

Snapback, Standoff, Strike: Iran's Converging Timelines

LTC René Berendsen, NLD Army (CSAG/CCJ5)

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Key Points

- The convergence of the JCPOA snapback expiration, ongoing U.S.-Iran negotiations, and the possibility of Israeli strikes places the Iran nuclear situation on the verge of a critical turning point.
- The United States, Iran, and other JCPOA participants, need to make a decision that will determine the future of Iran's nuclear program. Each decision leads to various potential scenarios.
- Close coordination between the U.S. and the E3 (France, United Kingdom, Germany) is essential, with both sides sharing precise and up-to-date information about Iran's nuclear progress and the status of negotiations.
- Iran has had multiple opportunities (under the JCPOA and in recent U.S.-Iran talks) to demonstrate compliance with its obligations. If Iran fails to comply, the U.S. and its allies must respond decisively to uphold nonproliferation and regional security.

Introduction

The February 2025 International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report reveals that Iran has intensified its nuclear program, openly violated prior agreements, and severely restricted IAEA monitoring. The IAEA notes that, "the significantly increased production and accumulation of high-enriched uranium by Iran, the only non-nuclear weapon State to produce such nuclear material, is of serious concern."¹

Iran claims its enrichment activities are for peaceful purposes, asserting their legitimacy under international law.² However, this claim is undermined by Iran's lack of transparency, its violations of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and the production of high-enriched uranium far exceeding civilian needs, raising doubts about its intentions.³

As the JCPOA snapback mechanism nears expiration in 2025, the opportunity to reimpose strict UN sanctions on Iran is fading. At the same time, the U.S. is negotiating with Iran to limit its nuclear ambitions, while Israel's warnings of potential military strikes on Iranian nuclear sites heighten tensions.

With Iran closer than ever to developing a nuclear weapon, this convergence of expiring sanctions, ongoing diplomacy, and rising threats creates a critical moment that can lead to multiple scenarios.

The graph on the next page illustrates the events converging in the coming months, each with critical deadlines and decision points.

JCPOA Snapback: This timeline tracks the potential reimposition of UN sanctions on Iran if it violates the 2015 nuclear deal, with a key deadline from August 14, 2025 (last date to call snapback) to October 18, 2025 (termination day). Decision points include, triggering of snapback or acceptance of termination day.

U.S.-Iran Talks: This line depicts ongoing negotiations, aiming for a new nuclear agreement, with a critical 60-day target set by President Trump. Key decision points involve whether the U.S. achieves progress in nuclear negotiations, awaits the outcome of JCPOA snapback, or pursues military action.

Israel Reaction: This timeline highlights Israel's concerns over Iran's nuclear program, with decision points centered on whether Israel pursues military action, especially if talks fail, snapback is not called, or Iran nears weapons-grade enrichment.

Iran Reaction: This tracks Iran's responses, such as accepting a deal with the U.S., complying with the JCPOA, retaliatory use of its proxies or the development of a nuclear weapon.

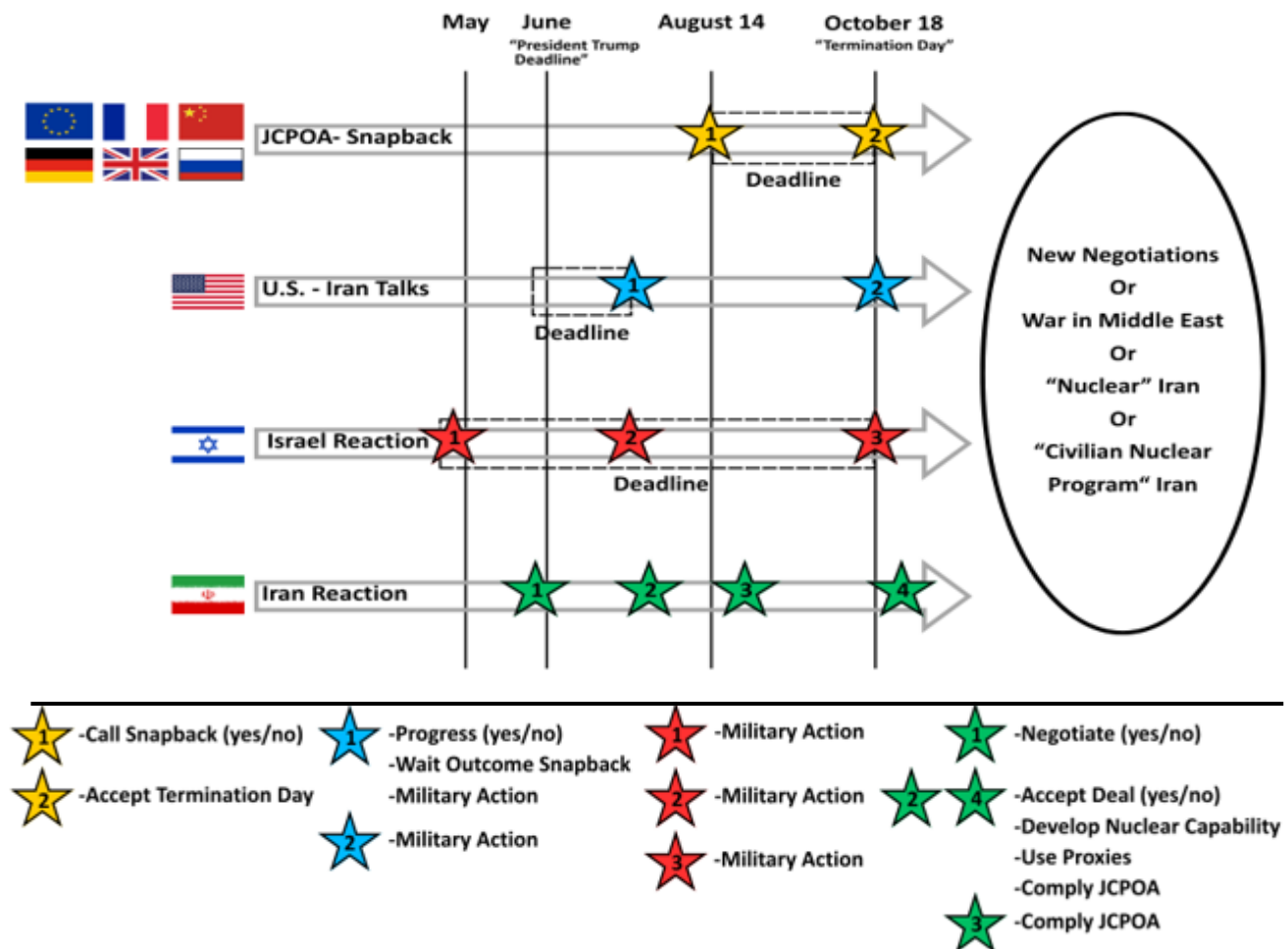


Figure 1. Converging Timelines and Decision Points Actors. Created by Author.

Conditions for Success

Although, success is hard to describe, all ongoing initiatives are focused on a balanced outcome that prevents Iran from achieving nuclear weapons capability, avoiding a regional war, and maintaining diplomatic/international leverage beyond October 2025. More specifically:

- Iran's enrichment is capped below weapons-grade and IAEA monitoring is restored.
- No Israeli/U.S. strikes or Iranian retaliation escalates into a broader conflict involving proxies or Gulf states.

The Converging Timelines

JCPOA Snapback

In 2015, the JCPOA was established to address international concerns about Iran's nuclear program and its potential to develop nuclear weapons. The JCPOA is annexed to the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2231 (2015).⁴ The UNSCR terminated all provisions of previous UNSCR's on the Iranian nuclear issue.

The JCPOA incorporates a "snapback mechanism" that enables its participants (the E3/EU+3 France, Germany, the United Kingdom, China, Russia, and originally the United States) to reinstate UN sanctions on Iran without a veto if Iran significantly violates its commitments.⁵ This mechanism would reinstate prior UNSCRs related to Iran, reimposing measures such as the expired UN arms embargo, which prohibited countries from supplying, selling, or transferring most combat equipment to Iran and barred Iran from exporting weapons.⁶

Snapback would also reinstate provisions that expired in October 2023, which restricted Iran from exporting missiles and drones or engaging in activities related to ballistic missiles designed to deliver nuclear weapons. Additionally, snapback would enforce export controls, travel bans, asset freezes, and other restrictions on individuals, entities, and banks involved in specific Iranian nuclear and missile activities, requiring national governments and the EU to integrate these designations into their laws. Consequently, most of Iran's nuclear activities, including those permitted under the JCPOA, would once again be prohibited. If Iran or any E3/EU+3 country believes the other is not fulfilling its obligations, they can refer the issue to the Joint Commission, initiating the JCPOA's formal dispute resolution process.⁷

In the meantime, Iran is breaching both the JCPOA and Iran's legally binding obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Safeguards Agreement. In December 2024, the E3 notified the UN Security Council of their readiness to activate the snapback mechanism if necessary to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon.⁸ Iran, in response, has threatened to withdraw from the NPT if snapback is triggered. The snapback mechanism is scheduled to expire on October 18, 2025.⁹

According to the February 2025 IAEA report, Iran committed multiple violations including failing to account for undeclared nuclear material and activities at four sites where the IAEA found evidence of past nuclear weapons-related work. Iran's nuclear declarations remain incomplete, with uranium from previous experiments still unaccounted for, and the IAEA's ability to monitor the program significantly reduced due to Iran's refusal to resolve outstanding safeguards violations and its lack of cooperation with inspectors.¹⁰

Assessment

- Although the U.S. withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018 under President Trump and cannot directly initiate the snapback mechanism, it can urge its E3 allies to trigger it. With the latest date to raise an initial dispute being August 14, 2025, allowing as few as 65 days for UN sanctions to be reimposed unless extended by consensus.¹¹
- Iran's potential withdrawal from the NPT could heighten tensions, signaling an open pursuit of nuclear weapons and increasing the likelihood of military action by Israel or the U.S.
- The original JCPOA took years to negotiate, and with Iran demanding sanctions relief and enrichment rights while the U.S. insists on zero enrichment and missile program restrictions, a new deal by June 2025 seems improbable, perpetuating a diplomatic standoff.

U.S.-Iran Talks

Since February 2025, the U.S., under President Trump, has pursued a “maximum pressure” policy. This includes tightening sanctions to drive Iran's oil exports to zero and directing the U.S. UN ambassador to work with allies on snapback. President Trump has also expressed interest in a new nuclear deal, proposing direct talks with Iran. In March 2025, President Trump wrote a letter to the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei and has set a deadline of 60 days to reach an agreement.¹² The U.S.-Iran talks started on April 12, 2025, and are entering a sixth round. The talks are moving in multiple directions without a clear outcome in sight, as negotiators make limited progress while key issues remain unresolved and both sides maintain tough public stances.¹³

Assessment

- Iran is a nuclear threshold state, possessing the technology and material to rapidly produce weapons-grade uranium if it chooses. To prevent Iran from becoming the "next North Korea," decisive action is needed.
- In the face of U.S. sanctions or military threats, Iran and the U.S. have fundamentally different ways of perceiving deterrence, raising the risk that they may not understand each other's signals.
- It is highly likely that the outcome (positive or negative) of the U.S.-Iran talks, have a significant impact on the security situation in the Middle East.

Israel Reaction

Since the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, Iran and Israel have been locked in a cycle of retaliatory strikes, escalating tensions in the region. In April 2025, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu declared, “Israel will work to destroy Iran's nuclear reactors and enrichment facilities to ensure that it is unable to enrich uranium for any purpose. We will not accept anything less than the complete elimination of the Iranian nuclear program.”¹⁴ U.S. intelligence agencies reported that Israel is contemplating strikes on Iranian nuclear sites in 2025, using the window of opportunity to capitalize on perceived vulnerabilities in Iran's defenses.¹⁵ Currently, Israel is actively preparing its military for a potential strike on Iran's nuclear facilities, signaling a heightened risk of further escalation.¹⁶

Assessment

- Israel, with the direct symbolic threat of Iran's “doomsday clock,” and guided by the Begin Doctrine, which prohibits enemies from developing weapons of mass destruction, is increasingly likely to launch preemptive

strikes as Iran's nuclear program advances and the JCPOA's restrictions near their October 18, 2025, expiration.¹⁷

- If U.S.-Iran negotiations collapse or snapback is not activated in time, the failure to reach a deal or reimpose UN sanctions could leave Iran unrestricted, heightening the risk of Israeli military action and escalating regional tensions.
- If Israel attacks Iran's facilities without U.S. approval, the U.S. could still be drawn into the conflict due to its close alliance with Israel.

Iran Reaction

Iran maintains that its nuclear program is exclusively for peaceful purposes. During the ongoing talks with the U.S., Iran has focused on obtaining clear, binding guarantees regarding the lifting of U.S. sanctions. In May 2025, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei expressed doubt about the talks' prospects, stating, "We don't think it will lead to any outcome. We don't know what will happen."¹⁸

Assessment

- Iran's nuclear program is fundamentally tied to regime survival.
- By staying under the nuclear weapons threshold, Iran uses its advanced enrichment capabilities to gain time and as a bargaining chip in negotiations, deterring adversaries and extracting concessions without overtly crossing into weaponization.

Potential Scenarios

1. U.S.-Iran Deal

A U.S.-Iran deal would see Iran cap its high-enriched uranium, reduces its stockpile, and restore IAEA monitoring, in exchange for phased U.S. sanctions relief. Facilitated by intermediaries like Oman, the deal leverages the JCPOA snapback mechanism to enforce compliance before its expiration.

Opportunities, Risks, and Outcomes

- A deal de-escalates tensions, delays Israel's attack urge, and strengthens non-proliferation.
- Iran's hardliners may reject concessions. U.S. domestic opposition could derail ratification. Israel's skepticism may persist, demanding stricter terms.
- A deal could stabilize the region, avert conflict, and preserve multilateral leverage, but weak enforcement could embolden Iran's regional influence or missile program. The tight timeline requires swift diplomacy to align stakeholders, while managing Israel's concerns to prevent unilateral action.
- The U.S. is pursuing bilateral talks with Iran, independent of the JCPOA framework, while the EU remains committed to the existing JCPOA, creating a complex diplomatic divergence. This diplomatic divergence could strain U.S.-EU relations, as the EU may view U.S. talks as undermining the JCPOA's legitimacy, especially if the U.S. offers sanctions relief without EU consensus.
- Iran could exploit this split, playing the U.S. and EU against each other to secure more favorable terms.

2. U.S.-Iran No Deal

If U.S.-Iran talks fail, Iran continues unrestricted high-enriched uranium production, and the U.S. maintains or intensifies sanctions. Stalled negotiations, driven by Iran's demand for full sanctions relief and U.S. insistence on verifiable limits, collapse amid mutual distrust.

Opportunities, Risks, and Outcomes

- The U.S. could share insights of its negotiations with the E3, giving them situational awareness about Iran's potential to comply with the JCPOA.
- The U.S. could rally allies for alternative pressure mechanisms (e.g., EU sanctions).
- Iran accelerates its nuclear program, nearing breakout capacity, while Israel's attack likelihood rises.
- Failure increases the chance of snapback activation before October 2025, but post-expiration, unilateral sanctions may prove ineffective, since Iran already experienced harsh sanctions, and found multiple ways to circumvent them.
- Regional tensions could escalate, with Iran's proxies retaliating against U.S. or Israeli actions.
- The absence of a deal risks a dangerous stalemate, pushing the region toward conflict.

3. Snapback

The JCPOA snapback mechanism is triggered before October 2025, reimposing UN sanctions on Iran for violating the agreement. Prompted by the IAEA's report of Iran's high-enriched uranium buildup and monitoring restrictions, a JCPOA participant activates snapback under UNSCR 2231.

Opportunities, Risks, and Outcomes

- Restored UN sanctions strengthen multilateral pressure, potentially forcing Iran back to negotiations.
- Russia and China may try to obstruct implementation, and Iran could retaliate by further enriching uranium or expelling IAEA inspectors.
- Iran's potential alignment with Russia and China could deepen, fostering stronger geopolitical and economic ties that further undermine Western influence.
- Snapback could delay Iran's nuclear progress but risks escalating tensions, as Iran may double down on its program or regional aggression. Israel might delay an attack, seeing sanctions as sufficient, but only temporarily. The window for snapback is narrow, and its success depends on unified international support, which is uncertain given global divisions.

4. No Snapback

The JCPOA snapback mechanism expires in October 2025 without activation, leaving UN sanctions lapsed. Hesitation among JCPOA participants, possibly due to Russian, Chinese opposition or U.S., EU indecision, allows the deadline to pass, as Iran continues its nuclear violations.

Opportunities, Risks, and Outcomes

- The U.S. and allies could pursue unilateral sanctions or a new UN resolution, though with less impact.

- Loss of UN leverage emboldens Iran to accelerate high-enriched uranium production, nearing weapons-grade capability.
- Without snapback, diplomatic pressure weakens, increasing Israel's likelihood of a preemptive strike. Iran may also exploit the absence of consequences by expanding its regional influence, while the U.S. faces challenges rallying a fractured international community.

5. Israeli Attack

Israel launches a preemptive strike on Iran's nuclear facilities prior to October 2025, targeting sites like Natanz and Fordow. Driven by the IAEA's report of Iran's high-enriched uranium and restricted monitoring, Israel acts to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran, perceiving diplomacy as failing.

Opportunities, Risks, and Outcomes

- A successful strike could delay Iran's nuclear program.
- Iran's fortified facilities are hard to destroy, and retaliation via proxies could ignite a regional war, potentially involving the U.S.
- A strike risks massive escalation, with Iran targeting Israeli or USCENTCOM assets in the region, damaging the relationship with regional partners, putting USCENTCOM Access, Basing, and Overflight (ABO) at risk. Furthermore, it could disrupt global energy markets (e.g., Strait of Hormuz). Diplomacy would collapse, and snapback becomes irrelevant. Global backlash could (further) isolate Israel, complicating U.S. support and regional stability.¹⁹

6. No Israel Attack

Israel refrains from striking Iran's nuclear facilities, opting for restraint or alternative pressure. U.S. assurances, progress in U.S.-Iran talks, or snapback activation convince Israel to delay, despite concerns over Iran's high-enriched uranium stockpile.

Opportunities, Risks, and Outcomes

- Avoiding a strike preserves diplomatic space, allowing negotiations or sanctions to take effect.
- Israel's patience may wane if Iran's nuclear advances continue, potentially leading to a delayed attack post-October 2025.
- Restraint reduces immediate escalation risks, maintaining stability and keeping snapback viable.
- Iran may exploit the delay to further enrich uranium, narrowing its breakout time.
- The U.S. must reinforce Israel's confidence with military or diplomatic guarantees, while Iran faces less immediate pressure to compromise, potentially prolonging the crisis.

7. Strategic Shock: Iran Demonstrates Nuclear Capability

In a surprising move, Iran demonstrates it has attained nuclear weapons capability, catching the U.S., Israel, and global powers off guard.

Opportunities, Risks, and Outcomes

- Iran strengthens its bargaining position in talks, potentially securing sanctions relief, economic aid, or diplomatic recognition.
- Israel, viewing a nuclear Iran as an existential threat, might launch strikes, risking a full-scale war.
- Iran's nuclear weapons capability shifts the regional power balance, prompting Gulf states to seek nuclear capabilities. Global markets react to heightened uncertainty, and diplomacy faces a new challenge: negotiating with a nuclear power.

Conclusion

Iran's nuclear progress, the nearing JCPOA snapback deadline, U.S.-Iran negotiations, and Israel's potential military action create a critical moment for global security.

Iran has had ample opportunity, both during the period of the JCPOA and now with the prospect of a U.S.-Iran agreement, to demonstrate compliance with its obligations. If Iran continues to fall short of its commitments, the U.S., E3, and allies must respond decisively and in unison. This response should combine coordinated diplomacy, sustained economic pressure, and credible military deterrence to prevent Iran from gaining nuclear weapons and to avert further regional conflict.

More specific, the U.S. should deepen coordination with the E3 and the UN to ensure a unified diplomatic front supported by strategic communication. One example would be the sharing of real-time details on U.S.-Iran negotiations with the E3 and UN Security Council members to foster trust and pre-commit to joint snapback activation.

Furthermore, USCENTCOM and a coalition of the willing (to ensure political alignment and international legitimacy and reducing the risk of global backlash) should prepare combined operational plans for limited, military action **as a last resort**, to be executed **only** if there is objective and reliable evidence demonstrating that Iran is imminently close to developing a nuclear weapon, or if Iran expels IAEA inspectors, thereby obstructing independent verification of its nuclear activities.

Plans should focus on Iran's vital interest and Centers of Gravity (COG), minimizing civilian casualties, ensuring military action is calibrated to deter without (further) destabilizing the region.

ANNEX A

Timeline of the Dispute Resolution Mechanism.²⁰

1. Step 1: Joint Commission Review (15 days)
 - a. Any party (Iran or E3/EU+3) can refer a compliance issue to the Joint Commission.
 - b. The Commission has 15 days to resolve the issue, extendable by consensus.
2. Step 2: Ministerial/Advisory Board Review (15 days)
 - a. If unresolved, the issue can be referred to Foreign Ministers and/or an Advisory Board (three members: one from each side, one independent).
 - b. Ministers and/or the Advisory Board have 15 days to resolve or provide a non-binding opinion, extendable by consensus.
3. Step 3: Joint Commission Final Consideration (5 days)
 - a. The Joint Commission considers the Advisory Board's opinion for up to 5 days.
4. Step 4: UN Security Council Notification (30 days)
 - a. If still unresolved, the complaining party may cease its commitments and/or notify the UN Security Council (UNSC).
 - b. The UNSC has 30 days to vote on continuing sanctions relief. If no resolution is adopted, previous UN sanctions are automatically reimposed ("snapback").

¹ International Atomic Energy Agency, "NPT Safeguards Agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran," February 26, 2025, <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/focus/iran/iaea-and-iran-iaea-board-reports> (accessed May 21, 2025).

² Maryam Geshani, "Iran's Right to Enrich Uranium: A legal Reality Made Political by US," *Tehran Times*, May 24, 2025, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/513482/Iran-s-right-to-enrich-uranium-A-legal-reality-made-political> (accessed June 9, 2025).

³ David Albright, Sarah Burkhard, Spencer Faragasso, "Analysis of IAEA Iran Verification and Monitoring Report — February 2025," *Institute for Science and International Security*, March 3, 2025, <https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/analysis-of-iaea-iran-verification-and-monitoring-report-february-2025> (accessed May 21, 2025).

⁴ United Nations Security Council, "Resolution 2231 (2015) on Iran Nuclear Issue," <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/2231/background> (accessed May 21, 2025).

⁵ The U.S. withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-ending-united-states-participation-unacceptable-iran-deal/>

⁶ More specific: UNSCR's 1696 (2006), 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), 1803 (2008), 1835 (2008), 1929 (2010) and 2224 (2015); Henry Rome, Louis Dugit-Gros, "Snapback Sanctions on Iran: More Bark Than Bite?" *The Washington Institute for NearEast Policy*, October 25, 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/snapback-sanctions-iran-more-bark-bite> (accessed May 21, 2025).

⁷ United Nations Security Council, "Letter Dated 16 July 2015 from the Permanent Representative of the United States of America to the United Nations Addressed to the President of the Security Council," July 16, 2015, <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2015/544> (accessed May 21, 2025).

⁸ Michelle Nichols, "Europeans Tell UN Ready to 'Snap Back' Iran Sanctions if Needed," *Reuters*, December 11, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europeans-tell-un-ready-snap-back-iran-sanctions-if-needed-2024-12-11/> (accessed May 21, 2025).

⁹ Also called "Termination Day" according to the JCPOA. "UNSCR Termination Day will occur in accordance with the terms of the UN Security Council resolution endorsing the JCPOA, which is 10 years from Adoption Day, provided that the provisions of previous resolutions have not been reinstated." United Nations Security Council, "Letter Dated 16 July 2015 from the Permanent Representative of the United States of America to the United Nations Addressed to the President of the Security Council."

¹⁰ Albright, Burkhard, Faragasso, “Analysis of IAEA Iran Verification and Monitoring Report — February 2025.”

¹¹ See Annex A for more details on the timeline. Some experts recommend to start the process even earlier (in June) to prevent all kinds of procedural obstructions.

¹² Miranda Jeyaretnam, “The Tense History and Modern Context Behind Israel’s Reported Plan to Attack Iran,” *Time*, May 21, 2025, <https://time.com/7287313/iran-israel-strike-report-nuclear-us-trump-history-context-explainer/> (accessed May 22, 2025).

¹³ Reuters, “Iran Says it Could Survive if US Nuclear Talks End Without a Deal,” May 26, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-will-not-temporarily-suspend-enrichment-secure-nuclear-deal-with-us-2025-05-26/> (accessed May 26, 2025).

¹⁴ Middle East Monitor, “Iran to Netanyahu: Any Hostile Action Will Be Met With a Devastating Response,” April 29, 2025, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20250429-iran-to-netanyahu-any-hostile-action-will-be-met-with-a-devastating-response/> (accessed May 21, 2025).

¹⁵ Jarid Malsin, Alexander Ward, Dov Lieber, “Israel Sees Opening for Strikes on Iranian Nuclear Sites, U.S. Intelligence Finds,” *The Wallstreet Journal*, February 12, 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/israel-sees-opening-for-strikes-on-iranian-nuclear-sites-u-s-intelligence-warned-76a7fa24> (accessed May 21, 2025).

¹⁶ Jim Sciutto, Katie Bo Lillis, Natasha Bertrand, “New Intelligence Suggests Israel is Preparing Possible Strike on Iranian Nuclear Facilities, US Officials Say,” *CNN*, May 20, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/05/20/politics/intelligence-israel-possible-strike-iran-nuclear-facilities> (accessed May 20, 2025).

¹⁷ The Jerusalem Post, “To Prevent a Nuclear Iran, It Is Time To Bring Back the Begin Doctrine,” April 18, 2025, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-850524> (accessed May 21, 2025).

¹⁸ David Gritten, “Iran’s Khamenei Doubts US Nuclear Talks Will Lead to Agreement,” *BBC*, May 20, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cp855k42wpko> (accessed June 2, 2025).

¹⁹ Mitchell Bard, “Public Opinion for Israel Shows an Alarming Trend,” *Jewish News Syndicate*, March 26, 2025, <https://www.jns.org/public-opinion-for-israel-shows-an-alarming-trend/> (accessed May 21, 2025).

²⁰ Gabriel Nornha, “Iran Sanctions, UN Security Council Resolution 2231, and the Path to Snapback,” *JINSA*, April 3, 2025, https://jinsa.org/jinsa_report/path-to-snapback-april-2025/ (accessed May 21, 2025).