

Analysis of the Role of Think Tanks in the United States Strategy Against the Islamic Republic of Iran: A Case Study of the Trump Administration

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Abstract

Think tanks can be considered a bridge between knowledge and policy, enabling policymakers to predict the consequences and impacts of their decisions through scientific and research-based studies. These think tanks have experienced significant growth in the United States, a country that claims to lead the international system in the current era. Given that this political actor requires various strategies on a wide range of global issues, especially regarding the Islamic Republic of Iran, the critical and influential role of active thinkers in this domain appears to be highly prominent. Therefore, the question this article seeks to answer is: "How have institutions or think tanks in U.S. foreign policy influenced the Trump administration's approach toward the Islamic Republic of Iran?" The research findings indicate that U.S. think tanks and strategists have provided multiple and diverse strategies using the U.S. diplomatic system to alter the behavior and nature of the political system of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Keywords: Strategy, Think Tanks, United States of America, Decision-Making Institutions, Islamic Republic of Iran.

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Introduction

In a context where the international system and relations between states are faced with significant complexities, think tanks and research institutes in the United States, which claims leadership of the international system in the contemporary era, have experienced substantial growth. Given that the U.S. requires a variety of strategies on a range of global issues, especially in foreign policy, the critical and influential role of active thinkers in this domain appears to be highly prominent (Soleimani , 2016: 54)

For instance, one of the main concerns and complexities of U.S. foreign policy over the past decade has been the strategy employed by the country in dealing with the Islamic Republic of Iran and its consequences. This is because the leaders and founders of the Iranian Revolution, after the victory of the Islamic Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, viewed the revolution as an opportunity to globalize the ideals of their Islamic revolutionary culture. In fact, from its inception, the Islamic Republic of Iran has rejected the existing international order and positioned itself as an anti-hegemonic power. Taleihur mphasizes that the the relations and interactions between the U.S. and the Islamic Republic of Iran after the Islamic Revolution (unlike during the Pahlavi regime) entered a new era of mutual conflicts and challenges, which continue to this day.

From this perspective, the relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States faced a form of confrontation, with the Islamic Republic adopting a "revisionist" strategy in response to the U.S. strategy aimed at "stabilizing the status quo." The United States, through various political, economic, and military levers, has attempted to prevent the export of the Islamic Revolution, a strategy aimed at altering regional and global political dynamics by exerting pressure on the Islamic Republic of Iran.

This process has highlighted the necessity of the active and powerful presence of strategists and think tanks in this domain. What is particularly significant in this context is the containment of the Islamic Republic of Iran with the goal of altering its political system or changing its political nature, which requires the implementation of a robust diplomacy and diverse strategies across various fields. This issue paves the way for the strong involvement of decision-making institutions and think tanks in designing targeted strategies for the U.S. diplomatic apparatus. In this process, and within the framework of designing the U.S. approach to the

Islamic Republic of Iran—particularly concerning the nuclear dossier—U.S. think tanks and strategists propose a variety of strategies for the utilization of the U.S. diplomatic system in dealing with Iran.

The behavior of the United States and its diplomatic apparatus over more than four decades indicates that two strategies, under the titles of "Strategy of Changing the Behavior of the Islamic Republic of Iran" and "Strategy of Changing the Revolutionary System of Iran," have consistently been proposed by U.S. think tanks as the intellectual foundation for the country's political and military elites in political and intellectual circles.

The question of which of these strategies, in practice, emerged as the dominant one in the early years of the fifth decade, with the coming to power of the Trump administration, and was recommended by U.S. think tanks to the ruling authorities in America¹ in dealing with the Iran issue, is a concern that this article seeks to address.

This research is significant because, given the election of Donald Trump in the 2024 U.S. elections, an accurate understanding of his administration's potential strategy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran will help prevent strategic, informational-operational, and security-related surprises. Furthermore, this study, while drawing on existing scholarly works, aims to address the current gap in these works—namely, the influence of think tanks and institutions closely aligned with the Republicans on U.S. foreign policy, particularly during the previous administration under Trump.

Theoretical Foundations and Background of the Study

1. Literature Review

In the context of U.S. strategy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran, several key works written in recent years can be highlighted:

Khodavardi and Ghafari Cherati, in their study titled "Analysis of Trump's Behavior Toward Iran from the Perspective of Layered Causal Analysis" (1399), state that the confrontation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States in political, military, economic, and cultural matters began after the victory of the Islamic Revolution and escalated with the rise of Donald Trump to power, entering a new phase. Trump, with a "principled realism" approach and by utilizing the "madman

¹. Administration

theory" of Nixon, sought to weaken Iran in various economic and political domains at regional and international levels. Therefore, analyzing his behavior and approaches toward Iran can provide a clear outlook for Iranian policymakers to advance national goals and develop counter-strategies against Trump's anti-Iranian policies. From this perspective, the above article, using a foresight analysis method based on layered causal analysis, explores and analyzes Trump's behavior toward the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Akhavan et al., in a joint article titled "Trump's Foreign Policy Strategy Regarding the Iranian Nuclear Dossier" (2018), attempted to evaluate Trump's strategic approach toward the Iranian nuclear issue within a logical and scientific framework. The research findings indicate that Trump's approach to the nuclear dossier was based on a hybrid model of quasi-isolationism and realism, with an emphasis on the doctrine of withdrawal.

Ahouei, in an article titled "An Analysis of U.S. Strategy in Middle East Alliances and Possible Options Toward Iran" (2017), examines the strategy of the United States in dealing with Iran. This study, using content analysis, investigates some recently published documents by American think tanks. The research findings indicate that the new administration in Washington will adopt a combination of "selective engagement" and "distant balancing" strategies toward Iran. The desired goal of the U.S. in this model is to create a draining power balance

among the Islamic Republic of Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, while simultaneously increasing costs for other rival powers, especially China. Thus, in the new era, these objectives will be pursued through a paradoxical blend of maintaining military presence and a threatening appearance, alongside a reduction in direct U.S. operational involvement in the Middle East.

Yazdanfam, in an article titled "Trump's Policy Toward Iran: Goals and Mechanisms" (2017), examines the goals and strategy of the United States toward the Islamic Republic of Iran. The study shows that the Trump administration pursued its objectives through strategies such as dismantling Obama's legacy, achieving a cost-effective exit from the JCPOA, preventing foreign investment in Iran, weakening the regional position of the Islamic Republic, supporting regional allies, and obtaining the wealth of the Gulf's monarchies. These goals were pursued through mechanisms such as portraying Iran as a villain, securitizing Iran,

applying broad and continuous pressure on the Islamic Republic, implementing numerous non-nuclear sanctions, and others.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations of the Research

Given the importance of the research, this section of the article aims to provide a deeper understanding of the topic under investigation by outlining the key concepts and theoretical framework.

2-1. Strategy

Strategy is a plan to counter any possible move by other actors at any stage of the game. This interpretation of strategy is discussed within game theory (McLean, 2002: 787). Strategy is one of the most decisive and guiding topics in military warfare.

seek to utilize strategy in managing foreign policy and military forces in order to expand their power and authority.

2-2. Overthrow or Regime change

Regime change refers to the alteration of a country's political system or the fundamental transformation of its core values. This change can occur through violent actions such as coups, assassinations, or the imposition of war, or it can take place through peaceful means by executing a calculated, long-term plan to infiltrate the political structures of a regime (Beilenson, 2002: 7).

In this type of regime change, efforts are made to infiltrate and influence the values of a nation's people, as these values are fundamental components of the culture that shapes that nation. The result of both actions ultimately leads to a change in the system and, in the end, overthrow.

2-3. Change of Political System Behavior

"Change of behavior" is defined as a process in which a country alters its political discourse and actions due to either coercion or persuasion. The goal of this type of strategy is for the targeted country to abandon its national objectives.

This approach is part of the United States' strategy in dealing with the Islamic Revolution of Iran. Given the nature of the Iranian Revolution, it signifies an attempt to change the direction on which the Iranian Revolution was founded (Seraj & Akhavan, 2013: 12).

2-4. Think Tanks

Think tanks are centers that focus on studying and researching policy-making issues. Additionally, think tanks refer to institutions that aim together and organize prominent researchers with the capacity to engage in deep and extensive research in order to offer solutions to decision-makers (Ardwai, 2013: 2). Therefore, think tanks are a global concept that seeks to bridge the gap between the people and the government, acting as a key and essential element in policy-making across all countries.

Research institutions, as think tanks, influence decision-makers by examining critical political issues and providing data. These institutions, through their studies and analyses, play a crucial role in shaping the decision-making process in a country's foreign policy.

Influence networks are another factor that, alongside think tanks, challenge the priorities of U.S. foreign policy. These influential networks, by entering think tanks, legal institutions, political entities, and penetrating the intellectual circles of decision-makers, seek to manipulate the strategic priorities and foreign policy of the country (Koushkar, 2021: 68). Some of these think tanks, such as the ones listed below, specifically focus on foreign policy:

1. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)
2. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
3. Brookings Institution
4. Council on Foreign Relations
5. Chatham House
6. International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)
7. International Crisis Group
8. French Institute of International Relations (IFRI)

Some think tanks have considerable resources at their disposal. The "RAND Corporation," for instance, has an annual budget of over 200 million dollars and employs more than 1,700 staff members. Its analyses on rational deterrence theory had a significant influence on U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War era.

Although think tanks often present themselves as independent and non-political, some of them maintain close ties with political parties. For example, in 1975, experts working at the "Brookings Institution"

wrote a report on how to address the Arab-Israeli conflict (which had stalled during President Gerald Ford's administration). This report had a significant impact on Jimmy Carter and was later adopted by his

administration. The report altered the U.S. approach to the conflict, and some of its authors went on to hold positions within the Carter administration (Jensehaugen, 2014).

In the United States, as the birthplace of modern think tanks, these institutions function as gateways to the government. Many experts from these think tanks enter the executive branch as executives, along with former managers who possess executive experience. These managers have navigated through real-world problems and have a deep understanding of bureaucratic issues and institutional challenges. Perhaps this is why some think tanks are referred to as the "government in waiting."

President Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s chose his executive and intellectual team from experts at the Heritage Foundation. Meanwhile, both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush¹ sought similar expertise from the Brookings Institution and American Enterprise Institute, respectively.

Following this tradition, Barack Obama entrusted the selection of his executive team to the president of the Center for American Progress (James McGann, 2007: 7).

According to many analysts, the most powerful and influential foreign actor affecting the White House and the Trump administration is the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. This institution is viewed by its critics as one of the most effective proponents of neoconservative ideas. Overall, think tanks have played a significant role in shaping the foreign policy of the United States from the past to the present.

Research Methodology

The present study employs library-based research and an analytical-descriptive method. Primary data collection is conducted from written and online sources, followed by categorization and analysis of qualitative data. Unlike the studies and articles mentioned in the research background section, this study aims to examine institutions and foundations affiliated with the Republican Party, particularly during the Trump administration, which has received less attention so far. In fact, studies examining U.S. foreign policy have generally focused on the role and influence of political actors in the foreign policy decision-making process or analyzed U.S. foreign policy based on systemic variables of the international system. However, this article takes a different approach by examining U.S. foreign

¹. George H. W. Bush/Son

policy during the Trump era from the perspective of think tanks and various research institutes.

Research Findings and Data Analysis

1. Trump Administration and U.S. Policy Against the Islamic Republic of Iran

Trump's unilateral, aggressive, and utilitarian approaches have been identified as key factors influencing the foreign policy management and decision-making process of his administration, particularly in relation to American national values and interests. (Shahmohammadi et al.¹, 2009: 1).

The fundamental stance of the Trump administration in foreign policy was the reconstruction of the foreign relations framework, aiming to secure U.S. interests based on power and pressure to maintain a stronger position (Strategic Annual Report, 2019: 12).

In this context, one of the key objectives of Trump's foreign policy during his campaign was to reinvigorate, intensify, and maximize the confrontation policies against the Islamic Republic of Iran (Khan & Zaman², 2018: 65)

Sanctions and military threats were the primary tools of the maximum pressure approach, which have consistently been on the table for decision-makers, both Republican and Democratic (Abbasi Khoshkar, 2021: 70).

Trump strongly criticized Obama during his election campaign for engaging in trade with the Islamic Republic of Iran on the nuclear issue, which led to the formation of the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) and the nuclear deal between Iran and the West Khan & Zaman, 2018: 66). In this context, he stated:

"The Iran deal was one of the worst and most one-sided deals the United States has ever had. The Iranian regime has committed numerous violations of the agreement... Iran does not comply with the spirit of the deal. Using linguistic manipulation of words and phrases, he sought to convey the underlying ideas and ideologies of his government, which was opposed to this deal, and create the conditions to either withdraw from or change the agreement. His entire speech was focused on the idea that, due

¹. Shahmohammadi, Yosef & et.al.

². Khan, Arif & Zaman, Nargis

to Iran's actions and its pursuit of nuclear weapons, the deal was wrong" (Adarang & Faraji, 2021: 38).

Therefore, his administration undertook an unprecedented offensive by using a range of tools, such as the Congressional Review Act and the final suspension of regulations, to neutralize the oversight legacy of the Obama administration. This highlighted the Trump administration's disregard for the rule of law and its deviation from administrative regulations Davis & Reeves¹, 2022: 1100).

In this way, the Trump administration criticized the shortcomings of the JCPOA and, by reverting to previous policies aimed at strategically weakening the Islamic Republic of Iran, suspended its commitments under the JCPOA on May 8, 2018, and reimposed all U.S. sanctions. The declared goal of the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" policy on Iran was to force the Islamic Republic to change its behavior, including negotiating a new nuclear agreement (Kenneth Katzman, 2021).

The Trump administration's policy of "maximum pressure" on the Islamic Republic of Iran in late 2018 took two main forms:

- a. Additional sanctions,
- b. Limited military action (Clayton Thomas , 2023: 3).

From this perspective, Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA and the pursuit of a maximum pressure strategy through the initiation of a hybrid war with the Islamic Republic of Iran was an objective aimed at intensifying political and economic pressures on Iran (Abbasi Khoshkar, 2021: 70). In this context, Trump's desired negotiations aimed to change Iran's behavior simultaneously in three areas: nuclear, missile, and regional influence. Katzman concluded that Trump began confronting Iran by withdrawing from the nuclear deal and imposing economic sanctions (Katzman, 2019).

Trump administration officials repeatedly stated that the U.S. policy was to change Iran's behavior and prevent the country from acquiring nuclear weapons, not regime change. However, statements from Trump officials, particularly a speech by Mike Pompeo, the U.S. Secretary of State, on July 22, 2018, suggested support for the political regime change in Iran (Katzman, 2021: 19).

¹. Davis, Noll; bethany, A.; and Revesz, Richard L

Additionally, the appointment of John Bolton as National Security Advisor led commentators to claim that one of the strongest proponents of the U.S. regime change policy, especially concerning Iran, was at the helm. During his presidency, several mysterious and successive military confrontations occurred between Iran and the United States and its allies (Mirza & Nayab¹, 2021: 311).

It is believed that Trump followed a policy of confrontation aimed at containing and isolating Iran (through the legitimacy of disarmament), as he believed that Iran supports terrorism and is developing a ballistic missile system (Katzman, 2021: 19).

Overall, the foreign policy of the Trump administration towards the Islamic Republic of Iran is rooted in three key pillars:

- ❖ First Pillar: "Delegitimization" focusing on alleged support for terrorism and the development of a ballistic missile system.
- ❖ Second Pillar: "Sanctions" manifesting in the imposition of further economic sanctions on Iran.
- ❖ Third Pillar: "Containment" of Iran, promoting policies aligned with the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Israel (Alcaro², 2018: 9-6).

Thus, the shift in U.S. foreign policy towards the Islamic Republic of Iran became evident with Trump's rise to power, the withdrawal from the nuclear deal, the imposition of sanctions on Iran, and the support for the coalition of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel to limit Iran's role in the region.

2. The Role of Think Tanks in Shaping U.S. Foreign Policy Strategy During the Trump Administration

Given the significance of the Islamic Republic of Iran in U.S. foreign policy, think tanks with varying political leanings attempt to provide theoretical frameworks and strategies for addressing or engaging with Iran. The strategies of American decision-making institutions aim to gradually diminish

Iran's strategic capabilities, seeking to induce voluntary nuclear retreat under the pressures of the U.S. and its allies. Ultimately, through

¹. Mirza, Muhammad Nadeem; & Nayab, Ayesha

². Alcaro, R.

intensified pressures and steps toward retreat, they seek to change the structure of the Iranian government (Soleimani, 2016: 55).

2-1. Strategy of Changing the Revolutionary Regime's Behavior in Iran

The strategy of changing the behavior of the revolutionary regime in the Islamic Republic of Iran is an approach that seeks to persuade Iran to cooperate with Western countries through compromise, negotiation, and diplomatic means. Proponents of this approach believe that if the United States intervenes with the aim of overthrowing the political system in Iran, it will ultimately strengthen the regime. Supporters argue that if the U.S. is genuinely interested in establishing relations with Iran, it must come to an agreement with the Iranian government.

The theorists of this approach support the establishment of dialogues between the two governments and believe that negotiations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States align with U.S. interests. They argue that, in the long term, such dialogues will serve U.S. interests, particularly in terms of geopolitics (Karimifard & Labkhandeh, 2016: 70).

2-2. The strategy of regime change in the Islamic Republic of Iran

The strategy of regime change in the Islamic Republic of Iran has a long history in U.S. foreign policy. The coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, orchestrated by the United Kingdom with U.S. support, is a clear example of this policy in action in Iran. This approach became a common and normalized aspect of U.S. policies towards Iran following the 1979 Islamic Revolution (Mousavian¹, 2016).

Proponents of this approach believe that Iran's behavioral patterns in the region, which stem from its ideological beliefs, are far too ingrained to be altered through

political and economic pressure alone. From their perspective, as long as the foundational identity and values in Iran remain unchanged, these behaviors will persist. Therefore, only a change in the political regime within Iran could eliminate this threat (Katzman, 2005: 224).

In this context, with the beginning of the fifth decade of the Islamic Revolution, various think tanks have proposed different strategic options

¹. Mousavian, H.

for guiding foreign policy and formulating national security strategy for the new government. These options sometimes have completely divergent or even contradictory approaches. Determining which of these versions the Trump administration followed requires an examination of the think tanks close to it. For this purpose, and in order to maintain comprehensiveness while being concise, think tanks such as the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, the Heritage Foundation, and the American Enterprise Institute, which have been among the most influential institutions in shaping U.S. policy toward Iran—particularly with respect to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—will be examined.

The reason for selecting these think tanks is that almost all scholars and researchers in this field agree that the most influential external factor affecting the White House and the Trump administration were these three think tanks. In the following, for the sake of comprehensiveness, some of the viewpoints of institutions or think tanks connected to neoconservative circles, which played a significant role in synergizing the proposed strategies of these institutions, will be briefly mentioned. The strategic reports of these think tanks, which are associated with conservative and neoconservative circles in the United States, provide a clearer understanding of the Trump administration's strategy in dealing with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

2-2-1. The Foundation for the Defense of Democracies (FDD)

Giglio has stated, "If you want to know what the Trump administration's next move on Iran will be, you can bet on whether it appears in Dubowitz's latest memo or in the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD)." The FDD is one of the most influential think tanks shaping Trump's strategy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran. Financially backed by Jewish investors with ties to the Likud Party, the institution actively supports a policy of regime change in Iran. Its strategy for achieving this objective revolves around imposing sanctions and encouraging the United States to pursue full-scale military confrontation with Iran.

Mark Dubowitz serves as the executive director of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD). Arguing that previous U.S. administrations' strategy of altering the Islamic Republic of Iran's behavior had failed, he strongly advocated for the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" strategy to comprehensively encircle and isolate Iran on the global stage (Dubowitz, 2018). He advised the Trump administration to adopt Ronald Reagan's approach toward the Soviet Union, which involved economic

warfare, support for anti-Soviet opposition forces, and the erosion of the regime's ideological legitimacy (Dubowitz, 2019).

In a conference titled "Iran's Regional, Nuclear, and Proxy Challenges," held at the Heritage Foundation in 2017, Mark Dubowitz explicitly stated: "President Trump should do exactly what Reagan did when confronting the Communist Soviet Union." During this event, he argued that "the United States must distance itself from the JCPOA and move toward striking at and reducing Iran's regional and global influence."

He further asserted that within the next decade, based on the commitments granted to Iran under the NPT, the country would develop a nuclear program on an industrial scale, utilizing advanced centrifuges,

while its ballistic missile program would receive financial support, ultimately solidifying Iran's regional and global dominance (Heritage¹, 2017: 3).

Marc Gerecht, another researcher at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, published a commentary in *The Atlantic* criticizing the Iran nuclear deal with the United States, arguing that it served as an opportunity for Iran. In this piece, he stated:

"Let's bring down the Iranian regime. The Iranian regime suffers from contradictions similar to those that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union." (Gerecht, 2018: 4).

In the same commentary, he criticized the *détente* policies pursued by both Democrats and moderate Republicans, asserting that "the collapse of the Soviet Union was the result of figures like Reagan and Henry Jackson, not Henry Kissinger and the Carter administration." (Ibid: 4).

Similarly, Michael Ledeen, another prominent researcher at this institute², wrote in a 2015 commentary:

"The likelihood of achieving regime change in Iran through non-violent means is even greater than it was in Gorbachev's Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was a superpower, whereas Iran is not. Moreover, the Soviet regime possessed nuclear weapons, while the Iranian regime does not." (Ledeen, 2015).

¹. The Heritage Foundation, August

². Michael Flynn, Trump's first National Security Advisor, authored a book shortly before the 2016 election. In this book, Ledeen, one of his neoconservative associates, repeatedly argued that the United States should have attacked Iran first, rather than Iraq.

An analysis of the strategic recommendations put forth by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) and their comparison with the Trump administration's approach toward the Islamic Republic of Iran indicate a direct correlation between the two. The alignment is evident in the language and concepts employed by Trump and his cabinet members when addressing Iran. Furthermore, Dubowitz played a significant role in drafting reports issued by the Iran Action Group, led by Brian Hook (Gardiner Harris, 2018).

In the maximum pressure approach, Trump and Pompeo were at the center of advancing this strategy, with the Foundation for Defense of Democracies playing the role of theorist, providing advice to various administrations, especially the Republican ones in the White House, on arms control and economic measures against Iran (Khoshkar, 2021: 69). Therefore, examining the actions of the past U.S. government under Donald Trump and the strategic recommendations made by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies reveals a positive correlation between the foundation's advice and the U.S. government's hostile policies toward Iran. The United States meticulously implemented the foundation's strategy regarding Iran.

2-2-2. The American Enterprise Institute

"Another institution that played a significant role in shaping the national security strategy and foreign policy of Trump with the onset of the fifth decade of the Islamic Revolution is the American Enterprise Institute. Robert Kagan, a prominent member of this institute, wrote in an article in the journal *Commentary* titled 'Can We Pursue a Strategy of Victory Against Iran':

"A strategy of victory, without causing a sudden collapse of the government in Iran, will better meet the security needs of the United States. This is possible. Therefore, isolating Iran from foreign investment and forcing it to focus on controlling its own people will yield significant results, potentially altering the alignment of the Middle East." (Frederick Kagan 2018). In the same memorandum, Kagan advises the United States government to:

1. Create a rift between the Islamic Republic of Iran and its foreign supporters,
2. Cut off Iran's access to foreign resources,

3. Impose defeats on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in key regional areas such as Iraq and Syria, undermining the IRGC's narrative among its domestic supporters,
4. Disrupt Iran's path to obtaining materials used at its nuclear sites,
5. Intensify internal disagreements within the regime regarding Iran's regional policies, and
6. Take advantage of leadership transitions in Iran (Kagan, 2018).

In the same memorandum, Kagan compares Syria to Afghanistan and Iraq to Poland in the context of Iran, as factors that were effective in the collapse of the Soviet Union. He believed that any long-term plan regarding the Islamic Republic of Iran should be based on consensus among America's allies. In this regard, he emphasized the need to prevent Russia and China from supporting Iran, in order to halt the development of Iran's nuclear program and force Iran to engage in a hard war to maintain its position in Iraq and Syria. At the same time, he recommended applying every method to pressure Iran's economy, in order to force Iran to reconsider its foreign strategy and compel it to retreat within its borders (Kagan, 2018).

An analysis of the strategic recommendations from the American Enterprise Institute, particularly those by Robert Kagan regarding the Islamic Republic of Iran, including his recommendations concerning Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the developments in these three countries (such as the protests in Iraq and Lebanon, the U.S. withdrawal from Idlib, Turkey's attack on the Kurds, and the resulting conflicts between Iran and Turkey) reveals the formation of conspiracies against the Islamic Republic of Iran in these countries by the United States. This clearly demonstrates the United States' adherence to the strategic approach proposed by this institute concerning Iran, whose ultimate goal is regime change in Iran.

2-2-3. The Heritage Foundation

The Heritage Foundation, alongside the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, serves as an intellectual arm of American neoconservatives, supported both intellectually and financially by influential capitalists. These think tanks have played a significant role in shaping the anti-Iran agenda of the White House. In recent years, with their influence in the White House, the Pentagon, and Congress, they have been pivotal in actions such as the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA (Iran nuclear deal) and sanctions targeting entities like the IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) and, more recently, the Supreme Leader's office. Analyzing U.S. policies toward

the Islamic Republic of Iran confirms that the predominant approach of the Trump administration, which mainly focused on sanctions and negotiations, has its roots in the strategic recommendations of these two think tanks, the Heritage Foundation and the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

Before the United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA, the Heritage Foundation published a report titled "The Dangerous Regional Consequences of the Iran Nuclear Deal," criticizing Barack Obama's policies toward Iran. It argued that the United States needed a new approach toward Iran: "America must recognize that Iran is a revisionist power, opposed to the status quo, determined to shift the balance of regional power in its favor and reshape the Middle East in line with its control over the Persian Gulf and its neighboring regions. This regime may become more hostile and domineering, especially if it sees no resistance from Washington and its allies. Washington must:" Top of Form Bottom of Form

- Clearly define red lines and emphasize their enforcement;
- Strengthen U.S. military forces and maintain their presence in the region to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and regional aggression;
- Repair relations with its allies and enhance their defense capabilities;
- Strengthen missile defense;
- Impose additional sanctions on Iran for terrorism, ballistic missile tests, and human rights violations;
- In addition to punishing Tehran for its hostile policies, the U.S. and its allies should penalize Iran's allies, particularly Hezbollah, which is Iran's tool in terrorist operations and interventions in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.

The Heritage Foundation has consistently provided many actionable recommendations to Trump regarding how to address the threats posed by Iran against the United States. There are significant similarities between the language of the Heritage Foundation about Iran and the political rhetoric of Donald Trump regarding Iran. In fact, this think tank, with its 38 influential proposals, has been one of the most impactful foundations in shaping Trump's foreign policy (Khoshkar, 2021: 71). In his 2018 speech at the Heritage Foundation, titled "After the Deal: A New Strategy on Iran," Mike Pompeo outlined the United States' strategy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran. The speech included twelve conditions for dealing with the Iranian government:

1. Iran must declare all aspects of its past nuclear activities to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA);
2. Uranium enrichment in Iran must cease, and no further plutonium processing should take place;
3. The IAEA must have the right to access all of Iran's military and non-military facilities;
4. Iran must shut down its ballistic missile production lines and prevent the production of missiles capable of carrying nuclear weapons;
5. All American citizens detained and imprisoned in Iran must be released;
6. Iran must cease its support for resistance groups in the Middle East, such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad;
7. Iran must support Iraq's sovereignty and refrain from the dissolution and disarmament of Shiite militia groups;
8. Iran must end its support for the Houthis in Yemen and support a peaceful strategy to end the conflict in the country;
9. Iran must withdraw all forces under its command from Syria;
10. Iran must cease supporting the Taliban and stop providing shelter to al-Qaeda leaders in Iran;
11. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) must refrain from training and supporting resistance groups in the region;
12. Iran must end its threatening behavior toward its neighbors, including threats to international shipping and cyberattacks (Mike Pompeo, 2018).

Mike Pompeo's speech, outlining the twelve conditions for negotiations with the Islamic Republic of Iran at the Heritage Foundation, reflects a new strategy by the United States toward Iran and the influence of this neoconservative think tank on the thoughts of politicians in the new U.S. administration. Before beginning his speech at the Heritage Foundation, he stated, "This institution has shaped my thinking on policy" (Pompeo, 2018). This is why the U.S. Secretary of State chose this think tank to announce the United States' positions on Iran.

Two months after Pompeo's announcement of the twelve conditions at the Heritage Foundation, he participated in another seminar titled "Supporting the Voice of Iranians," organized by the Heritage Foundation in Northern California with the presence of Iranians residing in the United States. In this seminar, he reiterated the demands of the United States and implicitly addressed the attendees, who unanimously called for regime change in the Islamic Republic of Iran, saying:

"The wish of the Trump administration is the same wish that you have for the people of Iran, a wish that, relying on divine power, will one day come true"¹ (Pompeo, 2018).

The Heritage Foundation clearly emphasizes the strategy of regime change in the Islamic Republic of Iran in its strategic recommendations, which are primarily presented in the form of reports. It believes that regime change in Iran is the key

to stability and security in the Middle East. In this regard, the foundation recommends not only a "preemptive war" against Iran but also regime change from within to the Trump administration.

In this think tank, internal protests by the people of Iran were closely monitored. Experts at the Heritage Foundation explained the effort to impose oil sanctions on Iran as a means of provoking economic pressure on the people.

From the perspective of Theodore Bromund the head of this neo-conservative think tank, Trump's strategy is one of "imposing costs" on Iran. According to Bromund, the Iranian government faces difficulties in securing resources and will not be able to continuously fund the costs of its regional policies. He believed that: Increasing the costs of Iran's actions is considered the best strategic approach for the Trump administration, which could lead Iran to a fate similar to that of the Soviet Union (Bromund, 2018)

In addition to the three think tanks mentioned above, which are referred to as close circles to the Trump administration in dealing with Iran, it is worth briefly mentioning the proposed strategies of some other think tanks or neoconservative "think tanks" that had an impact:

1. The Brookings Institution,
2. The Hoover Institution,
3. The Bipartisan Policy Center,
4. The Jewish Institute for National Security of America

2-2-4. The Brookings Institution

The Brookings Institution is one of the active research institutions in the United States regarding Iran, especially concerning the Iranian nuclear file. This institution has proposed its fundamental strategies based on

¹. This speech was full of symbolic peripheral variables, one of which was that the location of the speech was the "Ronald Reagan" library.

establishing communication at various levels with the aim of influencing decision-making layers within the Iranian government. In a part of the Brookings Institution's proposal titled "A Roadmap for Coexistence," one can observe the new U.S. policy toward Iran. In this proposal, the institution has urged the U.S. government to consider the fourth option, which involves establishing relations, among the choices of regime change, military attack, isolation, and creating relations (Soleimani, 2016: 62).

"Robert Einhorn," an active figure in the field of arms control, a member of the Center for 21st Century Security, and one of the authors of the Brookings Institution, emphasizes the impact of the agreement in the nuclear negotiations between the United States, its allies, and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Senior officials in the Obama administration believed that pressures would not have a significant impact on the outcome of the negotiations. However, what is crucial is that, although the agreement may not be able to halt Iran's enrichment capabilities, it can prevent the rapid growth of Iran's nuclear capacity. This agreement could weaken the threat of plutonium production at the Arak reactor and provide access to broad and systematic oversight. Therefore, influencing the layers of decision-making in Iran and simultaneously affecting key individuals in various positions, as well as maintaining pressure on Iran to induce nuclear rollback and ultimately transform the nature of the regime (political-cultural transformation), are among the most important factors. So much so that this institution recommended a confrontational and adversarial approach to the Islamic Republic to the Trump administration (Soleimani, 2016: 4).

"Kenneth Pollack," who worked as an expert on Iranian affairs at this research institute, believed that a strategy openly based on regime change in the Islamic Republic of Iran would entail very high costs. Therefore, if the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran were to conclude that the United States sought to change the political system in Iran, they would resist and might even harm the interests of the United States.

Despite this, the issue of regime change in the Islamic Republic of Iran should be utilized as a deterrent tool to show Iranian leaders that the United States has the ability and capacity to create instability within Iran (Pollack, 2018).

2-2-5. The National Security Institute of the United States

The "Jewish Institute for National Security of America" (JINSA) is another significant and influential center in the United States, playing a key role in formulating U.S. defense policies. This institute views defending the Israeli regime as aligned with U.S. national security. The institute considered the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) under the Trump administration as the beginning of a process aimed at changing the political system in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The foundation's recommendation was to adopt a comprehensive strategy in which the United States could eradicate the threats posed by Iran through maximum pressure in economic, military, and diplomatic fields.

In addition, the institute recommended that the Trump administration sell military equipment to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, strengthen military relations with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, and establish defense systems to protect against Iranian missile attacks. It also suggested imposing economic sanctions to isolate and reduce Iran's regional influence, particularly in Iraq and Syria, as well as to exacerbate internal dissatisfaction among the Iranian population (Edelman et al.¹, 2018: 16-1)

This institute, in its analysis of the Iranian nuclear issue, focuses on the potential consequences of a nuclear-armed Iran, linking this issue to the production of nuclear weapons. In this regard, researchers from the institute provide recommendations to U.S. officials. In a report titled "Risk and Competition as Part of a One-Year Project," they examine Iran's nuclear program and emphasize that a nuclear-armed Iran would pose a significant challenge to the interests of both the United States and Israel. Therefore, preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons should remain a top priority for the U.S. and Israel. Continuing the current mix of pressure and diplomacy, all options, including military action for prevention, must remain on the table. Thus, the United States and Israel should take proactive steps (Soleimani, 2016: 65).

The analysis of think tanks associated with conservatives, particularly those linked to the Trump administration, confirms that the strategy of regime change in Iran, despite a shift during Barack Obama's era which primarily emphasized changing Iran's behavior, became a fundamental

¹. Edelman, Eric; Wald, Charles & Others

approach for the U.S. during Donald Trump's presidency. There was a clear alignment between the strategic recommendations of these institutions and think tanks and the executive policies of the new U.S. administration. Additionally, the backgrounds of key members of the Trump administration revealed a composition of supporters for the strategy of political regime change in Iran. This can be summarized in the statement: "Key members of Trump's cabinet were primarily opposed to Iran, against the JCPOA, and supported political regime change in Iran" (Mousavian, 2016).

When Mike Pompeo was the Director of the CIA in the United States, he publicly declared his support for regime change in Iran during a Congressional session, stating that he was eager to see the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) discarded¹ (Dyer, 2016).

Michael Flynn, who was appointed as National Security Advisor in the Trump administration, considered regime change in Iran to be the best strategy for dealing with Iran and labeled the country as an enemy that had been in conflict with the United States and its allies for years. In his book titled *The Field of Fight*, he criticizes two U.S. Presidents, Carter and Obama, for not supporting the Shah and for their nuclear deal with Iran (Mousavian, 2016).

James Mattis, who served as the first Secretary of Defense under President Trump, consistently identified Iran as the primary threat to U.S. national security. He believed that, among the various threats facing America, none posed a more serious danger to the U.S. in the Middle East than Iran (Masoumi, 2016: 10). Trump argued that "before the nuclear deal, Iran was in the worst situation due to sanctions and had been practically cornered. However, Obama made a mistake; instead of tightening the noose on Iran, he extended his hand and lifted Iran from the corner, saving it from certain destruction" (Yazdanfam, 2017: 182).

The culmination of these factors leads us to the theoretical inference that the United States' strategy at the beginning of the fifth decade of the Islamic Revolution, despite its declared policy of changing the behavior of the political system in Iran, is ultimately regime change. The think tanks and policy circles closely aligned with the Trump administration and its advisors have long supported regime change and believe that the best

¹. Mike Pompeo criticized the Obama administration for negotiating with Tehran and, in contrast, suggested that Iran should be attacked with 2,000 bombs.

approach towards Iran is a combination of sanctions, support for opposition groups, and military intervention. Therefore, although the United States under Trump publicly emphasized the policy of changing the behavior of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the strategies recommended by think tanks and the conditions laid out by Pompeo and advisors close to the administration, as well as the brains behind U.S. policy on Iran in the White House, many of whom were key figures behind the 2003 preemptive strike on Iraq, indicate that what the U.S. sought was more than merely changing Iran's behavior. At its core, this would involve significant compromises on many of the revolution's goals, which are intrinsically tied to the identity, existence, and survival of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Conclusion

Four decades after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the hostile policies of the United States toward the Islamic Republic have persisted with varying degrees of intensity and severity. Consequently, the strategies

of the U.S. have evolved over the years, with the geopolitical landscape being shaped accordingly. With the advent of the fifth decade of the Islamic Revolution, coinciding with the rise of the Trump administration, the United States launched an extensive campaign against the Islamic Republic of Iran under the banner of maximum pressure, announcing its goal as the alteration of Iran's behavior. This objective has been met with significant skepticism by many political analysts. The question of whether there was an underlying strategy behind the announced policy that was being actively pursued by the U.S. was the central focus of this study. In order to address this inquiry, the strategic recommendations of think tanks affiliated with the Trump administration were examined. The analysis of these think tanks and the circles close to the Trump administration led to the conclusion that, in the fifth decade of the Islamic Revolution, contrary to the declared stance of changing the behavior of the Islamic Republic, the U.S. strategy was, in fact, regime change within the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Contrary to the claims of the U.S. government regarding its maximum pressure strategy aimed at changing the behavior of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the realization of the twelve demands articulated by Mike Pompeo, the U.S. Secretary of State, as presented by the Heritage Foundation, is only achievable through a fundamental transformation of the political system. The withdrawal from the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) with the intention of generating discontent among the Iranian

population, the imposition of severe economic sanctions, the designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization, the encouragement and strengthening of internal regime divisions, the dismantling of Iran's military presence in the region, and the use of diplomacy against Iran are key elements that were recommended to the Trump administration by the think tanks of the U.S. These policies were clearly followed by the administration. However, due to certain limitations, such as the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of states and the right of peoples to self-determination in international law, the U.S. publicly declared its strategy as one of changing the political behavior of the Islamic Republic rather than regime change.

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