

Donald Trump and the Iran Nuclear Deal: what is the future of the deal? A key issue concerning worldwide security

Anis Ghet *

Keywords: United States, Donald Trump, Iran, Nuclear Deal, Middle East.

Abstract

Withdrawing from international agreements and criticizing them were perhaps the most significant aspects of former President Donald Trump's administration, as it put the international community in the middle of global dilemmas by challenging international resolutions, references, and efforts, moreover, it also reflected poorly on the global nation's confidence towards US foreign policy. This article identifies and analyzes the most critical stages of the United States' decision to withdraw from the Iran nuclear agreement within the Trump era, including its current international ramifications, all of which have recognized Iran's commitment to the agreement, and thus the risk of destabilizing regional security and stability, along with increasing the pace of the nuclear race, taking into consideration the development of the Iran nuclear program since then.

Introduction

Since the mid-1980s, Israel, the United States, and other Western powers have accused Iran of pursuing the development of nuclear capabilities for

* Ph.D student at National University of Political Studies and Public Administration.

military purposes. Iranian officials have categorically denied the allegations, saying their nuclear program was designed for civilian purposes only. The spiral of accusations, on the one hand, and denials, on the other, intensified at the beginning of the 21st century with the discovery of previously unknown Iranian nuclear activities. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the European Union (EU) have been involved in lengthy negotiations with Iran to ensure compliance with the commitments of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). In short, the Iranian case was one of the most serious challenges of the NPT protocol.

For two decades, Iran has invested substantial human and financial resources in its nuclear program. In addition to relying on foreign technology, materials, and equipment, Iran has also developed indigenous nuclear expertise. This technological know-how could not only be taken from Iran. At the time, it was very likely that Iran would maintain a certain level of nuclear infrastructure. On the other hand, the decision-makers of the great powers considered that a strategy that could successfully address Iran's nuclear ambitions would have to address both supplier issues and the needs of the nuclear equation. Putting pressure on foreign governments and companies to end their cooperation with Tehran was not enough. Iran's security issues also needed to be addressed. Improving the security environment in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East would have substantially reduced Tehran's incentives to exercise its nuclear capabilities. Such an approach required close cooperation between all major global powers - the United States, the EU, Russia, and China.

Although there were differences between international intelligence agencies regarding the state of Iran's nuclear development, the fact that Iran had

not yet developed a nuclear weapon was a common denominator. Thus, despite the rhetoric, Western decision-makers considered it time to reach a compromise. A satisfactory and peaceful agreement with Tehran would have improved the security environment in the Middle East and strengthened the global non-proliferation regime.

But the road to the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed on July 14, 2015, in Vienna, would be long and difficult, with the main obstacles coming mainly from Washington, in the first stage, combined with the ambitions of ultra-conservative leaders in Tehran.

In the context of the early 21st century, the Bush administration was ready to take preemptive action against a regime considered threatening, so Iranian mullahs, who knew that the United States had significant military capability capable of destroying Iranian nuclear facilities in less than 48 hours, they had become concerned. Washington was also feeling uneasy, especially in the absence of any signs of change in Tehran's nuclear policy. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the small Gulf states, but especially Israel, were the regional players who expected certain security guarantees from the US administration. Regardless of the guarantees offered by the American security umbrella, the full development of Iran's nuclear program could have threatened Europe, Russia, and even the United States in the end.

In light of these considerations, it was becoming increasingly clear that steps needed to be taken to slow down, or even stop Iran's nuclear program. After long negotiations and an extremely difficult journey, in 2015, during the Obama administration, the JCPOA was signed in Vienna. This article presents a cursory foundation to the history of the Iranian nuclear program, continuing

with an overview of the US-Iran relationship, including the prospects for this relationship during the new administration.

Barack Obama has built a strategy for the Middle East designed to repair the damage done during George W. Bush's presidency. The United States wanted to rest a fatigued army, rebuild its diminished force, and provide political flexibility to confront long-term concerns. To that end, it has reduced troops in Iraq, avoided further large-scale military intervention, called on the Allies to take more responsibility for regional security, and for the most part sought to address diplomatic issues. He used a combination of commitment and sanctions to induce Iran to cease its nuclear weapons and sought to promote peace between Israelis and Palestinians, approaches approved by the international community - including a two-state solution, flexibility on the status of East Jerusalem, and stopping the expansion of Israeli settlements on Palestinian territory. Contrary to allies such as Saudi Arabia, Obama has also encouraged democratic reforms in the region, albeit inconsistently and with little success, and has clearly avoided favoring any part of the Sunni-Shiite division.

Donald Trump has adopted a different approach, as he pledged throughout the 2016 campaign. Certainly, there were concerns about continuity. The president encouraged allies to accept more of the regional security burden and resisted the temptation to deploy a significant amount of soldiers to Syria and other areas, as well as Obama, supporting Saudi Arabia's involvement in Yemen. From a critical standpoint, he deviated from his predecessor's policies. Relations with Riyadh have improved tremendously since the Obama administration when the US and Saudi administrations were at the edge. Similarly, improving ties with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who

suffered during Obama's tenure, was a priority. Trump withdrew from the 2015 agreement to reduce Iran's nuclear weapons - officially known as the JCPOA - and reinstated sanctions on Tehran. President Trump has refused to recognise Iran's commitment to the nuclear agreement, calling it among the worst deals in US history and emphasizing that Tehran is not honoring its commitments, and he has ordered the US Treasury to put penalties on the Revolutionary Guard. According to him, the US President has revealed a policy to deal with Iranian actions, including working with US partners to fight Tehran's disruptive and terrorist-supporting operations in the area, as well as imposing additional sanctions on the regime to eliminate its terrorist financing.¹

A summary overview of events

On July 14, 2015, Iran reached a historic agreement with six major global states to freeze the progress of its nuclear program, following a decade of constant expansion and years of negotiations. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) remarkably decreased Iran's recognized nuclear potential in exchange for embargo reassurance. Under the provisions of the deal, Iran has agreed to remove thousands of uranium-enriching centrifuges, ship tons of low-enriched uranium to Russia, demolish the core of a heavy water reactor capable of producing plutonium, and reconfigure the reactor to produce less plutonium. If Iran hadn't taken unlawful actions, it might have built the fuel for a nuclear weapon in as short as a few months before the agreement. Additionally, Iran has

¹ *OUTLAW REGIME: A CHRONICLE OF IRAN'S DESTRUCTIVE ACTIVITIES* 2020 Edition, Iran Action Group - U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, accessed January 3, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Outlaw-Regime-2020-A-Chronicle-of-Irans-Destabilizing-Activity.pdf>

claimed that it will not expand its capacity far off its contemporaneous stage for at least a decade.

Iran alongside the P5+1 (France, United Kingdom, Germany, Russia, China, and the United States) signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a 159-page agreement with five annexes.² On July 20, 2015, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 2231³, endorsing the nuclear deal. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) verifies Iran's compliance with the JCPOA's nuclear-related clauses in accordance with the agreement's conditions. The agreement's main objective is to decrease Iran's nuclear program and strengthen surveillance in exchange for relief from nuclear sanctions. Prior to it, Iran had spent more than two decades attempting to obtain the technology to develop nuclear weapons. Although it was unclear if Tehran would have made the ultimate choice to manufacture nuclear weapons, it had developed several technologies, including uranium enrichment, warhead design, and delivery systems, that would allow it to do so in a relatively short period of time. Tehran insists that its nuclear program is absolutely peaceful. Years of controversy and international action around Iran's nuclear program culminated in the JCPOA. When an exiled Iranian resistance group announced the existence of two nuclear sites in the summer of 2002, international interest in Iran soared. Within a year, the world realized that Iran had created or was in the process of creating everything required to manufacture enriched uranium, which could be used to fuel nuclear weapons as well as nuclear reactors. A uranium mine in Saghand, a

² *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action*, Vienna, 14 July 2015, accessed January 5, 2022, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/122460/full-text-of-the-iran-nuclear-deal.pdf>

³ *Resolution 2231 on Iran Nuclear Issue*, Adopted by the Security Council at its 7488th meeting, on 20 July 2015, accessed January 5, 2022, <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2231>

yellow cake production plant near Ardakan, a prototype uranium enrichment plant at Natanz, and a commercial-scale enrichment facility on the same site were among the sites. Furthermore, Iran was continuing construction on a 1,000-megawatt nuclear reactor at Bushehr and was constructing a heavy water production plant at Arak, next to which Iran planned to construct a 40-megawatt heavy water reactor.⁴ Succeeding allegations that Iran had obscured nuclear enlargement from the Agency, the IAEA started evaluating Iranian nuclear formerly in 2003. The IAEA was in charge of monitoring and verifying the JCPOA's nuclear-related clauses.

Iran has long argued that its nuclear program is benign, legal, and sanctioned by its status as a non-nuclear-weapon state under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which grants its signatories the ability to produce nuclear energy for peaceful purposes⁵. The US, on the other hand, claimed that Iran has no need for nuclear energy and that its civilian energy program is really a cover for the development of nuclear weapons. The JCPOA deviates from this position by permitting Iran to establish a commercial-scale uranium enrichment program after the first ten years of the agreement.

The JCPOA in Trump's Era

The initial attempts made by former president Barack Obama, who took office in 2009, to alter U.S.-Iranian ties were ineffective, owing chiefly to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's, refusal to negotiate with the US.

⁴ Congressional Research Service, *Iran's Nuclear Program*, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/nuke/RL34544.pdf>, pp. 17-20.

⁵ *Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)*, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt/text>

Obama also formed an international coalition to counter Iran's nuclear aspirations, leading a series of multilateral and unilateral economic sanctions against the country. Meanwhile, Obama launched backchannel discussions through Omani mediators, which resulted in the signature of the nuclear deal in 2015. However, it was not until Hassan Rouhani, Iran's president since 2013, and the development of pragmatic forces in the same year that Obama discovered a pro-engagement administration in Tehran. Iranians elected Rouhani's reformist supporters to the Majlis in 2016, reinforcing his pro-engagement agenda with the West.

From 2013 to 2016, there was still a positive tone in US-Iranian relations, reminiscent of the Clinton era, when both Obama and Rouhani acknowledged the importance of direct connection. This recognition created a little window of opportunity for the nations to directly interact at the highest standards, which helped to reduce tensions between them. The significance of Rouhani's pragmatic approach toward Iran's international relations, as well as Obama's recognition that Iran could not be dismissed from regional considerations, should not be underestimated in this context. Obama's departure, on the other hand, crushed prospects for closer ties between the two capitals.

Donald Trump's presidency began at a time when Tehran and Washington were implicitly coordinating in the battle against ISIS, and the Iran nuclear agreement had reduced the risk of a regional conflict in the Middle East. Nonetheless, citing the agreement's flaws, the Trump administration withdrew unilaterally from it and re-imposed economic sanctions on Iran in pursuit of an improved deal. Thus far, the enhanced interrogation of the Iranian economy has

not only failed to achieve its intended aims, but has rather exacerbated the Middle East's instability and fueled Iran's nuclear program.

Both Republican and Democratic presidents of the United States have attempted to reach out to Tehran for a strategic opening during the previous four decades. It indicates that US-Iran relations are out of pace, in the context that American presidents seeking to build bridges with Iran have indeed been hindered by the policies of their predecessors, who advocated a more confrontational stance. Furthermore, it appears that Washington's Iran advocates, who embrace a vision of US-Iranian relations, are supporting their ideological allies in Iran in controlling the few elected bodies of the Iranian polity, making relaxation of strained relations even less probable. This helps to explain why Iran and the United States are trapped in a vicious loop of squandered opportunities.

Since the Trump administration announced its withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018, Iranian officials have persistently opposed renegotiating the agreement or adopting a new treaty. Tehran has also made its continuing commitment to the JCPOA contingent on receiving benefits from the other JCPOA parties, known as the P4+1. Mohammad Javad Zarif, an Iranian government minister, stated on May 10, 2018, that in order for the deal to proceed, the remaining JCPOA participants, and thus the international community, must completely ensure that Iran is unconditionally repaid through appropriate national, regional, and global measures.⁶ He continued by stating that Iran decided to use the JCPOA mechanism, the Joint Commission

⁶ Letter dated 11 May 2018 from the Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General, General Assembly Security Council, accessed January 12, 2022, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2018_453.pdf

established by the agreement, to seek solutions to the United States' multiple cases of serious non-performance and illegal withdrawal, as well as to determine whether and how the remaining JCPOA participants and other economic partners can ensure that the Iranian people receive the full benefits which they are entitled to derive from this global diplomatic accomplishment. Before the JCPOA, Tehran also committed to rebuild and relaunch the country's nuclear projects. Numerous sessions of the Joint Commission convened under the JCPOA following the US pullout did not contribute to a firm Iranian commitment to the accord. Tehran claims that the other JCPOA signatories' efforts are insufficient to preserve the agreement's benefits for Iran. Iran stated in letters to the opposite JCPOA participants on May 8, 2019, that as of that day, Tehran has suspended some JCPOA actions, however, the regime stressed that it was not resigning from the accord. Iranian officials expressly said that the government will not remove low-enriched uranium (LEU) or deuterium oxide from the country in aim to maintain stockpiles below the JCPOA-mandated limitations. According to a press release published by Iran's Supreme National Security Council on May 8, 2019, Iran is no longer committed to adhering to the JCPOA-mandated constraints on LEU and moderator stocks.⁷

Beginning in July 2019, the International Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed that certain of Iran's nuclear operations exceeded the JCPOA's specified limitations and the Iranian government has subsequently expanded the amount of such activities. Consistent with IAEA reports, Iran has violated JCPOA-mandated restrictions on its moderator stockpile, the amount of

⁷ *Iran Sanctions*, Congressional Research Service, accessed January 12, 2022, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/RS20871.pdf>

centrifuges installed in Iran's pilot enrichment facility, Iran's LEU stockpile, and also the percentage of the key fissile isotope uranium within the LEU. Furthermore, Tehran is engaging in JCPOA-prohibited research and development, likewise as centrifuge manufacture, and has begun enriching uranium at its Fordow enrichment plant.⁸ Towards a January 5, 2020 announcement, the Iranian government declared the fifth and last stage in decreasing Tehran's JCPOA obligations, stating that Tehran will put aside the ultimate operational limits under the JCPOA, which is the restriction on the quantity of centrifuges. The statement made no specific adjustments to Iran's nuclear program, although the phrase restrictions might relate to the JCPOA-mandated limits on installed centrifuges at the country's commercial enrichment plan. Iran has not breached these restrictions, in keeping with a March report from the IAEA Director General consistent with the January 5 release, if that sanctions are lifted and Iran benefits from the JCPOA, Iran is able to resume its responsibilities under the deal. During a speech on May 6, Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, described Tehran's actions as a withdrawal from the government's JCPOA commitments on an equal scale.⁹ He further said that if the US and the P5+1 can uphold their full commitments under the JCPOA, Iran would return to the agreement on the same day. According to a May 6 report, Iran's Permanent Representative to the IAEA, Kazem Gharibabdi, declared that if the US and P4+1 proceed to act in a manner that undermines the JCPOA, Iran may limit or terminate its cooperation with the IAEA.

⁸ *The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance*, accessed January 16, 2022, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/JCPOA-at-a-glance>

⁹ *President Rouhani Warns the U.S. of 'Historic Regret' if President Trump Exits the Iran Nuclear Deal*, accessed January 16, 2022: <https://time.com/5267433/donald-trump-iran-nuclear-deal-regret-rouhani/>

According to news reports and US authorities in early December 2019, Iran was delivering short-range missiles to allied troops inside Iraq. In mid-December 2019, a series of fire assaults targeted Iraqi military installations where US soldiers are stationed. Secretary Pompeo responded by stating, "We must also use this as an opportunity to inform Iran's leaders that any assaults by them, or their proxies of any type, that hurt Americans, our friends, or our interests are going to be met with a forceful U.S. reaction."¹⁰ A rocket strike on a base in Kirkuk in northern Iraq on December 27, 2019, killed a US contractor and injured four US service personnel and two Iraqi military members. Two days later, the US launched retaliatory strikes on five facilities employed by the Iran-backed Iraqi armed organization Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), a US-designated Foreign FTO to whom the incident was ascribed. Abu Mahdi al Muhandis, head of the KH and a key player within the Iraqi-state aligned Popular Mobilization Forces, announced dozens of fighters had been killed or injured and pledged a very harsh retaliation to US forces in Iraq.

When Trump followed through on a vow to withdraw the US from the 2015 international deal limiting Iran's uranium enrichment program in May 2018, Tehran first reacted with strategic patience. However, when European efforts to keep the agreement afloat failed to provide any relief from the US' "highest pressure" viewpoint, and as Washington's approach became progressively antagonistic, Iran reversed its manners.

Starting in early 2019, Iran progressively revealed a series of what it called reversible violations of its nuclear accord obligations, such as exceeding limits on

¹⁰ Pompeo warns of 'decisive US response' if Iran harms US troops or allies, accessed January 16, 2022, <https://www.militarytimes.com/newsletters/daily-news-roundup/2019/12/13/pompeo-warns-of-decisive-us-response-if-iran-harms-us-troops-or-allies/>

its enriched uranium stockpile and enrichment level. Iran recently terminated its Additional Protocol with the International Atomic Energy Agency, a supplementary agreement that provided the nuclear group of inspectors with even more stringent techniques to monitor every stage of Iran's nuclear program than the agency's core supervisory agreement.

Parallel to this willingness to establish pressure on the Trump administration over the nuclear deal, Iran began to elevate military tensions with the United States in mid-2019. Following a series of raids on oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman that was blamed on Tehran, Iranian soldiers shot down a pilotless US drone that they claimed was flying on Iranian territory. Later that year, the US and Saudi Arabia accused Iran of attacking Saudi oil facilities using a drone and cruise missile.

In early January 2020, the events escalated. Following a string of violent incidents in Iraq involving Iranian-backed Shiite militias and US forces, Trump approved a drone operation that killed Iran's top military commander, General Qassem Soleimani, as he landed in Baghdad. Both parties subsequently backed down from the threat of escalation, but without settling their core disagreements.

Trump's re-imposition of US sanctions on trade with Iran spurred governments and corporations from Europe to the Asian area to divide connections with Tehran, demolishing the flood on Iranian oil exports precisely. Iran's social and political tensions have intensified as a result of the country's domestic economic decrease. However, rather than modifying the regime's behavior, greater US pressure appears to have bolstered the power of hardliners in Tehran, who emerged as the biggest winners in the February 2020 parliamentary elections.

Supporters of the Iran nuclear deal in Washington and Europe expected the Biden administration to quickly put the US back into compliance with the agreement by eliminating unilateral sanctions, while also holding follow-up dialogues to address Iran's missile program and regional behavior. However, discussions in Vienna to revive the JCPOA have been more challenging than expected, even as opponents of the accord in the US and Iran—as well as Israel, which has been embroiled in what amounts to a low-level covert war with Iran over the last year—consider their alternatives. And the outcome of Iran's presidential election in June 2020, which was won by conservative hardliner Ebrahim Raisi, has already created fresh obstacles.

The weakening of US-Iran relations corresponds with Iran and Saudi Arabia's struggle for regional domination, which includes proxy conflicts in Yemen and Syria, along with strategic competition in Lebanon and, more lately, Iraq. Both countries have recently had exploratory talks to calm tensions. Moreover, the Iranian people are increasingly trapped between the pressures of US sanctions and the persecution of an authoritarian regime in Tehran that is eager to expand its power and influence across the region at any cost to its own people.

The Nuclear Deal expectation and posterity after Trump's administration

A new Biden administration will have to confront the country's deep alienation as well as the country's position in foreign affairs. In the case of Iran, there is every reason to assume that a Biden presidency will return to a dialogue-based approach. During his time as vice president, the Iran deal was the

administration's crowning foreign policy achievement. Nevertheless, Biden has stated numerous times that the decision to abandon the agreement was a grievous mistake, and he precisely predicted in 2017 that breaking from the accord would isolate the US rather than Iran.

None of this is to imply that the route to return will be straightforward, and former President Trump has declared unambiguously that it will continue to impose sanctions in order to undermine Biden's ability to return to the deal. With Biden, though, the future of US-Iran relations may resemble the bright days of the JCPOA discussions.

The United States is at a crossroads, much as it was after 9/11, but this time with the added difficulty of an internal test of its democracy. Trump's despicable attempt to destroy the fundamental foundations of American democracy reflects his administration's efforts to weaken global diplomacy. The United States will undoubtedly play a significant part in defining this century as the world's main superpower—a status that may be embraced due to its international community's inability to maintain the US accountable for its actions.

The success or failure of the JCPOA, the framework of which is still in place and which Iran has already communicated to President-elect Biden, will define US-Iran relations in the next years. Biden is now required to choose between a path of peace and diplomacy and one of turmoil and aggression. How he decides to go with Iran might serve as a paradigm for US leadership in general, as well as the future of the global partnership.

The United States may either use its influence to lead the world into a new age of global cooperation and human relationships that acknowledge and combat existential threats such as climate change and nuclear proliferation, or it

can continue to flaunt its power and create more conflict. Without a significant adjustment in approach toward Iran, the risk of another catastrophic confrontation grows exponentially. One thing is certain: the entrance of a Biden administration brought renewed hope for political negotiations and stability.

The Biden administration took over an escalating and difficult bilateral relationship with Iran. For the past two years, Iran's military forces and affiliated militias have sought to disrupt global energy supplies, have assaulted Saudi Arabia with cruise missiles and drones, and therefore have relied on Iraqi militias to obstruct US military operations. The Biden administration has a motivation to end the cycle, it is however under pressure to impose significant costs on Iran in terms of maintaining deterrence. This strategy is founded on the premise that military strength may impose costs, preventing Tehran from using the approach to ensure its geopolitical interests.

To successfully prevent, the United States must acknowledge that its weapon of persuasive credibility, including the political restrictions placed on the use of force, are insufficient to dissuade Iran from taking coercive measures. The US will neither undertake a land war in Iran nor will it unleash the type of air attack necessary to seriously affect the Islamic Republic's military. Instead, Washington has chosen restrictions, which do inflict a cost on the Iranian government but have a poor track record of influencing Iranian activity, whether it is related to its nuclear program or domestic politics. By pursuing Soleimani for the operations of a militia he indirectly controlled, the Trump administration sought to enhance the legitimacy of US intervention by overtly associating Iran to its affiliates in Iraq. This operation definitely had an impact on Iranian authorities, however, the strike actually occurred within Iraq, and the US did

nothing after the IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) fired missiles at American forces. This self-imposed restriction means that the United States will not expand its operations inside Iran. Up to this point, the Biden presidency has adopted a similar strategy: striking a target in Syria in response to an attack in Iraq that is associated to Iran and therefore does not originate in Iraq. This policy is more conservative than the ones pursued by Trump, owing to the fact that previous assaults within Iraq led in significant domestic opposition to US soldiers, and the current administration would prefer to preserve a US and allied presence to build strength Iraqi Security Forces.¹¹ This policy tries to reduce Iranian influence by establishing more professional institutions within Iraq, rather than adopting steps that would incite pro-Iranian political elements who would take any chance to encourage the civilian government to expel US soldiers from the nation.

The Iranians have not retreated particularly in the face of these attempts. Instead, its military units and militias responded to the Biden team's operation with their own military strike on an Israeli ship in the Gulf of Oman, an escalation in the launch of ballistic missiles against Saudi Arabia from Yemeni bases, and the most recent rocket attack in Iraq. Tehran has projected that Washington would not hit targets in Tehran, therefore any of that kind operation, however improbable, would be limited in scope and would not culminate in the removal of the regime's fundamental foundations. Iran can reduce this risk by acting directly, through intermediaries, or by refusing to take attribution for its military activities. Finally, this approach is two-tiered. Iran's assaults on Saudi

¹¹ *U.S. airstrikes target Iran-backed militias in Syria in Biden's 1st military action*, accessed February 15, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/syria-us-airstrikes-iranian-militia-target/>

Arabia are intended to intimidate a regional US partner in exchange for Riyadh's support for Washington, and perhaps to demonstrate to Riyadh that Washington is not a reliable ally. The goal is to separate Riyadh from Washington, granting Iran more power to drive Washington out of the region and then deal with the Gulf Arab governments from a position of strength. As Iran's confrontational conduct grows, Gulf Arab nations' ties to Washington have only grown stronger, despite the region's monarchs' dissatisfaction with the current status quo.

Given this premise, and assuming that Washington's coercive strength is inadequate to enforce a regime-threatening expense on Iran, the United States should explore an alternative solution. In the lack of genuine coercive authority, Washington should suggest to Tehran that cooperation would be beneficial. This advantage would not need to be complicated, rather, it should focus on the fundamental assumption of the nuclear deal: sanctions relief. This plan would prioritize returning to the JCPOA as a means of de-escalating tensions with Iran. It would prepare the path for Iran to comply with a succession of nuclear agreements, exploit the decrease in tensions to promote regional security and offer Iran an opportunity for positive conduct. To do this, Washington must emphasize direct, bilateral talks with Iran.

It is almost certain that in response to the current rocket attack, the desire for military action will increase, and debates will actually occur on where and whose groups to aim. These disagreements are over strategy and will not decide Iranian action in the future. A successful strategy must outline the real benefits of de-escalation, rather than attempting to prove that such action would keep the country safe from attack, as well as provide the foundation for reciprocal advantages from further cooperation. This is how to effectively discourage, and it

is essential to bring this technique in an attempt to terminate the tit-for-tat loop, which serves neither party.

Conclusions

The JCPOA is a historic deal aimed at limiting Tehran's expanding nuclear program. Iran, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia, and China signed the agreement in 2015. The agreement was attacked by US Middle East partners, notably Gulf Arab nations and Israel, who voiced dissatisfaction with the fact that they were not contacted or included in the discussions. These states have remained staunchly opposed to the accord. The agreement focuses on important parts of Iran's nuclear program in order to limit its nuclear capabilities and cut the time it would take Iran to obtain a nuclear weapon to at least one year.

The JCPOA has three major criticisms. First, under the accord, Iran kept the freedom to pursue centrifuge research and development. Second, the agreement exempted Tehran from sanctions aimed at its missile program, regional actions, and nuclear advancement. The JCPOA exclusively addressed the nuclear program, neglecting the other two issues. Finally, various aspects of the agreement contained sunset provisions ranging from six to thirteen years, making it far from a permanent solution.

On May 8, four years ago, Donald Trump officially resigned from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also referred to as the Iran nuclear deal, while reiterating that it is US policy that Iran be refused a nuclear weapon

and intercontinental ballistic missiles. Since then, the Trump Administration has unilaterally re-imposed devastating sanctions on Iran, antagonizing our friends by requiring them to cooperate or suffer financial isolation. They have also sacrificed precious time by seeking to unravel the Iran nuclear deal rather than engaging in diplomacy to address its concerns. Currently, the United States is rushing to react to the impending expiration of a United Nations (UN) weapons embargo related to the nuclear accord.

In retribution for the Trump Administration's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA, Iran moved back from compliance one year later — beginning in May 2019 — and the allies have rejected demands to punish Iran for its genuine concerns. Because of the Trump Administration's actions, Iran's closeness to nuclear weapon capability has progressively risen, and Iran is now around six months away from possessing enough weapons-grade fissile material for a nuclear weapon. Iran was approximately a year away from reaching that milestone when President Trump entered office. Fundamentally, the Trump Administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA and "maximum pressure" campaign have not forged ahead of the US any far from its disclosed purposes.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated during a discussion of the Trump administration's stance toward Iran that the US will "ensure Iran will have no route to a nuclear weapon - not for now, not really ever."¹² There are two methods for obtaining weapons-grade fissile material for a nuclear weapon: enriching uranium-235 to 90% purity or higher and separating plutonium. The JCPOA prohibited Iran from enriching uranium above 3.67 percent until 2030,

¹² *After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy*, accessed February 18, 2022, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/event/after-the-deal-new-iran-strategy>

but Iran is enriching uranium to higher purity and growing its stockpile in reaction to US breaches.¹³

The JCPOA also prevented Iran from accumulating plutonium. This was especially significant because plutonium is the favored fissile material of the other nuclear-armed powers. Surprisingly, the Trump Administration clearly values the JCPOA's plutonium-related constraints, since it frequently grants exemptions to the United Kingdom and China to modernize Iran's heavy water reactor at Arak. The Arak reactor, as originally planned, might have produced enough plutonium from spent fuel to power one or two nuclear weapons each year.

"Once the time on the agreement's validity conditions expires, Iran will be liberated to race to the bomb, igniting a potentially deadly armaments race in the area," Secretary Pompeo said.¹⁴ First of all, Iran will never be free to seek nuclear weapons as long as it is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The NPT was the legal basis for the sanctions that brought Iran to the bargaining table in the first place. Second, Iran is now following the IAEA's Additional Protocol, which considerably improves international nuclear inspectors' ability to hunt for covert projects. According to the rules of the JCPOA, Iran is expected to ratify the Additional Protocol indefinitely in 2023. Furthermore, if the Trump administration was concerned about the JCPOA's fixed terms clauses, attempting to modify the deal appears to be less difficult than tearing it down and beginning again. Because Egypt, Iran, and Israel are all

¹³ IAEA Report on Iran Raises Serious Concerns About Monitoring, accessed February 18, 2022, <https://www.armscontrol.org/blog/2021-09-08/iaea-report-iran-raises-serious-concerns>

¹⁴ *After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy*, accessed February 21, 2022, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/event/after-the-deal-new-iran-strategy>

parties to the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, the Trump administration might have pushed for discussions on a testing embargo or regional accession to the treaty. Either choice would have reduced the region's proliferation dangers.

The Trump Administration's last criticism of the JCPOA served even less to address Iran's continued development of ballistic and cruise missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons. While the JCPOA was mainly focused on Iran's nuclear program, UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which approves and aids in the implementation of the JCPOA, directs Iran not to engage in any activity linked to ballistic missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons until 2023.¹⁵ Iran's compliance with this condition is questionable, despite the fact that it is not legally enforceable, but the Trump Administration did not pursue discussions to address its concerns.

It is significant that the first successful launch of a military satellite by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, rather than the Iranian Space Agency, occurred. As a consequence, Israel and India, both nuclear-armed states, relocated technology from civilian space projects to missiles, thus these achievements should be monitored closely. The United States' efforts to retain the UN arms embargo in place, on the other hand, enhance the deterrent logic of Iran's missile program in the first place. That shouldn't be the purpose of a regime that constantly proclaims Iran's largest and most diverse ballistic missile arsenal in the Middle East.

¹⁵ *Resolution 2231 (2015)* Adopted by the Security Council at its 7488th meeting, on 20 July 2015, accessed February 21, 2022, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/unsc_resolution2231-2015.pdf

In 2018, following an extreme intensity strategy, the Trump administration announced the US departure from the JCPOA, as well as the reinstatement of secondary penalties on Iran. The strategy was to force Tehran back to the negotiating table to address US and regional allies' reservations about the JCPOA. Meanwhile, the remaining signatories have attempted to maintain the agreement afloat by pressing the US to rejoin.

Following the withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA in the spring of 2019, Iran began to unilaterally reduce its compliance with key conditions. These infractions have brought Iran closer to attaining a nuclear bomb than when the agreement was reached in 2015. Furthermore, the Islamic Republic has demonstrated little willingness to comply until the US gives the sanctions relief promised in the agreement. Washington, on the other hand, has stated unequivocally that it would not rejoin the pact until Iran returns to full compliance.

The JCPOA's future has also become a key campaign concern in Iran, where voters came out to vote in the country's presidential elections on June 18, 2021. With conservative candidates favored to win, future discussions between Washington and Tehran were anticipated to become more challenging. Iran is unlikely to agree to debate its missile program or regional operations. Even more remarkable, some of the most critical restraints on the nuclear program are expected to lapse shortly. As a result, the United States and its Western allies must reach an agreement on either an extension of the JCPOA or a new framework to limit the nuclear program.

To further complicate matters, other signatories' views on what Washington should do differently. European allies want the US to return to the

agreement, with additional limits agreed upon separately. Moreover, some have claimed that the European Union may be the best contender to coordinate the restart of the JCPOA. Not only might the Union monitor both countries' compliance, but, as some in Iran think, conservative European leaders may persuade US Republicans to join in.

Even though both Russia and China's ties with Tehran have improved in recent years, both insist on keeping Iran's nuclear program under control. Iran cooperated with Russia in the Syrian civil war and opted to extend a 2001 partnership arrangement with Moscow in March 2021. Likewise, a UN arms embargo preventing China and Russia from supplying armaments to the Islamic Republic did expire in October 2020, allowing greater military collaboration.

Significantly, Iran has recently agreed to export oil to China in exchange for enormous economic investments in infrastructure, oil, gas, and petrochemicals. Since this agreement contains no precise figures or guarantees, the actual amount of the committed investment is uncertain. Estimates vary from \$400 billion to \$600 billion, indicating that Iran is striving to diversify its economic and security linkages in the face of ongoing US sanctions.¹⁶

In the Middle East, US allies' responses range from outright antagonism to grudging acceptance of any agreement. Israel is the most firmly opposed, threatening Iran with military action if the US withdraws from the JCPOA in January 2021. American Gulf partners are taking a different approach, expressing a willingness to engage in dialogue to address Tehran's regional operations and missile ambitions. The Abraham Accords also demonstrate how Israel and Arab

¹⁶ *The future of Iran's oil exports to China depends on a change in foreign policy*, accessed February 21, 2022, <https://menaaffairs.com/the-future-of-irans-oil-exports-to-china-depends-on-a-change-in-foreign-policy/>

states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, are struggling to keep the Islamic Republic isolated in the region. Normalization of Israeli-Arab relations implies a shift in perception of the region's main threat, from Israel to Iran.

Not only does Israel oppose the deal and any return to it, but it has also been conducting a "shadow war" against Iran for the previous years. In April 2021, Israel launched a naval offensive against Iranian oil tankers and commercial ships in the Red Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean, establishing a new front in its campaign to destabilize Iran. Other occurrences in 2020 included a gas-tank explosion at the Parchin military facility in July and a bomb explosion six days later at the Natanz complex.

Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, an Iranian scientist widely regarded as the architect of Iran's nuclear program, was assassinated outside of Tehran in November 2020. Iran responds to Israeli strikes in a variety of methods, most of which are covert, but some of which are open, such as the March 2021 missile on an Israeli cargo ship in the Arabian Sea. In April 2021, two claimed Israeli attacks occurred. The first incidence occurred in the Red Sea when an Iranian cargo ship collided with a suspected Israeli mine. The Natanz facility lost power on April 11th as a consequence of a suspected Mossad sabotage attempt. Hundreds of thousands of centrifuges have been damaged or destroyed.

The return to the negotiation table is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to pursue a diplomatic compromise in a region rife with instability and tragedy. However, given the multiple conflicting interests and divisions between the US and Iran, as well as open resistance from domestic actors and Middle Eastern allies, it is evident that the path ahead remains as difficult as ever, if not more so.

As a result, it is critical for the Biden Administration to engage in the present and future dialogues while being fully aware of significant developments since 2015 that are likely to influence the perspectives of participants in the area and inside the US.

Mainly, some argue that, due to a lack of precision and strong pledges, the China-Iran agreement will alter very little in the medium term. However, its timing offers Tehran some leverage and confidence in the continuing Vienna discussions, and it may even embolden hardliners to reject US concessions given in exchange for complete JCPOA compliance.

Furthermore, the Abraham Accords, which formed in the aftermath of the nuclear deal's ramifications, propose to restructure regional objectives and alliances, particularly regarding the Palestine matter. In an attempt to gain importance, the Palestinian Authority announced formerly that parliamentary elections would be held in the summer of 2021. With elections in Syria and Iran, along with post-election drama in Israel and Lebanon, the battle for attention and resources, as well as regional instability, would only going to intensify. Given the transactional character of the treaties and their poor institutional underpinning, it is uncertain how long partnerships between certain Gulf states and Israel will endure and whether they can prosper in the current context.

Moreover, as some have indicated, in order for the JCPOA to survive, the US government should seek opportunities to transform it from a political issue to one viewed through the lens of national-security concerns. Recent ideas include lifting critical sanctions on Iran in order to obtain an economic windfall in Republican districts. While this is unlikely to influence the deal's ardent opponents, it may ensure bipartisan support for a revised final agreement.

Additional settlements on Tehran's missile program or regional measures should be reached independently, with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and those concerned by Iran's activities included.

Finally, one of the most corrosive features of the Trump Administration's legacy is the destruction of US credibility in the region and throughout the world. Allies are eager to give President Joe Biden another opportunity. However, outside of the United States, it is obvious that Trump's actions are not considered an exception. Allies and opponents alike are cautious of striking agreements with Washington for fear that future administrations would renege on their commitments.