the nuclear dossier, and then [in December 2012] he was appointed secretary of state" (quoted in Savyon, Carmon & Mansharof, 2015). Moreover, according to Salehi, Kerry, as SFRC's chairman, sent Tehran a letter, via the Oman's Sultan, recognizing the Iranian right to uranium

enrichment¹⁶³. Apparently, it would seem that Kerry behaved as a “Congressional entrepreneur” (Carter and Scott, 2004, 2009; Carter et al. 2004) leading Congress to re-assume its role in foreign policy decision-making. Alternatively, his behavior supports the hypothesis of an effective collaboration between the executive and the legislative powers aimed at conflict resolution. However, it does not seem the Congress was aware of Kerry’s parallel diplomacy and it is hard to believe the SFRC would have supported it¹⁶⁴. It seems more likely that there was a covert “personal agreement” between the President and Kerry to resolve particular foreign policy issues.¹⁶⁵ In particular with regard to his quiet contacts with Tehran, Landler (2016a) wrote that the Secretary of State was “increasingly wary of Mr. Kerry’s freelance diplomacy. [...] Mrs. Clinton worried that he was promising too much to lure the Iranians to the table – a worry shared by people in the White House.” In an interview (Goldberg, 2016), Landler also said that going back to the “earliest days of the Iran negotiation when it was still a secret channel in Oman, Hillary [Clinton] was far more reluctant to get pulled into it. And it was, in fact, John Kerry and Obama who were really leaning into it.” In other terms, between the president and the SFRC’s chairman¹⁶⁶, Salehi’s and Landler’s claims unveiled an *entente*, which went beyond the executive and legislative powers’ struggle in order to change the distribution of power in foreign policy decision-making process between them (Warburg, 1989; Spanier and Noger, 2013; McCormick, 1993). A possible answer to this puzzle could explain Kerry’s behavior as driven more by a party-led loyalty than by an institution-led one. In other terms, by supporting the WH’s plans instead of containing and balancing executive’s overreach in foreign policy, Kerry chose to enhance the administration’s power for reasons of party loyalty. In any case, from January 2009 onwards – i.e. since the simultaneous Obama’s and Kerry’s taking up office – both the WH and the SFRC’s chairman covertly tried to open channels of direct communication with Tehran. This chapter will describe in detail such efforts. It is organized as follows: the first

¹⁶³ “We came to negotiate [with the U.S.] after Kerry wrote a letter and sent it to us via Oman, stating that America officially recognizes Iran’s rights regarding the [nuclear fuel] enrichment cycle” (Quoted in Savyon et al., 2015). It is worth noting that already on June 11, 2009, during an interview, Senator Kerry reportedly labelled the demand that Iran stop enriching uranium as “ridiculous”. Moreover, he said that “[t]hey [Iranians] have a right to peaceful nuclear power and to enrichment in that purpose” (Dombey, 2009).

¹⁶⁴ The 113th Congress SFRC’s members were Senators Marco Rubio, John McCain, Rand Paul, and Bob Corker who had always been against any engagement with Tehtan. Source: Congressional Record, 2013.

¹⁶⁵ According to Landler (2012), still as SFAC’s chairman, “Mr. Kerry has been a loyal supporter of the Obama administration, guiding an arms-reduction treaty with Russia to ratification in the Senate and playing diplomatic troubleshooter for the White House in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sudan.”

¹⁶⁶ On May, 9, 2009, during his presentation at a Committee’s hearing, Kerry showed a total consonance of visions with the WH strategy of engaging with Tehran saying, for instance: “I believe President Obama is 100 percent correct to open the door to direct talks with Iran. We [...] abandoned calls for regime change in Tehran and recognize a legitimate Iranian role in the region” (US SFRC, 2009).

part is devoted to the genesis of Obama WH Iran policy and looks at actors and agendas behind it; the second part uses Communication Sciences theoretical tools – as “frames”, “strategic narratives”, and “spinning” – to analyze the propaganda campaign ran by the WH for marketing the JCPOA; the last part describes the “trial of strength” occurred between the administration and Congress for the JCPOA ratification. Whilst the second and the third parts are entirely based on primary sources, the first one is based mainly on secondary sources. This is due to the fact that, so far, almost no document has been released regarding the US covert engagement with Tehran. Inescapably, as diplomacy scholar Maley noted (2016: 490), this is one of the existing problems in dealing scientifically with secret diplomacy. Therefore, according to the “indictary paradigm” prescriptions, players’ agendas are inferred from their acts and speeches as well as from the few available hints.

IV.1. Engaging Tehran

Preamble

According to the narrative produced by the WH, the covert American-Iranian talks leading to the JPOA signature started in July 2013, after Iranian President Rouhani’s election. In the speech celebrating the JCPOA signature, President Obama himself confirmed that the negotiations had started in 2013¹⁶⁷. Few days after, he reiterated that it was thanks to Rouhani’s election that a window of opportunity was finally open to talks with Tehran in order to settle the IND¹⁶⁸. This section is going to demonstrate that, firstly, the decision of engaging with Tehran was taken by Obama *before entering the White House*; secondly, it was implemented in 2009, at the very beginning of his administration, i.e. *during Ahmadinejad’s presidency*. To understand the possible reasons behind the administration’s narrative¹⁶⁹, it is worth analyzing the leak occurred two weeks before the 2012 election day,

¹⁶⁷ “Today, after two years of negotiations, the United States, together with our international partners, has achieved something that decades of animosity has not.” (President Barak Obama, 2015c).

¹⁶⁸ “Iran’s 2013 elections, when the Iranian people elected a new government that promised to improve the economy through engagement with the world. A window had cracked open. Iran came back to the nuclear talks.” (President Barak H. Obama, 2015e).

¹⁶⁹ According to Samuels (2016a), “[t]he idea that there was a new reality in Iran was politically useful to the Obama administration. By obtaining broad public currency for the thought that there was a significant split in the regime, and that the administration was reaching out to moderate-minded Iranians who wanted peaceful relations with their neighbors and with America, Obama was able to evade what might have otherwise been a divisive but clarifying debate over the actual policy choices that his administration was making. By eliminating the fuss about Iran’s nuclear program, the administration hoped to eliminate a source of structural tension between the two countries, which would create the space for America to disentangle itself from its established system of alliances with countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel and Turkey.”

when Obama was expected to publicly discuss foreign policy issues with his Republican contender. On October 20, the day before the last TV debate, *The New York Times* published an article (Landler & Cooper, 2012), in which the authors wrote that, according to some administration officials, “[t]he United States and Iran have agreed in principle for the first time to one-on-one negotiations over Iran’s nuclear program, setting the stage for what could be a last-ditch diplomatic effort to avert a military strike on Iran.” They added that the agreement was “a result of intense, secret exchanges between American and Iranian officials that date back almost to the beginning of President’s Obama term”¹⁷⁰. The article was shortly echoed by all the most influential American media. Yet, that revelation had been framed in a not so neutral way. In truth, not only the agreement was presented as the only available alternative to military actions¹⁷¹, but also the two journalists wrote that, according to their sources, “Iranian officials have insisted that the talks wait until after the presidential election [...] telling their American counterparts that they want to know with whom they would be negotiating”. As noted by the authors themselves, that disclosure had “the potential to help Mr. Obama make the case that he is nearing a diplomatic breakthrough in the decade-long effort by the world’s major powers to curb Tehran’s nuclear ambitions”. Moreover, it implicitly acknowledged that Obama was working effectively to avoid another American war in the ME. That same day, the WH denied the existence of bilateral talks (Reuters, 2012a). Three days later, it reiterated its denial by stating: “[w]e have been open to considering negotiations that are bilateral, but we have none scheduled and we have no agreements with the Iranians to do that. [...] There is nothing scheduled. There is no agreement” (Reuters, 2012b). Plausibly, the WH denied the existence of the talks for the same reasons it had maintained them secret, i.e. a very likely opposition from Congress as well as from its allies in the Middle East-Persian Gulf region (Israel, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States), all Tehran’s enemies. As described above, at a later date, the existence of a back channel *before* Rouhani’s election and the Obama’s re-election would have been revealed by one of the authors of the leak (Landler, 2016) and also corroborated by former Iranian negotiator Salheli. Interestingly, according to the latter, the Americans and not the Iranians stopped the negotiations for a while owing to the upcoming elections. He added that, in the first term, “[t]he Americans were willing to push the talks forward quickly and under very good conditions”, whilst they were quite tough and uncompromising during the

¹⁷⁰ As this section indeed demonstrates.

¹⁷¹ This would have represented the key-rhetorical topic of all the WH’s statements about the JCPOA. See the next section.

second one. More precisely, he revealed, “[d]uring the period when the secret negotiations with the Americans were under way in Oman, there was a situation in which it was easier to obtain concessions from the Americans. After the Rouhani government and the American administration took up office, and Kerry became secretary of state, the Americans spoke from a more assertive position. They no longer showed the same degree of eagerness to advance the negotiations. Their position became harder, and the threshold of their demands rose” (quoted in The Middle East Media Research Institute, 2015). An interpretation of such facts is that Obama wanted to secure the possibility of a deal with Tehran as an assurance for its second term re-election. As a matter of-fact, by means of the manufactured leak described above, President Obama was pictured as capable of diplomatically solving the longstanding confrontation with Tehran whilst avoiding another costly war. In other words, it appears as if an “October surprise” facilitating Obama’s re-election was carried out by the WH by means of a condescending and fast diplomacy with Iranians during the first term coupled with a timely revelation about its possible positive results. Regrettably, literature devoted to the Obama Administration’s dealing with the IND has taken for granted the WH’s narrative about when and with whom the diplomatic openings started. Even Jung (2016) and Wong-De Wai (2006), who take the IRI-US back channel as a case of secret diplomacy, have accepted Rouhani’s election in 2013 as the beginning of the US-IRI negotiations. Hence, an investigation of the implications of an earlier engagement with Tehran in terms of US foreign policy and US strategy in the MEPCG region has not yet been conducted. That will be handled in the conclusion of this thesis.

IV.1.A The beginning

According to Watson, diplomacy is “the process of dialogue and negotiations by which states in a system conduct their relations and pursue their purposes by means short of war” (Watson, 1984: 11). In other words, “diplomacy focuses on *interactions between actors* rather than the actors themselves, which is the focus of foreign policy” (Hocking, 2016: 67). Diplomacy scholars agree that diplomacy is essentially communication and, within communication, signaling plays a key-role. Jönsson & Hall (2003: 2) use the definition “[t]he ‘semantic obsession’ of diplomats” for describing the importance played by communications in diplomacy. For them, in diplomatic communication “saying is doing” and “doing is saying”. Eban states that in diplomacy “[s]peech is an incisive form of action” (1983: 393). According to Jönsson (2016: 79), “[t]o communicate, whether in a negotiations setting or

not, diplomats send signals intended to convey messages to their counterparts. As signals have no inherent meaning or credibility, the message actually conveyed is a matter of decoding and interpreting by the receivers". This section adopts a diplomacy framework, looking at the interactions between Washington and Tehran in the first semester of 2009.

In his inaugural address, President Obama said he would have talked with the IRI to diplomatically conclude the IND (President Barack H. Obama, 2009a). On that same day, the official White House website reportedly announced, "Barack Obama supports tough and direct diplomacy with Iran *without preconditions*" (Borger, 2009)¹⁷². On February 9, during his first press conference, when asked about the strategy the new WH would have developed towards the IRI, Obama answered:

my national security team is currently reviewing our existing Iran policy, looking at areas where we can have constructive dialogue, where we can directly engage with them. And my expectation is in the coming months we will be looking for openings that can be created where we can start sitting across the table, face to face, diplomatic overtures that will allow us to move our policy in a new direction. [...] *So there are going to be a set of objectives that we have in these conversations* [...] Now it's time for Iran to send some signals that it wants to act differently as well, and recognize that even as it has some rights as a member of the international community, with those rights come responsibilities. (President Barack Obama, 2009b)¹⁷³

It is hard to argue this was not the signal of an American opening. Less than 24 hours later, in truth, President Ahmadinejad answered by echoing Obama's words:

The new US administration has announced that they want to produce change and pursue the course of dialogue. It is quite clear that real change must be fundamental and not tactical. It is clear the Iranian nation welcomes real changes. [...] The Iranian nation is ready to hold talks, but talks in a fair atmosphere with mutual respect. (Siddique, 2009)

He reportedly also said that terrorism, the elimination of nuclear weapons, restructuring of the UN Security Council, and the fight against drug trafficking could have been subjects of discussion. Such a statement by Ahmadinejad about possible subjects of US-IRI discussions is particularly valuable because it was issued within a domestic context where the usual rhetoric should have prevented him from even questioning them. This exchange is also important because, shortly afterwards, any reference to matters of discussion different from the nuclear one would have disappeared from the official narrative devoted to the negotiations. However, given the very complex Iranian political system, time had to pass

¹⁷² Emphasis added.

¹⁷³ Emphasis added.

before direct talks could have initiated. Moreover, other confidence building measures were needed to reinforce Iranians' trust in WH's intentions. Twenty days later, on March 19, in a greeting speech addressing Iranian people in the Persian New Year's Eve ("*Niwruz*"), Obama made clear his choice of engaging with Tehran by saying,

My administration is now committed to diplomacy that addresses *the full range of issues before us*, and to pursuing constructive ties among the United States, Iran and the international community. This process will not be advanced by threats. We seek instead engagement that is honest and grounded in mutual respect. You, too, have a choice. The United States wants the Islamic Republic of Iran to take its rightful place in the community of nations. You have that right¹⁷⁴. (President Barack Obama, 2009c)

Obama's words signaled to Iranian political authorities his willingness to talk *on a full range of issues*, as well as the US acknowledgment of the Iranian right to be a full member of the international community. This was a condition Tehran had always been looking for: being recognized its role in regional politics by the Americans, as well as by the international community¹⁷⁵. Ahmadinejad's media advisor reportedly replied to Obama's "*Niwruz*" speech by stating: "We welcomed the interest of the American government to settle the differences" (Tait, 2009). Also in this case, it is hard to doubt that this exchange represented an American opening for dialogue,¹⁷⁶ as well as an Iranian acceptance of it. One month after that speech, Iranian acceptance of opening talks with Washington *on a full range of issues* would have been confirmed during an encounter between the then-US Ambassador in Muscat, Gary Grappo, and Sultan Qaboos's Special Envoy to Iran, Abdul Aziz al Rowas. In a (leaked) cable sent by Grappo to the State Department shortly after the meeting, he wrote that al Rowas had told him that "the Iranians would be eager to cooperate with us [the US], e.g., eliminating the Taliban in Afghanistan, restoring stability in Pakistan, ensuring a moderate and non-threatening India, and interdiction of narcotics trafficking" (Grappo, 2009).¹⁷⁷ He significantly added that according to the Sultan's envoy, "[t]hey [the Iranians] are ready and want to start, and you should not wait" adding that "he [al Rowas] thinks the Iranians probably *are encouraged by what they have been hearing from the US and may feel*

¹⁷⁴ Emphasis added.

¹⁷⁵ See, in Chapter 3, the text of the May 4, 2003 Iranian "roadmap".

¹⁷⁶ In fact, German Chancellor Angela Merkel reportedly interpreted the message precisely as an American offer to the IRI: "I think the message reflects exactly what the Europeans have always wanted – that an offer is being made to Iran" (MacAskil and Tait, 2009).

¹⁷⁷ A copy of the cable is in the Annexes.

*the US administration ‘can be trusted’ to begin a sincere dialog.’*¹⁷⁸ This cable confirms two things: firstly, Obama’s words had been effective in sending his quest for talks; secondly, there existed a range of issues which the US and the IRI could have negotiated. It is significant that during the meeting no mention was made of any aspect of the INP. This conveys the impression that for both parts the nuclear issue was secondary to other geopolitical matters. After that gathering in Muscat, between May 4 and 10, Obama sent a secret letter to Ayatollah Khamanei, reportedly providing aid not only to the IND resolution but also to the “*cooperation in regional and bilateral relations*”¹⁷⁹ (Slavin, 2009). After the cover up letter, initially the WH denied the fact, but, at a later date, it had to admit it (Slavin, 2009). Apart from the contents, the missive had a deep political and diplomatic significance. As a matter of fact, it was the first time an American president had addressed an Iranian supreme guide, implicitly acknowledging his political authority.

At this point, the main problem was how to make operational the American quest for talks and the Iranian acceptance of it. With such an aim, in the following months, both Washington and Tehran tried to reach out to each other through their own honest intermediary brokers: Italy, Brazil and Turkey¹⁸⁰ for the US, Oman for the IRI. In fact, in June 2009, in an unprecedented move, the Italian Foreign Minister asked his Iranian counterpart to attend the G8 summit devoted to Afghanistan’s and Pakistan’s stabilization organized by the Italian Prime Minister – at that time the G8 chairman. Reportedly, Tehran was invited to demonstrate it could be a “constructive player” in the region (Nigro, 2009a): the invitation implicitly acknowledged its role as a stakeholder. However, there was no Iranian answer (Il Tempo, 2009). Plausibly, Italy invited Tehran after a precise request from the WH aimed to make Americans and Iranians meet quietly within the G8 summit works. Democratic Nancy Pelosi, then-House Majority’s Speaker, reportedly said that Italy could have used its good offices with Tehran to solve the problems in Afghanistan (Nigro, 2009b). This hypothesis is confirmed by the fact that Secretary Clinton, already on March 11, 2009, allegedly had announced that “Iran would be invited to an upcoming multinational conference on Afghanistan” (quoted in Landler, 2009) – very likely the Italian G8 summit. This happened

¹⁷⁸ Emphasis added. Al Rowas even suggested Grappo possible bargaining tools to be used in the negotiations with the IRI: “Two areas are especially important to Iran at present, the US freeze on Iranian assets and the gas pipeline from Turkmenistan. These are of immense interest to the Iranians, he said, and would be useful tools for the US. He also identified Iran’s growing dependence on gasoline imports [...] and its limited supply of water, most of which is sourced in Central Asia.”

¹⁷⁹ Emphasis added.

¹⁸⁰ Regarding Brazil and Turkey, see Chapter II, paragraph “The Teheran deal”.

while her advisor, Dennis Ross, and her Deputy, William Burns were meeting their European allies and the non-proliferation experts for advice on how best to approach Tehran for possible talks (Stockman, 2009). The G8 general meeting took place in July 8-9.¹⁸¹ It ended with an announcement according to which the IRI was given two months for accepting an offer for talks concerning its nuclear program (New York Daily News, 2009). The two months passed without apparently any Iranian acceptance of talks. During the G20 Summit in Pittsburgh in September – the event chosen as the deadline for the acceptance of the offer – Obama, the UK Prime Minister, and the French President issued a joint statement justifying their quest for further UN sanctions (Obama, Sarkozy and Brown, 2009). However, it was not until July 2010 that the UNSC Resolution 1929, calling Tehran to suspend its uranium enrichment program, was issued after a White House’s quest¹⁸². In other words, it seems that the US wanted to leave the door open for talks. In fact, Secretary Clinton, few days after the G8 Summit, during a speech, stated:

Neither the president nor I have any illusions that direct dialogue with the Islamic Republic will guarantee success, but we also understand the importance of trying to engage Iran and offering its leaders a clear choice: whether to join the international community as a responsible member or to continue down a path to further isolation. [...] The opportunity will not remain open indefinitely. [...] The President and I believe that refusing to talk to countries rarely punishes them. And as long as engagement might advance our interests and our values, it is unwise to take it off the table. Negotiations can provide insight into regimes' calculations and the possibility -- even if it seems remote -- that a regime will, eventually, alter its behavior in exchange for the benefits of acceptance into the international community. (Kessler, 2009)

The message is clear: firstly, the administration had distanced itself from the Bush Administration stances (“we don’t talk to evil”¹⁸³); secondly, it had opened a timely limited window for dialogue with Tehran; thirdly, the possible Iranian engagement would have advanced US interests. While the WH was trying to reach out to Tehran by means of its allies, the Iranians set in motion their own honest intermediary broker, Sultan Qaboos bin Said of Oman. His mediation, although with a lot of stop-and-goes due to both American and Iranian domestic problems (Savyon et al., 2015), was the one who would have led Washington and Tehran to the negotiations table and then to the JPOA signature. In other

¹⁸¹ It is worth noting that such a G8 meeting was the same one during which President Obama personally asked Brazilian President Lula da Silva to approach Iranian President Ahmadinejad for solving – according to his own instructions and priorities – the IND. See Chapter II, “The Teheran Deal”.

¹⁸² As to UNSC resolution, see Chapter II, section “The Teheran deal”.

¹⁸³ See Chapter III.

terms, although the crucial moment of the negotiations happened in October 2012 (Cooper and Landler, 2012; Salomon, 2016; The Iran Project, 2015; Savyon et al., 2015), the very beginning of the IND solution had occurred in the very first months of the Obama presidency. More precisely, according to Landler (2016), the secret contacts between the WH (in the person of Dennis Ross, and one of his aide, Theran-born Ray Takey) and Sultan Qaboos's emissary, businessman Salem ben Nasser al-Ismaily, started with an encounter at the end of May 2009, in Washington. Already at that very first encounter, Mr. Ismaily "was carrying a sheet of paper that contained an offer by Iran to negotiate with the Obama administration *on a range of issues, from the nuclear program to Iran's support for Hezbollah*" (Landler, 2016b: 240)¹⁸⁴. This means that, contrary to what many authors argue, Mr. Ismaily did not act by his own goodwill, not even as a candid emissary of Oman's Sultan, but he was backed by the Iranian highest political authorities. Moreover, the Iranians had definitely accepted Obama's invitation to negotiate *on a full range of issues*. In other words, the May 2009 covert encounter between Ross, Takey and Ismaili represents the seminal contact from which further American and Iranian negotiations would have developed. Such a back channel would have lasted, although in that discontinuous form as Salomon (2016) Solomon and Lee (2013), Erlanger and Landler (2009), Rozen (2009), Ross (2015), Rhodes (2016), Kerry (2019), and Landler (2016a, 2016b) pictured, until the beginning of 2013, when Americans and Iranians would have been joined by the other P5+1 negotiation members.

IV. 1. B An ex-ante decision

Reportedly, already at the beginning of November 2008, shortly after his election, Obama with his advisors had prepared 4 different versions of the first secret letter he would have sent to Khamanej¹⁸⁵ at the beginning of May, 2009 (Tait and MacAskill 2009). This means that the US engagement with Tehran was decided *before* Obama entered the "Oval Office" and the "Situation Room", the places where it is conventionally said the presidents and their NSC teams shape US foreign policy. This also means that the engagement was not a group-level decision taken through a bargaining dynamic within the administration, as the governmental-bureaucratic politics model forecasts. On the contrary, the preparation of the

¹⁸⁴ Emphasis added.

¹⁸⁵ Reportedly, President Obama wrote at least four personal letters to Ayatollah Khamanej from 2009 up to 2014 (BBC News, 2014).

letter, as well as the inauguration speech and the January 20 WH website statement claiming Obama's will to talk with the Iranians *without preconditions* (Borger, 2009), described above, demonstrate that the decision of reaching out to Tehran was made before any official NSC meeting could have been made. For Margaret Hermann (2001), high-level diplomacy increases indeed the probability of individual-level decision making. Regarding the implementation of Obama's decision to talk with Iranians, the available accounts are Rhodes's (2016), Ross's (2015) and Landler's (2016: 233-234). Ross describes a NSC meeting which took place during the administration first year where the President was already fully convinced of engaging with the IRI and did not want to change his mind about it. According to Rhodes, the President waited until the removal of President Ahmadinejad before contacting the Iranians and, only in August 2013, he had the idea of writing a letter to the newly elected Iranian President Rouhani.¹⁸⁶ Landler (2016b: 233-235) describes a meeting in the Oval Office at the beginning of *March 2009*, between Obama, Vice President Biden, NSA Jim Jones with his two deputies, Tom Donilon and Denis McDonough, and Secretary of State Clinton with her special advisor for the Persian Gulf, Dennis Ross. Reportedly, President Obama asked: "[h]ow do we think about Iran? How do we approach it? How do we structure things?" From such questions, it appears that Obama had already decided the opening and what was to be discussed was only the "how", i.e. its practical implementation. In fact, Landler significantly adds: "[h]e [President Obama] wasn't looking for a briefing about specific policy options, nor was he interested in reopening the bitter campaign debate between him and Clinton about the wisdom of engaging with Iran's mullahs. *That had been settled by the election.*"¹⁸⁷ Once Ross finished his discouraging analysis, Obama replied: "I think the odds are low, but I really think we ought to engage them". From such a description two things emerge. Firstly, that Obama had already taken the decision of engaging with Tehran. Secondly, that the decision-making process concerning US Iran policy was led by a "dominant individual" (M. Hermann, 2001) or "predominant leader" (M. Hermann and C. Hermann, 1989). Hence, Preston's and Hart's (1999) suggestions on the nexus between leaders and their advisory systems appears to be partly helpful. Two months after the meeting in April in the Oval office, as seen above, Ross

¹⁸⁶ More precisely, Rhodes wrote, "[d]uring a morning meeting shortly after the election [of President Rouhani], Obama proposed taking advantage of this opening. "Why don't I send Rouhani a letter?" he asked. "It's worth testing." Susan [Rice] agreed. [...] At Obama's direction, a letter was drafted to Rouhani proposing discussions on the nuclear issue. Within weeks, we received a positive response – the Iranians wanted to get a diplomatic process under way." (Rhodes, 2016: 248-253).

¹⁸⁷ Emphasis added.

and Takeyh would have met the Omani emissary carrying the Iranian offer. However, that contact was not immediately fully exploited by the Secretary of State. In fact, although Clinton had told Ross to keep talking, she went on her first trip to Muscat in January 2011, on her way back from Yemen (Landler, 2016a). During her tenure as Secretary of State, Clinton was indeed very skeptical about engaging with the Iranians through quiet diplomacy (Landler, 2016). As a presidential candidate, she had indeed vehemently campaigned against the IRI (Morgan, 2008), yet it does not appear she directly obstructed President Obama's decision. This means that the opportunity of engaging with Tehran was occasioned during the 2008 primary elections, when the Democratic Party chose his presidential candidate. The choice was for Senator Obama who had made clear during his campaign he would talk to Ahmadinejad (Sidique, 2009). It means that the Democratic party's faction¹⁸⁸ which chose Obama, also agreed on his choice of engaging with Tehran and, plausibly, offered him all its assets in terms of information, experts, contacts, and leverage. The Democratic party's endorsement of the US engagement with Tehran planned by Senator Obama represents a key-step in the solution of the IND on which literature has not yet properly focused.

Cognitive theories have suggested that, in order to understand the genesis of his choices, we should consider Obama's psychological factors and look at the role played in his personal decision-making process by, for example, perceptions and misperceptions (Jervis, 1968, 1976), mental representations (R. Hermann, 1985; Cottam and Preston, 2007), beliefs (Walker and Schafer, 2006), analogies (Maoz, 1990), operational codes (Walker and Schafer, 2006), and evoked sets (Cashman, 1993, Jervis, 1976). Affective theories also – focused on how personality (Winter, 2003; M. Hermann, 1984; Preston, 2001) and emotions (McDermott, 2004; Geva et al. 2004) can affect the leader's decision making process – could represent useful avenues of investigation. Yet, focusing only on the leader's psychological characteristics appears to be a minor help. In truth, affective and cognitive theories are static because they relate to psychological traits which are indeed quite fixed in adults. Hence, they appear as being unable to explain the dynamic evolution of a personality. Conversely, taking into consideration factors related to a subject's personal relations – like friendships, mentorships, party's faction belonging, and so on – can better explain the evolution of Obama's preferences and choices (Blake & Mouton, 1961). In President Obama's case, such

¹⁸⁸ The existence of two big factions inside the Democratic Party is self-evident through the institutional way nominees are selected. Moreover, the Obama vs. Clinton primaries were characterized by a deep and bitter fault line, in particular concerning US foreign policy towards the ME (Landler, 2016b).

a different focus allows to consider other contexts than the WH as places where his foreign policy choices were shaped. The differences existing between President Obama's and Senator Obama's stances towards Tehran show indeed that an important change took place in his beliefs which plausibly had been driven by interpersonal influence. Senator Obama was in office from January 1997 until November 2008, and acted as the Chairman of the Senate CFA Subcommittee for European Affairs from 2007 to November 2008. During his tenure, he was active handling welfare issues and did not promote any relevant act concerning US foreign policy, except for the "Iran Sanctions Enabling Act", passed in August 2007¹⁸⁹. In his statement supporting that act, he identified the IRI as a terrorists' sponsor against which the US should have increased its coercive diplomacy¹⁹⁰. Yet, Obama's declarations about the policy he would pursue towards Tehran (Sidique, 2009; Stockman 2009) sound quite different. For instance, in September 2007, during an interview, Obama reportedly stated: "I would meet directly with Iranian leaders. [...] We would engage in a level of aggressive personal diplomacy in which a whole host of issues are on the table" by means of "a serious, coordinated diplomatic effort" (Gordon and Zeleny, 2007). It is plausible that Senator Obama changed his mind and developed new beliefs during his primaries and presidential campaigns within the Democratic Party. Then, once elected, his new preferences were definitively set out and operationalized during the presidential transition period within his "Transition Project's Advisory Board". At this point it is necessary to thoroughly explore Obama's life before the 2009 election.

IV.2.D The role of Obama's "shadow" foreign policy advisor, Z. Brezinski

Senator Obama's campaign team made clear that the Obama's years from 1981 until 1983 would remain underreported¹⁹¹. During those years, Obama had travelled to Pakistan and, once back to the US, moved from the Occidental University, in Los Angeles, to Columbia University, in New York (Obama, 1998). Obama reportedly said that going to Columbia was a great watershed in his life: "There was a fundamental rupture in my life between Occidental

¹⁸⁹ Source: US Congress' website (<https://www.congress.gov/member/barack-obama/O000167?searchResultViewType=expanded&KWICView=false>).

¹⁹⁰ "The need for these laws is clear. Iran uses the revenue it generates from its energy sector to finance its pursuit of nuclear weapons and support for terrorist groups like Hezbollah and Hamas. Along with a sustained diplomatic effort and toughened multilateral sanctions on Iran, divestment is a useful tool that State and local governments can use to increase economic pressure to persuade Iran to end its dangerous policies" (US Congress, 2007).

¹⁹¹ During his campaigns, no information was offered about it by his team: "The Obama campaign declined to discuss Obama's time at Columbia and his friendships in general. It won't, for example, release his transcript or name his friends" (Goldman and Tanner, 2008).

and Columbia, where I just became more serious” (Purdum, 2008). At Columbia, Brzezinski was the head of the Institute for Communist Affairs. It seems that Obama wrote his senior dissertation on Soviet nuclear disarmament (Popkins, 2008) and, given the topic, it is likely that he followed Brzezinski’s lectures, probably met and had some discussions with him. Yet, there is no evidence available of an encounter between Obama and Brzezinski at Columbia. Nor is it known whether, from his graduation onwards, Obama and Brzezinski had any contact. Nevertheless, once Obama became Senator and decided to run in the Democratic Party’s primaries, Brzezinski manifested publicly his support for Senator Obama and expressed a negative judgment on Hillary Clinton’s candidacy¹⁹². According to Lizza (2013):

In 2007, Obama called Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter’s national-security adviser and the reigning realist of the Democratic foreign-policy establishment. Obama told him that he had read his recent book, “Second Chance,” in which Brzezinski criticized Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush and their handling of the post-Cold War world. They began to speak and exchange e-mails about policy, and Brzezinski travelled with Obama during a stretch of the campaign. In September, 2007, Brzezinski introduced Obama at an event in Clinton, Iowa, where the candidate discussed the failures in Iraq. “I thought he had a really incisive grasp of what the twenty-first century is all about and how America has to relate to it,” Brzezinski told me. “He was reacting in a way that I very much shared, and we had a meeting of the minds—namely, that George Bush put the United States on a suicidal course”.

During the mentioned campaign speech in Iowa, Brzezinski himself had introduced Obama (Berman, 2007) and the latter described the former by saying:

[...] I can’t say enough about his contribution to our country, he’s somebody who has over decades framed some of the most prominent foreign policy specialists not only in the Democratic party but in the Republican as well, he is one of our most outstanding scholar. He is one of our most outstanding thinkers, he has proven to be an outstanding friend and somebody who I’ve learned an immense amount from. (Obama, 2007)

In other terms, in September 2007, Obama defined Brzezinski an “outstanding friend” he had learnt “an immense amount from.” In January 2008, during a conference call, Ann Lewis, a candidate Clinton’s senior adviser, “energetically contrasted Clinton’s pro-Israel credentials with those of Barack Obama. To make her point, she said that Obama’s “chief foreign-policy adviser” is Zbigniew Brzezinski” (Hirsh, 2008). Then, asked by a journalist,

¹⁹² Brzezinski reportedly said, “Obama is clearly more effective and has the upper hand. He has a sense of what is historically relevant and what is needed from the United States in relationship to the world.” Adding that: “Being a former first lady doesn’t prepare you to be president. [...] Clinton’s foreign policy approach is very conventional [...] I don’t think the country needs to go back to what we had eight years ago” (McGillis, 2007).

Brzezinski answered he had advised Obama “only on occasion” (Hirsh, 2008). Shortly after, the media confirmed that Brzezinski had been selected by Obama to advise him on foreign policy affairs. Some added that this had raised concerns among Israel supporters because Brzezinski had taken “a highly critical stance towards Israel in the past” and had “defended an academic attack on the American Jewish lobby [the Mearsheimer’s and Walt’s book, 2008]” (Lappin, 2007). In July 2008, in the aftermath of Samantha Power’s resignation from Obama’s team, Jason Horowitz wrote, “the office of Brzezinski—another of Obama’s foreign policy advisers” had relayed a statement about the event (Horowitz, 2008). For former Bush Administration’s officer, Michael Rubin, Brzezinski was not only Obama’s senior advisor, but also his mentor (Rubin, 2008). The circumstantial evidences presented above are consistent with a scenario in which, first of all, Obama and Z. Brzezinski have nurtured a personal relation through which Obama had learnt an “immense amount” from Brzezinski and considered him one of the American “outstanding thinkers”. Secondly, Brzezinski was indeed a foreign policy advisor of candidate Obama during both the primaries and the presidential campaigns. Yet, Obama’s team had been concealing such a relation during the whole campaigns,¹⁹³ whilst journalists, Republican party’s members and Clinton’s team were claiming the opposite. In an article in January 2013, journalist Poquet wrote about the Brzezinski’s “complicated relationship” with the Obama administration stating,

Brzezinski endorsed Obama for the presidency in the summer of 2007, giving the junior senator from Illinois crucial foreign-policy gravitas against the likes of Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden. However, the campaign kept him at arm’s length. “Brzezinski is not an adviser to the campaign,” the campaign’s Middle East adviser, Dennis Ross, told the New Jersey News in 2008. “Brzezinski came out and supported Obama early because of the war in Iraq. A year or so ago, they talked a couple of times. That’s the extent of it, and Sen. Obama has made it clear that on other Middle Eastern issues, Brzezinski is not who he looks to.” (Poquet, 2007)

The evidences presented above most probably demonstrate that despite Obama team’s denials, Brzezinski was one of Obama’s political advisor on foreign affairs during the 2007-2008 campaigns and during the presidential transition period. It is plausible that Brzezinski continued to advice Obama for some time also during his tenure as US president¹⁹⁴. Brzezinski’s stances towards Tehran when he was Carter’s NSA were described in Chapter

¹⁹³ Obama himself, apart from praising Brzezinski and introducing him during his “Iowa speech”, never mentioned Brzezinski as belonging to his foreign policy advisors’ circle. See, for example, the interview held on November 2007 (Gordon and Zeleny, 2007).

¹⁹⁴ This means that in 2008, the “conflicted” Democratic Party (Domhoff, 2005), by choosing Obama instead of Clinton, chose to adhere to Brzezinski’s foreign policy.

I. Brzezinski's vision of how US foreign policy towards Tehran would be like is described in the proceedings of this paragraph where it is compared with President Obama's decisions.

Since the Clinton Administration, Brzezinski had been supporting an American engagement with Tehran whilst opposing military actions and sanctions. For instance, in the years 1996-1997, he chaired a Council of Foreign Relations' (CFR) research group on US foreign policy towards Iraq and the IRI. The beginning of the group's final report (Brzezinski et al., 1997c), appears as a repetition of his "Carter doctrine":

The Persian Gulf is one of the few regions whose importance to the United States is obvious. The flow of Gulf oil will continue to be crucial to the economic well-being of the industrialized world for the foreseeable future; developments in the Gulf will have a critical impact on issues ranging from Arab-Israeli relations and religious extremism to terrorism and nuclear nonproliferation. Every president since Richard Nixon has recognized that ensuring Persian Gulf security and stability is a vital US interest.

After having criticized Clinton's *double containment* strategy, the authors affirmed that "Iran's geopolitical importance is greater than Iraq's, and the challenge it represents is more complex" adding, "[a] more nuanced approach could yield greater benefits at lower cost." Then, they stated,

One negative consequence of current policy is the damage inflicted on America's interest in gaining greater access to the energy sources of Central Asia. An independent and economically accessible Central Asia is in the interests of both the United States and Iran. The United States should do nothing to preclude Central Asia's eventual emergence, nor stand in the way of deals that might facilitate it. The United States should therefore refrain from automatically opposing the construction of gas and oil pipelines across Iran. [...] Another area of common interest is the resuscitation of US-Iranian commercial relations. To this end, Washington should be open-minded regarding the resumption of activity by American oil companies in Iran. In 1995, for example, the US government forced the cancellation of a \$1 billion deal between Iran and Conoco; this served no one's interests except those of the French firm Total. Future commercial deals should be evaluated on an individual basis and permitted unless they contribute specifically to Iranian behavior the United States opposes.

Such a proposed strategy appears as based on the interests of the American oil MNEs in the Persian Gulf-Caucasus-Central Asia region¹⁹⁵. The group also offered the president four policy recommendations: reducing rhetorical war and embargo; pressing the IAEA for more inspections; exploring "the potential of dialogue through track-two channels to Iran." In

¹⁹⁵ With regard to the connection between the Rockefeller's oil MNE Exxon-Mobil and Z. Brzezinski, see Ottaway and Morgan (1997).

2004, Brzezinski together with former CIA's Director, Robert Gates, and former ME senior political analyst of the Rockefeller's Exxon-Mobil oil giant from 2001 to 2004 (Maloney, n.d.) Suzanne Maloney, co-chaired a task-force which produced another CFR's report providing advice on US foreign policy towards Tehran (Brzezinski et al., 2004). It is noticeable that the task-force also included members like Stephen Heintz, president of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund¹⁹⁶, Nicholas Platt, President Emeritus of the Rockefeller's Asia Society¹⁹⁷, and William Luers, President of the United Nations Association of USA¹⁹⁸. Not to mention Ray Takeyh, and, as an observer, Puneet Talwar¹⁹⁹, then-advisor to the SPRC's Chairman, Senator Biden. Basically, the report stated that isolation, containment and sanctions had failed. Furthermore, US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan were offering the US new incentives to open a mutually beneficial dialogue with Tehran. In particular, the report claimed,

Dialogue between the United States and Iran need not await absolute harmony between the two governments. [...] Political and economic relations with Iran cannot be normalized unless and until the Iranian government demonstrates a commitment to abandoning its nuclear weapons programs and its support for terrorist groups. However, these demands should not constitute preconditions for dialogue. Instead, we envision a relationship through which the two countries pragmatically explore areas of common concern and potential cooperation, while continuing to pursue other incompatible objectives at the same time. [...] For these reasons, we advocate that Washington propose a compartmentalized process of dialogue, confidence building, and incremental engagement. The United States should identify the discrete set of issues on which critical US and Iranian interests converge and must be prepared to try to make progress along separate tracks, even while considerable differences remain in other areas. [...] In dealing with Iran, the United States should relinquish the rhetoric of regime change. [...] Rather, Washington's positions and policies must clearly communicate to the government and citizens of Iran that the United States favors political evolution: the long-range vision is an Iran that ushers in democracy itself in a meaningful and lasting manner.

Regarding the issue of regional conflicts, the report suggested,

From the perspective of US interests, one particular issue area appears particularly ripe for US-Iranian engagement: the future of Iraq and Afghanistan. The United States has a direct and

¹⁹⁶ With regard to Heinz, the RBF and their attempt at influencing Congress's approval of the JCPOA, see the last section of this chapter.

¹⁹⁷ On the role played by the Asia Society in the Track II diplomacy, see the last paragraph of this section.

¹⁹⁸ As such, he was the leader of the Track II diplomacy which paved the way for the US-IRI backchannel and that, at the time of the report, had been already on its way for two years, see the last paragraph of this section. Previously, in 2002-2003, Luers had been one of the AIC's Director directly involved in the covert meetings with the then-Iranian Ambassador to the UN, Zarif, and the then-Iranian Foreign Minister, Kharrazi, which contributed to the 2003 "grand bargain." See Chapter I, Section 2.

¹⁹⁹ On Takeyh and Talwar, see the next two paragraphs.

compelling interest in ensuring both countries' security and the success of their post-conflict governments. Iran has demonstrated its ability and readiness to use its influence constructively in these two countries, but also its capacity for making trouble. The United States should work with Tehran to capitalize on Iran's influence to advance the stability and consolidation of its neighbors.

Finally, the task force recommended that Tehran should be facilitated in its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). The suggestions advanced in the report on avoiding regime change rhetoric, involving Tehran in the future of Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the facilitation of the IRI's accession to the WTO would have been part of President Obama's program²⁰⁰. With regard to how to communicate with the Iranian government and citizens, it appears as fully implemented in President Obama's "*Niwruz*" speech. The CFR task force also envisioned a road-map for an eventual US-IRI dialogue consisting of, firstly, no preconditions about the nuclear program or the support for terrorist groups; secondly, no need of "absolute harmony between the two governments", but only pragmatic, progressive engagement "along separate tracks, even while considerable differences remain in other areas". Such a road-map looks like the path Obama's negotiators would have followed from May 2009 until November 2013. Moreover, regarding in particular the INP, the task force had recommended,

the United States work with its allies and the IAEA to outline a detailed framework agreement that would seek to outline a more durable solution to the nuclear issue. The basic parameters of such an agreement would institute ongoing rigorous constraints on Iran's nuclear program in exchange for continued access to peaceful technology and international markets.

Such a description appears as a summary of the conditions stated by the JPOA. To summarize, the 2004 CFR's report appears to have represented a prompt-pattern for the Obama Administration's Iranian policy. Significantly, some of the members of the task force (i.e., Ray Takey and Puneet Talwar), appointed by President Obama, would have played crucial roles in the US-IRI backchannel. Other facts confirm the closeness between Brzezinski's visions and Obama's Iranian foreign policy. For instance, in 2007 – shortly after President Bush had held IRGC' "Quds Force" responsible for killing US soldiers and was making his case for a military action against Tehran (Oren, 2011) – Brzezinski testified in front of the SFRC. On that occasion, he warned against any "military collision with Iran"

²⁰⁰ During the primaries campaign Senator Obama said, "I think it is important for us to send a signal that we are not hell bent on regime change, just for the sake of regime change, but expect changes in behavior and there are both carrots and there are sticks available to them for those changes in behavior." He also added, "we are willing to examine their membership in the W.T.O." (Gordon and Zeleny, 2007).

adding that even a defensive US military action against Iran would plunge “a lonely America into a spreading and deepening quagmire eventually ranging across Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan” (Brzezinski, 1997). During another hearing, on March 5, 2009 – invited by the then-Chairman, Senator Kerry – he said:

I do favor the initiation of talks directly with the Iranians involving us particularly, not just through our European friends, regarding the nuclear program. I think that should be initiated before too long. I’ve already tried to articulate the context and the manner in which this should be done. But I’m also of the view [...] that we not delay these talks, unless the Iranians want to delay them, past the Iranian elections. I would rather start them at a low level, a low key fashion, before the [Iranian] elections. (US SFRC, 2009)

What Brzezinski suggested about the time – before June 12, 2009, i.e. the Iranian election day – and the manner the talks should have been conducted – “low level” and bilateral – describes precisely what would have happened some weeks later. He also detailed the path that the talks should have followed:

First overtures, of course they have to be done quietly. [...] So yes, preliminary discussions quietly. But once the negotiating process starts, I would favor conducting it openly, not necessarily with open sessions, but sessions that are publicly known, maybe even some press briefings afterwards if there is agreement about press briefings. (US SFRC, 2009)

This is indeed a description of how the US-IRI negotiations actually evolved through secret and bilateral talks (in Oman) at the beginning, and publicly known sessions at close doors later (in Lausanne and Vienna with the P5+1). Brzezinski also added: “I just think that if we got into a military conflict [...] it would absolutely devastate the historical legacy of the Obama presidency and damage the United States, which is even more important” (Brzezinski, 2009) echoing Defense Secretary Gates’s words against any war with Tehran (Ross, 2015; Orin, 2011). During that hearing, Brzezinski also unveiled why an engagement with Tehran, instead of a military confrontation, would have been in the US’ interests. In fact, he said, “[t]he Russians, who may have reservations about Iran going nuclear, would be financially massive beneficiaries of an American-Iranian crisis” (Brzezinski, 2009). In an op-ed published in November 2007 (Brzezinski, 2007b), Brzezinski had already elaborated on the scenario created by an eventual American military attack against Tehran and had examined why an engagement should have been preferable for the US. Consistently with his realist conception of international relations, in that article he had framed an eventual US-IRI engagement within the wider context of US primacy in the Gulf region. As a matter of fact, for him, the Washington-Tehran entente would have been functional to the American

interests in many ways. First of all, it would have broken the constitution of that Eurasian continental mass – consisting of Europe, Central Asia, and Russia – the US had the geopolitical imperative of impeding that. Moreover, it would have assured the Iranian cooperation on stabilizing Iraq and Afghanistan. Additionally, it would have made the IRI's markets, its geographical position and its natural resources available to American corporates. By making Iranian and Caucasus-Central Asian oil and gas cheaply available to Europe, it would have also inflicted huge financial losses to Russia. Finally, it would have produced an additional Russia's weakening by eventually ousting China from Iranian hydrocarbon resources, which, in turn, could have led Beijing to look aggressively at Eastern Russia's land. In other terms, Brzezinski's plan for an American Iran foreign policy represented an evolution of his original "Arc of crisis" strategy²⁰¹ targeting Russia (in place of the former Soviet Union) by means of an Islamist regime (instead of Islamist militias) with the ultimate objective of American global hegemonic supremacy. Given the role played by Brzezinski in advising Obama, it is possible to argue that such objectives would have represented, at a later date, Obama's reasons – beyond nuclear deterrence – for his rapprochement with Tehran.

After Obama had become president, in January 2010, Brzezinski published an article devoted to Obama's foreign policy (Brzezinski, 2010: 16), writing,

To his credit, Obama has undertaken a truly ambitious effort to redefine the United States' view of the world and to reconnect the United States with the emerging historical context of the twenty-first century. He has done this remarkably well. In less than a year, he has comprehensively reconceptualized US foreign policy with respect to several centrally important geopolitical issues.

Among such geopolitical themes, there was the fact that "the United States ought to pursue serious negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program". It would be sufficient such an appreciation for illustrating the consonance of visions between Brzezinski and President Obama regarding Iranian policy. Yet, further evidence supporting such an argument is available. On October 25, 2011 – when the US-IRI backchannel was working but not yet of public domain – during an interview, Brzezinski said that some openings were ongoing and that the Iranians were willing to reach a deal (Brzezinski, 2011). He added that the Americans should have engaged with them in order to get a final solution to the Afghanistan problem, enhancing thus US position in the region. In February 2012, during another TV

²⁰¹ See Chapter I.

interview (Brzezinski, 2012), when asked about the opportunity of a military intervention against the IRI, he was adamantly clear about how the administration should have acted. Indeed, he answered: “We don’t need to go to war. And we have to make that very clear to our Israeli friends. We’re not going to go to war. They’re not going to go to war by flying over our airspace over Iraq. We’re not going to support them” also adding,

If they [Israelians] do it, they will be on their own. The consequences will be theirs, because the price we’ll all pay, based on a massive war, which the Iranians interpret as being done with our connivance, will be disastrous for us in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in the terms of oil, but also in the Middle East more generally.

As it will be shown in the next section, President Obama in all his speeches on the JCPOA made it clear that it was the only alternative to another, eventually nuclear, war in the ME. He also explained that, although his decision was in sharp contrast with Israel’s quests, he would not change his mind as a consequence of Israel’s pressure. The dismissal of any military action against Tehran – “an option which you can always keep in reserve if you really mean to use it” – was reiterated by Brzezinski in a speech at Chatham House, in November 2008 (Brzezinski, 2008b). He emphasized the need for the US to negotiate with the IRI without preconditions: “We have to negotiate seriously which means changing our posture. Abandoning what is the current American posture which is that we negotiate after the Iranians make fundamental concession as preconditions to negotiation.” On January 20, 2009, the WH’s website would have indeed reportedly announced, “Barack Obama supports tough and direct diplomacy with Iran without preconditions” (Borger, 2009). All the circumstantial evidence hereby provided must have demonstrated that Obama’s engagement with Tehran was suggested, even in its pattern, by his “shadow” foreign policy advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski.

IV.1.D Inside the Obama Administration’s “black box”

The process above described, in which the President’s choice of engaging with Tehran was implemented by the WH rather than decided, confirms some of President Obama’s first-hand descriptions. He has been defined as an intrusive “micromanager in chief”. Moreover, a senior Defense Department official described Obama to Karen Deyoung: “[i]n addressing challenges where there is internal disagreement or there are no good options — civil war in Syria, Russians in Ukraine and military dictatorship in Egypt, for example — policymaking has been ‘sclerotic at best, constipated at worse’”. In other situations, when “the president

has wanted to move swiftly on some of his most ambitious policy initiatives — the opening to Cuba and the early Iran nuclear negotiations — he has circumvented the usual practice for decision-making and kept a close hold within the White House” (Deyoung, 2015). His WH has been described as tending to overcentralize operations and lead all the other agencies (Rohde and Strobel, 2014). According to Deyoung, outside the administration, some lawmakers, policy experts, and scholars charged Obama’s NSC staff of being “filled with what they describe as acolytes who distrust the rest of the government and see protecting the president as their primary job” (Deyoung, 2015)²⁰². According to a former Western diplomat, the Obama Administration was one “where the White House dominates Iran policy” (quoted by Solomon and Lee, 2013). When Kerry was named Secretary of State, Landler wrote that his appointment was “likely to further centralize policy decisions in the White House, where for the past four years the president and a small circle of advisers have kept a tight grip on issues like Iran’s nuclear program” (Landler, 2012). As described by many first- and second-hand accounts (Rhodes, 2016; Kerry, 2019; Ross, 2015; Mann, 2012; Solomon and Lee, 2013; Samuels, 2016; Fayazmanesh, 2013; Landler, 2016a, 2016b; Parsi, 2012, 2017; Solomon, 2016) the implementation of the decision to engage with Tehran saw indeed the interplay of few WH actors. Among them, Secretary Clinton was one of the few who tried to oppose the President’s decision. In fact, according to Landler, “she would have favored hitting the Iranians with new sanctions after Rouhani was elected president. [...] the president was the one pushing the deal, and Hillary Clinton was nothing if not a loyal implementer of her boss’ policy (quoted in Goldberg, 2016). Dennis Ross, Clinton’s Special Advisor, was also against Obama’s choice. According to Fayazmanesh (2013), Ross – a key player of the Bush Administration’s coercive diplomacy against the IRI – represented a kind of Trojan horse for Israel and the Israeli lobby in Washington. He eventually left the Administration on November 10, 2011 because of his contrast with Obama’s strategy towards Tehran and the whole MEGP region (Ross, 2015). This fact certainly represents a proof of Israel’s and Israel lobby’s reduced influence on the Obama WH. Susan Rice, US Ambassador to the UN during the administration’s first term, played a role in paving the way for the official US-IRI rapprochement. In truth, according to Solomon and Lee (2013), who mentioned American and Iranian officials, “[a]t Mr. Obama’s direction, Ms. Rice had nurtured ties with her Iranian counterpart while serving from 2009-2013 as US ambassador to the United Nations”. Additionally, “Ms. Rice and Mohammad Khazaei, her Iranian

²⁰² A similar criticism is found in Gates (2014).

counterpart during her time at the U.N, had sought to calm tensions over regional spots and avert miscalculations between American and Iranian naval ships in the Persian Gulf.” Also, it is known that in September 2012, Rice and Khazaei “closely coordinated by phone to try to arrange a direct meeting between Messrs. Obama and Rouhani on the sidelines of the U.N. gathering”. Yet, the meeting did not occur and the “two sides eventually agreed to a phone call” (Solomon and Lee, 2013). An underestimated role in the US-IRI rapprochement was played by Senior Adviser and Assistant to the President for Intergovernmental Affairs and Public Engagement, Valerie Jarret. Born in Iran and Persian-speaker, Jarret was also the head of the WH’s Office of Public Engagement²⁰³. In that tenure, on July 18, 2012, she organized a White House roundtable with Iranian-American organizations, reportedly including the National Iranian American Council (NIAC). The NIAC is a lobby organization which, since 2002, has been supporting US engagement with the IRI providing publications, advocacy campaigns, and conferences²⁰⁴. Reportedly, Jarret also held secret meetings with Iranian emissaries (Staff, 2012). Since the beginning, Deputy National Security Advisor for strategic speechwriting, Benn Rhodes had been in tune with his boss’ decision to engage with Tehran (Samuels, 2016; Rhodes, 2016). He also developed a full-fledged communication campaign supporting the deal whose details will be described later. The rather underestimated role of two other key-players of the US-IRI rapprochement deserve to be analyzed. The first one is Iran-born Ray Takeyh, who briefly served as senior adviser on Iran to Mr. Ross from April to August 2009 (Rozen, 2009a). Before joining the State Department, Takeyh had co-authored with his wife, Suzanne Maloney, some articles concerning the IRI-US relationship. Among those, four are of particular interest. The first one (Maloney & Takeyh, 2007a) claimed that the US had to avoid another military stalemate in the ME by reaching out to the Iranians. The second one (Maloney & Takeyh, 2007b) reaffirmed the US’ convenience to engage with Tehran arguing that applying the approach Kissinger used towards the Soviet Union, “means beginning a comprehensive dialogue that puts all the major issues on the table.” The third one (Maloney & Takeyh, 2008a) called for

²⁰³ Source: The Obama White House’s online Archives (<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/engage/office>).

²⁰⁴ On its website, the NIAC defines itself as an organization founded “to give voice to the American-Iranian community” which advances its goals through grassroots advocacy, lobbying efforts in Washington, and political candidates’ engagement. It makes clear also that it does not receive funds from the Iranian government (Source: NIAC’s website, <https://www.niacouncil.org/mission-and-vision/>). Yet, the entanglement between the NIAC and the so-called US “trade lobby” and their attempts at pressuring the WH and Congress to obtain the relief of sanctions has been demonstrated by Hassain Daiouleslam (2017) and by the Iranian American Forum. Concerning the activity of the “Iranian lobby” and its influence on the US foreign policy see also Lopez (2009), Daiouleslam (2007, 2020), and Fayazmanesh (2008). In particular for its influence on the Obama’s WH see Daiouleslam (n.d.) and the video uploaded by the Iranian American Forum (2015).

“implementing multitrack, delinked negotiations on each of the most critical issues at stake: the restoration of diplomatic relationships, the nuclear issue, security in the Persian Gulf and Iraq, and broader regional issues.” The last one (Maloney & Takeyh, 2008b) claimed, “Iran could transform itself from one of the world’s foremost problem states to a respected problem-solver”. The impression offered by such articles is that of reading the roadmap of what, in few months, would have been Obama’s approach to Tehran. Such a perfect “prediction” can be explained by considering the entanglement existing between Maloney, Takey, their think-thanks – i.e., Brookings and the Council of Foreign Relations (CFR) – the administration, and the American big corporates. Suzanne Maloney, in fact, is a former Rockefeller’s Exxon-Mobile’s Middle East political strategist and her tenure as Brookings fellow had been financed by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund²⁰⁵. Ray Takey was a senior fellow at the CFR’ “Middle East Program”²⁰⁶, a component of the “David Rockefeller Studies Program”²⁰⁷ founded and financed by David Rockefeller²⁰⁸. Both of them were in the CFR’ task-force led by Brzezinsky which wrote the report above analyzed. Such entanglement raises doubts about the real role the “epistemic communities” (Haas, P. 2007; Adler, 2005; Shoup, 1977) played in the Obama Administration’s decision to engage with Tehran.

The second actor whose role has been rather underestimated is Puneet Talwar. From 2001 to 2008, Talwar had been the Chief Middle East Advisor to the then-SFRC’s chairman, Senator Joe Biden²⁰⁹. According to Salomon, as such, “Talwar intermittently attended international conference focused on nuclear proliferation and ending the crisis over Tehran’s program. The events were described as ‘Track two’ diplomacy, as no active American officials attended the meetings”. Yet, at such meetings, organized in European cities, also “Iranian diplomats who would gain top positions in the governments of Presidents Ahmadinejad and Rouhani” like Javad Zarif and Ali Akbar Salehi took part. When Obama took office in January 2009, Mr. Talwar was appointed to serve as his Special Assistant as

²⁰⁵ Source: [Rockefeller Brothers Fund’s website \(https://www.rbf.org/grantees/brookings-institution-0\)](https://www.rbf.org/grantees/brookings-institution-0).

²⁰⁶ Source: CFR’ website (<https://www.cfr.org/programs/middle-east-program>).

²⁰⁷ Source: CFR’ website (<https://www.cfr.org/think-tank>).

²⁰⁸ Source: CFR’ website (<https://www.cfr.org/funding>).

²⁰⁹ “From 2009-2014, Mr. Talwar served as the Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Iraq, Iran, and the Gulf States at the White House National Security Council. From 1995-1999 and 2001-2008, Mr. Talwar was the Chief Middle East Advisor to Vice President Biden on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He also served on the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff from 1999-2001, and was a foreign policy advisor in the House of Representatives.” Source: US state Department’s website (<https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/ei/biog/224691.htm>).

well as Senior Director for Iraq, Iran, and the Gulf States at the NSC. As Solomon argued, “[t]he White House hoped Talwar could capitalize on his experience, and contacts, to smooth the way for a direct dialogue with Tehran” (Solomon, 2016: 244-245). Since the backchannel with Tehran was established, in May 2009, Talwar would have played an “under-the-radar” but very effective role in the negotiations (Solomon and Lee, 2013; Landler, 2016b; Solomon, 2016)²¹⁰.

IV.1. E “Trak II” diplomacy and the role of the oil MNEs

The role played by “Track II” diplomacy mentioned by Solomon, and in which reportedly Talwar had participated, requires a detailed analysis because it has gone so far overlooked by academic literature. That “public diplomacy” was organized by three actors: the “Asia Society”, the “United Nations Association” (an independent organization which officially advocates the U.N.’ mandates), and the “Pugwash”, an international NGO aimed at disarmament (Solomon and Lee, 2013). The “Asia Society”²¹¹ was founded and financed by Exxon-Mobil’s owner David Rockefeller²¹² through his Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF). The RBF had also founded and financed “The Iran project”²¹³ and the “Ploughshare”²¹⁴ foundation, two very active American entities in promoting sanctions relief and diplomatic engagement with Tehran²¹⁵. It was the RBT itself which had established and financed, from

²¹⁰ According to Talwar’s own personal biography in the advisory company he founded with some of former Obama WH staffers, the “West Exec Advisors”, it is claimed that he “initiated the secret talks that produced the Iran nuclear deal”. Source: West Exec Advisors’ website (<http://westexec.com/puneet-talwar/>).

²¹¹ “Asia Society is the leading educational organization dedicated to promoting mutual understanding and strengthening partnerships among peoples, leaders, and institutions of Asia and the United States in a global context.” Source: Asia Society’s website (<https://asiasociety.org/about>).

²¹² Source: Asia Society’s website (<https://asiasociety.org/about>).

²¹³ “The Iran Project site is a non-professional news website run by a group of Iranians inside and outside of Iran. This site is meant to influence the policy of the Iranian government and foreign media to the extent it can.” Source: “The Iran Project’s website (<https://theiranproject.com/about/>).

²¹⁴ On its website, the “Ploughshare” foundation states: “We recently ran a five-year, \$12 million campaign to forge a diplomatic solution to the Iran nuclear crisis. Our network of 85 organizations and 200 individuals—think tanks, media specialists, policy advocates, grassroots campaigners and many more—prevailed despite a fierce and well-financed opposition. The historic agreement of 2015 rolled back Iran’s nuclear program and prevented another war in the Middle East.” Source: the [Ploughshare’s website](https://www.ploughshares.org/about-us) (<https://www.ploughshares.org/about-us>).

²¹⁵ They also strongly supported the JCPOA in what hardly cannot be seen as an attempt at influencing the Congress. With regard to “The Iran project”, see the following paragraph. About the “Ploughshare” foundation, “on March [2014] RBF gave Ploughshares a one-year \$500,000 grant specifically for its Iran program, with the goal “advancing just and durable peace.” RBF has also been a major donor to Ploughshares’ Iran program in previous years, providing a grant of \$1 million in 2013 and two separate grants, also totalling \$1 million, in May and June of 2012 (Inside philanthropy, 2014).

2002 to 2008, the American “Track II” diplomacy with Tehran mentioned by Solomon²¹⁶. The RBF 2008 report offers precious insights into how the fund influenced the US foreign policy towards Tehran. In fact, it reads,

Because of the lack of a sustained diplomatic dialogue between the United States and Iran for the better part of the past 30 years, this unofficial dialogue [the 2002-2008 Track II diplomacy between the US and the IRI founded by the RBF] gave US participants an inside look at Iranian politics and Iranian society. It provided a unique opportunity to gain insight about the Iranian decision-making process and the different power centers in the Islamic republic. They learned that the Iranian regime is not monolithic; that different power centers hold different views on various policy issues. In interviews, the Iranian participants indicated that their internal meeting reports were shared with high-level officials in Tehran, including the office of the Supreme Leader, the president, foreign minister, and other officials who were involved with US-Iran relations. The US team had several opportunities to discuss the Track II dialogue with Iranian officials. As noted, the US co-conveners met with the Iranian U.N. representative on a regular basis and briefed him about the dialogue deliberations. Some US participants met with Iranian officials, including the foreign minister, who visited the United States. Three of the US participants also visited Iran as tourists and in their capacity as Track II dialogue participants. While in Tehran they also had an opportunity to meet with Iranian officials to discuss the dialogue. Nearly all of the US participants were invited to meetings with President Ahmadinejad during his visits to New York for U.N. General Assembly sessions²¹⁷. **The US team had**

²¹⁶ In its 2010 Report (RBF, 2010) it is stated that, from 2002 through 2008, the Fund had been supporting the Track II dialogue involving influential American and Iranian citizens, co-organized and co-facilitated with the United Nations Association of the United States of America (UNA-USA), under the leadership of Ambassador William Luers. At p. 17 the report goes saying: “The RBF’s engagement in the U.S.-Iran Track II dialogue as a co-convenor, participant, and funder was highly unusual for a foundation. As one Iran expert noted: “The RBF’s role was beneficial both for substantive and instrumental reasons. Instrumentally, the RBF and Stephen Heintz [the RBF president] are more knowledgeable than other funders about the topics under discussion and developed personal stakes in the project; substantively, having the funder at the table adds legitimacy and gravitas on the U.S. side both because of the Rockefeller name and because it is a foundation.” And on, “In addition to the dialogue process, it [the RBF] funded a cluster of projects which helped expand the knowledge-base in the United States about Iran and U.S.-Iran relations, opened additional communication channels between the United States and Iran, and brought other American constituencies into the U.S.-Iran policy debate. In 2008, approximately 11 percent of the Fund’s Peace and Security budget was allocated to U.S.-Iran focused projects, including modest funding for Canada-Iran Track II efforts that also included some U.S. participation” (RBF, 2010: 18). From 2002 to 2008 the RBF funding of the US/Canada Track II diplomacy was of a total of 1 million and 374,000 US Dollars (RBF, 2010: 18). In its section devoted to “Future Recommendations of the US-Iran Track II” the report states: “the U.S.-Iran dialogue should remain a priority given the Fund’s history in this arena, as well as the expertise represented on the board and in the staff. The RBF has a comparative advantage; it continues to have remarkable access to senior policymakers in the United States and important relationships in Tehran and with the Iranian Mission to the United Nations” (RBF, 2010: 21). It makes also important references to the activities undertaken by another actor founded and early financed by the RBF and deeply involved in paving the way to IRI-US rapprochement, i.e. the “Iran project”: “While the UNA [United Nations Association]/RBF Track II process remains suspended, the UNA project, renamed the Iran Project, and relocated to the Foundation for a Civil Society, continues to work on U.S. policy toward Iran.” Such recommendations end by saying: “If diplomatic efforts are successfully revived, a new parallel Track II effort could also prove to be of significant value.” (RBF, 2010: 21).

²¹⁷ This confirms what said in Chapter II about Ahmadinejad’s willingness to reach out to the US [N. of the A.].

continuous access to high-level US decision makers. As one American convener put it, “They always listened to us.” According to some interviewees, the briefings with US officials helped change their image of Iran as a monolithic entity. When the dialogue started, one US participant noted that the US administration believed that Iran was on the verge of implosion²¹⁸, “We presented a different picture to them, a picture of a regime that is strong, here to stay for the foreseeable future, and we convinced key official players that this was the case. (RBF, 2010: 13)²¹⁹

The Rockefeller family’s support to “Track II” diplomacy which contributed to reaching the JPOC throws light on the role played by oil MNEs in facilitating the US-IRI rapprochement. It also confirms Fayazmanesh’s (2008) argument, according to which American openings towards the IRI have always been led by MNEs eager to get lucrative deals with Tehran.

About the third organizer of that parallel diplomacy, i.e. the international NGO “Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs”, whose mission is claimed to be bringing “scientific insight and reason to bear on namely, the catastrophic threat posed to humanity by nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction”²²⁰. On March 17, 2009, his current chairman, Italian physicist Paolo Cotta-Ramusino, published an op-ed unveiling that, the year before, Pugwash had held “four meetings in Europe in which – in their personal capacities – some Iranian officials met with western and other experts”. Also, he claimed that his article had been inspired by his “personal perspectives, based on these [2008 four meetings] and many other interactions with people from the region.” Therein he wrote, “[i]f future talks are focused only on denying enrichment capability to Iran, these talks will go nowhere, while from the point of view of preventing proliferation, what really matters is monitoring and international control” (Cotta-Ramusino, 2009), a prediction of what actually the JPOA would have stated four years later. On December 13-14, 2014, Cotta-Ramosino chaired a Pugwash Workshop held in Rome “with the oil and gas community about the future of business operations in Iran. The meeting was intended to discuss policy options for the energy market, and beyond, in light of the outcome of the Iranian nuclear talks and of the situation in Iraq and in the Middle East” (Pugwash, 2014a). His Final Report (Pugwash, 2014b) claimed that the workshop was “organized with the intent of better understanding the

²¹⁸ See Chapter III [N. of the A.].

²¹⁹ Emphasis added.

²²⁰ Source: the Pugwash’s website (<https://pugwash.org/about-pugwash/>). According to Allen (1976) all the Pugwash’s international conferences have been financed by the tax-exempt Rockefeller CFR foundations. On the relationship between the Pugwash’s founder, Cyrus Eaton, and David Rockefeller see The Executive Intelligence Review (1977).

priorities of Iranian political leaders and of the Western business community”, a rather unusual aim for an NGO devoted to non-proliferation. The report describes the features the final deal with Tehran should have for meeting the oil and gas MNEs’ expectations. Interestingly, the July 2015 JCPOA would satisfy all of them, as, for instance, supporting UNSC resolutions, the preliminary lift of sanctions as well as their termination, instead of suspension, the “cooperative” frame and the permanent nature of the deal. Some excerpts are quoted below *ad verbatim* because they show the importance a conclusive deal represented for the oil and gas corporates.

The business community displayed a strong interest in the recreation of normal economic ties with Iran. The participants pointed out that substantive gains can be foreseen in the event of a deal, but it is necessary to ensure that its terms cannot be revised with too much ease. [...] lifting sanctions is a prerequisite for the reinstatement of business ties between Iran and US and European firms, which should come in the early stages of the agreement. [...] it is also crucial that sanctions are terminated rather than simply suspended, because leaving open the possibility of reinstating them easily acts as a powerful disincentive for long-term investments. [...] A possible UNSC resolution supporting any deal may prove helpful, including by making it potentially more difficult for the US Congress to create further hurdles. [...] The fight against Daesh [...] also provides an opportunity for cooperation between Iran and the West. (Pugwash, 2014b)

To conclude, the analysis of “Track II” diplomacy which paved the way for the JPOA²²¹ offers hints about the influence American corporates played on the US foreign policy decision making process not only directly, through their lobbies, but also indirectly, through the NGOs, the foundations, and the think tanks they had founded and financed. This finding supports Jacobs’s and Pag’s (2015: 107) claims according to which, “US foreign policy is most heavily and consistently influenced by internationally oriented business leaders, followed by experts (who, however, may themselves be influenced by business)”.

Conclusion

The decision of reaching out the Iranians was taken by Obama before being elected president and plausibly during his 2008 primaries campaign, influenced by his foreign policy advisor, Z. Brzezinski. Once elected, Obama appointed people who agreed with his decision

²²¹ Significantly, William Luers, who served as UNA’s president and organized the meetings in 2002 through 2006, in September 2013 said, “[m]uch of what we discussed is still relevant now. [...] The elements of a deal are well understood” (Solomon and Lee, 2013). As to the importance played by this RBF financed “track II” diplomacy in getting the final deal, see Rosen (2017).

and would have effectively implemented it. In other terms, contrary to governmental-bureaucratic policy models, the decision of engaging with the IRI was not the result of any bargaining within neither the NSC, nor the wider executive, but it was brought into the WH by President Obama himself. Then, a restricted circle of advisers (in particular, Benn Rhodes, Puneet Talwar, and Valerie Jarret), contributed to effectively implement it, with the external crucial support of the SFRC's chairman, John Kerry. The only two actors who opposed the President's intentions, Secretary Clinton and her advisor, Dennis Ross, ended up resigning – Ross – or accepting the president's decisions – Clinton, to be later replaced by a stronger supporter of the president's choices, i.e. John Kerry. This section has demonstrated that in foreign policy decision-making process advisors matter. Yet, researchers should pay particular attention to the role of the parties of belonging as well as “shadow” advisors. Informal practices of advising should also be investigated²²². In the Obama-Brzezinski case, it may be that Brzezinski advised Senator and, later, President Obama by email as Brzezinski himself admitted (Lizza, 2013). Brzezinski's son, Mark, was an advisor during Obama's campaign (Hirsh, 2007) and was later appointed at the Department of State, hence, it is possible that he channeled his father's advice to Senator Obama. Finally, it is plausible that the WH hid the fact that Brzezinski was one of President Obama's advisors for the same reason Senator Obama's campaign team did, that is, Brzezinski had always been opposing Israeli influence on US foreign policy, especially the one concerning Tehran.

IV.2 Selling the deal

Preamble

The “marketing” step (Mintz & DeRouen, 2010) was a crucial one within the Obama WH decision-making process of engaging with Tehran. In fact, during the 90 days of the Congressional revision the WH appeared as more focused on beating dissonant voices through than interested in engaging a fair confrontation with them. This section analyzes such a media campaign carried out by the Obama WH for “selling” its breakthrough policy to Congress and citizens. It presented two peculiar features. Firstly, the fact of framing the

²²² For instance, Kissinger is said to have never written any of his advice to the President as he used to speak personally to him (Daalder & Destler, 2009).

deal as the only viable alternative to another, possibly nuclear, war. Secondly, the fact of “spinning” narratives by using the media as an echo-chamber to make them gain traction in the political and public debate. Such a campaign used the same persuasive communication techniques traditionally used by states in a propaganda campaign. In many aspects it appeared indeed as such. Foreign policy scholars have underlined the importance of communication techniques in “marketing” foreign policies to domestic audiences, especially when they are in breach of traditional ones (Subotic, 2016). Obama’s choice was precisely that kind of policy because the rapprochement was a contrasting decision in comparison with the past administrations’ approaches to Tehran. In addition, not later than 2010, the Obama WH itself had asked the UNSC a resolution for additional sanctions by publicly stressing both Tehran’s non-compliance with IAEA’s quests and its support to terrorism. In such a context, when the JPOA was reached, the WH needed a persuasive, effective media campaign justifying his choice. That was created under the direction of Ben Rhodes, President Obama’s Advisor for Strategic Communication. This section will analyze, firstly, the main techniques usually adopted in propaganda campaigns and, secondly, it will focus on the ones used by the Obama-WH in his media campaign supporting the deal.

IV.2. A Techniques of persuasive communication²²³

For Jowatt and O’Donnel (2012) propaganda is “the deliberate, systemic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist”. State actors resort to persuasive communication techniques for their propaganda campaigns whose goal is to influence public’s perceptions and make them support political choices. According to Stiff’s and Mongeau, “persuasive communication represents *any message that is intended to shape, reinforce, or change the responses of another, or others*” (Siff and Mongeau 2016: 12). Such a definition summarizes the three fundamental dimensions of a persuasive activity: response-shaping, response-reinforcing and response-changing. The manipulative power of persuasive communication is based, on the one hand, on the asymmetric and uncertain features of the communicative contexts, and on the other hand, on human beings’ mechanisms of decision-making and behavioral responses. Recent developments in cognitivist, psychological and behavioral sciences demonstrate indeed how human behavior is constituted by automatisms triggered

²²³ This part is based on Rocca (2017: 663-664)

more by perceptions and emotions than by rational thinking (Kahneman, 2011; The World Bank, 2015). This appears to be particularly the case in an information-saturated environment (like cyberspace, for example) because of some cognitive energy-saving mechanisms (Brock & Balloun, 1967). For Origgi (2008; 2013), even in a standard context, individual decision-making process is not rationally related to information but emotionally to “trust”. According to neuro-cognitivist scientists (Pylyshyn, 2003; see also The World Bank, 2015, chapter 3: “Mental Maps”) perceptions are filtered through subjective representations of reality (a paradigm of knowledge construction similar to that one proposed by constructionist approaches to social sciences). In other terms, they are such “mental maps” – and not “raw” reality – which influence the personal attribution of meaning to events. Already in the 4th century B.C., Aristotle discovered that language was able to shape perceptions and to create representations of reality. Most of the techniques currently adopted in propaganda campaigns are indeed built on his discoveries. The more commonly used in political communication are: rhetoric; echo-chambers; discourse’s polarization; fake-news’ and half-truths’ spread; argumentative fallacies; truths’ concealment; framing; and narratives spinning techniques. Framing is the promotion of “a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment condition” (Entman, 1993: 52). A narrative is “a rendering of events, actions, and characters in a certain way for a certain purpose. The purpose is persuasion. The method is identification” (Mann, 2015: 1). The terms “narrative spinning” or “spin doctoring” are commonly used to describe the orchestrated diffusion of narratives intentionally made to achieve planned effects in the audience. Usually, it is made “through and communications campaigns that are based on deception and manipulation. Governments, political actors, and corporations are using this technique to protect their image from criticism, to achieve consensus and public support and to sell their ideas and opinions” (Valentini, 2015: 1). Maltese (2000), Krebs (2015), and Farnsworth (2015) have described how various American administrations have exploited the language manipulative potentialities and, in particular, spinning techniques for making domestic constituencies support their choices on national security and foreign policy. The technological and structural features of the web – i.e. interactivity within an asymmetric communicative context – has hugely increased the leverage for the opportunistic use of such tools (Fogg, 2003; Lieto and Venero 2013, 2014; Thielman, 2016).

Deputy NSA for Strategic Communications, Ben Rhodes, and his team have exploited persuasive communication techniques – especially rhetoric, spinning of strategic narratives,

framing, and eco-chambers – for marketing the WH’s choice of engaging with Tehran²²⁴, in particular during the 90 days of the Congress’ review of the JCPOA. Rhodes himself, asked to explain the unusual number of experts cheerleading for the deal appeared in the media, admitted: “[w]e created an echo chamber. [...] They were saying things that validated what we had given them to say”. Adding also: “[w]e had test drives to know who was going to be able to carry our message effectively, and how to use outside groups like Ploughshares, the Iran Project and whomever else. So we knew the tactics that worked” (quoted in Samuels, 2016a)²²⁵. The narratives the WH “spinned off” are described in the next section.

IV.2. B Political narratives supporting the deal

No sooner were the President and Congress confronted with the possibility of abandoning coercive diplomacy against Tehran than the WH inflated supportive narratives of the deal for the public arena. Applying rhetorical analysis tools (Feldmann et al., 2004) to the narratives used in Obama’s official speeches, we can identify how the WH conveyed its choice as a viable “political possibility” (Holland, 2013). Firstly, the frames used in the presidential speeches mainly consisted of portraying the deal as a historical American diplomacy’s achievement comparable to the agreements reached with the Soviet Union during the Cold War on the limitation of nuclear weapons. Secondly, depicting the deal as the best available guarantee for the US and American allies’ national security interests. Thirdly, questioning it was the only peaceful alternative to avoiding another American war in the ME. Finally, stating that under the deal the international community could have undertaken whatever verification of the progress and the peaceful purposes of the INP. No mention was made of the right to uranium enrichment, as well as other issues of past

²²⁴ Samuels (2016a) offers a detailed description of the way the WH team managed external communication: “Chad Kreikemeier, [...] helped run the team, which included three to six people from each of several agencies, [...] the State Department, Treasury, the American delegation to the United Nations (i.e., Samantha Power), “at times D.O.D.” (the Department of Defense) and also the Department of Energy and the National Security Council. Rhodes “was kind of like the quarterback,” running the daily video conferences and coming up with lines of attack and parry. “He was extremely good about immediately getting to a phrase or a way of getting the message out that just made more sense,” Kreikemeier remembers. Framing the deal as a choice between peace and war was Rhodes’s go-to move — and proved to be a winning argument. [...] Early on, Rhodes asked her [Tanya Somanader] to create a rapid-response account that fact-checked everything related to the Iran deal. “So, we developed a plan that was like: The Iran deal is literally going to be the tip of everything that we stand up online,” Somanader says. “And we’re going to map it onto what we know about the different audiences we’re dealing with: the public, pundits, experts, the right wing, Congress.”

²²⁵ Tanya Somanader, the WH Office of Digital Strategy’s Director of digital response, even said: “For those in need of more traditional-seeming forms of validation, handpicked Beltway insiders like Jeffrey Goldberg of The Atlantic and Laura Rozen of Al-Monitor helped retail the administration’s narrative” (quoted in Samuels, 2016a).

American deep concern, like the Iranian development of ballistic missiles capacities, its support to terrorism, and its links with *Hezbollah* and *Hamas*. In other words, all the debated issues which in the past 13 years the American-Iranian diplomatic confrontation had been based on vanished from the official WH's narratives. So, for instance, in the 2015 "State of the Union Address" (The Obama White House, 2015a) the Iranian negotiators were not represented – as usual before (Ducombe, 2016) – as the "plotters" working against whatever diplomatic solution of the IND. On the contrary, the real enemy of the deal was presumably from within the US, in a posturing and ideologically partisan Congress. In his speech announcing the signature of the IRAN Nuclear Deal Framework on April 2, 2015 (President Barack Obama, 2015b) – an example of President Obama's "declaratory foreign policy" (Hastedt, 20012: 16) - Obama framed the success of the negotiations with Tehran as his true foreign policy legacy. The speech began by rhetorically claiming that the US security had been Obama's first priority for striking a deal and the alternatives were bound to be only military. Tackling the problem of the American allies' reactions – Israel's, in particular – Obama admitted that it was no secret that the Israeli Prime Minister did not agree to whether the US should have moved forward "with a peaceful resolution to the Iranian issue". However, by smartly using rhetoric potentiality, he assured Netanyahu that the JCPOA was "the best option" for Israeli security and invited the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries²²⁶ to meet him to discuss how to further strengthen their security cooperation. In the final passage, by framing the deal as the only peaceful way to manage the INP, Obama shifted responsibility onto Congress for eventually choosing war instead of peace. In the July 14th presidential speech announcing the JCPOA's signature (President Barak Obama, 2015c), in order to avoid possible accusations of weakness from Congress, Obama framed the deal as a success for the US and as the only alternative to a war in the ME ("put simply, no deal means a greater chance of more war in the Middle East"). The much debated issue of the Iranian right to enriched uranium was bypassed by stating, "[b]ecause of this deal, Iran will not produce the highly enriched uranium and weapons-grade plutonium that form the raw materials necessary for a nuclear bomb." Finally, addressing directly Congress, Obama reiterated that the JCPOA met with the US national security interest as well as with its allies, and that he would have vetoed "any legislation that prevents the successful implementation of this deal." The absence of peaceful alternatives to the JCPOA would have been the frame Obama used in another speech (The

²²⁶ Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Bahrain.

White House, 2015e) in which he also mentioned the lobbies' negative influence on Congressmen (as, according to him, it had happened during the Congressional vote on the invasion of Iraq). Then, having defined the JCPOA as the "strongest non-proliferation agreement ever negotiated", Obama criticized lawmakers' opposition to the deal by using stylistic devices aimed to create an empathic effect on the audience. Again he also approached the problem of Israel's security by repeating that the JCPOA would assure Israeli security interest. At the same time, Obama made crystal clear that Netanyahu's opposition would not make him change his mind. It is worth mentioning his precise words because they illustrate two things: firstly, the WH clever use of rhetoric; secondly, how far the President had gone with the JCPOA abandoning the traditional US-Israel entente. In fact, he said, "I recognize that Prime Minister Netanyahu disagrees [...] But I believe he is wrong. [...] And as President of the United States, it would be an abrogation of my constitutional duty to act against my best judgment simply because it causes temporary friction/opposition with a dear friend and ally." Then, Obama reiterated his key-argument, i.e. no peaceful alternatives existed to the JCPOA, adding that an eventual war in the ME would have been "anything but simple" and entirely Congress's responsibility. In his testimony in front of the SFRC, on August 23 (Kerry, 2015), also Secretary of State Kerry insisted on framing the JCPOA as the only peaceful alternative to prevent the IRI from getting nuclear weapons.

Conclusions

Many authors (Mintz and Redd, 2014; Baumm and Potter, 2008; Cohen, 2015; Entman, 2004; Johnson and Cartee, 2004; Miskimmons et al., 2014; Subitic, 2006; Holland, 2013; Skidmore, 1993) emphasize the crucial role played by the "marketing step" in the foreign policy decision-making process. The Obama WH dealing with the JCPOA is a case in point. Benn Rhodes's career in the WH – from being a speechwriter without any foreign policy experience during the Obama presidential campaign, to becoming Deputy NSA, playing a remarkable role in important US foreign policy cases – illustrates the importance the Obama WH gave to communication. Yet, the persuasive communication techniques used by Rhodes's team raises concerns over the fairness and the objectivity of the media coverage regarding policy issues²²⁷. Contrary to what many authors claim about the so-called "media

²²⁷ The so-called "Benghazi cover up", reportedly orchestrated by Rhodes and Susan Rice (Source: <https://www.judicialwatch.org/press-releases/judicial-watch-benghazi-documents-point-white-house->

pervasiveness” and “media effect”, i.e. the media do influence foreign policy (see, for instance, Hoge, 1994; Kennan, 1993; Willis, 2007). This chapter has shown that, in this case, the causal relation developed in the opposite direction, i.e. it was the executive which influenced the media²²⁸. This finding supports the “manufacturing consent” model proposed by Chomsky and Herman (1988); Entmann (1991); (Bennet, 1990) and Hallin (1986) according to which the media are used and manipulated by the executives in support of their policies. However, doubts may arise about the real possibilities of being subject to critical scrutiny by citizens and legislative power on foreign policy decision-making process. It also suggests that foreign policy scholars should absolutely take into full consideration the policy-politics-media entanglement.

IV. 3. The White House Vs. Congress

Preamble

This section analyzes the role of Congress in the final step of the decision-making process devoted to the US engagement with Tehran. In particular, it addresses the relationship occurred between the WH and Congress from the JPOA’s signature on 24 November 2013 to 17 September 2015, when the Congressional review of the deal ended. The review was required by the Senate because the WH’s decision to give the JCPOA the form of an “executive agreement”, instead of that of a treaty, had kept Congress away from the decision-making process. That is why, on April 14, 2015, the SFRC unanimously passed legislation authored by Republican Senator Corker requiring the President to submit the deal to Congress for a vote of approval or disapproval. One month later, the Senate passed the

[misleading-talking-points/](#) confirms the manipulative use of media pursued by the Obama WH or, at least, by a circle within it. On the Obama WH problematic use of media, see Greenwald, 2012.

²²⁸In this regard, the deep personal connections of many people within the Obama WH with the American corporate media have raised doubts whether the media could have been unbiased and fully independent of the executive power. In fact, for example, during the Obama Administration, Ben Rodhes’s brother himself, David Ross, was the CBS President; the husband of the former US Ambassador to the UN and later National Security Advisor, Susan Rice, Ian Cameron, was the ABC news executive producer; President Obama Senior Advisor Valerie Jarret’s daughter, Laura Jarret, was CNN Washington-based political reporter; the wife of President Obama’s press secretary, and former director of communications for Vice President Joe Biden, Jay Carney, Claire Shipman, was senior national correspondent of ABC News; Elizabeth Sherwood, Deputy Secretary of Energy from October 2014 to January 2017, and, previously, White House Coordinator for Defense Policy, Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction, and Arms Control and, before that, Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for European Affairs since January 2009, is the sister of Ben Sherwood, president of ABC News; Katie Hogan, Deputy Press Secretary for President Obama during his re-election campaign, is married to Matthew Jaffe, a reporter for ABC News and Univision; CNN President, Virginia Moseley, is the wife of former Secretary of State’s, Hillary Clinton, Deputy Secretary for Management and Resources, Tom Nides (Source: Red Pilled World Blog, 2017).

Corker legislation 98-1, showing the bi-partisan support for a Congressional review of the deal. According to a Republican aide, such kind of legislation was a response to the administration's overreach, "despite a long history of Congress playing a role in international agreements, which has provided added legitimacy and longevity to many of these accords" (Quoted in York, 2015). This section investigates whether the Obama WH pursued such an "executive overreach" *vis-à-vis* Congress in developing its Iranian foreign policy. The "executive overreach" or "executive aggrandizement" (Garber & Wimmer, 1987; Allen, 2007) is defined as an administration's "tendency to push unilateral executive power beyond constitutional and customary limits" which relies on a presidential lack of "a proper respect for constitutional checks and balances" (McConnell, 2012). Some authors have demonstrated President Obama's continuation of President Bush's tendency to executive overreach in his "war on terror" (Glennon, 2016; Restad, 2012). This section will prove that such a tendency was indeed also present in the foreign policy-making regarding Tehran. A possible justification may be Obama's need to "secure" his deal with Tehran away from the influences Saudi Arabian and Israeli lobbies would have played on Congress. In fact, the deal represented a groundbreaking shift not only in the US foreign policy towards the IRI, but also in the balance of power in the Middle East-Persian Gulf region. Congress reacted to the White House's overreach through some unprecedented initiatives. For instance, the House's speaker invited the Israeli Prime Minister to address Congress in a joint session about the consequences of the deal in the region. Moreover, 47 Republican Senators sent a letter to Iranian political authorities to inform them that any deal Tehran would have reached with the US without legislative approval could have been revised by the next president "with the stroke of a pen" (as it indeed happened with President Trump). During the Congressional review, some interest groups conducted an assertive advocacy campaign to encourage citizens to influence their Senators' and Representatives' votes. This section will unveil the under-researched role of two interest groups: the Roman Catholic Church and the Rockefeller family.

IV. 3. A President's and Congress' roles in foreign policy-making

The American Constitution states that, "He [the President] shall have Power, by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, to make Treaties, provided two thirds of the Senators present concur" (US Constitution, Article II, Section 2). Yet, being so concise, it leaves the

division of powers regarding foreign policymaking rather vague, under-defined²²⁹. This is precisely the leverage the Obama WH used to secure its choice of engaging with Tehran against any possible Congress's opposition. In truth, the WH gave the JCPOA neither the juridical form of a treaty, which has to be approved by two thirds of the Senators, nor the form of a joint executive-congressional agreement which requires Congress's approval. Instead, it forged it as an "executive agreement" whose legal form gives the president room for overcoming Congress's opposition by allowing him a veto right. According to Merlati, initially the Administration was so intransigent to argue that the executive agreement with the IRI "would be binding even without a vote of approval by Congress" and only later the same Administration accepted that the deal be put to a Congressional vote, as required by the Corker legislation (Castiglioni and Merlati, 2015: 85)²³⁰. The WH secured the JCPOA against Congress's opposition also through a Presidential Act – known as "Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act of 2015" (INARA) (US Congress, 2015) – which Obama signed on May 22, 2015. According to it, once a nuclear agreement had been negotiated with Tehran, Congress would have had sixty days for passing an approval or disapproval resolution, or for doing nothing. The INARA included additional time beyond the sixty days for the president to veto a resolution and for Congress to take a vote on whether to bypass or accept the presidential veto. In case of a presidential veto, opponents could have defeated the deal only if they had been able to raise two-thirds of votes in both houses of Congress²³¹. The "executive agreement" form and the possibility of a presidential veto represented the ways through which the WH thought it could secure its choice away from Congress's and lobbies' oppositions. Already during January 2015 "State of the Union Address" (President Obama, 2015a), Obama had made clear he would manage Congress's resistance saying, "new sanctions passed by this Congress, at this moment in time, will all but guarantee that

²²⁹ In fact, this is a debated issue by law scholars (see, for example, Wilt, 2019; Chapman, 1996). Concerning in particular President Obama's tendency to overusing his presidential power *vis-à-vis* Congress in foreign policy matters, see Marshall (2014). For a complete analysis of the conflict between Congress and the WH on the JCPOA made by law scholars, see Daugirdas & Mortenson (2015).

²³⁰ According to law expert David Rivkin, any international agreement requiring major undertakings on the part of the U.S. – as the proposed Iran deal -- must be sent to the Senate for advice and consent (Quoted in Collinson, 2015). According to Mulligan (2018), although Presidents claim inherent powers to conclude executive agreements under Article II of the Constitution, yet, U.S. law stipulates that an agreement is only viewed as a treaty once it has been made with "the advice and consent of the Senate". Administrations often choose to conclude deals with foreign states that do not meet that requirement (as the Obama Administration did with the JCPOA). Such an "executive agreement" is still considered a treaty that is binding under international law, but it does not reach the same standard under U.S. law.

²³¹ On the details of the "Mechanics of Congressional Review" and their political significance, see in particular Adebahr (2015). Regarding the INARA national legal perspective and the JCPOA international legal perspective, see Daugirdas & Mortenson (2015: 649-663).

diplomacy fails [...]. And that's why I will veto any new sanctions bill that threatens to undo this progress.”²³² In the speech announcing the JCPOA signature (President Barack Obama, 2015c), Obama predicted he would veto any legislation that could prevent the successful implementation of the deal. On that same day, during a press conference, Obama also made a reference to the activities of anti-Iranian lobbies which could put the deal in danger saying, “[m]y hope is that everyone in Congress also evaluates this agreement based on the facts, not on politics. Not on posturing. Not on the fact that this is a deal that I bring to Congress, as opposed to a Democratic president. Not based on lobbying” (President Barack Obama, 2015d). The “trial of strength” between President Obama and Congress was definitely under way.

IV. 3.B Congress' reaction

On January 21, 2015, in his testimony before the SFRC, Deputy Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, stated: “We assess that we still have a credible chance of reaching a deal that is in the best interest of America's security, as well as the security of our allies” (Blinken, 2015). This claim triggered a tough reaction of Congress which wanted to have its say on such a shift in US foreign policy. Senate Republican majority Speaker, in a breach of protocol, invited Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu to deliver a speech in a joint session of Congress. On March 3, during his speech, Netanyahu claimed that the Iran deal “would all but guarantee that Iran gets [nuclear] weapons, lots of them” (Netanyahu, 2015). A week later, Senator Cotton and 46 other Republican Senators signed an open letter to Iranian political authorities warning that any deal reached without legislative approval could be revised by the next president “with the stroke of a pen” (Cotton, 2015). The missive represented a strong Congress's reaction against the deal, as well as Obama WH tendency for executive aggrandizement. This was made crystal clear by Republican Senator Paul during a Secretary of State's hearing at the SFRC. As a matter of fact, Paul vehemently criticized the WH bid to keep the deal away from Congress, saying to Kerry that his administration was one “that seeks to legislate when that is not in their purview”. He added: “I signed the letter to Iran. But you know what? The message I was sending was to you [Kerry]. I signed it to an administration that doesn't listen, to an administration that, every

²³² Concerning in general the sanctions, it has to be noted that sanctions imposed by the President by means of an executive act can be removed unilaterally by him (Mayer, 2002). Whilst sanctions voted by Congress can be only temporarily suspended by him because for permanently lifting them it is necessary another Congress's vote.

turn, tries to go around Congress because you think you can't get your way" (quoted in Collinson, 2015). Part of the Congress had its say in US foreign policy towards Tehran and the rejection was due to the WH-choices. Yet, Congress's denial turned out unsuccessful. In fact, in the second week of September, Democrat Senators blocked a resolution of disapproval of the deal and the revision term passed without producing either a resolution of approval or a resolution of disapproval²³³. President Obama did not have to exercise the veto he had threatened.

IV. 3.C Organized groups try to influence Congress

American political scientists have scrutinized the role played by lobbies and interest groups (Baumgartner and Leech, 1998; Dür and Dirk De Bièvre, 2007; Baumgartner et al., 2009), and advocacy campaigns (Mahoney, 2008; Hojnacki et al, 2012) in the US foreign policymaking. According to Gilens and Page (2014: 564), "economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on US government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence." Former Congress's senior analyst, Mike Lofgren, illustrated the deep influence lobbies and organized groups of interests have on Congressmen (Lofgren, 2016). According to law scholar, Lawrence Lessig (2011), the American lobbying system has created a kind of "gift economy" system able to affect what laws are passed and how they are made. For Skidmore (1993), the influence of groups of interest exemplifies one of the main domestic limits to foreign policy shaping and making. IR scholars, Mearsheimer and Walt (2008), argued that lobbies – and the pro-Israeli one, in particular – play an important and questionable role in US foreign policy. Some authors have investigated the role of interest groups and lobbies in US foreign policy towards Tehran, in particular during the IND (Lopez, 2009; Dreyfuss 2011a, 2011b; Fayazmanesh, 2008, 2012; Parsi, 2007, 2012). Yet, a few have investigated the influence lobbies and interest groups played *on Congress* during the revision term of the JCPOA. According to Koch (2016: 10), so far the only detailed study of the influence of interest groups on Congress, particularly the House of Representatives, during the JCPOA revision term, the pro-deal interest groups mainly consisted of the following: Center for Arms Control and non-Proliferation; the National Foreign Trade Council Inc.; Americans for Peace Now; the Friends Committee on National Legislation. Conversely, the anti-deal groups included ACT! For America, the AIPAC, the

²³³ For a summary of the main events occurred during the Congressional review, see Arms Control, 2015.

American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, the Republican Jewish Coalition. It is indisputable that within the anti-deal group, the Israeli lobby was the most represented one. In this regard, it is worth noting that one of the AIPAC's statements, issued the day after the JCPOA signature, challenged the WH narrative that there was no peaceful alternative to the deal. By contrast, for the Committee, the JCPOA would have inflated instability and a nuclear race in the region. Moreover, summoned Congress to reject the deal and urge the administration to work closely with its allies to maintain economic pressure on Tehran (Broder, 2015). At the beginning of the Congressional revision term, the AIPAC also founded a separate advocacy group – the “Citizens for a Nuclear Free Iran” – devoted to making American citizens oppose the deal. It is worthy pointing out that, as reported by *Politico*'s journalist Lerner (2015), the group's Advisory Board included five former Democrat Congressmen. During the Congressional review term, the “Israel lobby” also exercised their power on Democrat Senators so that they would collude with Republican majority in voting a resolution of disapproval (Francis et al., 2015). However, the leverage that two organized groups exercised on Congress has also remained under-investigated in Koch's research. These two groups were the following: the Rockefeller family, through its RBF, and the American Catholic Church.

The RBF is “a private, family foundation helping to advance social change that contributes to a more just, sustainable, and peaceful world. It was created in 1940 by the sons of John D. Rockefeller, Jr.—John D. 3rd, Nelson, Winthrop, Laurence, and David—as vehicle by which they could share advice and research on charitable activities and coordinate their philanthropic efforts to better effect.”²³⁴ In 2002, at the beginning of the IND, the RBF funded, together with the United Nations Association of the United States of America, and since then has generously financed (Rosen, 2017), “The Iran Project”, a non-governmental organization working to promote dialogue between the United States and Tehran. Consistently with its mission, “The Iran Project” has been opposing coercive diplomacy whilst calling for a diplomatic solution to the IND through its reports and analyses. On July 16, 2015, at the beginning of the Congressional review, “The Iran Project” publicly endorsed a letter written by 100 former US ambassadors (The Iran Project, 2015a) in which the deal was framed, once again, as the only alternative to military action. Although addressed to the president, the missive was intended as a message for Congressmen. In truth, it claimed, “Congress must give careful attention to evaluating whether alternatives would be more or

²³⁴ Source: The Rockefeller Brothers Fund's website: <https://www.rbf.org/about/our-history>.

less likely to narrow the options for resolving this issue without the use of force. In our judgement the JCPOA deserves Congressional support”. It is very plausible that the RBF, through its “Iran Project”, tried to influence Congress because of the Rockefeller family’s economic interests in sanctions relief against the IRI, which would have made possible for its companies to get lucrative deals with Tehran. Fayazmanesh (2008, Chapter 5) has illustrated the role American MNEs, especially the oil ones, have played on US Iranian foreign policy by opposing sanctions²³⁵. A few days later, on July 20, 2015, “The Iran Project” issued another statement (The Iran Project, 2015b) warning against a possible withdrawal from the deal which had been underwritten by 65 former diplomats and leaders from the US national security community. Most of the signatories had previously participated in the US-Iran foreign policy-making like, for instance, former Bush’s NSA, Brent Scowcroft, former Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, former Secretary of State’s Powell Chief of Staff, Lawrence Wilkerson,²³⁶ former Director of Policy Planning at the Department of State, Anne-Marie Slaughter, former NSC Director for Iran and the Persian Gulf, Gary Sick²³⁷, former Senior Adviser, Barnett R. Rubin, former Ambassadors, James Dobbins and Thomas Pickering²³⁸, former Under Secretary of State, Nicholas Burns, former HFRC’s Chairman, Lee Hamilton, and former Carter’s NSA, Zbigniew Brzezinski²³⁹. In the letter, they invited Congressmen “to be closely involved in the oversight, monitoring and enforcement of this agreement” adding that a “rejection of the agreement could leave the US with the only alternative of having to use military force unilaterally in the future.” In other terms, precisely as it had happened in the President’s speeches, the JCPOA was framed as the only peaceful alternative to war. Although the statement was not expressly addressed to Congress, the authority of the signatories was plausibly aimed to exercise some influence on Congressmen, similar to that one exerted by think-tanks on foreign policy establishment (Haas, 1990; Rich, 2005; Goldstein & Keohane, 1993; Adler, 1992).

²³⁵ According to a *Washington Post* article (Ottaway and Morgan, 1997) such an opposition “lured a prestigious group of U.S. prospectors: former high-ranking government officials bent on winning a stake in the bonanza for themselves or their companies.” Reportedly, the list included, among others, “two former national security advisors, Brent Scowcroft and Zbigniew Brzezinski”, the former as a Pennzoil’s consultant, whilst the latter as an Amoco’s one. Both Pennzoil and Amoco companies are owned by the Rockefeller family’s Standard Oil conglomerate.

²³⁶ See Chapter III.

²³⁷ See Chapter I, paragraph “October Surprise”.

²³⁸ On his role in the “grand bargain” affaire, see chapter III.

²³⁹ See Chapter I, and this Chapter.

The second poorly studied organized group which tried to influence Congressmen to make them support the JCPOA was the Catholic Church²⁴⁰. During the whole IND, the American Catholic Church, by means of its “Committee on International Peace and Justice” (CIPJ) belonging to the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, had been reaching out to American political authorities to get their support for a diplomatic solution to the IND. Actually, a number of letters were sent to Congressmen, to Secretaries of State, Kerry and Clinton, to Senate Committees, to the House Committee on Foreign Relations, and to Obama’s NSA, Tom Donilon²⁴¹. Herein, only the letters to Congress are analyzed. On January 6, 2014, Rev. Pates, then-CIPJ’s Chairman, sent a letter to the SCFR and to the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs (responsible for taking possible further sanctions against the IRI). Therein, he wrote, “the Committee urges Congress not to take any actions that could undermine the negotiations process.” Then, he reminded Congress of the official pro-deal position of the Holy See and concluded by claiming the importance of a diplomatic solution to the IND for the ME. On July 14, 2015, i.e. on the same day of the JCPOA’s signature, the new Chairman, Rev. Oscar Cantù, wrote a letter to each Senator and House Representative explaining the position of the Church on the deal. Echoing the WH narrative, he wrote that his committee would continue “to urge Congress to endorse the result of these intense negotiations” because the only alternative would be an armed conflict. A second American Catholic Church’s component who tried to influence lawmakers during the Congressional revision was the “Pax Christi USA” (PCUSA). It is the American section of the “Pax Christi International”, an international Catholic peace movement whose main aim is to impact communities and public policies on peaceful resolution or transformation of conflicts²⁴². From January 2015 onwards, it undertook an

²⁴⁰ The term “Catholic Church” summarizes and oversimplifies a complex variety of entities: a territorial body (the Vatican City State); an international person who exercises sovereignty with nation-states and international organizations (The Holy See); the Pope and the Roman Curia (which incorporates the Holy See’s Secretariat of State, i.e. the organ devoted to internal and external political affairs); Catholic religious orders, movements and organizations (whose most own a transnational nature); Catholic schools and Universities; the believers (Barbato, 2013). Such a “multi-entities” institution can act at the same time in different national and international public spaces, playing alternatively as a *state-actor* (The Holy See and its official representatives: the Popes, The Secretaries of State, the Secretaries for the Relation with States and the *Nunzios*, i.e. the Holy See’s ambassadors, the Holy See’s permanent observers at the U.N.) as well as a non-state actor, by means of one of its component, usually a transnational religious movement or charitable organization, or the National Conferences of Bishops, as in this case.

²⁴¹ In the letter addressed to Donilon, on December 12, 2012, the CIJP’s Chairman went so far to even suggest to him the elements an agreement with the IRI should have had. The first one was that “Iran’s right to enrich uranium should be internationally affirmed in exchange for Iran’s commitment to limit enrichment convincingly short of weapons-grade potential as confirmed by verifiable inspections”.

²⁴² Source: Pax Christi’s website: <https://paxchristi.net>. It defines itself as “a membership organization that rejects war, preparation for war, every form of violence and domination, and personal and systemic racism.” Source: <https://paxchristiusa.org/about/our-vision/>.

intense and capillary advocacy campaign for “educating the American Catholic Congressmen (who are the majority²⁴³) about the consequences of the Iran Deal.”²⁴⁴ The campaign consisted mainly of making available to Congressmen documents and information about the IND on the one hand, and informing American citizens about the consequences of an eventual Congress’s rejection of the JCPOA, on the other hand. In particular, on its website, the PCUSA instructed citizens how to keep in touch with their Senators and House Representatives and address them properly (Pax Christi 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d). It also made available PCUSA’s, Holy See’s, and CIJO’s documents concerning the IND. Finally, they invited citizens to send a letter to their local newspaper’s editors urging Senators and Representatives to support the deal (Pax Christi, 2015e). It is worth noting that the PCUSA’s advocacy campaign was undertaken in collaboration with the NIAC (See Pax Christi, 2015d), which, as explained above in the first section, is a component of the “Iranian lobby” in Washington. Finally, a third Catholic Church’s member which tried to influence Congressmen was “The Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns”²⁴⁵, an organization belonging to the Dominicans’ Brotherhood religious movement. It undertook an advocacy campaign similar to the one launched by the PCUSA by providing its audience with arguments, documents and facilitated procedures in order to contact Senators and Representatives directly. In addition, the Office published online and kept two lists updated, with Senators’ and Representatives’ names and positions on the deal, so that American citizens could have checked their own Senator’s and Representative’s position and express their thanks or compliance with it (The Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns, 2015). To the best of my knowledge, the role played by the American Roman Catholic Church in trying to influence, in general, the solution to the IND, and, in particular, Congress’s revision of the JCPOA, has not received, so far, any attention from scholars. This is a regrettable missing point because of two reasons. Firstly, Roman Catholic Congressmen represent more than a

²⁴³ This was actually an incorrect information. See footnote no.244 [Note of the author].

²⁴⁴ Personal correspondence of the author with José Henriquez in 2017, at that time Secretary General of Pax Christi International.

²⁴⁵ “The Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns: Peace, Social Justice and Integrity of Creation, is a collaborative ministry of the Maryknoll Sisters, the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers and the Maryknoll Lay Missioners. Through theological reflection on and systemic analysis of the reality lived and observed by Maryknoll missioners around the world, the office facilitates among missioners, as Catholics and agents of Christ’s Gospel, a personal and corporate commitment to peace, social justice and the integrity of creation. The mission of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns is carried out through education and advocacy in cooperation with other Maryknoll departments and entities. The office also collaborates regularly with other institutions and organizations working for peace, social justice and the integrity of creation. It brings the voice and experience of Maryknoll into policy discussions in the United Nations, the U.S. and other governments, international financial institutions and the corporate world.” Source: The Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns’s website: <https://maryknollogc.org/our-mission>.

fourth of the Congress²⁴⁶, and then it would be interesting to investigate whether their religious belonging represented an important factor in voting the deal. Secondly, most of the Obama Administration's key-actors –like Secretary of State Kerry, Secretary of Defense Panetta, NSA Donilon, Deputy Secretary of State William Burns, Vice President Biden whether the Church's indications played a role in their decisions. As to the Roman Catholic Church's goals in influencing the US foreign policy towards Tehran, it is possible to develop just some hypotheses. The first one takes for granted the ones indicated by Rev. Cantù in his letter, i.e. peace and stability in the world and in particular in the Middle East. According to another hypothesis, the Holy See wished the IRI to be fully reintegrated into the international community by means of the JCPOA²⁴⁷. This because the two states, being the only two theocracies in the world – i.e. whose legal systems are based on religious law and whose highest political authorities are also the supreme religious leaders – had acted on the same side at various UN agencies' conferences addressing social and ethical matters (Ringaert, 2011; Abdullah, 1996)²⁴⁸.

To conclude, the American Catholic Church and the RBF's "Iran Project" have tried to influence Congress to approve the JCPOA. In the pro-deal advocacy campaigns made by them, the JCPOA was framed as the only alternative to another war in the ME, precisely as it had been made in Obama's official statements. It would be worth investigating whether this had been deliberately managed by the WH jointly with such organizations to create an influential "eco-chamber" to influence Congress. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the conclusions of what has been so far the only scientific research devoted to the influence of groups of interest in Congress during the JCPOA's revision term (Koch, 2016, 2020: the first is Koch's PhD dissertation, the second an article drawn from it). The author explains the pro-deal groups' success with "their alliance with President Obama in combination with increased financial contribution and organizational strength, due to the combined resources in a strong coalition, as well as assistance by the media to spread their message" (2016: XII).

²⁴⁶102 House Representatives on a total of 435. Source: <https://civil.services/us-house/list/roman-catholic-representatives>. 21 Senators on a total of 100. Source: <https://civil.services/us-senate/list/roman-catholic-senators>.

²⁴⁷ It is worthy pointing out that the Holy See publicly reiterated time and time again its support for a solution of the IND which would fully re-admit Tehran in the international community. See, for instance, Secretary of State Parolin's statement about allowing Tehran to participate in international negotiations aimed to end the Syrian war (Parolin, P. 2014) in which the IRI is pictured not only as a stakeholder but also as an actor which potentially could have contributed to the stabilization of the region.

²⁴⁸ Significantly, the Holy See and the IRI have been nurturing reach diplomatic relations since the Islamic Republic's birth in 1979, developing in particular a great number of cultural exchanges between their Universities in Qom and in the Rome (personal interview of the author to the *Nunzio*, i.e. Vatican Ambassador, to Tehran. July 2014).

By exploring further the media's role, she wrote that "[a]ssistance by the media to spread their message also contributed to the lobbying success of the Pro-Diplomacy groups despite still being financially and organizationally disadvantaged to the Pro-Sanctions groups" (Koch, 2020: 86). Yet, as demonstrated in the previous section, the media campaign for the JCPOA had been orchestrated by the W.H. Hence, this raises concerns over the entanglement which had existed between the administration, the media and the pro-deal interest groups, as well as over its consequences for Congress and US foreign policy towards Tehran.

Conclusion

The conflict on the deal with Tehran between Congress and the WH was deeply ingrained in the Constitution's opacity concerning the power of reaching international deals. The situation of "divided government" could also have contributed²⁴⁹ to it. At that time, the presidency was in Democrats' hands, whilst the Senate and the House of Representatives in Republicans' ones and, as a consequence, the political environment involved in the policymaking concerning Tehran was highly polarized and partisan-dominated (Mann & Ornstein, 2016). The fact that no resolution on the JCPOA was issued by Congress within its revision term represents lawmakers' failure, contrary to what various authors have theorized about their increasing power in foreign policy-making (Ripley & Lindsay, 1993; Scott and Carter, 2011; Scott, 1997; Scott, 2009). Congress was indeed assertively but ineffectively in the decision-making process regarding US Iranian policy. Following Rosati and Scott's taxonomy, it can be defined as a "strategic Congress" (Rosati and Scott, 2014: 321) because it selected its battle and was willing to challenge the President. Yet, it did not reach any practical result. By contrast, it was successful for the Obama WH, which managed successfully an unfavorable domestic balance of power. The President-Congress confrontation can be seen as a confirmation of Hersman's argument (2000). For him, contrary to conventional wisdom believing that both Congress and President belonging to the same political party are most appropriate to "get things done", they are internal institutional conflicts, dynamics and issue loyalties, which actually may influence more US foreign policy-making.

²⁴⁹ In the 2014 Mid-Term elections, the Republicans achieved their largest majority in the House since [1928](#) (Haas, 2015).

The main reasons for understanding the WH's victory in its trial of strength with Congress appear to be the following ones. Firstly, the assertiveness of a cohesive WH. The fact that the President, the Secretary and the whole Department of State, as well as the NSC shared common objectives and interests increased indeed the President's strength in facing a Congress polarized along ideological lines. The leaders' personalities and the presidential style also mattered about creating such a cohesiveness (Hermann, M., 1980). Many authors, in fact, described President Obama as an active pragmatist (Alter, 2010) or a "consequentialist"²⁵⁰ (Lyzza, 2011; Garrison, Rosati and Scott, 2012). In addition, differently from the first term during which deep ideological and personal divergences existed between the President and the Secretary of State (Lyander, 2016; Lyzza, 2011), the Obama Administration's second term witnessed an effective consonance with the President and his new Secretary of State, John Kerry (so different also from what had happened during the Bush Administration's first term). There was also a strong trustworthy relation between Kerry and his Deputy, Ambassador William Burns²⁵¹, a longstanding supporter of the American engagement with Tehran. Secondly, the WH proved to master competently, although questionably, communication techniques, enforced by the pro-deal groups of interest's advocacy campaigns. As Koch noted (2020: 86), "The rhetoric of President Barack Obama and pro-diplomacy groups presenting war as the only other option to the JCPOA was another significant factor because the legislators might have felt pressured by their constituents to oppose yet another war due to a general public war-weariness at the time." This would confirm the importance of communication techniques in foreign policy-making as already stated by a number of scholars (Baum and Potter, 2008; Hersman, 2000; Pena, 2003; Gowin, 1996; Mintz and DeRouen, 2010). However, although Congress did not succeed in changing the administration's Iranian foreign policy, nevertheless the JPOA was such a breakthrough change in the US foreign policy regarding both Tehran and the MEPCG region that, in order to secure its choice, the WH had to overreach by choosing an "executive agreement" form instead of that one of an ordinary "international treaty". This would not be without consequences on the future of the JCPOA. As a matter of fact, within less than two years and a half from the day of its ratification, the JCPOA would be cancelled by the following president "with a stroke of his pen". The unprecedented event of a foreign prime

²⁵⁰ "Obama's aides often insist that he is an anti-ideological politician interested only in what actually works. He is, one says, a "consequentialist" (Lyzza, 2011).

²⁵¹ According to Secretary Kerry, "Bill [Burns], a career Foreign Service officer, was hugely respected at Foggy Bottom. He stood out as one of the most capable career diplomats the department has ever known. I knew he had the respect of former secretary of state Clinton as well as the president" (Kerry, 2018).

minister invited to speak to Congress without prior information to the President indicates, firstly, how much importance Israel and its lobby had been in obstructing a US deal with the IRI. Secondly, that, at least regarding-when considering US Iran foreign policy, the Israel lobby definitely lost its position as principal Congress influencer (Mearshmeir & Walt, 2008).

Chapter Conclusion

Behind the surface of a containment policy made up of sanctions and military threat – the president had in fact always reiterated that, with Tehran, “all the options were on the table” – the Obama WH had been trying to reach out to Tehran for a comprehensive deal since its inception. On his first day taking office, President Obama made publicly clear he would discuss *without preconditions a whole range of issues* of mutual interest. Such a policy was very plausibly decided following up the suggestion of Zbigniew Brzezinski, Obama’s foreign policy advisor during his primaries and presidential campaigns. Even the way how that choice would be implemented – i.e. by means of secret bilateral talks at the beginning, followed by open, multilateral talks with other countries’ negotiators – appears to be as planned in advance, following Brzezinski’s advice. The negotiations were kept secret to circumvent possible ME American allies’ and Congress’s oppositions to a policy which would have changed not only the US-IRI relation, but also the balance of power in the region. The fact that Senator Obama relied on Brzezinski’s advice, at least for what concerned the US foreign policy towards the IRI, is consistent with what Preston predicted (2001), since Obama was indeed a president with little foreign policy experience. What neither Preston nor other scholars emphasizing the role of advisors predicted is the significant role advisors could play during the campaigns and the transition period. Backed by Brzezinski, although with little experience, President Obama did not change his plans for the Iranian engagement in front of Clinton’s, Secretary of State, and her Senior Adviser’s disagreement and he would increasingly have relied on his entente with the SFRC’s Chairman, Senator Kerry, as well as on with unexperienced WH staffer like Valerie Jarrett and Ben Rhodes, not only for key foreign policy matters, like the INP. For such reasons Obama appears– at least for what concerns his Iranian policy– as a “crusader” (Stoessinger, 1979), directive (Lewin and Lippit, 1938; Bass and Valenzi, 1974; Bennis and Nanus, 1985), task-oriented (Byars, 1973; Fiedler and Chemers, 1984; Chemers, 1997), transformational (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985,

1997; Hargrove, 1989; Glad, 1996) president. In fact, such a kind of leaders tend to “choose associates who define issues as they do and who generally share their goals” (Hermann et al., 2001: 87). Moreover, “[t]hese leaders value loyalty and often move to shape norms and institutions to facilitate their personal goals”. In Obama’s case, a personal goal was his re-election. President Obama’s engagement with Tehran is a proof of what leadership’s scholars Herman, Preston and Korany predicted, “there should be leaders in democratic systems that manifest expansionist and evangelist leadership styles as well as leaders in autocratic systems that are reactive and accommodative” because it doesn’t exist “a monotonic relationship [...] between type of political structure and sensitivity to the political context” (Hermann et al., 2001: 120). This chapter has also shown the influence the RBF exerted on US foreign policy towards Tehran. In fact, by means of some of its funded entities from within the so-called “epistemic community” – the Asia Society, the Pugwash Foundation, and the Council of Foreign Relation – the RBF implemented a parallel diplomacy which would lead at a later date, to President Obama’s back channel. The RBF, together with the American Catholic Church, was also very active in trying to influence Congress’s approval of the JCPOA by means of another entity it had founded, i.e. “The Iran Project”. In this regard, the findings of this chapter support some scholars’ claims about the economic and financial elites’ primary roles in influencing US foreign policy (Jacobs and Page, 2005; Cox, ed., 2010; Van Apeldorne and de Graaf, 2015). Such an influence is exerted also through the experts the élites generally finance (Gilens & Page, 2014). Anthropologist Janine Wedel has analyzed the deep entanglement existing between the epistemic community and the financial-industrial sectors and described how the “experts” have become part of that “network of power and influence” which “connect state with private, bureaucracy with market, political with economic, macro with micro, global with national, all the while making decisions – decisions backed by the power of the state” (Wedel, 2009, 2017). The consequences of such intersections on US foreign policy-making have not yet been fully acknowledged despite the most insightful analyses (as, for instance, Abelsom, 2006, 2014, 2018).

This chapter has also demonstrated the key-role played, within the Obama Administration’s decision-making process, by the “marketing step” in selling a conflictual policy to public opinion and Congress. The JCPOA case represents indeed an example of how all the propaganda campaigns’ potentialities (Fitzgerald & Brantly, 2017) can fully be implemented even in the domestic context for making citizens and lawmakers accept executive’s choices. Finally, the description of the confrontation between the WH and

Congress has shown Obama Administration's executive aggrandizement in foreign policy. This confirms what public law scholar, William Marshall, has claimed regarding the Obama Administration:

But, by and large, President Obama has employed executive power aggressively when he believed circumstances required. Some have defended President Obama's expansive use of presidential power in these circumstances as justified precisely because Congress has become so obstreperous. According to this view, the President does, and should have, the power to aggressively use executive power when Congress does not act responsively or appropriately. [...] [I]ncreased polarization in American politics has made the work of the executive branch more difficult and that this Congress in particular has failed to act responsibly. [...] [P]residents may no longer be able to expect that members of Congress will abandon their partisan interests in favor of the common good. [...] [H]owever, that separation-of-powers constraints on the presidency should be adjusted to reflect this new political dynamic. Presidential power has already expanded dramatically since the middle part of the twentieth century [...] the executive branch has become the most dangerous branch (Marshall, 2014: 774-775).

In other terms, President Obama did not abandon the executive tendency to overreach already existing in the Bush Administration (Allen, 2012; Glennon, 2016; Restad, 2012), but he further developed it.

FINAL CONCLUSION

This thesis has analyzed U.S foreign policy towards the Islamic Republic of Iran during the 13 years of the Iran Nuclear Deal, focusing on the US stances regarding the Iranian nuclear program and its possible solutions. It has attempted to give an answer to the question why the US rejected a comprehensive solution achievable in 2003 whilst reaching one, similar to what concerns the Iranian right to uranium enrichment, but less beneficial for the American side, in 2013. Relying on middle-range foreign policy theories, the search for an answer has been conducted through the investigation of the decision-making processes at work within the G. W. Bush and Obama Administrations. Such theories, rejecting the unitary actor hypothesis, also allowed the search for the actors who, inside what we define as “the US”, actually took or influenced those decisions. The foreign policy analysis carried out has been multifactorial and multilevel (Hudson, 2005: 2) throughout the whole research. As to the latter, the focus on the “micro” level – represented by the decision-making process – has coexisted with the “macro” one, consisting in the US strategy regarding the IRI and the Middle East-Persian Gulf region.

Concerning the first level of analysis, i.e. the “micro” one, consisting of the actors at work in the foreign process decision-making processes, the findings can be summarized as follows. As far as the first research question is concerned, i.e., who rejected the 2003 possible solution of the IND and who, in 2009, accepted to solve the diplomatic conflict with Tehran, the thesis has demonstrated that it was a faction inside the Bush Administration – consisting of the Vice-President, the Secretary of Defense and their neoconservative allies, mainly present at the Pentagon – who made the administration reject the “grand bargain” in 2003. Yet, that offer was a comprehensive proposal for normalizing the US-IRI diplomatic relations which did not come candidly from Tehran, but was the product of the Iranian-US Department of State covert efforts, made jointly with the “Iranian lobby” in Washington. That same faction also maneuvered against the State Department during both terms, to make the Administration choose a “regime-change from within” strategy, by relying mainly on two Iranian dissident terrorist groups, the Islamist *Jundallah* and the Leninist-Islamist MEK. In 2009, it was the neo-elected President Obama himself who, advised by the former Carter’s NSA, Zbigniew Brzezinski, took the lead and, by relying on the SCFR’s Chairman, John Kerry, became personally involved in the opening with Tehran. Obama also insisted on

engaging Tehran, against the opinions of his Secretary of State's, H. Clinton, and Clinton's Special Advisor for Persian Gulf, Dennis Ross. In April 2013, the first deal (the JPOA) was reached, and from then onwards the Obama Administration – in particular, the President, the Vice-President, the Secretary of State, and the Deputy NSA Ben Rhodes – fought a trial of strength against Congress, Israel and the Israeli lobby in Washington to come to the final deal, the JCPOA, which was signed in July, 2015. Then, again, the executive branch vehemently faced the Congress opposition, overreaching its constitutional limits concerning the power of signing international treaties. In the end, the administration won, but it was a Pyrrhic victory. Twelve months after the JCPOA ratification, the newly elected President, Donald Trump, declared he would use that same power the Constitution allows presidents to cancel the executive order signed by Obama which passed the JCPOA. On May 8, 2018, the United States officially withdrew from the JCPOA.

The dissection of the decision-making processes at work in the Bush and Obama administrations uncovered other valuable findings. Firstly, it was confirmed Putnam's (1998) formalization of foreign policy-making as a two-level game where domestic and international factors interact, influencing the final outcome. In this case, the domestic factors at work consisted, mainly, of interest groups, i.e. MNEs and lobby groups, as predicted by Jacobs and Page (2005), whilst Congress and public opinion played a secondary role only and they were themselves the target of influence campaigns launched by the administration as well as by advocacy groups, maneuvered by lobby and interest groups. However, the thesis findings, in this regard, contrary to what was claimed by Mearsheimer and Walt (2008), tend to downplay the role of the Israeli lobby, whilst they throw light on the actions of another, rather under-researched lobby, i.e. the Iranian one. Among the many domestic factors, the analysis of both administrations' dealing with Tehran has shown the importance gained, over time, by foundations, think-thank and, more generally, the so-called epistemic community. Yet, the IR literature devoted to the issue has appeared not fully suitable for grasping the deep, complex entanglement existing between such a community and the process of foreign policy-shaping. Approaches coming from other disciplines, such as, for instance, sociology (see, for example, Wedel, 2009 and 2017), seem more equipped for considering the consequences of such a tangled relationship and can contribute to making foreign policy analysis a truly "integrative theoretical enterprise" (Hudson, 2005). Regarding the international factors, American allies – Israel, in particular – have played a major role, far more than others. Israel's government, in fact, fearing a shift in the regional balance of

power represented by an American-Iranian agreement, tried to derail the negotiations. Prime Minister Netanyahu went even so far to address a joint session of Congress in March 2015, warning legislators against a possible, final deal with Tehran. The thesis findings also confirm the basic tenets of the bureaucratic politics model, i.e. its framing of foreign policy decision-making process' outcomes as the result of internal bargaining between different groups of power having different agendas (Allison, 1971; Allison & Halperin, 1972; Halperin & Clapp, 2007). The refusal of the "grand bargain" was indeed a textbook case of the turf wars occurring between factions coexisting in the Bush Administration's foreign policy establishment. The thesis has also confirmed the existence of that unrestrained executive discretion already underlined by Koch (1990) in his study of the executive power after the "Iran-Contra" scandal. Both the Bush and Obama administrations have in fact decided and implemented an Iran foreign policy on which Congress could exercise little control if any. This was possible also because most of such policy has been secretly adopted by means of covert intelligence operations, as well as diplomatic back channels. Executive aggrandizement and reliance on covert operations were indeed two elements of continuity between the Bush and Obama administrations, as already claimed, contrary to conventional wisdom, by some authors (Glennon, 2014; Sanger, 2012; Risen, 2014). Moreover, executive overreach has also been pursued at individual level by two key players of the IND: Vice-President Dick Cheney (in particular *vis-à-vis* the NSC system and process) and President Obama (*vis-à-vis* the Congress oversight). Another feature shared by the two administrations is the minor role played by the legislative branch in the process of foreign policy shaping, contrary to what some authors claim (Scott, J. M., 1997; Scott and Carter, 2011) and the American Constitution itself acknowledges. The fact that John Kerry, as Chairman of the potentially powerful SFRC, had a pivotal role in reaching out Tehran, from 2009 to 2012, does not reverse such a consideration. On the contrary, the fact that, as far as it is known, the Committee was not aware of Kerry's mission, raises doubts about the effectiveness of the Committee's functions and of the real separation of powers between the President and Congressmen. A further common feature discovered by this research is the fact, noted also by Mann (2004, 2012) that, under both administrations, foreign policy was "White House centered". More precisely, under Bush it was overseen by Dick Cheney (Gelmann, 2008) as no Vice-President had ever done before (Warshaw, 2009; Blumenthal, 2007; Montgomery, 2009), whilst under Obama it was under the tight control of the President, acting as the "predominant leader" (Hermann, 2001), and his inner circle (DeYoung, 2015; Solomon and Lee, 2013). As a consequence, during both the administrations – although in a more dramatic

way during the Bush one (Kessler and Ricks, 2004) – there was a tendency to dismiss the NSC system and process, at least for what concerned US foreign policy towards Tehran. This fact can be related to a perceived inadequacy of the system which, although redefined by many presidential reforms, was enacted by the Congress' National Security Act of 1947. Some authors claim that it was deeply influenced by the Cold War objectives and great power competition, and, therefore, it resulted unsuitable for facing the post-Cold War national security's environment (Worley, 2012). However, it appears indeed more related to a quest for personal maneuver, power and unaccountability.

Looking for an answer to the second question, – i.e., the reasons of the people who rejected the 2003 offer and of those who engaged with Tehran from 2009 on – both the “micro” and the “macro” level of analysis intersect. At “micro”, personal level, the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons group who opposed the State Department's opening with Tehran had two main objectives. First of all, as demonstrated by first-hand accounts of their behavior and private statements – far more significant than the public ones (Jacobs, 2015) – they wanted to derail as much as possible Secretary of State Colin Powell's initiatives. Secondly, they were led by a “thirst for power” (Morgenthau, 1962; Niebuhr, 1952) inside the administration, the Republican party and also at international level. Such a power was seen as achievable through American power's global projection disguised as diffusion of American values. In this sense, the Bush Administration's national security policy, as it was influenced by the Cheney-Rumsfeld-Neocons, was marked by “hubris and sanctimony” (Bachevich, 2009: 7). Even President Obama had his maintenance of power as a personal objective. In fact, his administration, during his first term, was very careful with hiding the ongoing secret talks to Congress, public opinion, and regional allies as well. Moreover, later on, during the 2012 presidential campaign, some information about the negotiations leaked in such a way to suggest to American citizens that the success of disbanding the Iranian nuclear threat depended on Obama's re-election. Additionally, in some interviews President Obama gave at the end of his tenure (Goldberg, 2015; 2016a), he framed the JCPOA as his true legacy, what he should be remembered for, plausibly in the hope of making the audience forget – or forgive him for – other, less encouraging results of his tenure, like the intervention in Libya or the costly stalemate in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile investigating the objectives behind the key-actors' choices, the thesis has also approached the “macro” level, finding a continuity between the Bush and Obama administrations, under the surface of their apparently different dealing with Tehran. Their

discrepancies, in fact, pertained only to the *instruments* through which to achieve the same long-term foreign policy objective, that was American hegemony. Within the Bush Administration, for the Cheney-Rumsfeld-neocons faction such tools were identified as regime change from outside or from within (through CIA covert operations and dissidents', separatists' and terrorist groups' training and financial support). Whilst, for the NSA and later Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, the tools were coercive diplomacy and intelligence, and, for the State Department, they were coercive and quiet diplomacy. In other terms, for Bush, Rumsfeld, Cheney and the neocons in the administrations, American hegemony in the ME-Persian Gulf region and rapprochement with Tehran were two mutually exclusive options. By contrast, for the State Department, and the NSA, the latter would have been instrumental to the former. Within the Obama Administration, the instruments used were coercive diplomacy, cyberattacks and, at the same time, quiet diplomacy. Yet, for that administration, as it was for the State Department in 2003, American hegemony in the ME-Persian Gulf region and Tehran's engagement were not considered mutually exclusive. On the contrary, the former could be achieved more easily by relying on the latter. In any case, for all the factions and both administrations, the ultimate objective – for which the containment of, or an alliance with, Tehran were just instruments – was to maintain US global dominance in a key-region such as the Middle East-Persian Gulf. The Obama's *instrumental* change of strategy regarding Tehran and the region pointed out by this thesis confirms Bachevich's prophetic intuition that “[c]andidate Obama differed with Bush [...] not on fundamental principles but on operational priorities” (2009: 187). Additionally, Obama too pursued those “dreams of managing history”, which although traditionally associated by scholars and analysts with neo-conservatives acolytes, Reinhold Niebuhr (1952: 3) had diagnosed as an American attitude. In other terms, the findings of this investigation confirm what American foreign policy scholar, David A. Hughes (2017: 1-2) said, “if we know something about US foreign policy, it is that continuity of agenda always triumphs. [...] Since the end of the Cold War the United States' quest for world domination has been undeniable.” The IRI, like Iran before, has been considered as functional for American supremacy, particularly in the Persian Gulf-Central Asian theatre. What changed were just the means to achieve it through either diplomatic, and, potentially, military confrontation or engagement. In fact, the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance – developed by the same actors who would later dominate the Bush Administration – had offered a strategy for “precluding the emergence of any future global competitor” in that area, whilst the 2000 “Project for a New American Century”, another milestone by that group, proposed “a

blueprint for maintaining global US preeminence”. Zbigniew Brzezinski, inspirer of the “Carter doctrine” and Obama’s principal ME-Persian Gulf foreign policy advisor, although he had always opposed neocons’ stances, expressed a similar thought in 1998, during a revealing interview:

The Eurasia, that is the immense ensemble Europe-Russia-Asia, is at the world’s center: who controls it, controls the planet. The Eurasia has always been the exchequer where the fight for global supremacy is played. Since the end of the Cold War, the primacy in Eurasia is American, but for how long? A competitor, or a group of competitors, could call into question it within few decades, and not necessarily for the good of humanity.

He also added the reasons why, in his opinion, the US should engage with Tehran instead of squeezing it through sanctions or military confronting it:

This embargo [against the IRI] is stupid. By isolating Iran, the US are isolated. Because Iran is a main gateway to Central Asia and the Caucasus at the same time. We need to try to resume talks with Tehran instead of satisfying the lobby, in particular the Israeli one. (Jauvert, 1998)²⁵²

It seems very plausibly that Brzezinski sustained precisely this argument when, ten years later, became Obama’s ME foreign policy advisor. An indirect confirmation of how strategically important the Persian Gulf-Middle East region – and, therefore, Tehran – has been always considered by the US, comes from a testimony of four former US high-rank diplomats before the Senate Armed Service Committee, held in December 2017 (US Senate Committee on US Armed Service, 2017). In particular, in his statement, former Ambassador Eric Edelman said clearly that, “US policymakers have considered access to the region’s energy resources vital for US allies in Europe, and ultimately for the United States itself. Moreover, the region’s strategic importance – linking Europe and Asia – made it particularly important from a geopolitical point of view”, adding that, “[t]he geostrategic and economic factors that made the Middle East so important to our national security in the past are just as potent today” (Edelman, 2017). Iran has indeed always been considered as a crucial state in the American geopolitical strategy. The reasons for its relevance come, firstly, from its geographic location: buffer zone between European and Asian land masses, sharing a long borderline with the Soviet Union before, and, later, with post-Soviet republics (the so-called Russian “near abroad”), as well as with Afghanistan and Iraq. Also, it overlooks the Strait of Hormuz, the key-sea passage for the Persian Gulf states’ oil, and being the closer and

²⁵² Translated from the French by the author.

easier access to open sea for all the landlocked Central Asian Republics. Secondly, the IRI plays a major role within the Muslim world, particularly the Shi'a one (Maloney, 2008); to say nothing of its huge hydrocarbon reserves, able to heavily influence the price and the worldwide availability of oil and, potentially, of gas (Scott, 2008; 2012). As Chapter I has demonstrated, such a geopolitical value has influenced the US approach towards the IRI since its birth and has opened up opportunities for covert mutually beneficial engagement – in opposition to an official narrative of confrontation and potential conflict. During the Cold War, the Islamic Republic has been exploited by the US as an ideological bulwark against Communism and, as such, considered as even more reliable than the Sha'a. It was seen as well as a material bulwark against the Soviet-Russian access to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. What is more, it has been an Islamist ally for defeating Soviet, first, and Russian, later, influence in Central Asia and in the Balkans, (and also, as a nuclear pretext for heavily supplying Eastern Europe with anti-ballistic missile-based weaponry against Russia). Therefore, the Obama Administration's choice – as well as the Bush's State Department one – of engaging Tehran was consistent with such a way of considering Iran and the IRI. According to Ganji, within Carter's NSC “the debate over strategy towards Iran can best be summed up in terms of political versus military containment of the Soviet Union and New World Order versus global primacy” (Ganji, 2012: 6-7), however, that can be said also for the following administration, in particular the G. W. Bush's and the Obama's one.

A possible path for future research is the analysis of the Trump Administration's hard stances towards Tehran, its nuclear program and the JCPOA. At a first glance, they appear as a replication of the official Bush Administration's behavior, characterized by the refusal of any deal and collaboration with the Iranian regime (The “Hadley rules”). Trump has been keeping “a regime-change plan involving the MEK (Leup, 2018), plus an open (Dreyfuss, 2019) as well as a covert (Dreyfuss, 2020) military option as Bush did. Yet, it would be worth investigating whether a faction inside the administration, under the cover of a vitriolic anti-Iranian rhetoric reassuring the US regional allies (Israel, the Gulf states), has pursued quite diplomatic efforts to reach out to Tehran (or some factions inside the Iranian extremely complex power system) as it happened during the Bush Administration. In particular, the State Department's – and, inside it, the Near East Affairs Bureau's – role should be investigated to prove whether there has been continuity in its approach towards the IRI. Yet, the president himself, after having withdrawn from the JCPOA, appeared as interested in reaching another deal (Woodward, 2020), although his Secretary of State did not share his

view (Afrasiabi, 2020), replicating President Obama-Secretary of State Clinton divergent script already used by the previous administration. Even the assassination of IRG' General Qassem Soleimani, in January 2020, can be seen in this perspective, i.e. as a way to reach out a group inside the IRI to officially communicate or secretly collude with. Traditionally, in fact, the IRGC' leaders have been consistent with their refusal to make any pact with Washington, neither open nor covert, limiting the contacts to tactical operations to get rid of the Taliban during the American invasion of Afghanistan. Therefore, the elimination of their most charismatic leader – which, it is worth noting, was followed by only a limited and announced retaliation by Tehran – can be interpreted as an attempt to build a room for maneuver for that faction inside Tehran which is interested in dialoguing (covertly and/or overtly) with Washington. With this regard, it must be remembered that the current Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, was a pivotal player of the long-lasting covert US-IRI collusion deceptively called “Iran-Contra” affair. As such, he demonstrated to be able to effectively work for a mutually beneficial Washington-Tehran back channel. In addition, it is noteworthy quoting what the Supreme leader Khamenei declared, in May 2019: “[t]here won't be any war [...] We don't seek a war, and they [the Americans] don't either. They know it's not in their interests” (Reuters, 2019). This statement can be interpreted as a signal that the other two options available in foreign policy, diplomacy and covert operations, can be used for managing the two states' relationship. However, President Trump's interactions with Tehran have occurred in a new context different from that one in which the cover State Department's opening were done during the Bush Administration. Firstly, there is no American dependence on oil foreign production and, moreover, the eventual disruption of the Persian Gulf's flux of oil caused by an external aggressor appear as unlikely (Glaser & Kelanic, 2017). For Washington, the situation in Iraq is also different – more stabilized – than it was in 2002-2003. In other terms, Tehran's value as a possible regional stabilizer is diminished compared to 2002-2003 (at the time of the State Department's opening) and 2009-2012 (at the time of the Obama's opening) and this can have made the American interests to engage with it vanish. The Trump Administration's behavior towards Tehran should be properly explored by bearing in mind Ali Ansari's suggestion according to which the US and the IRI are similar since both rely on large, complex bureaucracies (Ansari, 2007). The intersections of agenda and interests of groups belonging to the American and the Iranian bureaucracies, as predicted by the bureaucratic politics model, can potentially open channels of communication against all odds, as it has indeed happened since the birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran and during the whole IND. The other factors which have to

be considered for understanding the Trump Administration's Iran foreign policy are the same ones which the thesis have demonstrated as capable to influence the US foreign policy decision-making process during the Bush and Obama administrations. They are, mainly, the Israeli and the Iranian lobby, and the American MNEs eager to do business with Tehran. Another avenue for further research is represented by the study of the relationship between the epistemic community, its donors and the foreign policy establishment, whose complexity and deepness has been enlightened by this thesis. Contributions coming from other disciplines – as, for instance, finance, law, sociology – can be helpful for grasping the many dimensions of such an entanglement and, at the same time, enhancing the heuristic potential of foreign policy theories, as suggested by Hudson (2005). Additionally, the role played by the oil MNEs in the US foreign policy towards the IRI as well as other oil-reach countries as Iraq, Libya and Azerbaijan appears as worth of being investigated. Finally, the existence of the “Gladio B” plan – consisting of the exploitation of Islamic terrorism by the US and NATO since the middle 1990s in the Caucasus-Central Asia-Persian Gulf regions (Giraldi, 2008: 2012) – deserves to be proved and analyzed for a better understanding of American foreign policy's long-term objectives.

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LIST OF ATTACHMENTS

1. President Ahmadinejad's letter to President G. W. Bush
2. President Obama's letter to President Lula
3. 3.a Ambassador Guldemann's cover letter + "Roadmap"
3.b Original draft of the proposal
3.c Ambassador Zarif's corrections to the proposal
3d Amended copy of the proposal
4. NSA Condoleeza Rice's "Talk points" for her off-the-records meeting with J. Risen on the "Operation Merlin"
5. 5.a Amirahmadi (2002a): "A proposal for US-Iran Cooperation against Saddam Hussein"
5.b Amirahmadi (2002b): "Meeting with Dr. Javad Zarif, September 2002"
5.c Amirahmadi (2004): "The Chronology of the Grand Bargain Initiative (2001-2004)"
6. U.S. Ambassador Gary Grappo's cable from Muscat

Mr George Bush,
President of the United States of America

For sometime now I have been thinking, how one can justify the undeniable contradictions that exist in the international arena -- which are being constantly debated, specially in political forums and amongst university students. Many questions remain unanswered. These have prompted me to discuss some of the contradictions and questions, in the hopes that it might bring about an opportunity to redress them.

Can one be a follower of Jesus Christ (PBUH), the great Messenger of God,

Feel obliged to respect human rights,
Present liberalism as a civilization model,

Announce one's opposition to the proliferation of nuclear weapons and WMDs,

Make "War and Terror" his slogan,

And finally,

Work towards the establishment of a unified international community – a community which Christ and the virtuous of the Earth will one day govern,

But at the same time,

Have countries attacked; The lives, reputations and possessions of people destroyed and on the slight chance of the ... of a ... criminals in a village city, or convoy for example the entire village, city or convey set ablaze.

Or because of the possibility of the existence of WMDs in one country, it is occupied, around one hundred thousand people killed, its water sources, agriculture and industry destroyed, close to 180,000 foreign troops put on the ground, sanctity of private homes of citizens broken, and the country pushed back perhaps fifty years. At what price? Hundreds of billions of dollars spent from the treasury of one country and certain other countries and tens of thousands of young men and women – as occupation troops – put in harms way, taken away from family and love ones, their hands stained with the blood of others, subjected to so much psychological pressure that everyday some commit suicide and those returning home suffer depression, become sickly and grapple with all sorts of ailments; while some are killed and their bodies handed over to their families.

On the pretext of the existence of WMDs, this great tragedy came to engulf both the peoples of the occupied and the occupying country. Later it was revealed that no WMDs existed to begin with.

Of course Saddam was a murderous dictator. But the war was not waged to topple him, the announced goal of the war was to find and destroy weapons of mass destruction. He was toppled along the way towards another goal, nevertheless the people of the region are happy about it. I point out that throughout the many years of the ... war on Iraq Saddam was supported by the West.

Mr President,

You might know that I am a teacher. My students ask me how can these actions be reconciled with the values outlined at the beginning of this letter and duty to the tradition of Jesus Christ (PBUH), the Messenger of peace and forgiveness.

There are prisoners in Guantanamo Bay that have not been tried, have no legal representation, their families cannot see them and are obviously kept in a strange land outside their own country. There is no international monitoring of their conditions and fate. No one knows whether they are prisoners, POWs, accused or criminals.

European investigators have confirmed the existence of secret prisons in Europe too. I could not correlate the abduction of a person, and him or her being kept in secret prisons, with the provisions of any judicial system. For that matter, I fail to understand how such actions correspond to the values outlined in the beginning of this letter, i.e. the teachings of Jesus Christ (PBUH), human rights and liberal values.

Young people, university students and ordinary people have many questions about the phenomenon of Israel. I am sure you are familiar with some of them.

Throughout history many countries have been occupied, but I think the establishment of a new country with a new people, is a new phenomenon that is exclusive to our times.

Students are saying that sixty years ago such a country did not exist. They show old documents and globes and say try as we have, we have not been able to find a country named Israel.

I tell them to study the history of WWI and II. One of my students told me that during WWII, which more than tens of millions of people perished in, news about the war, was quickly disseminated by the warring parties. Each touted their victories and the most recent battlefield defeat of the other party. After the war, they claimed that six million Jews had been killed. Six million people that were surely related to at least two million families.

Again let us assume that these events are true. Does that logically translate into the establishment of the state of Israel in the Middle East or support for such a state? How can this phenomenon be rationalised or explained?

Mr President,

I am sure you know how – and at what cost – Israel was established:

- Many thousands were killed in the process.
- Millions of indigenous people were made refugees.
- Hundred of thousands of hectares of farmland, olive plantations, towns and villages were destroyed.

This tragedy is not exclusive to the time of establishment; unfortunately it has been ongoing for sixty years now.

A regime has been established which does not show mercy even to kids, destroys houses while the occupants are still in them, announces beforehand its list and plans to assassinate Palestinian figures and keeps thousands of Palestinians in prison. Such a phenomenon is unique – or at the very least extremely rare – in recent memory.

Another big question asked by people is why is this regime being supported?

Is support for this regime in line with the teachings of Jesus Christ (PBUH) or Moses (PBUH) or liberal values?

Or are we to understand that allowing the original inhabitants of these lands – inside and outside Palestine – whether they are Christian, Muslim or Jew, to determine their fate, runs

contrary to principles of democracy, human rights and the teachings of prophets? If not, why is there so much opposition to a referendum?

The newly elected Palestinian administration recently took office. All independent observers have confirmed that this government represents the electorate. Unbelievably, they have put the elected government under pressure and have advised it to recognise the Israeli regime, abandon the struggle and follow the programs of the previous government.

If the current Palestinian government had run on the above platform, would the Palestinian people have voted for it? Again, can such position taken in opposition to the Palestinian government be reconciled with the values outlined earlier? The people are also saying “why are all UNSC resolutions in condemnation of Israel vetoed?”

Mr President,

As you are well aware, I live amongst the people and am in constant contact with them -- many people from around the Middle East manage to contact me as well. They do not have faith in these dubious policies either. There is evidence that the people of the region are becoming increasingly angry with such policies.

It is not my intention to pose too many questions, but I need to refer to other points as well.

Why is it that any technological and scientific achievement reached in the Middle East regions is translated into and portrayed as a threat to the Zionist regime? Is not scientific R&D one of the basic rights of nations.

You are familiar with history. Aside from the Middle Ages, in what other point in history has scientific and technical progress been a crime? Can the possibility of scientific achievements being utilised for military purposes be reason enough to oppose science and technology altogether? If such a supposition is true, then all scientific disciplines, including physics, chemistry, mathematics, medicine, engineering, etc. must be opposed.

Lies were told in the Iraqi matter. What was the result? I have no doubt that telling lies is reprehensible in any culture, and you do not like to be lied to.

Mr President,

Don't Latin Americans have the right to ask, why their elected governments are being opposed and coup leaders supported? Or, why must they constantly be threatened and live in fear?

The people of Africa are hardworking, creative and talented. They can play an important and valuable role in providing for the needs of humanity and contribute to its material and spiritual progress. Poverty and hardship in large parts of Africa are preventing this from happening. Don't they have the right to ask why their enormous wealth – including minerals – is being looted, despite the fact that they need it more than others?

Again, do such actions correspond to the teachings of Christ and the tenets of human rights?

The brave and faithful people of Iran too have many questions and grievances, including: the coup d'état of 1953 and the subsequent toppling of the legal government of the day, opposition to the Islamic revolution, transformation of an Embassy into a headquarters supporting the activities of those opposing the Islamic Republic (many thousands of pages of documents corroborates this claim), support for Saddam in the war waged against Iran, the shooting down of the Iranian passenger plane, freezing the assets of the Iranian nation, increasing threats, anger and displeasure vis-à-vis the scientific and nuclear progress of the Iranian nation (just when all Iranians are jubilant and collaborating their country's progress), and many other grievances that I will not refer to in this letter.

Mr President,

September Eleven was a horrendous incident. The killing of innocents is deplorable and appalling in any part of the world. Our government immediately declared its disgust with the perpetrators and offered its condolences to the bereaved and expressed its sympathies.

All governments have a duty to protect the lives, property and good standing of their citizens. Reportedly your government employs extensive security, protection and intelligence systems – and even hunts its opponents abroad. September eleven was not a simple operation. Could it be planned and executed without coordination with intelligence and security services – or their extensive infiltration? Of course this is just an educated guess. Why have the various aspects of the attacks been kept secret? Why are we not told who botched their responsibilities? And, why aren't those responsible and the guilty parties identified and put on trial?

All governments have a duty to provide security and peace of mind for their citizens. For some years now, the people of your country and neighbours of world trouble spots do not have peace of mind. After 9.11, instead of healing and tending to the emotional wounds of the survivors and the American people – who had been immensely traumatised by the attacks – some Western media only intensified the climates of fear and insecurity – some constantly talked about the possibility of new terror attacks and kept the people in fear. Is that service to the American people? Is it possible to calculate the damages incurred from fear and panic?

American citizen lived in constant fear of fresh attacks that could come at any moment and in any place. They felt insecure in the streets, in their place of work and at home. Who would be happy with this situation? Why was the media, instead of conveying a feeling of security and providing peace of mind, giving rise to a feeling of insecurity?

Some believe that the hype paved the way – and was the justification – for an attack on Afghanistan. Again I need to refer to the role of media.

In media charters, correct dissemination of information and honest reporting of a story are established tenets. I express my deep regret about the disregard shown by certain Western media for these principles. The main pretext for an attack on Iraq was the existence of WMDs. This was repeated incessantly – for the public to, finally, believe – and the ground set for an attack on Iraq.

Will the truth not be lost in a contrive and deceptive climate?

Again, if the truth is allowed to be lost, how can that be reconciled with the earlier mentioned values?

Is the truth known to the Almighty lost as well?

Mr President,

In countries around the world, citizens provide for the expenses of governments so that their governments in turn are able to serve them.

The question here is “what has the hundreds of billions of dollars, spent every year to pay for the Iraqi campaign, produced for the citizens?”

As your Excellency is aware, in some states of your country, people are living in poverty. Many thousands are homeless and unemployment is a huge problem. Of course these problems exist – to a larger or lesser extent – in other countries as well. With these conditions in mind, can the gargantuan expenses of the campaign – paid from the public treasury – be explained and be consistent with the aforementioned principles?

What has been said, are some of the grievances of the people around the world, in our region and in your country. But my main contention – which I am hoping you will agree to some of it – is:

Those in power have specific time in office, and do not rule indefinitely, but their names will be recorded in history and will be constantly judged in the immediate and distant futures.

The people will scrutinize our presidencies.

Did we manage to bring peace, security and prosperity for the people or insecurity and unemployment?

Did we intend to establish justice, or just supported especial interest groups, and by forcing many people to live in poverty and hardship, made a few people rich and powerful – thus trading the approval of the people and the Almighty with theirs’?

Did we defend the rights of the underprivileged or ignore them?

Did we defend the rights of all people around the world or imposed wars on them, interfered illegally in their affairs, established hellish prisons and incarcerated some of them?

Did we bring the world peace and security or raised the specter of intimidation and threats?

Did we tell the truth to our nation and others around the world or presented an inverted version of it?

Were we on the side of people or the occupiers and oppressors?

Did our administration set out to promote rational behaviour, logic, ethics, peace, fulfilling obligations, justice, service to the people, prosperity, progress and respect for human dignity or the force of guns.

Intimidation, insecurity, disregard for the people, delaying the progress and excellence of other nations, and trample on people’s rights?

And finally, they will judge us on whether we remained true to our oath of office – to serve the people, which is our main task, and the traditions of the prophets – or not?

Mr President,

How much longer can the world tolerate this situation?

Where will this trend lead the world to?

How long must the people of the world pay for the incorrect decisions of some rulers?

How much longer will the specter of insecurity – raised from the stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction – hunt the people of the world?

How much longer will the blood of the innocent men, women and children be spilled on the streets, and people's houses destroyed over their heads?
Are you pleased with the current condition of the world?
Do you think present policies can continue?

If billions of dollars spent on security, military campaigns and troop movement were instead spent on investment and assistance for poor countries, promotion of health, combating different diseases, education and improvement of mental and physical fitness, assistance to the victims of natural disasters, creation of employment opportunities and production, development projects and poverty alleviation, establishment of peace, mediation between disputing states and distinguishing the flames of racial, ethnic and other conflicts would the world be today? Would not your government, and people be justifiably proud? Would not your administration's political and economic standing have been stronger? And I am most sorry to say, would there have been an ever increasing global hatred of the American governments?

Mr President, it is not my intention to distress anyone.

If prophet Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Ishmael, Joseph or Jesus Christ (PBUH) were with us today, how would they have judged such behaviour? Will we be given a role to play in the promised world, where justice will become universal and Jesus Christ (PBUH) will be present? Will they even accept us?

My basic question is this: Is there no better way to interact with the rest of the world? Today there are hundreds of millions of Christians, hundreds of millions of Moslems and millions of people who follow the teachings of Moses (PBUH). All divine religions share and respect on word and that is "monotheism" or belief in a single God and no other in the world.

The holy Koran stresses this common word and calls on an followers of divine religions and says: [3.64] Say: O followers of the Book! Come to an equitable proposition between us and you that we shall not serve any but Allah and (that) we shall not associate aught. With Him and (that) some of us shall not take others for lords besides Allah, but if they turn back, then say: Bear witness that we are Muslims. (The Family of Imran).

Mr President,

According to divine verses, we have all been called upon to worship one God and follow the teachings of divine prophets.

"To worship a God which is above all powers in the world and can do all He pleases." "The Lord which knows that which is hidden and visible, the past and the future, knows what goes on in the Hearts of His servants and records their deeds."

"The Lord who is the possessor of the heavens and the earth and all universe is His court" "planning for the universe is done by His hands, and gives His servants the glad tidings of mercy and forgiveness of sins". "He is the companion of the oppressed and the enemy of oppressors". "He is the Compassionate, the Merciful". "He is the recourse of the faithful and guides them towards the light from darkness". "He is witness to the actions of His servants", "He calls on servants to be faithful and do good deeds, and asks them to stay on the path of righteousness and remain steadfast". "Calls on servants to heed His prophets and He is a witness to their deeds." "A bad ending belongs only to those who have chosen the life of this

world and disobey Him and oppress His servants”. And “A good and eternal paradise belong to those servants who fear His majesty and do not follow their lascivious selves.”

We believe a return to the teachings of the divine prophets is the only road leading to salvations. I have been told that Your Excellency follows the teachings of Jesus (PBUH), and believes in the divine promise of the rule of the righteous on Earth.

We also believe that Jesus Christ (PBUH) was one of the great prophets of the Almighty. He has been repeatedly praised in the Koran. Jesus (PBUH) has been quoted in Koran as well; [19,36] And surely Allah is my Lord and your Lord, therefore serves Him; this is the right path, Marium.

Service to and obedience of the Almighty is the credo of all divine messengers.

The God of all people in Europe, Asia, Africa, America, the Pacific and the rest of the world is one. He is the Almighty who wants to guide and give dignity to all His servants. He has given greatness to Humans.

We again read in the Holy Book: “The Almighty God sent His prophets with miracles and clear signs to guide the people and show them divine signs and purify them from sins and pollutions. And He sent the Book and the balance so that the people display justice and avoid the rebellious.”

All of the above verses can be seen, one way or the other, in the Good Book as well.

Divine prophets have promised:

The day will come when all humans will congregate before the court of the Almighty, so that their deeds are examined. The good will be directed towards Haven and evildoers will meet divine retribution. I trust both of us believe in such a day, but it will not be easy to calculate the actions of rulers, because we must be answerable to our nations and all others whose lives have been directly or indirectly effected by our actions.

All prophets, speak of peace and tranquillity for man – based on monotheism, justice and respect for human dignity.

Do you not think that if all of us come to believe in and abide by these principles, that is, monotheism, worship of God, justice, respect for the dignity of man, belief in the Last Day, we can overcome the present problems of the world – that are the result of disobedience to the Almighty and the teachings of prophets – and improve our performance?

Do you not think that belief in these principles promotes and guarantees peace, friendship and justice?

Do you not think that the aforementioned written or unwritten principles are universally respected?

Will you not accept this invitation? That is, a genuine return to the teachings of prophets, to monotheism and justice, to preserve human dignity and obedience to the Almighty and His prophets?

Mr President,

History tells us that repressive and cruel governments do not survive. God has entrusted the fate of man to them. The Almighty has not left the universe and humanity to their own devices. Many things have happened contrary to the wishes and plans of governments. These tell us that there is a higher power at work and all events are determined by Him.

Can one deny the signs of change in the world today?

Is this situation of the world today comparable to that of ten years ago? Changes happen fast and come at a furious pace.

The people of the world are not happy with the status quo and pay little heed to the promises and comments made by a number of influential world leaders. Many people around the world feel insecure and oppose the spreading of insecurity and war and do not approve of and accept dubious policies.

The people are protesting the increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots and the rich and poor countries.

The people are disgusted with increasing corruption.

The people of many countries are angry about the attacks on their cultural foundations and the disintegration of families. They are equally dismayed with the fading of care and compassion. The people of the world have no faith in international organisations, because their rights are not advocated by these organisations.

Liberalism and Western style democracy have not been able to help realize the ideals of humanity. Today these two concepts have failed. Those with insight can already hear the sounds of the shattering and fall of the ideology and thoughts of the liberal democratic systems.

We increasingly see that people around the world are flocking towards a main focal point – that is the Almighty God. Undoubtedly through faith in God and the teachings of the prophets, the people will conquer their problems. My question for you is: “Do you not want to join them?”

Mr President,

Whether we like it or not, the world is gravitating towards faith in the Almighty and justice and the will of God will prevail over all things.

Vasalam Ala Man Ataba'al hoda

Mahmood Ahmadi-Najad
President of the Islamic Republic of Iran

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

April 20, 2010

His Excellency
Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva
President of the Federative Republic of Brazil
Brasilia

Dear Mr. President:

I want to thank you for our meeting with Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan during the Nuclear Security Summit. We spent some time focused on Iran, the issue of the provision of nuclear fuel for the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR), and the intent of Brazil and Turkey to work toward finding an acceptable solution. I promised to respond in detail to your ideas. I have carefully considered our discussion, and I would like to offer a detailed explanation of my perspective and suggest a way ahead.

I agree with you that the TRR is an opportunity to pave the way for a broader dialogue in dealing with the more fundamental concerns of the international community regarding Iran's overall nuclear program. From the beginning, I have viewed Iran's request as a clear and tangible opportunity to begin to build mutual trust and confidence, and thereby create time and space for a constructive diplomatic process. That is why the United States so strongly supported the proposal put forth by former International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General ElBaradei.

The IAEA's proposal was crafted to be fair and balanced, and for both sides to gain trust and confidence. For us, Iran's agreement to transfer 1,200 kg of Iran's low enriched uranium (LEU) out of the country would build confidence and reduce regional tensions by substantially reducing Iran's LEU stockpile. I want to underscore that this element is of fundamental importance for the United States. For Iran, it would receive the nuclear fuel requested to ensure continued operation of the TRR to produce needed medical isotopes and, by using its own material, Iran would begin to demonstrate peaceful nuclear intent. Notwithstanding Iran's continuing defiance of five United Nations Security Council resolutions mandating that it cease its enrichment of uranium, we were prepared to support and facilitate action on a proposal that would provide Iran nuclear fuel using uranium enriched by Iran -- a demonstration of our willingness to be creative in pursuing a way to build mutual confidence.

During the course of the consultations, we also recognized Iran's desire for assurances. As a result, my team focused on ensuring that the IAEA's proposal contained several built-in

measures, including a U.S. national declaration of support, to send a clear signal from my government of our willingness to become a direct signatory and potentially even play a more direct role in the fuel production process, a central role for Russia, and the IAEA's assumption of full custody of the nuclear material throughout the fuel production process. In effect, the IAEA's proposal offered Iran significant and substantial assurances and commitments from the IAEA, the United States, and Russia. Dr. ElBaradei stated publicly last year that the United States would be assuming the vast majority of the risk in the IAEA's proposal.

As we discussed, Iran appears to be pursuing a strategy that is designed to create the impression of flexibility without agreeing to actions that can begin to build mutual trust and confidence. We have observed Iran convey hints of flexibility to you and others, but formally reiterate an unacceptable position through official channels to the IAEA. Iran has continued to reject the IAEA's proposal and insist that Iran retain its low-enriched uranium on its territory until delivery of nuclear fuel. This is the position that Iran formally conveyed to the IAEA in January 2010 and again in February.

We understand from you, Turkey and others that Iran continues to propose that Iran would retain its LEU on its territory until there is a simultaneous exchange of its LEU for nuclear fuel. As General Jones noted during our meeting, it will require one year for any amount of nuclear fuel to be produced. Thus, the confidence-building strength of the IAEA's proposal would be completely eliminated for the United States and several risks would emerge. First, Iran would be able to continue to stockpile LEU throughout this time, which would enable them to acquire an LEU stockpile equivalent to the amount needed for two or three nuclear weapons in a year's time. Second, there would be no guarantee that Iran would ultimately agree to the final exchange. Third, IAEA "custody" of Iran's LEU inside of Iran would provide us no measurable improvement over the current situation, and the IAEA cannot prevent Iran from re-assuming control of its uranium at any time.

There is a potentially important compromise that has already been offered. Last November, the IAEA conveyed to Iran our offer to allow Iran to ship its 1,200 kg of LEU to a third country -- specifically Turkey -- at the outset of the process to be held "in escrow" as a guarantee during the fuel production process that Iran would get back its uranium if we failed to deliver the fuel. Iran has never pursued the "escrow" compromise and has provided no credible explanation for its rejection. I believe that this raises real questions about Iran's nuclear intentions, if Iran is unwilling to accept an offer to demonstrate that its LEU is for peaceful, civilian purposes. I would urge Brazil to impress upon Iran the opportunity presented by this offer to "escrow" its uranium in Turkey while the nuclear fuel is being produced.

Throughout this process, instead of building confidence Iran has undermined confidence in the way it has approached this opportunity. That is why I question whether Iran is prepared to engage Brazil in good faith, and why I cautioned you during our meeting. To begin a constructive diplomatic process, Iran has to convey to the IAEA a constructive commitment to engagement through official channels -- something it has failed to do. Meanwhile, we will pursue sanctions on the timeline that I have outlined. I have also made clear that I will leave the door open to engagement with Iran. As you know, Iran has thus far failed to accept my offer of comprehensive and unconditional dialogue.

I look forward to the next opportunity to see you and discuss these issues as we consider the challenge of Iran's nuclear program to the security of the international community, including in the U.N. Security Council.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Barack Obama", written in a cursive style. The signature is positioned to the right of the word "Sincerely,".

1. On April 21, I had a longer discussion with Sadeq Kharrazi who came to see me (S.Kh. is the Iranian Ambassador in Paris, former Deputy-FM and nephew of the Foreign Minister, his sister is married to the son of the Religious Leader Khamenei). During this discussion a first draft of the enclosed Roadmap was developed. He said that he would discuss this with the Leader and the Foreign Minister.
2. On May 2, I met him again for three hours. He told me that he had two long discussions with the Leader on the Roadmap. In these meetings, which both lasted almost two hours, only President Khatami and FM Kharrazi were present; "we went through every word of the this paper". (He additionally had a series of separat meetings with both). - The question is dealt with in high secrecy, therefore no one else has been informed, (S.Kh. himself has become also very discreet in our last contacts). - S.Kh. presented the paper to the Leader as a proposal which he had discussed, with a friend in Europe who has close contacts with higher echelons in the DoS. The Leader explicitly had asked him whether this is a US-proposal and S.Kh. denied this, saying that, if it is accepted, this friend could convey it to Washington as the basis for opening the bilateral discussion.
3. Then S.Kh. told me that the Leader uttered some reservations as for some points; the President and the Foreign Minister were very positive, there was no problem from their side. Then he said "They (meaning above all the Leader) agree with 85%-90% of the paper. But everything can be negotiated." (By 'agree' he meant to agree with the points themselves referred to as 'US aims' in the Roadmap, and not only to agree that the US puts these points on the agenda). - "There is a clear interest to tackle the problem of our relations with the US. I told them, this is a golden opportunity, one day we must find a solution". - Then S.Kh. asked me whether I could present the enclosed Roadmap very confidentially to someone very high in the DoS in order to get to know the US-reaction on it. - He asked me to make some minor changes in the Roadmap draft of our previous meeting, we re-wrote for instance the Iranian statement on the Middle East, and he said that he thinks, that this statement would be acceptable - "the peace process is a reality".
4. Then he said: "If the Americans agree to have a discreet bilateral meeting on the basis of this Roadmap, then this meeting could be arranged very soon. In this meeting our remaining reservations could be discussed as well as the US would bring in their reservations on this paper. I am sure that these differences can be eliminated. If we can agree on a Roadmap to clarify the procedure, as a next step it could already be decided in this first meeting that the two Foreign Ministers could meet for starting the process" along the lines of the Roadmap "to decide on how to proceed to resolve everything from A till Z". - Asked whether the meeting between the two foreign ministers has been agreed by the Leader, he said: "Look, if we can agree on the procedure, I believe honestly that it is O.K. for the meeting of the foreign ministers in Paris or Geneva, there is soon an occasion." - Asked whom he thinks would participate in the first discreet meeting, he mentioned Armitage, referring to the positive positions of the latter on Iranian democracy. - I told him that I think that this is impossible, but then he mentioned a meeting these days between Khalilzad and Zarif (Ambassador to the UN) in Geneva on terrorism and said it could be a similar level from the DoS and on their side maybe him or Zarif or both.
5. When I tried to obtain from him a precise answer on what exactly the Leader explicitly has agreed, he said that the lack of trust in the US imposes them to proceed very carefully and very confidentially. After discussing this problem with him I understood that they want to be sure that if this initiative failed, and if anything about the new Iranian flexibility outlined in it became known, they would - also for internal reasons - not be bound to it. - However, I got the clear impression that there is a strong will of the regime to tackle the problem with the US now and to try it with this initiative.

Roadmap

US aims: (Iran agrees that the US puts the following aims on the agenda)

- **WMD:** full transparency for security that there are no Iranian endeavours to develop or possess WMD, full cooperation with IAEA based on Iranian adoption of all relevant instruments (93+2 and all further IAEA protocols)
- **Terrorism:** decisive action against any terrorists (above all Al Qaida) on Iranian territory, full cooperation and exchange of all relevant information.
- **Iraq:** coordination of Iranian influence for actively supporting political stabilization and the establishment of democratic institutions and a democratic government representing all ethnic and religious groups in Iraq.
- **Middle East:**
 1. stop of any material support to Palestinian opposition groups (Hamas, Jihad etc.) from Iranian territory, pressure on these organisations to stop violent action against civilians within borders of 1967.
 2. action on Hisbollah to become an exclusively political and social organization within Lebanon
 3. acceptance of the two-states-approach.

Iranian aims: (the US accepts a dialogue „in mutual respect“ and agrees that Iran puts the following aims on the agenda)

- **US refrains from supporting change of the political system by direct interference from outside**
- **Abolishment of all sanctions:** commercial sanctions, frozen assets, refusal of access to WTO
- **Iraq:** pursuit of MKO, support of the repatriation of MKO-members, support of the Iranian claims for Iraqi reparation, no Turkish invasion in North Iraq, respect for the Iranian national interests in Iraq and religious links to Najaf/Kerbala.
- **Access to peaceful nuclear technology, biotechnology and chemical technology**
- **Recognition of Iran's legitimate security interests in the region with the according defense capacity.**
- **Terrorism:** action against MKO and affiliated organizations in the US

Steps:

1. **Communication of mutual agreement on the following procedure**
2. **Mutual simultaneous statements** „we have always been ready for direct and authoritative talks with the US/with Iran with the aim of discussing - in mutual respect - our common interests and our mutual concerns, but we have always made it clear that, such talks can only be held, if genuine progress for a solution of our own concerns can be achieved“.
3. **A direct meeting on the appropriate level will be held with the previously agreed aims**
 - a) **of a decision on the first mutual steps:**
 - **Iraq:** establishment of a common working group on Iraq, active Iranian support for Iraqi stabilization, US-commitment to resolve MKO problem in Iraq, US-commitment to take Iranian reparation claims into the discussion on Iraq foreign debts.
 - **Terrorism:** Iranian commitment for decisive action against Al Qaida members in Iran, agreement on cooperation and information exchange
 - **Iranian statement** „that it supports a peaceful solution in the Middle East, that it accepts a solution which is accepted by the Palestinians and that it follows with interest the discussion on the Roadmap, presented by the Quartet.“
 - **US-acceptance of Iranian access to WTO-membership negotiations**
 - b) **of the establishment of three parallel working groups on disarmament, regional security, and economic cooperation.** Their aim is an agreement on three parallel road maps, for the discussions of these working groups each side accepts that the other side's aims (see above) are put on the agenda:
 - 1) **Disarmament:** road map, which combines the mutual aims of, on the one side, full transparency by international commitments and guarantees to abstain from WMD with, on the other side, access to western technology (in the three areas),
 - 2) **Terrorism and regional security:** road map for above mentioned aims on Middle East and terrorism
 - 3) **Economic cooperation:** road map for the lifting of the sanctions and the solution of the frozen assets
 - c) **and of a public statement after this first meeting on the achieved agreements**

Iranian aims:

(the US accepts a dialogue „in mutual respect“ and agrees that Iran puts the following aims on the agenda)

- **US refrains from supporting change of the political system by direct interference from outside**
- **Abolishment of all sanctions**: commercial sanctions, frozen assets, refusal of access to WTO
- **Iraq**: pursuit of MKO, support of repatriation of MKO-members, support of Iranian claims for Iraqi reparation, no Turkish invasion in North Iraq, respect for Iranian national interests in Iraq and religious links to Najaf/Kerbala
- **Access to peaceful nuclear technology, biotechnology and chemical technology**
- **Recognition of Iran's legitimate security interests** in the region with according defense capacity
- **Terrorism**: action against MKO and affiliated organizations in the US

US aims: (Iran agrees that the US puts the following aims on the agenda)

- **WMD**: full transparency for security that there are no Iranian endeavours to develop or possess WMD, full cooperation with IAEA based on Iranian adoption of all relevant instruments (93+2 and all further IAEA protocols)
- **Terrorism**: decisive action against any terrorists (above all Al Qaida) on Iranian territory, full cooperation and exchange of all relevant information
- **Iraq**: coordination of Iranian influence for actively supporting political stabilization and the establishment of democratic institutions and a non-religious government.
- **Middle East**:
 - 1) stop of any material support to Palestinian opposition groups (Hamas, Jihad etc) from Iranian territory, pressure on these organisations to stop violent action against civilians within borders of 1967.
 - 2) action on Hisbollah to become a mere political organization within Lebanon
 - 3) acceptance of the Arab League Beirut decision (Saudi initiative, two-states-approach)

Steps:

- I communication of mutual agreement on the following procedure
- II **mutual simultaneous statements** „we have always been ready for direct and authoritative talks with the US/with Iran with the aim of discussing - in mutual respect – our common interests and our mutual concerns, but we have always made it clear that, such talks can only be held, if genuine progress for a solution of our own concerns can be achieved“
- III. **a first direct meeting** on the appropriate level (for instance in Paris) will be held with the **previously agreed aims**
 - a) **of a decision on the first mutual steps**
 - **Iraq**: establishment of a common group, active Iranian support for Iraqi stabilization, US-commitment to resolve MKO problem in Iraq, US-commitment to take Iranian reparation claims into the discussion on Iraq foreign debts
 - **Terrorism**: Iranian commitment for enhanced action against Al Qaida members in Iran, agreement on cooperation and information exchange
 - Iranian general statement „to support a peaceful solution in the **Middle East** involving the parties concerned“
 - US-acceptance of Iranian access to WTO-membership negotiations
 - b) **of the establishment of three parallel working groups** on disarmament, regional security, and economic cooperation. Their aim is an agreement on **three parallel road maps**, for the discussions of these working groups each side accepts that the other side's aims (see above) are put on the agenda:
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 - 2) **Terrorism and regional security**: road map for above mentioned aims on Middle East and terrorism
 - 3) **Economic cooperation**: road map for the abolishment of the sanctions and solution of frozen assets
 - c) **and of a public statement after this first meeting on the achieved agreements**

Iranian aims:

(The US accepts a dialogue “in mutual respect” and agrees that Iran puts the following aims on the agenda)

- ~~US refrains from supporting change of the political system by direct interference from outside~~Halt in US hostile behavior and rectification of status of Iran in the US: (interference in internal or external relations, “axis of evil”, terrorism list.)
- ~~Abolishment of all sanctions: commercial sanctions, frozen assets, refusal of access to WTO~~judgments(FSIA), impediments in international trade and financial institutions
- ~~Iraq: democratic and fully representative government in Iraq, pursuit of MKO, support of repatriation of MKO members,~~ support of Iranian claims for Iraqi reparations, ~~no Turkish invasion in North Iraq,~~ respect for Iranian national interests in Iraq and religious links to Najaf/Karbal.
- ~~Full access to peaceful nuclear technology, biotechnology and chemical technology~~
- Recognition of Iran’s legitimate security interests in the region with according defense capacity.
- ~~Terrorism: pursuit of anti-Iranian terrorists, above all MKO and support for repatriation of their members in Iraq, decisive~~ action against ~~anti Iranian terrorists, above all~~ MKO and affiliated organizations in the US

US aims: (Iran accepts a dialogue “in mutual respect” and agrees that the US puts the following aims on the agenda)

- **WMD:** full transparency for security that there are no Iranian endeavors to develop or possess WMD, full cooperation with IAEA based on Iranian adoption of all relevant instruments (93+2 and all further IAEA protocols)
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 - 1) stop of any material support to Palestinian opposition groups (Hamas, Jihad etc.) from Iranian territory, pressure on these organizations to stop violent action against civilians within borders of 1967.
 - 2) action on Hizbollah to become a mere political organization within Lebanon
 - 3) acceptance of the Arab League Beirut declaration (Saudi initiative, two-states-approach)

Steps:

- I. communication of **mutual agreement on the following procedure**
- II. **mutual simultaneous statements** “We have always been ready for direct and authoritative talks with the US/with Iran in good faith and with the aim of discussing – in mutual respect – our common interests and our mutual concerns based on merits and objective realities, but we have always made it clear that, such talks can only be held, if genuine progress for a solution of our own concerns can be achieved.”
- III. **a first direct meeting** on the appropriate level (for instance in Paris) will be held **with the previously agreed aims**
 - a. of a **decision on the first mutual steps**
 - **Iraq:** establishment of a common group, active Iranian support for Iraqi stabilization, ~~US commitment to resolve MKO problem in Iraq,~~ US-commitment to take actively support Iranian reparation claims ~~within~~ into the discussions on Iraq foreign debts.
 - **Terrorism:** ~~US-commitment to disarm and remove MKO from Iraq and take action in accordance with SCR1373 against its leadership,~~ Iranian commitment for enhanced action against Al Qaida members in Iran, agreement on cooperation and information exchange
 - Iranian general statement “to support a peaceful solution in the **Middle East** involving the parties concerned”
 - ~~US general statement that “Iran did not belong to ‘the axis of evil’”~~
 - US-acceptance to halt its impediments against Iran in international financial and trade institutions of Iranian access to WTO-membership negotiations
 - b. of the **establishment of three parallel working groups** on disarmament, regional security and economic cooperation. Their **aim is an agreement on three parallel road maps**, for the discussions of these working groups, each side accepts that the other side’s aims (see above) are put on the agenda:
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 - 2) **Terrorism and regional security:** road map for above mentioned aims on the Middle east and terrorism
 - 3) **Economic cooperation:** road map for the abolishment of the sanctions, rescinding of judgments, and ~~solution of frozen un-freezing of assets~~
 - c. of agreement on a time-table for implementation
 - e-d. and of a public statement after this first meeting on the achieved agreements

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Iranian aims:

(The US accepts a dialogue “in mutual respect” and agrees that Iran puts the following aims on the agenda)

- **Halt in US hostile behavior and rectification of status of Iran in the US:** (interference in internal or external relations, “axis of evil”, terrorism list.)
- **Abolishment of all sanctions:** commercial sanctions, frozen assets, judgments(FSIA), impediments in international trade and financial institutions
- **Iraq:** democratic and fully representative government in Iraq, support of Iranian claims for Iraqi reparations, respect for Iranian national interests in Iraq and religious links to Najaf/Karbala.
- **Full access to peaceful nuclear technology, biotechnology and chemical technology**
- Recognition of Iran’s **legitimate security interests** in the region with according defense capacity.
- **Terrorism:** pursuit of anti-Iranian terrorists, above all MKO and support for repatriation of their members in Iraq, decisive action against anti Iranian terrorists, above all MKO and affiliated organizations in the US

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Steps:

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- III. **a first direct meeting** on the appropriate level (for instance in Paris) will be held **with the previously agreed aims**
 - a. of a **decision on the first mutual steps**
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 - 3) **Economic cooperation:** road map for the abolishment of the sanctions, rescinding of judgments, and un-freezing of assets
 - c. of agreement on a time-table for implementation
 - d. and of a **public statement after this first meeting on the achieved agreements**

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- This meeting is completely OFF-THE-RECORD.
- We've never called a meeting like this before in this Administration-the fact that we have done so may tell you how seriously we view this matter.
- We've asked you to come in for a meeting because this is something which should not be discussed over open telephone lines.
- Jim, someone has inappropriately and incorrectly given you information about one of the most sensitive and important programs this country has.
- I say "inappropriately" because this information in the wrong hands could easily lead to the death of a U.S. citizen...and conceivably contribute to the deaths of millions of innocent victims of a foreign nuclear weapons program.
- I say "incorrectly," because someone has apparently told you that the program was mismanaged and already revealed to the Iranian government. To the best of knowledge of all of us here...that is totally false.
- Preventing working nuclear weapons from falling into the hands of rogue states is one of the most important missions that this, or any other, Administration can have.
- I won't ask you your source, because I know you will not tell me.
- There is no partial answer here. We see no way to write part of this story. If you write it...you endanger lives and national security.
- Asking journalists not to write a story is asking a lot. Now, I am going to ask you more. I am going to ask...in the strongest possible terms...that you not discuss this matter with colleagues and that you not conduct further inquiries around town about it. Each conversation, each call, increases the likelihood that the story will get out...even if you decide to do the right thing and not publish it.
- If you feel the need to discuss this with your seniors in New York. I request that you do so face-to-face. It is much too sensitive for telephone lines.

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Additionally, I ask that the details of the prospective story be immediately purged from your computer systems.

- Jim, I understand that you may have some government documents that impinge upon this story. If that is true, I won't ask that you turn them over to us...but I will ask that you shred every copy-now.
- Let me anticipate a question. You may be wondering, will there be a time when it would be safe for you to write the story. I cannot foresee such a time. Even if Iran turns into a democracy and renounces weapons of mass destruction, the techniques used to hinder their nuclear program could still be useful in preventing other rogue states from endangering us all.
- You have our promise that if we learn of any other news organization plans to publish this story...we will let you know immediately. If any other organization gets this information...we will work as hard to convince them not to publish as we are with you.
- What do you get if you agree not to publish? The comfort of knowing that you haven't contributed to making the world a more dangerous place.

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Memo to Myself

Confidential

October 2002

Hooshang Amirahmadi, Ph.D.

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For the American Iranian Council

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A Proposal for US-Iran Cooperation against Saddam Hussein

Saddam Hussein, just like Al-Qaeda and Taliban in Afghanistan, is a sworn enemy of both Iran and the United States. Yet, the two countries have not arrived at a consensus on assessing Iraqi threats or to an agreement in dealing with Saddam Hussein. This is largely due to a lack of direct and authoritative communication between Washington and Tehran. Considering the increasing chance of a war with Iraq, their cooperation on strategic issue of Iraq is necessary and possible and would be in their best interests.

The Islamic Republic has expressed its receptiveness to coordinated measures to abate the costs and risks of counteracting with Iraqi threats and of the post Saddam Hussein situation. The Bush administration has also indicated interest. Managed properly, well-communicated and coordinated actions to address Iraqi threats would reduce misunderstanding and provide another window of opportunity for official interactions toward mending Iran-U.S. relations.

For this to happen, both sides must help open the window and open it wide. This will be neither easy nor risk free, but it is certainly possible as happened during the US war in Afghanistan. This time, however, the cooperation should be constructed in such a way that the window would not close after the Iraqi crisis is over as, again, happened in the Afghan case. The key to a more lasting partnership is careful attention to the realities on both sides and in the region.

The United States and Iran have been unfriendly since the revolution in 1979. The memories and issues involved are for the most part historical, bitter, and complex, including mutual distrust, suspicion, perceived threats, and the uncertainty of reciprocity. Worst yet, extremists in Tehran want to join forces with Iraq to prevent their anticipated harm by the United States. Opposed to US-Iran cooperation are also powerful interests in Washington, the Middle East, and beyond.

As the experience of collaboration over Afghanistan demonstrated, a lasting cooperation between the two governments must account for the influence of these powerful forces. Their concerns cannot and should not be overlooked. A measured and limited cooperation will allow time for these forces to adjust and taste the fruits of cooperation. Washington and Tehran must also consider the high possibility of an Iraqi extreme

reaction to US-Iran coordination. One way to address this problem would be to take a low profile and act in the context of the United Nations.

The United States and Iran should not expect to resolve their contending issues with this proposed cooperation. But, it is indispensable for the gradual process of building trust and mutual respect with public support. It is important to account for the needs of the states, and the concerns of the third parties, but it is even more significant to consider the demands of the people. For the Iranians, democracy and respect for human rights are among such uncompromising demands.

The following two lists are prepared with this state of affairs in mind. They are hoped to provide the basis for an honest negotiation between Washington and Tehran to arrive at a definitive understanding on how to cooperate over Iraq before, during and after the expected war. That war is hoped to take place with the UN consent, involving no direct Israeli intervention, must change the current Iraqi regime, and establish a more representative government in Baghdad.

Things Iran Should Do for the United States

In considering this list, Iran must weigh the cost of its inaction including the consequences that can follow from an American victory in Iraq, and the fact that normalization of relations is in the best interest of Iran.

- Establish a hotline of communication with the United States to exchange information and prevent misunderstanding
- Not cooperate with Iraq during the war
- Not use oil as a weapon
- Prepare Iranian hospitals in the vicinity for receiving Americans wounded by Iraqi chemical/biological weapons
- Allow the emergency trespassing of American warplanes in Iranian air space and their landing on Iranian soil, and provide humanitarian assistance to their crew.
- Receive war refugees and arrange for their camping inside Iraqi territories or Iranian soil depending on circumstances
- Close all Iranian borders to fleeing Iraqi Ba'ath Party members and military personnel, or terrorists
- Lift all restrictions on groups inside or outside of Iran who wish to fight Saddam Hussein's arm forces.
- Provide humanitarian assistance to the Iraqi civilians hurt or displaced by the war
- Prevent Iraqi military forces from using any Iranian borders, waters or air spaces
- Assist the United States in forming a representative and stable post-Saddam Hussein government (as in the case of Afghanistan)
- Not demand the immediate return of the war refugees till the new government in Baghdad is stable
- Not cooperate with anti-American military forces after the war, and help to destroy them

- Iran will provide evidence for charging Saddam Hussein and members of his inner circle with crimes against humanity in the case he is toppled
- Iran will use the cooperation over Iraq to engage with the US for more open direct bilateral talks to address US' broader concerns with terrorism, proliferation of WMD, Middle East peace, and human rights.

Things the United States Should Do for Iran

In considering this list, the United States needs to appreciate the fact that the status quo in Iraq is more anti-American than anti-Iran, Iraq is a much more difficult case than Afghanistan, Tehran will be taking a great risk for the cooperation, and that normalization of relations with Iran is in Washington's best interest.

- Express intention to normalize relations with Iran and change its tone and actions to reflect that expressed will
- Extend to Iran the same protection extended to other regional allies against possible Iraqi biological and chemical attacks
- Free the frozen Iranian assets (against purchase of say civilian jets or other similarly significant civilian products)
- Partially lift sanctions in selected areas, including Iranian energy sector
- Drop American opposition to Iran's membership in WTO and Asia Development Bank as well as Iran's loan applications to the IMF and the World Bank
- Acknowledge Iran's legitimate national security concerns and its rights to provide for its defensive means
- Guarantee the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq
- Take measures to reduce the American military presence in the region after the war

Memo to Myself

Confidential

November 2002

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Meetings with Dr. Zarif and Dr. Kharrazi, and in NSC and State Department

Meeting with Dr. Javad Zarif, September 2002

Two major developments made us, in AIC, think that perhaps a new window of opportunity might be opened in US-Iran relations; First is the appointment of Dr. Javad Zarif as Iran's new Ambassador to the UN, replacing Mr. Hadi Nejad-Housseinian. Dr. Zarif is considered both more liberal and better informed about the legal problems facing Iran globally and in relation to the United States. Americans also know Dr. Zarif well as they have worked with him in many occasions including in Bonn, Germany, when the two nations discussed the formation of the post-Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The other development is the growing tension between Iraq and the United States. Saddam Hussein happens to be inimical to both Tehran and Washington. An opportunity for cooperation then exists for both sides to exploit.

With these and other understandings in mind, I proposed that Dr. Zarif and a small number of AIC Board of Directors meet. That meeting took place in September 2002 at the Ambassador's residence. Present were Ambassador Thomas Pickering, Ambassador Frank Wisner, Ambassador Nick Platt, Ambassador Bill Miller, Ambassador Richard Murphy, Mr. Hassan Nemazee, and Professor Hooshang Amirahmadi. The discussion focused on US-Iran relations. Dr. Zarif made most of the talking. He described the various tendencies among the Iranian religious elite vis a vis the United States.

There are those who dogmatically oppose any relations with the United States; the Leader, who is not ideological about relations with the US, strongly believes that the relations will not serve Iran's best interest; and those who wish to interact with the US but have serious concerns. These include imbalance in power between the two governments. Iran's power centered on its rhetoric but that has been largely withdrawn in recent years. In sharp contrast, the US has all the leverage of power in its side and yet has advanced more rhetoric in recent years, the last of which was the "axis of evil." Adding this to the bad intention of the US toward the regime in Tehran, you get the distrust that is so deep and thick in US-Iran relations.

Aside from the problem with rhetoric, Washington often responds negatively to Iran's gestures of goodwill. The Afghan case is a recent example. Iran helped the US and was expecting rewards, but instead Tehran became evil. He gave several other examples of

Iran's goodwill gestures, including the signals Tehran has been sending regarding a possible US-Iran cooperation on ousting Saddam Hussein (e.g., sending Ayatollah Hakim's son to Washington with Iranian diplomatic passport). This lack of positive response, Dr. Zarif think, is due to strong anti-Iran lobby organizations in the United States. He concluded by saying that he is ready to take steps that can be sustained toward an eventual dialogue.

Ambassador Murphy reminded Dr. Zarif that while Israeli lobbies are powerful, part of the complain about Iran comes directly from Israel and by the leadership in Tel Aviv. Ambassador Miller reminded Ambassador Zarif that Iran has not been speaking in one authoritative voice and has not taken on a few major congressional initiatives including one offered by Senator Joe Biden at AIC's March 2002 conference. Dr. Zarif reported that he has just met a Senator from Arkansas and that he intends to meet more Congressmen and Senators in the coming months. Mr. Nemazee cautioned that if Iran was to remain oblivious to the dangerous situation that exists, Iran could in the future become another Iraq. Then all doors will be closed. Dr. Zarif responded that he was also concerned about such an eventuality and said that Iran does not intend to provide any pretext to the US for that to happen. Supporting Hassan's position, I commented that such an eventually, that is the Iraqization of Iran, is the next natural step in the evolution of US-Iran relations unless Washington and Tehran take serious steps soon toward mending relations.

Ambassadors Pickering, Wisner and Platt all asked questions and made comments. Mr. Wisner was more interested in substantive talks between the two governments and did not think that formalities mattered much. This he said requires that Iran and the US accept to negotiate on substantive issues of concern, issues that both sides see central to their immediate national interests. Ambassador Pickering asked if Iran was indeed ready to normalize relations with the US. Dr. Zarif responded by saying that no decision has been made to normalize relations with the US but added emphatically that Iran has not also made a decision not to have normal relations with the US, implying diplomatically, that normalization was an option and that Iran is not against it. Tom reported that before he comes to the meeting, he spoke to the State Department and was told that the Bush administration is prepared to normalize and discuss ways of arriving at such an eventuality.

Tom then put the main proposal of the night on the table. For the US and Iran to work and normalize relations, three things need to happen: one, they must accept and decide to normalize relations (political will); two, they must find the right approach to come together; and three, they must focus on substantive issues requiring immediate attention. Political will, a road map, and a prioritized list of key issues. These are the key requirements. Dr. Zarif did not object to this strategy but said that for the first to happen in Iran's side, the US must show some degree of good intention. I suggested that the US publicly state that it wishes to normalize relations with Iran, to which Iran needs to publicly and positively respond. These announcements can be coordinated to take place simultaneously at an AIC forum. With those positions in the open, then the two sides can negotiate for establishing diplomatic ties and resolving disputes between them.

More discussions followed but no new ideas were advanced and the meeting was adjourned with a positive and productive tone on Dr. Zarif's part: "with your assistance, we hope to make advances and I am ready to work with you on that." We decided to continue the discussion while Iran and the US will use their other channels (including the Swiss Embassy in Tehran) to communicate and send messages back and forth.

Meeting with FM Dr. Kamal Kharrazi, September 2002

This dinner meeting, organized by AIC, was held in the same residence and among the participants five were from the previous meeting with Dr. Zarif: Ambassadors Pickering, Platt, Wisner, Miller and I. Two US senators had their people sitting at the table as well (Senators Biden and Senator Hagel). I was the only non-official Iranian-American present. Ten guests were invited to have dinner with the Minister. Dr. Kharrazi conducted much of the discussion, and he focused on many negative experiences with the US, focusing on several Iranian gestures and American negative responses. The discussions and questions that were put to the FM were similar to ones that came out in the previous meeting.

Initially, he seemed to suggest that there was no hope! It was toward the end of the meeting that all changed. After hearing such negative views, I asked if the Minister had anything positive to say, and asked a pointed question: "Dr. Kharrazi, please tell us in clearest possible language if Iran wishes to normalize relations with the US." He stayed quiet for a while and then responded: "Yes! We are ready to normalize relations" with the US and prepared to discuss problems that exist between us, but for that to happen we must be able to trust the US and this requires some initial positive gestures in the part of Washington, particularly a change in tone.

The FM had dropped a bombshell, the audience thought! Never before Iran had said so explicitly that it wanted to normalize RELATIONS with the US. Iran had always insisted that they were for the normalization of the CONDITIONS for a dialogue. The group changed mood and left happy that night. I stayed behind to discuss the matter further with the Minister and Ambassador Zarif. During our long discussion that night through the early morning, we begin to formulate a proposal. It will call for an AIC conference at which the two sides will read a coordinated statement. That statement will unequivocally express the wishes of the two governments to normalize relations and on that basis would be ready to negotiate for establishing diplomatic ties and resolution of their disputes. Others will also speak at the conference, which will focus on "reframing regional security" including a panel on Iraq. I insisted that the FM agrees to the proposal. He was initially non-committal but said I shall work on that with Dr. Zarif, which we did in a subsequent meeting. The next few days after the proposal was better prepared, I shared the idea with Ambassador Pickering. He made corrective suggestions and his comments were also included in the final idea. Later that week I took the proposal to NSC and Tom to his contact in the State Department.

Meeting in NSC and Discussions with Directors, September and October 2002

I meet Dr. Zalmeh Khalilzad, Special Assistant to the President Bush, in his office in NSC. Present was Hillary Mann, NSC Director for Iran and Iraq. We spent about two hours to discuss the meetings with Drs. Zarif and Kharrazi, the proposal I had developed, and the many aspects of US-Iran relations, including political reform and human rights in Iran. Again, the proposal will call for a conference organized by AIC at which officials from the US and Iran will read a statement previously coordinated between them. The statements should convey the message that the two nations are prepared to normalize relations, and are ready to negotiate toward establishing diplomatic ties and resolution of disputes. Zal asked if the Supreme Leader had approved this. I replied no and emphasized that this was AIC proposal, prepared with the consent of Dr. Zarif and his direct boss. But I also emphatically stated that, knowing Dr. Kharrazi, I do not believe he would have made any new gesture of such magnitude without the knowledge and consent of the Leader. I was referring to the statement by the FM in September meeting in which he said Tehran was ready to normalize relations if conditions permitted.

At the conclusion of that meeting, Dr. Khalilzad told me that “in principle, there is no problem with the proposal,” but he must consult with his superiors before a definitive answer is given. He asked for a few days. I asked him to also speak to Ambassador Pickering, which he subsequently did. Per Tom’s report to me, he was positively inclined toward our proposal. At the conclusion of my meeting with Zal and Hillary, I begged them to make sure that no compromises is made with Iran over political reform and human rights. I explicitly made them know that these two issues were central to AIC’s concern in any negotiations between the two governments. After several phone conversations between me and Zalmy, he then offered to meet D. Zarif. That proposal is now on the table for Tehran to take. Dr. Zarif’s immediate reaction to that proposal was that it was not new and that the US does not seem to be prepared for a fresh new approach. I must emphasize that NSC has not rejected our proposal and that in two weeks we might hear from Zal with some better news! Meanwhile we hope that the meeting between Drs. Zarif and Khalilzad will take place and soon [Note: The two later met – see the Grand Bargain Chronology).

Discussions with the State Department, September and October 2002

The proposal was also shared with the State Department. Tom took the main responsibility for that track. We frequently met and spoke by telephone to coordinate various messages. In the process the State Department proposed that the US and Iran cooperate on Iraq but that US-Iran issues be also included. In another productive meeting between Dr. Zarif and me, he accepted the proposal but cautioned that his approval is conditioned on official acceptance by Tehran, and that its implementation will depend on official acceptance of the idea by the US as well. No specific public statement will be made on the nature of the cooperation over Iraq, which shall remain low profile due to sensitivities involved. We expect to hold a conference where the two sides will come and talk about Iraq in the larger context of regional security. The parties will share lectures 48

hours in advance and they hope to have their official statements “proportionally positive.”

While this is not the same as our previous proposal, it is fairly close to it and as a first step will open the road for subsequent discussions for normalization. To facilitate the dialogue on Iraq, I have prepared a statement including two lists of “things” that the two sides might consider doing for each other as the US goes to war with Iraq. The statement is sent to Tom for review and change from an American perspective. After we have finalized the statement in our side, we will forward it to the two sides as a possible basis for discussion and hopefully cooperation. Let us hope that this will be the case! It is important to emphasize at the end that the list of “things” we propose is ours, and that it does not reflect positions on either side.

Memo to Myself

Confidential

June 2004

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(Note: this memo was prepared on the basis of my notes throughout the 2001-2004 when a group of us at AIC were heavily involved in establishing dialogue and improving relations between the US and Iran. Certain items were included in the memo most recently after extensive discussions with a high-ranking Iranian official).

The Chronology of the Grand Bargain Initiative (2001-2004)

1. **October or November 2001:** The US proposes to Iran that they should directly negotiate over Iraq within the Committee set out for Afghanistan. The proposal was received through the Swiss Embassy or during the negotiations over Afghanistan within the Afghan Committee (this American proposal was followed by the Axis of Evil speech in January 2002).
2. **February 2002:** Iran makes a counterproposal for direct negotiations over Iraq within the framework of 5+6 (five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council plus Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, and Syria). The proposal was sent to the State Department via the UN Secretary-General, Mr. Kofi Anan. The US rejected the idea because they did not want to involve Russia and China in the negotiations. **Thomas Pickering** and **Brent Scowcroft** had tried to convince Ambassador **Javad Zarif** to prepare Iran for the American proposal.
3. **March 2002:** AIC organized a major event in Washington that brought Senators **Joe Biden**, **Chuck Hagel**, **Robert Torricelli**, and **Zalmay Khalilzad**. Senator Biden made the proposal that a congressional delegation go to Tehran and meet its counterpart in Tehran.
4. **September 2002:** A select number of AIC Boards meet Ambassador Zarif at his residence (including, **Tom Pickering**, **Frank Wisner**, **Hooshang Amirahmadi**, and **Richard Murphy**). Zarif had just arrived from Tehran as Iran's new Ambassador. Significantly, Ambassador Pickering reported that before he comes to the meeting he spoke to the State Department and was told that the US is **prepared to normalize relations with Iran**. It was agreed that AIC organizes a conference where the two sides will come and simultaneously announce their intention to normalize relations (see Memo to Myself).
5. **September 2002:** A select group of AIC Board members meet Iran's Foreign Minister, **Dr. Kamal Kharrazi**, at the residence of Dr. Zarif. It was at this meeting that Iran,

through its Foreign Minister, for the first time, expressed that it wants to **normalize relations** with the US. Till then, Iran had only spoken about normalization of the **conditions** for negotiations. The expression was like a bomb drop for all of us. **Ambassador Pickering delivered that message to the State Department.**

6. **October 2002:** We developed a proposal for US-Iran Cooperation over Iraq. I then met **Zalmy Khalilzad** in his NSC office in the White House to convey the normalization desire of Iran, our plan to hold a conference for simultaneous expression of intentions to normalize (see Memo to Myself), and the proposal for cooperation on Iraq (see Proposal on US-Iran Cooperation on Iraq).
7. **September-November 2002:** I met **Ryan Crocker** and others in State Department. Exchanged views and information about what might be done to engage the two sides. Pickering was the main contact with the Department. His main contact was **Ambassador Bill Burns**, the third ranking official at the Department. He was to convince Mr. Burns to participate in our proposed event, along with Dr. Zarif, for the simultaneous expression of the two countries' desire to normalize.
8. **January 2003:** **Ambassador Zarif** meets **Ambassador Ryan Crocker** (of the State Department) in Paris. They discuss ways that the two governments could cooperate over Iraq. AIC had already prepared a proposal for US-Iran cooperation on Iraq (see Proposal on US-Iran Cooperation on Iraq). Meanwhile, the US was preparing for the war against **Saddam Hussein**.
9. **March 2003, April:** **Ambassador Zarif** meets **Zalmy Khalilzad** (a director of the National Security Council) and **Ryan Crocker** in Geneva. They discuss cooperation on Iraq. The US is now very close to invading Iraq. Dr. Zarif had tried to explain to **Ambassador Khalilzad** what could happen after the US invades Iraq (warned him of the post-Saddam problems).
10. **March 20, 2003:** The US officially invade Iraq. **Saddam Hussein** is overthrown.
11. **May 1, 2003:** Per Zarif, Iran's FM receives a "proposal from the State Department. Zarif is in Tehran and uses the opportunity to modify the Iran side of the proposal. (**Wilkerson** – Colin Powell's Chief of Staff -- is said to have noted that the said proposal was very similar to one being circulated in the State Department at the time, and Undersecretary **Richard Armitage** is quoted as saying he had seen the proposal but thought it reflected the wishes of the Swiss Ambassador more than the positions of Iran or the US -- per **Maziar Bahari** and **Seymour Hirsch** in Newsweek.
12. **May 3, 2003:** **Ambassador Zarif** meets **Ambassador Zalmy Khalilzad** and **Ambassador Ryan Crocker** in Geneva. The US delegation is headed by Dr. Khalilzad. The US has already invaded Iraq and is in control of its Government. The situation begins to deteriorate in Iraq along the line predicted by Zarif. During this meeting, Khalilzad tells Zarif that the US has learned that a terrorist bombing incident is planned to happen in the Persian Gulf area. He asks that Iranian Government utilize members of Al-Qaeda in

Iranian prisons for information on the planned incident. The incident happened on May 12 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

13. **May 4, 2003:** The Grand Bargain proposal is faxed to the US Government. **On May 4,** Tim Guldemann, the Swiss Ambassador in Tehran, authenticates the proposal.
14. **May 12, 2003:** Immediately after the bombing in Saudi Arabia, the US accused Iran of complicity with the terrorists (unfortunately, Iran had not taken the US information seriously and had not followed the request that it uses imprisoned Al-Qaeda operatives to get information for the US).
15. **May 24, 2003:** The planned meeting between Zarif and Khalilzad did not take place. Zarif went to Geneva for the meeting but Khalilzad did not show up. In Zarif's view, the neocons have orchestrated the accusation against Iran so that they could derail Zarif-Khalilzad negotiations. They succeeded. After the Zarif-Khalilzad meetings ended, the accusations also stopped! (Note, as per Zarif, while he was meeting Khalilzad, neo-cons were sending him message asking that he should talk to them (he named Richard Pearl in particular – who was at the time Chairman of the Defense Policy Board in the Pentagon).



MUSCAT 00000383 001.3 OF 002

CLASSIFIED BY: Gary A. Grappo, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

Summary

1. (C)Sultan Qaboos' Special Envoy to Iran and Advisor for Cultural Affairs, Abdul `Aziz al Rowas, told the Ambassador April 25 that Iran is ready to begin a quiet dialog "at a lower level" with the U.S. Al Rowas advised the U.S. that as we advance in our efforts to engage with Iran, we remember that "they live in a house with lots of glass windows" and that such vulnerabilities provide opportunities for the U.S. to exploit. He also noted key areas in which the Iranians would be eager to cooperate with us, e.g., eliminating the Taliban in Afghanistan, restoring stability in Pakistan, ensuring a moderate and non-threatening India, and interdiction of narcotics trafficking. But, he warned that we should expect to encounter resistance from other Gulf States, whose fears of Iran actually reflect their concerns for their own persecuted domestic Shi'a populations. Al Rowas also shared his insights on the upcoming presidential elections in Iran.

2. (C)The former minister claimed that progress in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would bolster our efforts to contain Iranian interference in Lebanon, Syria and the Palestinian Territories. He also commended President Obama for "walking the talk" on both Iran as well as Middle East peace. End Summary.

Iran Is Ready

3. (C)The former Information Minister said that despite his earlier advice (reftel), the U.S. should look for a way to initiate direct dialog with the Iranians now. "They are ready and want to start, and you should not wait." He said Tehran would want to keep talks at a "lower level" for now and avoid public attention. As to what had changed his mind, Al Rowas said he thinks the Iranians probably are encouraged by what they have been hearing from the U.S. and may feel the U.S. administration "can be trusted" to begin a sincere dialog.

On Negotiating with Iran: "A House with Lots of Glass Windows"

4. (C)Al Rowas advised carefully assessing Iran, its historic interests in the region and, most of all, its vulnerabilities. For centuries, he said, Iran's focus had been toward Central and South Asia, and not the Gulf. "The best thing you can do is get them to turn their back on the Gulf again," i.e., provide assurances that they are not threatened in the Gulf and Indian Ocean. He also repeated a warning he reportedly made when he met with Iranian officials last December that "you (Iran) live in a house with lots of glass windows." Iran faces many serious challenges at present, e.g., an ailing economy, diverse and quarrelsome ethnic and religious minorities, a population largely in favor of greater interaction with



the West, instability along its borders, and growing environmental problems. The U.S. can have an impact "in all of these" and should come to the table prepared to use Iran's exposure in these areas to its advantage.

5. (C)Two areas are especially important to Iran at present: the U.S. freeze on Iranian assets and the gas pipeline from Turkmenistan. These are of immense interest to the Iranians, he said, and would be useful bargaining tools for the U.S. He also identified Iran's growing dependence on gasoline imports -- "now more than 60%" -- and its limited supply of water, most of which is sourced in Central Asia. "You have many more bargaining tools with them than they have against you; use all of them," he strongly advised. He noted that Iran had exploited U.S. vulnerabilities in Lebanon and increasingly among the Palestinians, but "your tools impact directly Iran's interests."

And Shared Interests, Too

6. (C)The U.S. and Iran share interests, too, and the Iranians understand that the U.S. can help them. For example, Iran adamantly opposes the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan and can be "your most effective ally" in fighting the Taliban. They are ready to cooperate immediately, he said. Similarly, on stability in Pakistan and elsewhere in Central Asia, narcotics interdiction, and regional environmental challenges, Iran shares interests with the U.S. Iran also fears India's growing power and influence in the region; closer ties with the U.S. would allay some of those concerns. "They don't like to admit these things, but they need you in the region."

Arabs Must Reevaluate Policies toward Domestic Shi'a

7. (C)Al Rowas admitted that Oman sees dealing with Iran differently than most of its Gulf Arab neighbors. Their concerns about Iran actually reflect insecurities about their respective domestic Shi'a populations, whom they have effectively excluded from public life.

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He cited Shi'a in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia as facing especially recalcitrant governments unwilling to include them or even give them proper recognition. Better treatment of their Shi'a populations by these governments would eliminate any perceived exposure to Iran, he argued. Echoing recent comments made by Sultan Qaboos, Al Rowas said Arab governments must stop using religion as an issue between them and Iran. "It's a no-win approach; let's judge them by their actions and leave religion out of it." He commended the U.S. for omitting religion from its other many criticisms of Tehran and urged us to continue. "Religion is non-negotiable for them; everything else is open for discussion."

Ahmadinejad Still Favored to Win

8. (C)Al Rowas said he met and spoke at length with former Iranian



President Khatami at the recent Istanbul conference. The former president admitted that he really had had no intention of actually running for president again but had felt the need to "keep the field balanced" via a vis the conservatives until a stronger moderate candidate could come forth. Mir Hossein Mousavi is a credible moderate and "should do well." However, he said, at this juncture, because he is largely unknown among Iran's large youth population, Mousavi faces an uphill struggle. Also, the candidacy of former parliamentary speaker Mehdi Karroubi could spoil his support among moderates. On the conservative side, the rumored candidacy of former IRGC chief Mohsen Rezai is unlikely to harm Ahmadinejad, who still enjoys considerable support among the IRGC and even the bazaaris.

9. (C)On the other hand, he advised watching the charitable organizations and their religious patrons, whose influence in Iran and among the electorate rivals that of the IRGC. He noted that the presence of two candidates on either side is probably what the Supreme Leader prefers in order to ensure no single candidate acquires "too much" support. He also commented that Khamanei appears to be working to shore up his support among the IRGC and Qom-based charitable organization heads. For now, said Al Rowas, Ahmadinejad continues to enjoy the Supreme Leader's support and remains the candidate to beat.

Addressing Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Strengthens Iran Dialog

10. (C)Al Rowas urged the U.S. to step up its pressure on the Israelis to get them to take steps to improve conditions for Palestinians. In particular, he said, securing Israeli reassurances on the two-state solution, halting Israeli settlement activity and creating greater economic opportunities should be out top priorities. He emphasized that progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front would strengthen our hand in discussions with the Iranians, who heretofore had succeeded in exploiting our failures and capitalizing on Palestinian and greater Arab frustration with our efforts. This had been an "American vulnerability," he said, which the U.S. can now address and thereby significantly improve its bargaining status with Tehran.

President Obama "Walking the Talk"

11. (C)Al Rowas said the President has shown that he can "walk the talk" of his campaign promises on Iran and the Middle East. Arabs are optimistic, although the President faces enormous challenges. But the President's actions to date have been encouraging and raised the image of the U.S. in the region.

Comment

12. (C)Al Rowas has been among the most skeptical of Omani senior officials regarding U.S. dialog with Iran. Other than his conversation with Khatami in Istanbul, itbs unclear what may have changed his mind. Oman is very keen to see lowered tensions in the region over Iran and senior MFA officials have always argued for direct dialog between Washington and Tehran. From the Omani

perspective, getting the U.S. to open a dialog now, as opposed to after the Iranian presidential elections, seems to be the quickest way for them to achieve what they want.

GRAPPO

