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**Can 2021 be the year Iran and the GCC States  
engage in dialogue?  
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## **Can 2021 be the year Iran and the GCC States engage in dialogue? Mehran Haghiri**

### *Geopolitical Developments*

Trump's defeat in the November presidential elections in the U.S. has once again initiated a major shift in the Persian Gulf region. Recent developments surrounding the three-and-a-half-year long blockade of Qatar signal that those shifts are already occurring in the region. Easing tensions and reassessing relations with Iran should be next on the foreign policy agendas of the Arab monarchies making up the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

There are at least four major developments that have either occurred in the recent past, or will in the near future, which increase the urgency and possibility of dialogue between Iran and GCC member states. These include Biden's victory in the US presidential elections, and the Maximum Pressure campaign's failure to isolate and weaken Iran, the likely resurrection of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and the June 2021 presidential elections in Iran. The consequences of these developments have either manifested themselves already or will be clearer in the near future.

### *Trump's Defeat and the Start of a New Era*

The United States is once again a key player in the shifts occurring in the Persian Gulf. In 2015, it was President Obama's policies that led to the JCPOA, and it was he who [advised](#) that

Saudi Arabia and other GCC states should "share the region with Iran." In 2017, it was President Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign which inhibited the actual implementation of those policy changes and set-in motion a series of new geopolitical shifts in the region. Now, reaching 2021, the victory of Joe Biden in the November presidential elections in the US has yet again sparked a turning point that despite being counter to the Trump administration's main principles, it is not, and cannot be, similar to the policies during the end of the Obama administration either.

Biden will come to office facing a completely different political landscape and a whole set of new issues in the region. He has [vowed](#) to return Washington to the JCPOA and has [threatened](#) to make Saudi Arabia "the pariah that they are," completely opposite positions on two important issues that have guided the US' Middle East policy in the past four years.

Albeit for different reasons, the leaders of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) did not celebrate Trump's electoral defeat last month. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain were heavily invested in the Trump administration's Middle East policies. The UAE, on the other hand, has managed to find the balance of having working ties with both political parties in Washington. Qatar did not wish for the continuation of Trump's approach to the region, especially given Trump's [role](#) on the imposition of the blockade. Oman and Kuwait also welcome the end of the

Trump era because Muscat and Kuwaiti City too prefer less tension, instability, and uncertainty in their neighborhood.

### *Failure of the Maximum Pressure Campaign*

Trump's "maximum pressure" agenda toward the Islamic Republic failed in at least three regards. First, it did not curtail Iran's regional influence. Second, it did not succeed in rallying the entire region against Iran. Third, it did not lead to the Islamic Republic's collapse. Because it can be presumed that these three goals of the maximum pressure campaign were part of what aligned Saudi, Bahraini and Emirati interests with the Trump Administration, a reassessment of policies is only natural with Trump's defeat. The talks about a partial end to the blockade on Qatar illustrates that these reassessments are already taking place.

Some of the [demands](#) of the blockading states were related to Doha's relations with Iran, which included closing the Iranian diplomatic missions in Qatar, cutting off military and intelligence cooperation with Iran, and limiting trade and commerce with Iran. The ironic issue with these demands was that some of the other GCC states, including [Oman](#) and the [UAE \(especially Dubai\)](#), had, and continue to have much more significant diplomatic, economic, and even military ties with Iran. Now that the blockade is about to (partially) end without even considering these demands, it can be inferred that the quartet's anti-Iran policies have failed in this regard as well.

The Middle East Strategic Alliance also failed. Ever since the

Trump administration assumed the White House and officially withdrew from the JCPOA, there was an effort to establish an "Arab NATO" to directly deal with Iran. At the sidelines of the 2018 United Nations General Assembly in New York, Secretary Mike Pompeo met with his counterparts from the six GCC countries, plus Egypt and Jordan to promote MESA's establishment and released a [statement](#) claiming that "all participants agreed on the need to confront threats from Iran directed at the region and the United States." In the two years since, some countries left the group, no actual coordination took place, and in the [words](#) of Biden's nominee for Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, the dreams of establishing an Arab NATO proved to be a "hollow enterprise."

Although some analysts view it as an actual thirst for war, the recent normalization of relations between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain could also signify an appetite for peace. Joining a nominal alliance against Iran could have been among the reasons behind Bahrain's decision. However, the Bahraini Foreign Minister, Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani, [said](#) during his speech at the 2020 Manama Dialogue that "the new cooperation with Israel is not reactive to any threat nor targeted against any country," instead, "it is a proactive move intended to help consolidate security, stability and prosperity for the entire Middle East."

The officialization of UAE-Israel relations cannot be seen as solely targeted at Iran either. The UAE has, for some time, [attempted](#) to ease its tensions with Iran, and has, for example, [provided](#) humanitarian aid to Iran during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, having relations with Israel is not

necessarily an impediment of having cordial ties with the Islamic Republic. This move most be viewed as part of Abu Dhabi's bold, yet adventurous, foreign policy.

### *Reviving the JCPOA*

The primary supposed worry of some GCC states in 2021 is the US returning back to the JCPOA soon after Biden's inauguration. As they did in the 2013-2015 period, some leaders in the GCC are concerned about the ways in which a détente between Iran and the US would change the regional balance of power. Some have [argued](#) that the GCC states should have a seat at the table of any renewed negotiations over the JCPOA, or that possible future negotiations should include Iran's missile development and actions in the region.

But the JCPOA was an agreement solely on the nuclear issue, and what Iran (was supposed to have) received in exchange was also only related to sanctions on Iran's nuclear program—not non-nuclear issues. Moreover, any agreement on these other issues should be settled separately and, indeed, in an inclusive regional format. Such an agreement must be between Iran, the six GCC states, plus Iraq, and possibly Yemen. With regard to the JCPOA, however, one can predict that the posturing of some of these states will once again change, as they did in 2015 after the Camp David [summit](#), and they will eventually welcome an agreement that resolves the concerns over the Iranian nuclear program.

### *Iran's June 2021 Presidential Elections*

Iran's June 2021 presidential elections will be yet another important leadership change in the region. With the end of Rouhani's presidency approaching, much has been anticipated of Iran's political future, mostly assuming that a 'hardliner' or 'conservative' will win in the upcoming elections. Regardless, however, the end of Rouhani and Zarif's diplomatic outreach and global engagement efforts should be concerning for all, and to not take advantage of dealing with a willing partner at an opportune time would be a mistake.

While reaching a comprehensive agreement might not be possible in the coming months, laying the foundation and initiating dialogue with the current Iranian diplomatic team is in the interest of all parties involved, especially since all states have, in one way or another, expressed their interest in resolving the geopolitical tensions.

### *Moving Forward*

One way to initiate dialogue between all parties involved is for Oman or Kuwait to work in tandem with the UN Secretary General and to utilize the platforms available to him and the UN more broadly, as argued in a [separate piece](#).

Reconfiguration of the current geopolitical situation is inevitable. The benefits of taking advantage of this opening for diplomacy and dialogue far exceed the current disastrous situation in the region or the possibility of further heightened hostilities in the near future.

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