

## Addressing Iran Ballistic Missile Program. Three Lessons from the Negotiation Over the Iranian Nuclear Program

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### Description

After deep and intense negotiations, Iran and the UN Security Council members together with Germany (P5 + 1) finally reached a “historic” agreement on Tehran’s controversial nuclear program two years ago. While this agreement foreshadowed a certain regional lull, there is an upsurge in tensions between Iran and its regional neighbours, and the bone of contention is its ballistic missile program. Regarding this issue, Trump administration, on the one hand, has firmly required from Iran a substantial change in its regional behavior, and foremostly the inclusion of its ballistic program in the nuclear agreement the package. Iran however, is strongly opposed to such an initiative it claims that the two dossiers are clearly distinct. Facing this deadlock, negotiating with Tehran seems to be the only viable option. However, the implementation of a diplomatic strategy faces many obstacles. This modest article is an attempt to identify three main lessons from the negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program, which could be applied to its ballistic missile program.

Less than three years after its official come-back in global affairs, Iran is once more the main international source of concern, especially from some Western states. Although the controversial nuclear program of Iran is no more the main source of concern of the international community, mostly thanks to the JCPOA,<sup>1</sup> the Iranian ballistic program remains the stumbling block between Tehran and Western chancelleries. Following Donald Trump’s virulent speech at the UN General Assembly on rogue States like Iran, Emmanuel Macron has recently expressed his deep concern over the regional activities of Tehran, regarding especially its ballistic program. According to the French president, the Iranian missile fired from Yemen was a clear sign of Tehran worrisome ballistic missile program. This concern is as great as he even mentioned the possibility for Iran to be sanctioned again for its controversial ballistic program.<sup>2</sup> On the first hand, adopting new sanctions against Iran on its ballistic program risk to seriously jeopardize the nuclear agreement that was fiercely negotiated two years ago, although the issues are clearly distinct. On the second hand, the military option would certainly have disastrous consequences, particularly from the humanitarian perspective in an already unstable region. Although the diplomatic approach seems to be the only viable option as it was the case two years ago, its applicability is nonetheless difficult, if not impossible. The objective of this article is therefore to highlight three main lessons from the former multilateral negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program which could be applied to Iran’s ballistic program [1,2].

According to several scholars, the seeds of the Iranian ballistic program were sown during the Iran-Iraq war from 1980 to 1988. As Tytti Erästö puts it, “the role of ballistic missiles in Iran’s national security was highlighted in the 1980s, when its cities were left defenseless against

Scud missile and air attacks from Iraq under President Saddam Hussein. Iran’s acquisition and use of its own short-range missiles is regarded as a crucial turning point in the Iran-Iraq War.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, the ballistic program has a historical central role in the Iranian collective memory, and particularly in its national defense and security policy [3]. This reality certainly explains Tehran’s categorical refusal to include the ballistic program in the agenda of the multilateral negotiations on the nuclear program between 2013 and 2015. Today, more than a deterrent asset, the Iranian ballistic program is also the symbol of its sovereignty, as well as its regional influence [4].

Given the multidimensional symbolic value of its ballistic program, any constructive approach in that regard must be a pragmatic one. In other words, Iran ballistic missile program should be “put in context”. In fact, one cannot expect a peaceful regional behavior from Tehran without taking into account the regional dynamics. For it must be recalled that Iran has developed its ballistic missile program in response to an external threat. Yesterday it was Iraq, today it is Israel and the main monarchies of the Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia [5]. Thereof, the recent military agreements signed between the USA and Saudi Arabia are not going to ease the Iranian deep fears and concerns. Like Farhad Rezaei rightly noted, “from the perspective of Tehran, Washington’s policy of arming its allies with long-range ballistic missiles, advanced fighters, and other military equipment has threatened its security interests, not to mention its deterrent power”.<sup>4</sup>

Although they do not fundamentally break the regional strategic balance, the recent agreements between Washington and its regional allies are a clear and blatant message to Iran who feels threatened but also strengthened in the consolidation and improvement of its ballistic program [6]. Therefore, solving the Iranian ballistic equation requires taking into account the security variables of its regional rivals and this implies obviously a political cost from the US as it had been the case during the negotiation between the P5+1 group and Iran. Indeed, in

<sup>3</sup>ERÄSTÖ, Tytti, Time for Europe to put Iran’s missile programme in context, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), October 30, 2017. Accessed from <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topicalbackgrounder/2017/time-europe-put-irans-missile-programme-context>

<sup>4</sup>REZAEI, Farhad, Iran’s Ballistic Missile Program: A New Case for Engaging Iran?, Insight Turkey, Volume 18, N.4, 2016, published by SETA Foundation. Accessed from <https://www.insightturkey.com/author/farhadrezaei/irans-ballistic-missile-program-a-new-case-for-engaging-iran> on the 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2017 at 13h48.

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<sup>1</sup> The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is the technical name of the Iranian nuclear agreement which has been signed on July 14th, 2015 between Iran and the P5+1 (Russia, China, France, USA, Great Britain, Germany).

<sup>2</sup> IRISH, John, Despite EU caution, France pursues tough line on Iran missile program, Reuters, November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2017. Accessed from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-france-eu/despite-eu-caution-france-pursuestough-line-on-iran-missile-program-idUSKBN1DF23M>

order to achieve the historical deal with Tehran, Washington paid a huge prize, which consisted essentially of a cooling of the bilateral relations between the United States and its traditional allies in the sub-region.

Another important lesson from the previous negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program is the need for a united international coalition led by an assertive and assumed leadership. In fact, the negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program were conclusive partly because they had been conducted under Barack Obama's leadership who made it a landmark of his foreign policy [7]. Conscious of the stakes and difficulties of international negotiations on the thorny Iranian issue, President Barack Obama formed and led an international coalition made up of Germany and other permanent members of the Security Council (P5 + 1). As he declared during his 2016 state of the Union address, "on issues of global concern, we will mobilize the world to work with us, and make sure other countries pull their own weight".<sup>5</sup> Hence, his nuclear diplomacy was essentially a pragmatic one, as it simultaneously combined elements of coercion and cooperation. An important element to highlight is the unity of the P5 + 1 group, notwithstanding their bilateral tensions on very hot issues at the time, notably Taiwan and Ukraine.

Yet, with regard to the Iranian ballistic program, no international power seems to emerge as the leader of a coalition of states willing to negotiate with Iran. Worse, the P5 + 1 group is clearly divided on the issue, whether one considers the Western bloc (USA, France, Germany, EU) or the Eastern bloc (China or Russia). The approach to the Iranian ballistic dossier is so sensitive and controversial that it has created a clear divide in the transatlantic alliance. As emphasized by Ellie Geranmayeh, *on many global security issues, Europeans take very different approaches than the new American president. But perhaps nowhere is the difference more profound than on the question of Iran.*<sup>6</sup> In fact, on the one hand, the EU is formally opposed to a renegotiation of the Iranian nuclear agreement including the Iranian ballistic program, while the American and French presidents advocate for a such an initiative [8], with even the possibility of adopting sanctions against Iranian dignitaries in case of non-compliance.<sup>7</sup> Lastly, Russia and China do not seem very eager to push Iran toward a restriction of its ballistic activities, especially as they benefit from the security dividends of the nuclear agreement.

Finally, expecting an Iranian behavior change regarding its ballistic missile program in a relatively short lapse is an illusion. It must be recalled that between the accidental discovery of the Iranian nuclear program in 2002 and the start of the substantial negotiations in 2013, eleven years had passed, while it took nearly two years of intense negotiations to finally come to the signing of the historic JCPOA [9]. In addition, the success of the multilateral negotiations was also due to the confidence-building measures of the various protagonists. These measures include, among others, concrete proposals on technical aspects of the nuclear program,<sup>8</sup> but especially frequent exchanges

between the Foreign Ministers of the two States, namely John Kerry and Mohammad Zarif. Not to mention the *strategic patience*<sup>9</sup> shown by the Obama administration during these negotiations.

The Trump administration, on the other hand, has had so far, an essentially acrimonious approach towards Iran over its ballistic program. In addition to its vehement rhetoric, it does not display tangible signs of an indispensable compromise necessary for the success of any diplomatic negotiation. For example, the US Secretary of State so far did not have any formal contacts with his Iranian counterpart, which could indicate a punitive, but historically counterproductive and isolationist behavior of Americans towards Iranians. However, more than ever, the Middle East is a real cauldron; Whether we look toward Syria, Yemen, Lebanon or Iraq, the political situation is at best unstable and worst catastrophic. Regardless the bilateral relation with Iran, whether one considers it as a friend or an adversary, Tehran is undoubtedly an important regional actor. Hence, it will naturally play an incremental role in the regional dynamics and could be perceived as part of the solution or part of the problem. Considering the important security issues related to the Iranian ballistic program, a more pragmatic American approach, far from emotions and ideology, is urgently needed. Can Donald Trump dare such approach?

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<sup>5</sup>Barack Obama's 2016 state of the union address, available from <http://time.com/4501910/president-obama-united-nations-speech-transcript/>, accessed on the 27<sup>th</sup> December 2017 at 10h50.

<sup>6</sup>GERANMAYEH, Ellie, the coming clash: Why Iran will divide Europe from the United States, Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations, 25<sup>th</sup> October 2017. A document accessed from the website [http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/why\\_iran\\_will\\_divide\\_europe\\_from\\_the\\_united\\_states\\_7230](http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/why_iran_will_divide_europe_from_the_united_states_7230) on the 26<sup>th</sup> December 2017.

<sup>7</sup>IRISH, John, Despite EU caution, France pursues tough line on Iran missile program, *Op. Cit.*

<sup>8</sup>TIEZZI, Shannon, *What Did China Bring to the Iran Talks? How China, as one of the seven main negotiating parties, approached the Iran talks*, The Diplomat, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2015. A document accessed from

<https://thediplomat.com/2015/07/what-did-china-bring-to-the-iran-talks/>, on 24<sup>th</sup> December 2017 at 12h15.

<sup>9</sup>SLAVIN, Barbara, The Iran Stalemate and the Need for Strategic Patience, Atlantic Council, The South Asia Center, November 2010. Accessed from [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/123729/ACUS\\_IranIBNov10.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/123729/ACUS_IranIBNov10.pdf) on the 20<sup>th</sup> December 2017 at 14h29.