

The Geopolitical Implications of Returning to the JCPOA

Author: LTC Sami Alshehri, Saudi Arabian Military, CCJ5 CSAG

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.

Key Points

- The 2015 JCPOA was a temporary solution that would only delay Iran from building a nuclear bomb. It did not spur Iran to stop its malign activities and correspond to international norms.
- The maximum pressure campaign hit the Iranian economy very hard. Yet, Iran's economy did not entirely collapse, nor did the regime submit to US demands.
- The complexities of returning to the JCPOA represent severe challenges to the US administration to include endangering the US geopolitical alignment, and its hegemonic role in the Middle East.
- Iran has already gained nuclear knowledge that will not disappear after returning to JCPOA.
- Regional countries will not stand idle while Iran becomes a nuclear power. Countries would seek to protect their existence which could trigger a nuclear arms race to achieve balance.
- Although a quick return to an incomprehensive deal with Iran may appear attractive as a domestic political win, that would not favor US national interests. On the contrary, it would likely favor China, Russia, and European countries.
- A more comprehensive solution that upholds US influence, serves US national interests, and promises stability in the region would be the better deal for all parties.

Introduction

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is a detailed agreement reached between Iran, and the UN Security Council's five permanent members (US, Russia, the UK, China, France), plus Germany (together the "P5+1"). The agreement was reached on July 14, 2015, and was endorsed by UN Security Council Resolution 2231. The goal of the deal was to limit Iran's uranium enrichment program until the year 2030.¹ Based on specific requirements described in the agreement, the nuclear-related provisions of the JCPOA are verified by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).²

The agreement came after a long period of international tension over Iran's efforts to develop nuclear capabilities. Although Iran claimed that its nuclear program was for peaceful purposes, the international community, based on Iran's profoundly troubling behavior in the region and its hegemonic aspirations, did not believe that Iran's nuclear program was entirely peaceful.³ Under the agreement, Iran agreed to limit its nuclear activities and allow

¹ Dan Smith, "The US withdrawal from the Iran deal: One year on," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/expert-comment/2019/us-withdrawal-iran-deal-one-year> (accessed May 24, 2021).

² Arms Control Association, "The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Actions (JCPOA) at a Glance," <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/JCPOA-at-a-glance> (accessed May 24, 2021).

³ Staff, "Iran Nuclear Deal: Key Details," BBC, June 11, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33521655> (accessed May 24, 2021).

international inspectors into its nuclear facilities in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions.⁴ The removal of economic sanctions allowed Iran to gain access to over \$100 B in frozen assets, resume trading oil on international markets, and use the global financial system for trade.

Key Points of the JCPOA:⁵

- Reduce the uranium enrichment capacity by more than two-thirds and limit enriching beyond the level of 3.76% purity, low-enriched uranium (LEU) for the first 15 years of the deal.
- Restrict Fordow underground enrichment plant, including the use of the facility only for non-military research, removal two-thirds of its centrifuges, and refrain from any fissile material at the site.
- Reduce Iran's stockpile of LEU by 96% by either shipping the uranium abroad or diluting it.
- Limit research, development, and future enrichment capacity.
- Remove the reactor core at Arak, fill it with concrete, and redesign it so that it produces less plutonium. No new heavy water plants for 15 years.
- Give IAEA inspectors full access to all Iran's declared nuclear sites and allow inspectors to visit nondeclared sites.
- Provide access to facilities and people suspected of involvement in past experimental work.
- US and EU guarantee they will suspend financial and economic sanctions.
- Incorporate the JCPOA into a new security council resolution intended to replace the previous sanctions on Iran over its nuclear program.

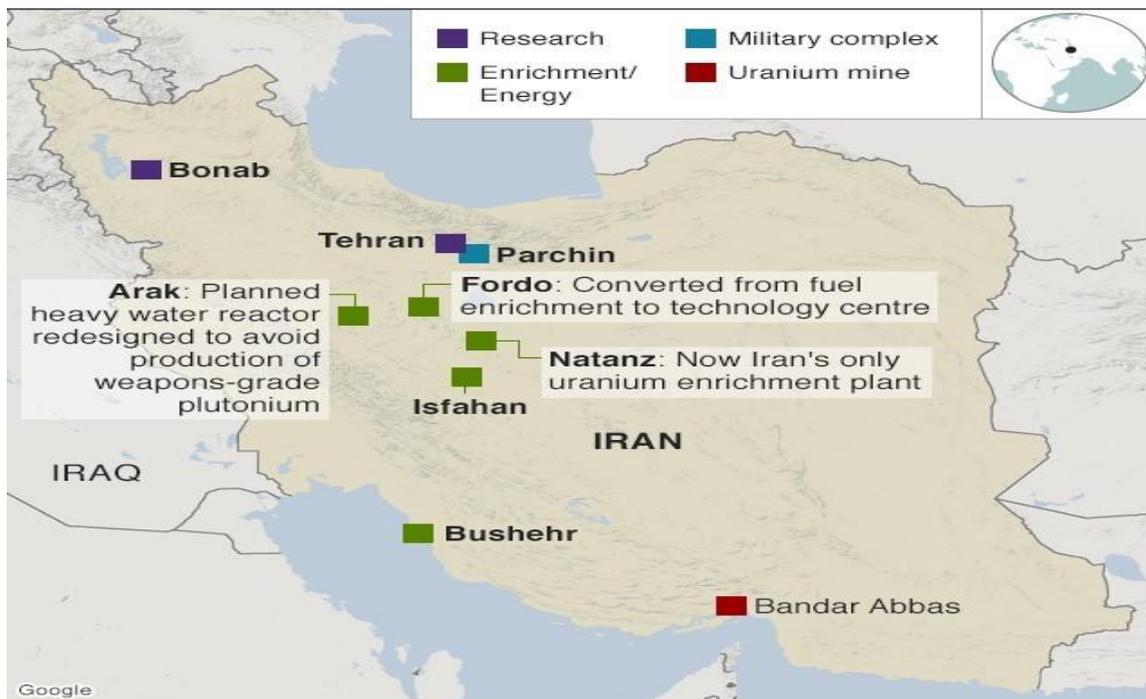


Figure 1. Changes under the JCPOA to limit Iran's Nuclear Program (Source: European Parliamentary Research Service)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Julian Boger, "Iran Nuclear Deal: The Key Points," The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/14/iran-nuclear-dealkey-points> (accessed June 6, 2021).

Nevertheless, the JCPOA was considered outside the context of Iran's record of destabilization in the region. Also, it did not address the growing developments of Iran's ballistic and cruise missile programs, which could be used to deliver nuclear warheads. Despite President Obama's certifications that the JCPOA would spur Iran to stop its malign activities and correspond to international norms, Iran has proven the opposite.⁶ In fact, during the JCPOA, Iran's hostility increased and its nuclear ambitions and quest for regional hegemony continued.⁷ One might say that the Iranian regime saw the deal as an excellent opportunity to march across the Middle East.

The Iranian regime used its newly JCPOA-provided assets to fuel its proxies across the region, and continued to be the world's largest sponsor of terror.⁸ Instead of boosting the economic fortunes of the struggling people, Iran used the unfrozen assets to increase its defense budget (of which two-thirds goes to the IRGC) by 30-40%.⁸ In addition, Iran increased funds sent to Hezbollah, Hamas, and other groups to nearly \$1 B annually.⁹ Iran's efforts to destabilize its neighbors intensified and its regional malign behavior continued by establishing hegemonic influence that threatens its neighbors and the region as a whole.

The US withdrawal from the JCPOA

In May 2018, the US announced it would withdraw from the JCPOA. President Trump affirmed that the deal would not prevent an Iranian nuclear bomb. He called the deal the "worst deal ever," and he criticized Obama's administration for giving up too much for too little.¹⁰ Secretary of State Mike Pompeo listed the following examples of how the situation in the region had deteriorated since the JCPOA was signed, and how the JCPOA was harmful to stability in the Middle East, America, Europe, and the entire world:

- Lebanon has become a more comfortable home for Hezbollah, and Hezbollah is now heavily armed by Iran.
- Hezbollah and the IRGC provide ground forces in Syria to help the Assad regime and make Syria a kill zone.
- Iran perpetuates the conflict in Syria that resulted in displacing more than 6 M Syrians and caused over 5 M to seek refuge outside Syria, among which are foreign fighters who have crossed into Europe.
- Iran-backed militias in Iraq jeopardize Iraq's sovereignty and undermine the state's authority.
- Iran's support to the Houthi militia fuels the conflict in Yemen and continues to starve and terrify the people.
- IRGC provides missiles to the Houthis to attack civilian targets in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and threaten maritime security in the Red Sea.
- Iran supports the Taliban in Afghanistan with weapons and funds that lead to further violence and hinders peace and stability for the people.

⁶ Mike Pompeo, "After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy," The Heritage Foundation, May 21, 2018, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/event/after-the-deal-new-iran-strategy> (accessed June 10, 2021).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁸ Yaakov Amidror, Jacob Nagel & Jonathan Schachter, "What we know about Iran five years after Netanyahu's speech to Congress," Real Clear Defense, March 11, 2020, https://www.realcleardefense.com/2020/03/11/yaakov_amidror_jacob_nagel_amp_jonathan_schachter_312482.html (accessed June 4, 2021).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Jonathan Allen, Alex Moe and Frank Thorp, "Trump announces withdrawal from Iran nuclear deal," NBC News, May 8, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-intends-withdraw-iran-nuclear-deal-sources-say-n872291> (accessed June 10, 2021).

- Iranian Quds Forces conduct covert assassinations in Europe.
- Iran continues to hold Americans hostage.
- Iran continues to serve as a sanctuary for Al-Qaeda and refuses to bring senior Al-Qaeda members in Tehran to justice.¹¹

The US Maximum Pressure Campaign

After the US withdrew from the JCPOA, the Trump administration-imposed sanctions on Iran, promising that those sanctions would lead to a better outcome than the JCPOA. President Trump pledged a comprehensive and lasting solution to the Iranian threat.¹² He also promised that the new sanctions would help reach a broader outcome beyond eliminating the nuclear threat; and that it would eliminate Iran's ballistic missile threat, stop Iran's terrorist activities, and block its threatening activity across the Middle East. Indeed, the sanctions have contributed to the severe breakdown of Iran's economy, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹³ However, one can argue that those sanctions have failed to alter Iranian policies. Among those arguments are the following:

- Iran's ballistic missile program has continued, improved, and become more aggressive in the region.
- Iran possesses sufficient low-enriched uranium for a single nuclear weapon and has resumed enrichment.
- The Biden administration has undermined sanctions as a non-kinetic tool of foreign policy.
- The US withdrawal in Afghanistan, and its reduction of military footprint in CENTCOM AOR, have deepened the divide with the US' closest allies in Europe, has strengthened the Iranian hardliners, and discredited the former Iranian president.¹⁴

On the other hand, it appears that the maximum pressure campaign sought better and more comprehensive outcomes than what was expected from the JCPOA. The JCPOA itself was a temporary solution that would only delay Iran from building a nuclear bomb while allowing it to continue destabilizing the region through using the unfrozen funds to fuel the conflicts in the region. However, the outcomes the maximum pressure campaign sought were not reached for different reasons. The possible reason is Iran did not perceive a significant military threat against their nuclear program and proxy militias. Iran felt that the US was avoiding any military actions that might lead to direct confrontation or start a new war in the Middle East.

Although the maximum pressure campaign hit the Iranian economy very hard, it did not cause the Iranian regime concede defeat or submit to US demands. Iran did not respond to President Trump's invitation to return to the negotiation table.¹⁵ One could claim that Iran has always proven a high capacity to withstand any economic

¹¹ Mike Pompeo, "After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy," The Heritage Foundation, May 21, 2018,

<https://www.heritage.org/defense/event/after-the-deal-new-iran-strategy> (accessed June 10, 2021).

¹² US Department of State, "On President Trump's Decision to Withdraw From the JCPOA," May 8, 2018, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/onpresident-trumps-decision-to-withdraw-from-the-icpoa/index.html> (accessed June 11, 2021).

¹³ Barbara Slavin, "Five reasons why US 'maximum pressure' on Iran has backfired," Atlantic Council, May 14, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/five-reasons-why-us-maximum-pressure-on-iran-has-backfired/> (accessed June 11, 2021).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ali Vaez, "Trump's 'Maximum Pressure' Won't Make Iran Yield," The Atlantic, May 12, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/05/why-trumps-sanctions-iran-arent-working/589288/> (accessed June 13, 2021).

¹⁷ Mark Moore, "Iran foreign minister reveals John Kerry kept in touch about Israeli covert operations," New York Post, April 26, 2021, <https://nypost.com/2021/04/26/iran-foreign-minister-says-john-kerry-met-with-him-during-trump-years/> (accessed June 14, 2021).

sanctions. Iran's ability to withstand and not return to the negotiation table could be unofficial assurances from the US, through shadow diplomacy, to pause any actions until last year's US election. President Trump accused the former US Secretary of State John Kerry of violating federal law by siding with Iran over US interests.¹⁷ Moreover, Iran's foreign affairs minister claimed in a leaked recording that Mr. Kerry told him about Israeli attacks on Iranian interests in Syria.¹⁶ Whether the claim is true or false, the idea of the US shifting its foreign policies almost 180 degrees in every presidential election has serious drawbacks that affect the conduct of foreign policy, especially in developing and sustaining policies that require consistency and a long-term vision.¹⁷

Returning to the JCPOA

Even before President Biden was sworn in, he already planned to return to the JCPOA. He stated that his plan for dealing with Iran would start by rejoining the JCPOA. He argued that a nuclear crisis could be averted by keeping Iran boxed inside the JCPOA while negotiating a more robust deal.¹⁸ However, it seems that returning to the JCPOA is not very simple. There are complexities in returning to the agreement that represent severe challenges to the US administration. One of the most challenging issues for the US administration is how to return to the JCPOA without endangering the US geopolitical alignments and the US hegemonic role in the Middle East.¹⁹ Returning to the JCPOA without considering the traditional US allies' interests could impact historical relationships in the region and open the doors for China and Russia to gain more regional influence.

Another challenge is that the Iranian scientists have already gained nuclear knowledge to uranium enrichment and lower the nuclear breakout time. This is despite the assassination of Mohsen Fakhrrizadeh, the father of the Iranian nuclear program.²⁰ Regardless of any future nuclear deal, Iran would have the ability to reengage in nuclear development activities. Iran is ambitious to be fully capable of countering any future US and Western hegemony. This objective makes Iran's nuclear capabilities a top priority for the regime to alter the balance of power in the region. Iran would always use its nuclear pursuits to gain leverage and use it to blackmail the US. Historically, Iran was able to exploit regional crises. Case in point was when Iran used the unfrozen funds to fuel its proxies and escalate its malign activities.²¹ It also exploited the power vacuum that resulted after the so-called Arab Spring to impose a new reality in its favor.

Regarding the Abraham Accords, the likely effects on the could vary depending on the kind of deal the US would make with Iran and the extent of GCC countries and Israel's satisfaction with the agreement. Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries announced they would be on board should the US decide to return to the JCPOA, while Israel

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Benjamin Melusky, "The Electoral Cycle and the Conduct of Foreign Policy," Old Dominion University, <https://www.odu.edu/content/dam/odu/offices/mun/docs/bmelusky-the-electoral-cycle-and.pdf> (accessed June 20, 2021).

¹⁸ Joby Warrick and Ann Gearan, "Biden has vowed to quickly restore the Iran nuclear deal, but that may be easier said than done," The Washington Post, December 9, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/12/09/biden-foreign-policy-iran/> (accessed June 14, 2021).

¹⁹ Mahmoud Abo Alqassem, "The Geopolitical Cost of Biden Returning to the Iranian Nuclear Deal," Rasanah, March 30, 2021, <https://rasanah-iiis.org/-/مقالات-التي-لغة-الجيواس-اس-ة-لعودة-ادن-ل-> (accessed June 3, 2021).

²⁰ Robin Write, "Why the Assassination of a Scientist Will Have No Impact on Iran's Nuclear Program," The New Yorker, November 30, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/why-the-assassination-of-a-scientist-will-have-no-impact-on-irans-nuclearprogram> (accessed June 20, 2021).

²¹ Mahmoud Abo Alqassem, "The Geopolitical Cost of Biden Returning to the Iranian Nuclear Deal," Rasanah, March 30, 2021, <https://rasanah-iiis.org/-/مقالات-التي-لغة-الجيواس-اس-ة-لعودة-ادن-ل-> (accessed June 3, 2021).

still opposes the deal.²² Nevertheless, analysts believe that despite the narrative of peace around the Abraham Accords, the main driver for the deal is deterring Iran both politically and militarily.²³ Another factor impacting the Abraham Accords would be the new Israeli government's directions. It is noteworthy to mention that one of the first statements of the new Prime Minister of Israel is that the new government coalition will not allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon, and will work to extend peace agreements with Arab countries.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that the US plan to quickly return to the JCPOA, and restore relations with Iran through making concessions, could generate mistrust among historic US allies in the region. This policy would push those countries to find alternatives by building a more diverse partnership with other global powers.²⁴ Thus, it could put at risk the US' influence and open the doors for other powers' influence in the region. China and Russia would surely take advantage of any disruptions to US influence in the region. China is very motivated to form an economic partnership with countries in the region, including the GCC, to secure its national interests. On the other hand, Russia wants to play a more significant role in the region to counter US and NATO influence, especially while the US administration is working to reconstruct its alliance with NATO countries.

One of the most important geopolitical implications of returning to JCPOA could be the launch of a regional nuclear arms race. This is highly likely to play into great power competition. The countries in the region will not stand idle while Iran is recognized as nuclear power and would likely seek to protect their existence from the expansionist ambitions of the Iranian regime.

Conclusion

There are significant risks in returning to the JCPOA, especially if the new deal does not include Iran's ballistic missile program, Iran's hostile destabilizing activities through direct or proxy involvement, or account for concerned AOR countries. Even if the US succeeded in restructuring its relations with Iran, and controlling its nuclear program, Iran's hatred toward the US is deeply rooted and driven by its national identity. Therefore, as long as the current Iranian regime exists, the US will not achieve any economic or cultural accomplishments in Iran. The US should reevaluate its stance towards negotiation with the Iranian regime because a relaunch of JCPOA does not seem to favor US national interests.

Thus, the US should pursue a more comprehensive solution to the issue that goes beyond reaching a temporary deal that only delays Iran's capabilities to produce a nuclear weapon. Although a quick deal with Iran could be attractive as a domestic political win, it will not last long. The Israelis will likely work to prove how fragile the deal is. Also, Israel will likely continue conducting military attacks inside Iran. In addition, other countries in the region might look for alternatives to the US.

Achieving a more comprehensive solution upholds US influence in the region, serves US national interests, and promotes stability in the region. Such an objective solution be reached when the US takes the lead in the negotiations, regains political leverage, stops making further compromises, fosters cooperation with regional allies, and bolsters the deal with a significant political, economic, and military campaign to counter Iranian-backed

²² Tridivesh Maini, "Biden Administration's GCC Outreach and the Revival of JCPOA," *The Geopolitics*, May 8, 2021, <https://thegeopolitics.com/biden-administrations-gcc-outreach-and-the-revival-of-jcpoa/> (accessed June 16, 2021).

²³ Kabir Taneja, "The Abrahamic Middle East — Will Israeli-Arab alignment on Iran create a new equilibrium for peace?," *Observer Research Foundation*, December 28, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/will-israeli-arab-alignment-iran-create-newequilibrium-peace/> (accessed June 16, 2021).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

proxies. Thus, drawing clear red lines for the Iranian regime will amplify the seriousness and commitment of the US for ensuring the region's stability and protecting its interests.

Recommendations for the US/USCENTCOM

- Block Iran's exploitation of US forces' withdrawal by maintaining sufficient US forces in the region to deter Iran and project US seriousness and commitment to region's stability, and to defend US interests.
- Continue to support regional efforts aimed at confronting the terrorist activities of Iranian-backed groups in the region, particularly Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria.
- Conduct qualitative operations to respond to the repeated attacks targeting US interests in Iraq.
- Propose military plans that support the political and economic strategies for counter the Iranian nuclear program and the Iranian international terrorist network.
- Continue to support US historical regional allies by supplying military equipment needed to protect their territories and interests, and strengthen the US' 'partner of choice' to deter other global powers efforts to project influence in the AOR.