

# American attitude towards Iran and its reflection on Iran policy towards the Arab region

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this study is to cover the change that happened in the American foreign policy toward Iran by changing the American leadership from Obama to Trump. In addition to its coverage for the Iranian foreign policy toward the Arab region during the presidency period of Obama in the USA and also during the presidency period of Trump, to discover whether a change has happened in the Iranian foreign policy toward the Arab region is a result of the change in the American foreign policy or not. This can be discovered by concentrating on Yemen, Syria and Iraq, taking into consideration the Iranian and American national interests in the Arab region, as well as the regional role of Iran and its intervention in the Arab region.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study was based on the analytical method of the foreign policy that is based on analyzing facts and events, as well as analyzing the roles and interests within the framework of the states' foreign policy. This method was used in the study for the purpose of analyzing the impact of the change in the American leadership from Obama to Trump on the US foreign policy toward Iran in the light of the American interest; in addition to the Iranian foreign policy toward the Arab region (Yemen, Syria and Iraq) in the presidency period of both Obama and Trump in light of the regional role of Iran and its passion to achieve its national interest

**Findings** – The study concluded that the change in the American foreign policy toward Iran is a result of the change of the American leadership from Obama to Trump by the American interest requirements in accordance to the respective of both of them. The change in the American policy led to a change in the trends of the Iranian foreign policy toward the Arab region in the term of the regional Iranian role. Under the American and Iranian convergence in the period of Obama, the Iranian role in the Arab region was limited to what could achieve its national interest and what did not threaten the American interest, especially after Iran had guaranteed that the USA is by its side. In the framework of the American and Iranian confrontation under Trump's current presidency, the Iranian role has expanded in the Arab region, where Iran has intensified its intervention in Yemen, Syria and Iraq politically and militarily. Iran became more threatening to the American interest, as it became a means of pressure to the USA under Trump's ruling in the purpose of changing its position toward it.

**Originality/value** – The importance of the study stems from the fact that it is seeking to analyze the change of the American foreign policy toward Iran within the period of two different presidential years of Obama and Trump, whereas, their trends were different in dealing with Iran between rapprochement and hostility toward it, on the basis of the American interest. In addition to testing whether this change



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in the American foreign policy toward Iran has been accompanied by a change in the Iranian foreign policy toward the Arab region.

**Keywords** The American attitude, The American foreign policy, Iran foreign policy, Arab region, Obama's policy, Trump's policy

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Iran occupies a privileged strategic position. From the north, it is bordered by the Caspian Sea and from the south by the Arabian Gulf and the Arabian Sea. It is also the center of the world's most important oil regions in Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Gulf, which the USA and Western countries have always sought to control (Fuller, 1991, p. 43). In addition, Iran has a number of islands that control the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf, as well as an oil reserve of 9 per cent of the world's reserves. Since the outbreak of the Iranian revolution in 1979, the Middle East has witnessed significant developments because of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of Islamic republic in Central Asia, as well as the events of September 11, 2001, at the beginning of the new millennium, the war on Afghanistan, and then the war on Iraq. These events occurred in the area surrounding Iran, which led to the increase of the US blockade of Iran, especially the establishment of US military bases in Central Asia, and the deployment of American fleets in the Gulf region, where Iran is practically facing what can be described as strategic isolation (Habashneh, 2008, p. 11).

Concerning the US–Iranian relations, they have historically been very hostile, except for the rapprochements witnessed under the Shah's reign, and under former US President Barack Obama that led to the signing of the nuclear deal in May 2015 (Balushi, 2016, p. 50). Nevertheless, after the change of the US' decision-maker with Trump winning the presidency, there has been a major shift in the US attitude toward Iran, highlighted by the American withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal in May 2018, and the imposition of economic sanctions on Iran (Zoueiri and Suleiman, 2018, p. 13).

Therefore, the study aims at testing, whether the change in the American foreign policy toward Iran – as a result of the change of the political leadership from Obama to Trump – is accompanied by a change in the Iranian foreign policy toward the Arab region.

### 1.1 Literature review

*1.1.1 Literature related to the change in the American foreign policy toward Iran between Obama and Trump.* Farhani and Qamadi (2016) argued that the Iranian nuclear program was the reason of the conflict that happened between Iran and the USA; thus, in accordance with Zoueiri and Suleiman (2018), the ex-president Barack Obama adopted a different view toward Iran (where the American interest has achieved at the first place). Also, Castiglioni (2013) concluded that the American interest requires using diplomatic solutions as an alternative for the military solutions to convince Iran to renounce its nuclear program. Nunlist (2016) advocated keeping open dialog channels and negotiation between the USA and its opponents, such as Iran, in Obama's era; this could be achieved by leaving a space for negotiation on the Iranian nuclear file.

Katzman (2019) suggested that the Iranian nuclear agreement in Obama's era led to a convergence between the USA and Iran (started from achieving the national interest). Abdul Fattah (2014) concluded that this agreement can finish the ideological war between both states causing the integration of Iran within the global system. Zoueiri and Suleiman (2018) assured that in accordance with Obama's perspective, such an agreement serves the American interest by getting rid of the Iranian nuclear danger; (as) it also achieved Iran's interest by improving its economic relationship with the USA and by encouraging it to invest its previously frozen funds.

Under Trump's administration, [Badawi \(2018\)](#) pointed out that Trump started hostile against Iran and accused it of being a corrupting dictatorship state. Trump saw that the American interest will be achieved by confronting Iran and by taking sides with Gulf States. Whereas, [Masters and Hunt \(2017\)](#) highlighted Trump's isolationist approach and his invitation to get rid of the loads carried by the USA as a result of its playing the leadership role in the world, which was the reason for starting the confrontation between the USA and Iran. In the same context, [Katzman \(2019\)](#) concluded that Trump started confronting Iran by his withdrawal from the nuclear agreement and by imposing economic sanctions on it, because of Iran's non-stoppable way of being the largest terrorism sponsor, especially indicated by its support to the Houthis in Yemen whom it provides with money and weapons and by its insistence on developing its long range missile system.

[Monitoring and Analysis Unit \(2017\)](#) study mentioned that Trump saw that the agreement did not restrict Iran's desire in possessing nuclear weapons, which contradicts with the US interest. [Alcaro \(2018\)](#) referred to Trump's fear of the growing influence of Iran in the Middle East (by what is threatening America's interest). Thus, Trump followed the confrontation policy for the aim of containing and isolating Iran (by legitimacy disarmament), as it is sponsoring terrorism, and developing the ballistic missile system. He also imposed sanctions and supported anti-Iran powers, such as Israel, Saudi Arabia and Emirates.

*1.1.2 Literature related to Iran foreign policy toward the Arab region.* [Balushi \(2016\)](#) pointed out that the Arab region – especially the Gulf region – is experiencing a continuous state of instability in the security conditions, because of Iran's intervention (in it out of its regional role). Whereas [Ezz El-Arab \(2014\)](#) added that the Iranian intervention – in the Arab region in light of the *rapprochement* with the USA in the period of Obama – came to support the pro-Iran Shiites in Syria, Iraq and Yemen as a part of Iran's practicing of its regional role for achieving its national interest. Moreover, [Ali \(2018\)](#) highlighted that Iran's support to Shiites in Syria, Yemen and Iraq has increased the Iranian influence in the Arab region, in a way that threatens the American interest in the region, especially, under America's confrontation policy against Iran, that Trump – the current president – is following. According to [Atrissi \(2018\)](#), the Iranian influence in the Arab region led to increasing instability in the region in a way that threatens the American interest there.

By revising the literature review, it is clear that some of the literature is focusing on the American foreign policy toward Iran either during Obama's era or during Trump's era. Some studies focus on both Obama's and Trump's eras. In the meantime, some studies focus on the Iranian foreign policy toward the Arab region during either Obama's era or Trump's era, whereas other studies reflect on the two eras combined. None of these studies examined directly, whether the change in the American foreign policy toward Iran, resulting from the change of the political leadership from Obama to Trump, affected the Iranian foreign policy toward the Arab region or not, and this is what distinguishes the current study, as it discusses the change in the American attitude toward Iran and examines whether this change may have caused a change in the Iranian foreign policy toward the Arab region or not.

### *1.2 Research problem*

The change in the American administration is sometimes accompanied by a change in the orientations of the American foreign policy toward some important cases. This is followed by many regional and international consequences in turn. Research studies on changes of the American foreign policy from the ruling years of Obama – the ex-president – and Trump – the current president – represent evidence of this, especially, with Trump's arrival to rule,

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the American foreign policy has changed its approach to achieving the American interest by withdrawing from the nuclear agreement and imposing economic sanctions on Iran. Hence, the research problem is represented in the answer of the upcoming main question:

*RQ1.* What is the impact of the shift in the US attitude toward Iran on Iran's policy toward the Arab region?

### 1.3 Research questions

- How did the US–Iran rapprochement under Obama's presidency affect the course of relations between the two countries?
- What is the shift that occurred in US policy toward Iran under President Trump?
- What are the orientations of Iran's foreign policy toward the Arab region under Obama?
- Are there indicators of change in Iran's foreign policy toward the Arab region under Trump?

## 2. Study theoretical framework

The external determinants, whether regional or international, play an important role in influencing states' foreign policies. These determinants represent a set of external constraints and circumstances within which the foreign policy operates and they play a key role in determining the choices of the decision-maker (Dawood, 2017, p. 49). Therefore, the external factor is considered very important as being one of the determinants that affect the political system either negatively or positively (Hamdan, 2016, p. 92). Under the influence of the external environment, states often resort to a particular policy; such environment allows the state to take certain actions and leave others. Meanwhile, the available alternatives may restrict the political system. Generally, the opportunities for the state's political system may increase when external pressures decrease (Shehata, 2007, p. 30). The external factor also helps with the effects of the external environment in understanding the policy of the countries toward their regional and international surroundings, as there are some interlocking interests at the regional and international level. The decision-maker at the external level has to deal with it in a way that maximizes the benefits and helps avoiding as much losses as possible (Belal, 2017, pp. 475–476).

Foreign policy scholars worked on exploring the effect of the external determinant – represented in the international system – on the foreign policy of the States. Of these scholars, Charles A. McClelland, George Modelski, Andrew Scott, Richard Rose, Dougherty and Kaplan divided the international system into balance of power system, loose bipolar system, tight bipolar system, universal system, hierarchical system and unite veto system (Mukled, 1987, pp. 134–140).

According to Gouvertich, the foreign policies of states does not only depend on internal factors, but rather it is a reflection of the international situation that might impose changes and influences on a certain country and persuade it to change its policy through the impact of the economy, international coordination and alliances (Gouvertich, 1978, p. 882). Waltz concluded that the structure of the international system could restrict the options available to States in terms of costs and benefits, as countries calculate the cost they shall incur as a result of a specific act and balance between that cost and the forecasted benefit that such act shall realize at the regional or international level (Waltz, 1979, p. 107). Therefore, foreign

policy of all countries interacts with the concept of the environment. These interactions include multiple elements, such as objectives, capacities, strategies, technical means and methods, tactics, as well as decisions in addition to actions and foreign policy outcomes. James N. Rosenau refers to the issue of national–international interrelations. Gabriel Almond and Bingham Powell added that the international environment affects the development of national political systems, regardless of the foundation or structure of that international system. Almond and Powell also say that there is an interactive relationship between national potential and international potentials (Al-Nuaimi, 2011, p. 112).

There has been a shift in the international system from a multipolar system before Second World War to a bipolar system with the emergence of the USA and the Soviet Union as the two main powers that formed the eastern and western camps. However, the fall of the Soviet Union led to a shift in the international system and the change of the pattern of interactions, whereas the freedom that small countries had in their foreign policy has declined. By dominating the international system, the USA has relied on a policy of intimidating states and political regimes and restricting their actions and securing their drift behind US policy and securing their subordination to the American policy in a way that secure a larger amount of interests that the USA is pursuing, not in isolation from the US strategy to control the world (Al-Nuaimi, 2011, pp. 117–118).

With regard to the external determinant of the Iranian foreign policy, it is of two levels: the first level is the determinant of the regional environment. This level includes countries that Iran interacts with at the regional level, as Iran is surrounded by many regional regimes, such as South-West Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East and the Arab region, including the Gulf states. However, the current study focuses on Iran's foreign policy toward the Arab region, especially after the rise of the sectarian Shiite doctrine that marked the internal conflict in Syria, Iraq and Yemen after the Arab Spring revolution (Al-Otaibi, 2008, p. 69). The second level is the international determinant which includes the remaining countries in the international structure system that impact or by which Iran's external decision is impacted (Belal, 2017, p. 476), as the foreign

### **3. Change in the American foreign policy toward Iran between Obama and Trump**

#### *3.1 American foreign policy toward Iran during Obama's administration*

On the basis of President Obama's American foreign policy vision of achieving the US interest, he followed a moderate and flexible foreign policy that is based on conversations and cooperation, not conflicts. He saw that the American interest required working on the idea of changing the world vision of the USA from being a state that favors military interventions to a state that uses soft power and diplomatic tools for the aim of restoring allies and confronting adversaries. Obama tried to close the gaps left by the policy of conflict with the adversaries, which have been exploited by Russia and China against the US national interest, (Branda, 2018, pp. 161–162). Consequently, the American foreign policy excluded the military option and opened up conversation and negotiation channels with the US adversaries as Iran, and this is through opening space for negotiation over the Iranian nuclear file (Nunlist, 2016, p. 3).

With respect to the American foreign policy toward Iran, Obama followed the principle of "Diplomacy first," which he promoted during his election campaign to become the basis for his foreign policy. Obama saw that the American interest required using the diplomatic solutions as an alternative to the military intervention for persuading Iran to abandon its nuclear program. As a result of this, Obama refused to follow Bush the son in preventing communication with Tehran as one of the forms of pressure on the Iranian system. Obama

stressed in his statement at Cairo University on launching a long-term diplomatic campaign in the Middle East; and with respect to Iran, he stressed on the importance of escaping from the “Trap of the past” and continuing toward a future full of mutual respect (Castiglioni, 2013, p. 3).

The negotiations on the nuclear agreement faced internal opposition in America, as President Obama faced Republican-majority opposition as well as the opposition of few Democrats in the American Congress, in addition to the opposition of some states’ Governors to this agreement. Pence – Governor of Indiana – in the statement that he sent to Obama expressed a reservation on reducing the level of imposed sanctions on Iran. He stated that the investors in Indiana will not invest their money in companies that will work with Iran (Adebahr, 2017, pp. 3–4). Despite the internal pressure, Obama insisted on adopting a new strategy toward Iran for achieving the American interest: by getting rid of the Iranian nuclear danger, to avoid Iran’s owning of a nuclear bomb or launching of another war in the Middle East (Katzman, 2019, p. 19). In addition, Obama started to discuss the mutual economic and strategic interests between the two states, starting from the possibility of turning Iran from a revolutionary and ideological state rejecting regional and international reality into a state working to integrate into the world system (Abdul Fattah, 2014, p. 137). The negotiations resulted in the signing of the Iranian nuclear deal in 2015 between the P5 + 1 (USA, UK, France, China, Russia and Germany) and Iran. This agreement included the guarantee of the peaceful nature of Iran’s nuclear program in exchange for a gradual lifting of sanctions (Hijazin, 2016, p. 156).

Thus, the former President Barack Obama proceeded from a different vision of the relation with Iran. He lifted the US and Western international economic sanctions imposed on Iran since 2006 in exchange for Iran’s promise to dismantle its nuclear program and prevent the development of nuclear military capabilities. Sanctions on the Iranian side were lifted after the agreement came into force in 2016, especially the financial and economic sanctions, and hundreds of billions of Iranian funds frozen abroad as a result of economic sanctions were released (Zoueiri and Suleiman, 2018, p. 14).

### *3.2 Change in the American foreign policy toward Iran during Trump’s administration*

The American foreign policy trends highly differed with the arrival of the current American President Donald Trump. Whereas, Trump has moved from the principle of achieving the American interest according to his vision, so he focused on his statement on his election campaign based on the internal affairs of the USA. Then, his isolationist approach has represented in not depending the USA on the policy of intervention in the state affairs, (Masters and Hunt, 2017). He called for getting rid of the burdens of universal leadership by the USA; thus, the USA will adopt an attitude of partners bearing the financial burden (Branda, 2018, p. 162).

With respect to the American foreign policy toward Iran, after winning the elections, Trump started attacking Iran and accused it of always sponsoring terrorism by providing money and weapons and not preventing the development of its long-range missile system (Katzman, 2019, p. 21). In his first speech to the UN General Assembly, Trump accused Iran of being a corrupt dictatorship. Then, he officially announced the withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal, followed by the announcement of a new set of economic sanctions on Iran, from which the US President was exempting Tehran every 90 days. But Trump rejected the exemption and began to impose economic sanctions on the Iranian side. The economic sanctions came first to target non-oil economic sectors and currency trade, followed by the second package of sanctions targeting Iranian ports, Iranian energy sector, as well as companies buying Iranian oil (Badawi, 2018, p. 2).

This has resulted in Iran's return to strengthening its nuclear capabilities, increasing the political vulnerability to the US military action with helping Saudi and Israeli and opposing European and Russian (Blackwill, 2018, pp. 40–41). In his statement in May 2018, Bombio – the American foreign minister – announced that the USA is ready for restoring diplomatic and economic relations, but under some conditions, the most important of which are the complete disarmament of Iran's nuclear program, the halting of the ballistic missiles system and the stopping of the Iranian intervention in the region, especially, in Yemen, Syria and Iraq, (Thompson, 2018, p. 2).

The reasons for the tension between Iran and the USA during Trump's administration are because of:

- *The Iranian nuclear deal*: Trump sees that the deal granted Iran significant gains without restricting its desire to acquire nuclear weapons and that it allowed Iran to exceed the permitted quantities of heavy water. It also allowed Tehran to threaten international inspectors to prevent them from accessing suspected places.
- *Iranian ballistic missile system*: Despite US warnings, Tehran kept announcing that it was testing missiles to serve the continued development of its missile system. The most recent test was that of their new missile (Khorram Shahr), in late September 2017. It represents the latest model of the Iranian ballistic missile system. Iran is now able to target US military pieces in the Persian Gulf waters and the US military bases located nearby.
- *Iran's role in destabilizing the region*: Iran has a presence and an influence on a number of important issues in the region through its allies, who represent an intellectual, political and in some cases military extension, as is the case with Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and Shiite groups in Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Tehran is able to employ these groups to destabilize those countries. (Monitoring and Analysis Unit, 2017).

Consequently, the American foreign policy toward Iran prevailed through Trump – the current President – in three poles. The first pole is “Delegitimation” by focusing on Iran's help to terrorism and its development of the ballistic missiles system. The second pole is “Sanctions” by imposing more economic sanctions on Iran. The third pole is “Containment” by encouraging Emirates' and Saudi Arabia's policies, as well as the Israeli policy. All three of which aim at limiting the Iranian role in the region (Alcaro, 2018, pp. 6–9).

#### 4. Iranian foreign policy toward the Arab region during the presidency of Obama and Trump

##### 4.1 Iranian foreign policy toward the Arab region during Obama's presidency

Iranian foreign policy had tended in the light of the US–Iran *rapprochement* during Obama's presidency to play the Iranian role in the Arab region (Ali, 2018, pp. 238–239). However, this role had been limited to the protection of the Iranian interest. After the Arab Spring revolution in 2011, Iran interfered to a limited extent in Iraq and in Yemen to support the Houthis and in Syria to support the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, in a manner that was consistent with the US interest (Alani, 2015, p. 112). The Iranian intervention in the Arab region was based on earning the loyalty of military and political powers in the countries to achieve Iran's interest (Hourani, 2018, p. 3).

4.1.1 *Iranian policy toward Yemen*. Iran proceeded to interfere in Yemen, in the light of the chaotic conditions that prevailed during and after the outbreak of the Yemeni Revolution against the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh. These conditions resulted in a complicated and

violent political scene that gave Iran the opportunity to enhance its role and influence on the Yemeni scene. In this context, there was persistent evidence of an increase of Iran's efforts and its activities to provide its allies in Yemen with all kinds of support, especially the Houthis, who are convergent with respect to their doctrine and ideology (Al Kady, 2017, p. 5).

By Iran's interference in Yemen to support the Shiite Houthi movement in northern Yemen, this increased the civil and sectarian war in Yemen between the Houthi movement and the Hadi regime (Abu Zeid, 2015, p. 24). In addition, the Houthi movement threatened the southern borders of Saudi Arabia, posing a threat to its national security (Hazem, 2017, p. 75). The KSA led the "Decisive storm" on March 26, 2015, to counter the Houthi expansion and to restore legitimacy to Hadi (Al-Asraj, 2015, p. 164).

*4.1.2 Iranian policy toward Syria.* The Syrian crisis was an opportunity for Iran to play a regional role, especially with the Iran-US *rapprochement* during the Obama era, as Syria's strategic importance resides in its role in securing the continuity of the land corridor from Tehran to Beirut and reaching the warm waters of the Mediterranean Sea (Diab, 2018, p. 1). Therefore, after Syria has entered its crisis as a result of the public protests calling for regime change in 2011, the Iranian role of supporting the Syrian regime has emerged (Goodarzi, 2013, p. 50), as Iran saw Syria as an important window in the Arab region and as a strategic depth to it (Morsi, 2018, p. 40).

Accordingly, the Iranian interference in Syria came as Syria represents a vital link between Tehran and Hezbollah, and for what Syria secures for Tehran, on the one hand defending the weapons transfer corridors to Hezbollah in Lebanon, and on the other hand resisting – according to the Iranian strategy – the Arab Regional Axis that aims to contain the growing geopolitical field of Iran (Hourani, 2018, p. 2).

*4.1.3 Iranian policy toward Iraq.* Iran has interfered in Iraq since Obama's term to enhance its regional role and to achieve its regional interests, especially after the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) posed a threat to the Iranian role in the region; given that "ISIS" was an extension of Sunni Jihadist movements and given the fact that "ISIS" invaded nearly one-third of the total area of Iraq, which led to enhance its power to threaten the Iranian interests through limiting Iran's role in the region (Abdul Latif, 2015, p. 3) despite the bias of the Central Government of Tehran – formed by the USA – that is under Shiite's control, it is not surprising that Iran has enlisted Iraqi Shiite militias and played an official role in leading the Iraqi's campaign against ISIS (Nader, 2018, pp. 1–5).

The Iranian interference in Iraq is because of achieving the Iranian interest, as a result of the internal contradictions inside Iran that arose from the decline in the economic condition and the recurring conflicts over power centers among the Iranian regime wings, especially that the Iraqi security crisis raised the fear of its spread to Iran. In addition, this interference is motivated by a religious and doctrinal dimension as it served the protection of Shiite's religious places and shrines in Iraq. Furthermore, there is the US policy toward Iraq, as Obama's policy encouraged the Iranian role to exert influence on the Iraqi internal balances. Although Iran is not officially involved in the Global Coalition against Terrorism that is led by Washington, the US Administration welcomed the Iranian role in Iraq, giving, thereby, Tehran the green light to play its regional role in Iraq (Khouli, 2016, p. 4).

From the foregoing, it is clear that the Iranian interference in the Arab region in the light of the Iran-US *rapprochement* in Obama's era was based on Iran's role as a regional power and on achieving the Iranian interest, especially after guaranteeing the US support. Washington gave Tehran the green light during Obama's era to play its role in the Arab region in a manner consistent with the US interest; therefore, Iran did not expand this role, especially in Yemen, Syria and Iraq.



#### *4.2 Iranian foreign policy toward Arab region during Trump's presidency*

*4.2.1 Iranian policy toward Yemen.* Iranian interference in Yemen is one of the major points for Iran that would enhance its attitude in the region and support its situation either in facing the other regional parties or in facing some international forces, especially the USA. The political vacuum which arose from the vulnerability of Yemen and its weakness gave Iran big opportunities to enhance its influence and achieve its goals in Yemen, especially through a possible complete seizure of power by pro-Iran elements. Iran wished either to enable its allies at the pinnacle of the power in Yemen or to push Yemen toward further chaos, which would provide Iran with more space for an increased role and influence on the Yemeni scene, a thing that would harm the security and stability of the regional neighbors and threaten the US interests (Al Kady, 2017, p. 6).

Iran has broadly supported the Houthis, pro-Iran groups, in Yemen in response to the US hostile policy toward it, which led Houthis to fire missiles at airports in Riyadh and UAE. The Houthis had carried out the first missile attack at Riyadh region on May 19, 2017, just a few hours before US President Donald Trump's plane landed as he visited Saudi Arabia. It was only a reaction to the US declaration of a new resistance strategy against the Iranian regime and its "Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)," in which Iran played a major role in the missile development program for the Houthis.

Iran has been taking advantage of the great weakness experienced by the Yemeni state during this stage to expand its role, especially with the division of the Armed Forces and Security Forces of Yemen, the bad economic conditions of poverty and unemployment experienced by the Yemeni people and the internal disagreements among the political parties in Yemen and above all the Houthi rebellion in the north and the separatist movement in the south and al-Qaeda groups activities (Amin, 2020, p. 3).

*4.2.2 Iranian policy toward Syria.* Iran acted within a context of hostile confrontation between the USA and itself, a confrontation that was provoked by President Trump's opposition to Iran's regional role. Therefore, Iran provided the Syrian regime with weapon, soldiers and information, worked on storing short, medium and long-range missiles in Syrian cities, as well as established factories of ballistic missiles in northwest Syria in 2018. Iran's relationship with Syria moved from a strategic partnership to a significant political presence, a declared military presence, dominance over the developments of the events and participation in the political and military decisions taken by the Syrian regime in view of Syria's role in serving the Iran's strategy in the region (Hourani, 2018, p. 2).

Iran also worked on raising the efficiency of "Hezbollah" in respect of using missiles. This may be what led Tehran to constitute a threat to the US interests in the region, which made president Trump, after his promise not to enter into long-term wars in Middle East, send a US force of 2,000 soldiers to face Iranian "terrorism" that occurred throughout Syria (Zelait, 2019).

*4.2.3 Iranian policy toward Iraq.* Iranian interference had an influential role in Iraq and to control the Iraqi Government and parliament, Tehran persuaded Shiites to run for election in uniform rolls to take advantage of their demographic power in the Iraqi elections. These rolls were dominated by groups that were close to Iran (Nader, 2018, pp. 1-5). The Iranian role expanded in Iraq, especially in the parliament elections held in May 12, 2018, after an attempt from "Mullah" regime to support the candidacy of the leaders of the popular mobilization forces (PMF) militias in the elections won by Alliance Toward Reforms Coalition (Saairun), led by the Shiite clergyman "Muqtada al-Sadr," and the coalition won the first place with 54 seats. The candidacy of the leaders of PMF militias in the elections was a part of Iran's significant policy to control the region to threaten the US interests in the region. In addition, Iran played also a military role through financing, training and arming

the armed Shiites guerrillas in Iraq, especially through “Quds Force” affiliated with IRGC (Salah, 2018, pp. 2–5).

The Iranian interference in Iraq has reached high levels; the political appointments are dictated mostly by Iran, not to mention that Tehran controls the Iraqi political scene and uses the country as a battlefield for wars by proxy. Iranian influence can be felt at the cultural level as well, as photos of the Iranian religious figures are widely spread, especially in the Shiite cities located in the south of the country. Many Iraqis are disappointed because of the imposition of the Iranian version of Shiism, because this strengthens Iran’s claim that it is the leader of the Shiite world (Haddad, 2019, p. 3). It cannot be ignored that the Iranian dominance and penetration in Iraq and its interference in Iraq’s decisions were among the causes for the demonstrations and the public outrage. Iran tries to address its crisis and confrontation with the USA through turning Iraq into a battlefield of a war by proxy and exploit and plunder the Iraqi resources to address the Tehran economic crisis (Al-Ubaidi, 2019).

The concern of the present study is to focus on the external determinant and its impact on the Iranian foreign policy, especially Iran’s relation with USA. As the prevailing international system led the USA to be dominant and resulted in its non-compliance with the provisions of the game but rather applying its own rules that serve the continuity of its international hegemony and its strong influence, the ability of Iran’s external political decision-maker to take a decision depends on his awareness of the capabilities and possibilities he possesses. This gives him a margin of political, regional and international freedom of movement based on power and influence and his willingness to play an active, influential and independent role in the international community (Al-Nuaimi, 2011, pp. 119–120).

With the shift in US foreign policy toward Iran from *rapprochement* to hostility and confrontation under Trump current administration, Iran has worked to complete the Iranian airspace program and to gain an influential and distinctive regional role. Moreover, it has sought to preserve the imbalance of power between Iran and its Arab neighbors by removing Syria completely from the equation of Arab power and playing on sectarian and ethnic differences in Iraq and Yemen by spreading anarchy, a matter that has maximized the potentials of the State of Iran and its control over the region as a compensation for the loss of the American support that it had obtained after signing the nuclear agreement during the presidency of Obama (Al-Atoum, 2016). For this reason, there has been a change in Iran’s policy toward Arab region that is manifested in:

- (1) Iran is pursuing the strategy of unbalanced confrontation by defending itself beyond its borders through the State Belt and the Arab Regional Arms. Therefore, Iran is striving to tighten its control over Syria, Yemen and Iraq, which are its first lines of defense in its confrontation with USA (Abdul Aziz, 2017, p. 56).
- Expanding Iran’s intervention in the Arab region which would pose a threat to US interests in the region. This is through the support of some Arab regimes, whether politically, militarily or at the security level, such as Iran’s support for the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, which Iran supplies with weapons, soldiers, information, and short, medium and long-range missiles (Hourani, 2018, p. 2). Iran is also seeking to use Syria as its direct military front, the matter that is contrary to the concept of using proxies in Iraq and Lebanon (Zelait, 2019).
  - Imposing Iranian control over areas that surround US military bases in the Arab region to deter any hostile policy by the USA by threatening to strike

American bases. By January 8, Iran has become already able to fire missiles at various US sites inside Iraq, including the Ain al-Assad Air Base and AL-Harir Base in Erbil, northern Kurdistan region (Al Shorouk online, 2020). Moreover, Iran's missile attacks on ISIS sites were not only a counter-terrorism operation, but rather a warning to America that Tehran was ready to attack from the air (Katzman, 2019, p. 44).

- The incursion into the Arab countries with the aim of destabilizing the security of pro-US Gulf States through Iran's search for significant penetration and control in Syria, Yemen and Iraq that can be listed under Iran's strategic plan to confront the USA (Atrissi, 2018, p. 45) and using this method to exert pressure on the USA by threatening US interests in the region, in particular with the development of Iranian military capabilities and developing its missile system, as Iran has become able to hit some American military targets whenever it wants (Abdul Aziz, 2017, p. 57).
- Supporting Shiite groups in some Arab countries, such as Iraq, Syria and Yemen, and threatening to use some Shiite groups in some terrorist operations. The Houthis, for instance, have been able to fire some missiles at some airports in Riyadh and the UAE, a matter that might lead to threatening US interests in the Gulf states.

## 5. Results

In light of the external determinant and its impact on Iranian foreign policy, it is clear that the prevailing international system is still dominated by the USA. This influenced the Iranian external decision-maker in taking the decision, as the decisions he makes depend on the extent of his awareness of the capabilities and potentials that Iran possesses.

Former President Barack Obama adopted a different vision of relations with Iran that led to the signing of the Nuclear Agreement which contributed in achieving the US interest by eliminating the obsession with the Iran's Nuclear Program and preventing the development of nuclear military capabilities. In addition, it contributed to achieving the Iranian interest by lifting the economic sanctions imposed on Iran.

A shift in US foreign policy toward Iran occurred with Trump's rise to power, manifested in withdrawing from the Nuclear Agreement, imposing sanctions on Iran and supporting the Saudi–Emirati–Israeli front to limit the Iranian role in the region.

The Iranian interference in the Arab region in the light of the US–Iran *rapprochement* during Obama's era was based on Iran's role as a regional power and has the aim of achieving Iran's interest. Washington gave Tehran the green light during Obama's era to play its role in the Arab region, in a manner consistent with the US interest. Therefore, Iran has not expanded this role, especially in Yemen, Syria and Iraq.

In light of the Iran–US confrontation under current President Trump, Iran's foreign policy toward the Arab region has changed. This came in response of the change in US foreign policy toward Iran. The change in Iranian policy is manifested in:

- First, the expansion of Iran's intervention in the Arab region by using the States Belt states and the Arab Regional Arms States as being its first line of defense in the confrontation with USA.
- Second, supporting Syria politically and militarily by using it as a direct military front, contrary to the concept of using proxies in Iraq and Lebanon to threaten American interests.

- Third, tightening control over Iraq and the use of Shiites to control the political system, so that Iran can threaten and hit US military bases.
- Fourth, providing more support to the Houthis in Yemen to use the Houthi group to threaten US interests by conducting some terrorist acts, and by threatening US allies from the Gulf States and in particular Saudi Arabia.

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