

Iran's Nuclear Program: Analysis and Policy Recommendation for the United States



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WRITER'S COMMENT: As a student in UWP 102D, I was tasked with writing a policy paper about any current international relations issue. Although I was initially overwhelmed by the number of issues to choose from, I eventually decided on Iran's nuclear program. I wanted to learn more about the Iran nuclear deal because it was hailed as a great success during the Obama administration but subsequently collapsed when former President Trump withdrew from the agreement. If another nuclear agreement is not created in the near future, it could have major implications for U.S.-Iranian relations and international stability. Moreover, this issue appealed to me because of its gravity and complexity. By gaining a deep understanding of the controversies and nuances associated with this issue, I was able to formulate a policy recommendation that the United States Department of State could pursue. This policy recommendation is based on extensive research on Iran's nuclear program and seeks to advance both American national security interests and global security more broadly.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: When I first read Maya Hsu's policy paper draft in my Writing in International Relations course (UWP 102D), I was excited at how thorough and clear it was, but I was not surprised. Each assignment leading up to that first draft revealed that Maya cares about and works to achieve effective writing. She invests time in planning her work and then revising her drafts. She also cares deeply about politics, human rights, and international relations. For her policy paper, Maya tackled a very complex problem with a long history. Writing for an audience of foreign policy professionals, Maya

presented a focused, reasonable, informed analysis of the problem and a persuasive argument about the best policy for the U.S. to implement in its relations with Iran. I majored in International Relations here at UCD, and I want my course to give students the opportunity to research, analyze, and make an argument about a current real-world problem that also presents a pressing policy problem for at least one government. Maya's policy paper epitomizes everything I hope the course makes possible.

—Lisa Klotz, University Writing Program

Executive Summary

Iran's nuclear program presents a dire threat to United States national security interests and global peace more broadly. If Iran developed a nuclear weapon, it could directly attack the United States or one of its allies. Iran could also use a nuclear weapon to expand its influence in the Middle East or increase support for terrorist groups, which would further destabilize the region. The use of nuclear weapons in the twenty-first century would create a dangerous precedent for future conflicts while also encouraging other countries to develop nuclear arsenals (Bahgat, 2006). Moreover, Iran's activities could lead to a new era of nuclear warfare that includes mass casualties and the erosion of international trust. The United States Department of State must act swiftly to prevent Iran from developing and deploying a weapon of mass destruction that could fundamentally change global security.

After the United States withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a historic international agreement that constrained Iran's nuclear activities in exchange for sanctions relief, Iran stopped complying with the agreement (Katzman & Kerr, 2016a). Beginning in 2019, Iran "started exceeding agreed-upon limits to its stockpile of low-enriched uranium," "began enriching uranium to higher concentrations," and "began developing new centrifuges to accelerate uranium enrichment" (Robinson,

2021, para. 23). These activities have raised concerns among the international community that Iran is developing a nuclear weapon (Katzman et al., 2021). Given these recent developments, Iran's breakout time, the "amount of time it would take Iran to produce a single nuclear bomb if it were to launch an all-out race to do so" (Lynch, 2022, para. 9), has shrunk from one year to one month.

Since former President Donald Trump pulled out of the JCPOA, the United States has issued heavy sanctions against Iran to address its nuclear program and other problematic aspects of its behavior (Katzman et al., 2021). However, despite increased sanctions, Iran has increased its nuclear activities (Robinson, 2020). The United States and Iran are currently engaged in negotiations about Iran's nuclear program, but it is unclear whether these talks will lead to a mutual recommitment to the JCPOA (Hansler et al., 2022). During these negotiations, the United States should seek to re-enter the original JCPOA as quickly as possible to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon; once Iran resumes compliance with the JCPOA, the United States should then pursue follow-on negotiations to strengthen the nuclear deal and address other problematic aspects of Iran's behavior, such as its human rights abuses and its missile program.

Context

Development of Iran's Nuclear Program

Iran's nuclear program began in the 1950s, and initially, the Iranian government demonstrated a commitment to a peaceful nuclear program (Bahgat, 2006). In 1970, Iran ratified the Treaty of the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), which prohibits states without nuclear weapons from receiving or acquiring them (Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, 1968, art. II). However, in 2003, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) found that Iran was in non-compliance with the NPT, which raised concerns that Iran was building a nuclear weapon

(Kerr, 2019). Although it is unclear when Iran first started seeking nuclear weapons, there are several explanations for why Iran would want such a weapon. First, instability and violence in the Middle East could have played a role (Fisher, 2015). During the Iran-Iraq War, Iraq's use of chemical weapons killed or injured thousands of Iranians; the international community's indifference reinforced that "Iran is fully justified to arm itself with nuclear weapons for defense and deterrence" (Bahgat, 2006, p. 314). The presence of United States troops in Iraq and Afghanistan could have also compelled Iran to develop nuclear weapons to protect itself from a potential United States invasion (Fisher, 2015). Additionally, "the right to develop nuclear power is a matter of national pride, where the population is largely united behind the regime" (Bahgat, 2006, p. 323). Some combination of these factors likely explains Iran's desire for nuclear weapons (Fisher, 2015).

Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

In 2015, Iran and the P5+1 (China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) signed the JCPOA, which places several restrictions on Iran's nuclear program (Katzman & Kerr, 2016a). The goal of the JCPOA is "to ensure that Iran's nuclear program can be used for purely peaceful purposes, in exchange for a broad lifting of U.S., European Union (EU), and United Nations (U.N.) sanctions on Iran" (Katzman & Kerr, 2016a, p. 8). More specifically, the JCPOA "includes a detailed set of physical limits on numbers and types of centrifuges, centrifuge research and development, centrifuge manufacturing, locations and levels of enrichment, and stocks of enriched uranium. The physical limits phase out over 10 to 15 years" (Samore et al., 2015, p. 23). The deal also enables the IAEA to monitor Iran's nuclear activities (Katzman & Kerr, 2016a). In exchange, the United States ended major sanctions on Iran's financial and energy sectors, rescinded banking sanctions, and lifted many secondary sanctions that discouraged firms from doing business in Iran (Samore et al.,

2015). However, the JCPOA does not require the United States to lift sanctions related to human rights abuses, Iran's missile program, or Iran's support for terrorist groups (Katzman et al., 2021).

The JCPOA is a controversial agreement in the United States that has sparked intense debate. Proponents of the JCPOA argue that, without the deal, Iran could increase its nuclear activities and eventually produce a nuclear weapon (Samore et al., 2015). Additionally, the deal reduces the likelihood of military conflict between the United States and Iran (Samore et al., 2015). Critics of the JCPOA argue that restrictions on Iran's nuclear program are not harsh enough and that the deal is not comprehensive; it does not address Iran's support for terrorist groups, its human rights violations, or its ballistic missile program (Samore et al., 2015). Opponents also claim that, because many of the provisions expire after 10 to 15 years, "the nuclear deal only delays—rather than stops—Iran's quest to develop nuclear weapons" (Kroenig, 2018, p. 95). Moreover, the JCPOA has benefits and shortcomings, and it continues to be a point of contention in American politics.

Effectiveness of the JCPOA

Although critics of the JCPOA claim that it is insufficient, the deal largely fulfilled its goal of limiting Iran's nuclear activities. Before the United States withdrawal, "all official reports and statements from the United Nations, European Union, the IAEA, and the P5+1 indicate that Iran has complied with the JCPOA" (Katzman & Kerr, 2016b). While the JCPOA effectively limited Iran's nuclear activities, it failed to change other aspects of its behavior. For example, there is evidence that Iran used the money it received from the United States and international sanctions relief to support terrorist groups in the region (Bergman & Mazzetti, 2019). Iran has also continued to develop its ballistic missile program (Katzman et al., 2021). However, the JCPOA was not created to change Iran's behavior more broadly (Katzman & Kerr, 2016a). Moreover, the JCPOA is limited in scope, but it prevented

Iran from further developing its nuclear program.

United States Withdrawal from the JCPOA

On May 8, 2018, the Trump administration withdrew from the JCPOA and re-imposed sanctions on Iran as part of a maximum pressure campaign. The Trump administration claimed, “the JCPOA did not address the broad range of Iran’s objectionable behaviors and that JCPOA-mandated limitations on Iranian nuclear activities did not justify the sanctions relief provided” (Katzman et al., 2021, p. 2). Former U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson criticized the JCPOA for failing “to achieve the objective of a non-nuclear Iran; it only delays their goal of becoming a nuclear state” (Katzman & Kerr, 2016b, p. 22). The Trump administration reimposed all sanctions lifted under the JCPOA and introduced new sanctions (Katzman et al., 2021). Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo asserted that the United States would enter a new deal only if it included more severe restrictions on Iran’s nuclear activities, addressed Iran’s ballistic missile program, and prohibited Iran from sponsoring terrorist groups, among other demands (Katzman & Kerr, 2016b). Ultimately, the Trump administration engaged in this maximum pressure campaign to negotiate a stronger version of the JCPOA.

Iran’s Current Nuclear Activities

Since the United States withdrew from the JCPOA, Iran has increased its nuclear activities and violated several provisions of the agreement. Given these recent activities, Iran’s breakout time has shrunk from one year to one month (Lynch, 2022). The United States and Iran are currently engaged in indirect talks about rejoining the JCPOA. However, the window for reinstating the deal is quickly closing as Iran gains more intelligence about nuclear weapons (Hansler et al., 2022). At some point, Iran will have too much knowledge and infrastructure for the deal to be effective in preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon

(Jewish Institute for National Security of America [JINSA], 2021). Thus, the United States Department of State must act swiftly to halt Iran's nuclear activities.

Problems With the Existing Policy

The United States is using aggressive sanctions against Iran in an attempt to place more restrictions on the country's nuclear program and address other aspects of Iran's behavior (Katzman et al., 2021). On November 4, 2018, the United States re-imposed all sanctions on Iran that had been lifted under the JCPOA and issued new sanctions to place additional pressure on Iran (Katzman et al., 2021). The United States also designated Iran's Central Bank and other financial institutions as terrorist organizations and implemented secondary sanctions (Katzman et al., 2021). As these sanctions damage the economy, Iran may be compelled to re-negotiate the JCPOA in exchange for sanctions relief. This maximum pressure campaign allows the United States to express its disapproval of other problematic aspects of Iran's behavior, such as its human rights violations, its ballistic missile program, and its support for terrorist organizations. It also signals to Iran that the United States is committed to ensuring Iran's nuclear program remains entirely peaceful. However, this strategy has emboldened Iran to expand its nuclear activities and is harming Iranian civilians.

After the United States withdrew from the JCPOA and re-imposed sanctions, Iran began violating the JCPOA (Katzman et al., 2021). This shift in behavior suggests that the current sanctions may be encouraging Iran to exceed agreed-upon limits on its nuclear activities. Additionally, sanctions are not deterring Iran from committing human rights abuses or advancing its missile program (O'Toole, 2021). The fact that neither the Trump nor the Biden administrations have successfully negotiated a stronger version of the JCPOA is another indicator that the current policy is failing.

United States sanctions are also likely harming Iranian

civilians, who are not involved in Iran’s nuclear program. An analysis of United States sanctions before 2015 revealed that “economic sanctions have adversely affected population health in Iran, by impairing [social determinants of health], health care delivery, and access to care” (Aloosh, 2019, p. 12). These sanctions were also associated with inflation, increased unemployment, and shortages of basic goods (Nichols & Charbonneau, 2012). Given that the Trump administration re-imposed all sanctions lifted under the JCPOA and implemented new ones, it is safe to assume that the Iranian people are suffering once again from United States sanctions. Thus, U.S sanctions are contributing to poor standards of living in Iran without eliciting changes in Iran’s behavior.

Policy Alternatives

Policy Option One: Continue with the Maximum Pressure Campaign

The State Department could recommend that the President continue with the maximum pressure campaign to negotiate a stronger nuclear agreement. This new deal would place more restrictions on Iran’s nuclear capabilities while also addressing “its support for terrorism; aggressive regional interventions; intimidation efforts through its armed drone, ballistic missile, and cruise missile attacks; and manifest human rights violations” (Brookes et al., 2020, p. 5). Until Iran agrees to a more robust agreement, the United States would continue with aggressive sanctions to bring Iran to the negotiating table (Brookes et al., 2020). This policy option is advantageous because it allows the United States to economically punish Iran for a wide range of its problematic behaviors. Additionally, aggressive United States sanctions led to the creation of the JCPOA, so constraining the Iranian economy could yield another nuclear agreement. A renegotiated nuclear deal could remedy many of the flaws with the original JCPOA by placing permanent limitations on Iran’s

nuclear program and addressing other problematic aspects of Iran's behavior. If successful, this policy option could remove the threat of a nuclear Iran and increase stability in the Middle East more broadly.

Although a stronger version of the JCPOA could prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, it seems unlikely that Iran or the United States would agree to such a deal. Iran's current and former presidents have both signaled an unwillingness to compromise on its missile program and its regional influence, which highlights the challenges that the United States will face in creating a stronger nuclear agreement (Fassihi et al, 2021; Arouzi, 2020). Even if Iran did agree to renegotiate the JCPOA, the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act (INARA) allows the U.S. Congress to review "any agreement reached with Iran regarding its nuclear program" (Katzman et al., 2021); if lawmakers are unsatisfied with the agreement, they can issue a joint resolution of disapproval, effectively preventing the deal from taking effect (Katzman et al., 2021). Given the highly polarized nature of the U.S. Congress, lawmakers could block a new deal from taking effect. Moreover, this policy option is risky because both Iran and the United States could refuse to enter a new deal, which could lead to Iran continuing its nuclear program and eventually developing a nuclear weapon.

Policy Option Two: Use Military Force to Destroy Iran's Nuclear Infrastructure

The State Department could recommend that the President and the Department of Defense launch airstrikes to destroy Iran's nuclear infrastructure. This policy option would remove the immediate threat of a nuclear Iran; even if Iran wanted to develop its nuclear program after the attack, it would take years to rebuild its infrastructure. There is also evidence to suggest that Iran would not seek to rebuild its nuclear program after an attack; after Iraq's and Syria's nuclear infrastructure were destroyed, both countries were either unwilling or unable to restart their nuclear programs

(Kroenig, 2012). The threat of another military attack could also deter Iran from pursuing nuclear weapons in the future and prevent nuclear proliferation in other countries (Kroenig, 2012). Even if Iran tries to rebuild its nuclear program, destroying key infrastructure will buy the United States time to develop more robust policies to prevent Iran from developing a weapon.

Using military force to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities comes with many risks that ultimately make the policy too dangerous. First, United States military action could provoke war: Iran might retaliate against U.S. troops or allies, launching missiles at military installations or civilian populations in the Gulf or perhaps even Europe. It could activate its proxies abroad, stirring sectarian tensions in Iraq, disrupting the Arab Spring, and ordering terrorist attacks against Israel and the United States (Kroenig, 2012, p. 82).

Moreover, airstrikes could inadvertently threaten United States national security interests, further deteriorate U.S.-Iran relations, and lead to increased instability in the Middle East. Iran could also retaliate by closing the Strait of Hormuz, through which about 20 percent of the world's oil supply travels; such an oil shock would have economic ramifications around the world (Kroenig, 2012). Additionally, unlike in Syria and Iraq, Iran's nuclear program is a great source of national pride; thus, an attack could embolden Iran to rebuild its nuclear program and develop a nuclear weapon (Disvallar, 2022). Ultimately, this policy could delay a nuclear Iran but at the cost of provoking war, increasing Iran's nuclear ambitions, and making U.S.-Iran relations more volatile.

Policy Option Three: Rejoin the Original JCPOA and Pursue Follow-On Negotiations

The State Department could recommend that the President rejoin the original JCPOA and then pursue follow-on negotiations to strengthen the deal (Katzman et al., 2021). This policy acknowledges that the original JCPOA on its own is insufficient. Some of its flaws include that it fails to address non-nuclear

activities, and many of the restrictions on Iran's nuclear activities expire after 10 to 15 years; follow-on negotiations would work to address these shortcomings (Kroenig, 2018). Additionally, since the JCPOA allows the United States to continue sanctions not related to Iran's nuclear activities, the United States could still place economic pressure on Iran until it agrees to follow-on negotiations to address Iran's human rights violations and its support for terrorist organizations, among other issues. However, since Iran's nuclear program is the most pressing threat, this policy will limit Iran's nuclear activities as quickly as possible while avoiding military action. By emphasizing diplomatic negotiations, this policy also seeks to strengthen and repair the relationship between the United States and Iran.

Additionally, rejoining the original JCPOA may be more feasible than immediately creating a stronger version of the agreement. Although Iran has signaled its resistance to limit its missile program and its influence in the Middle East,

Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i, who is Iran's paramount decision maker and whose views on major national security issues almost always prevail, stated on January 8, 2021, in reference to a possible U.S. resumption of JCPOA participation; 'If they return to their commitments, we will return to ours' (Katzman et al., 2021, p. 2).

Moreover, Iran has demonstrated a willingness to re-enter the original JCPOA. In the United States, Congress may not be able to prevent the President from resuming the JCPOA. Although the INARA is slightly ambiguous on this issue, if the United States simply rejoins the original JCPOA without making any changes to the agreement, Congress may not have the ability to review and reject the agreement (Katzman et al., 2021); if the President does not have to submit the JCPOA for congressional approval, the United States can rejoin the agreement more quickly, meaning that Iran would stop certain nuclear activities sooner.

Although this policy is the best option for the United States, it still has limitations. A likely possibility is that Iran rejoins the

JCPOA but refuses to agree to follow-on negotiations. In this case, after key provisions of the JCPOA expire, Iran could advance its nuclear program and work towards developing a weapon. Even if Iran agrees to resume compliance with the JCPOA, it cannot reverse all activities that currently violate the agreement (JINSA, 2021). For example, Iran cannot “uninstall the invaluable learning experience its scientists have gained” (JINSA, 2021, p. 12) through developing its nuclear program. Moreover, some experts question whether the original JCPOA is still relevant considering how much Iran’s nuclear program has advanced in recent years (JINSA, 2021). Additionally, if the JCPOA is not amended to create consequences for parties that leave the deal, future U.S. administrations could withdraw from the JCPOA; such a decision would further diminish U.S. credibility and make another nuclear deal even more unlikely.

Despite its flaws, this policy is the most feasible way to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. Rejoining the JCPOA will still place meaningful restrictions on Iran’s nuclear program until follow-on negotiations occur, and the United States can use sanctions to bring Iran to the negotiating table. This more gradual approach promotes cooperation and diplomacy, which will hopefully improve U.S.-Iran relations and stability in the Middle East. Ultimately, the United States should seek to strengthen the JCPOA and limit other aspects of Iran’s behavior, but it should prioritize restricting Iran’s nuclear activities as quickly as possible; this policy option allows the United States to achieve both of these objectives.

Analysis

None of the policies described above can definitively eliminate the threat of a nuclear Iran, but rejoining the JCPOA and pursuing follow-on negotiations is the best available option. Military action is the least desirable option because it increases the risk of war and economic instability. Policy options one and three are similar because both have the JCPOA at their foundation. However, the

third policy option is better because it is the most practical. Given that the United States withdrew from the JCPOA despite Iranian compliance, Iran may be reluctant to rejoin a nuclear agreement, let alone one that places even more restrictions on its activities. Moreover, in recent months, Iran has demonstrated a willingness to re-enter the original JCPOA, and the United States should capitalize on this opportunity. The third policy recognizes that the JCPOA alone is insufficient to address Iran's nuclear activities and its other problematic behaviors; at the same time, it recognizes the need to urgently address Iran's nuclear program. Conversely, the first policy option takes an all-or-nothing approach that could result in a nuclear Iran. Thus, the United States should seek to re-enter the JCPOA as quickly as possible and then work to create follow-on agreements that protect U.S. national security interests and global stability more broadly.

Conclusion

The United States Department of State should seek to rejoin the JCPOA and pursue follow-on negotiations to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. This policy option is ideal because it allows the United States to quickly place restrictions on Iran's nuclear program while also addressing other problematic aspects of Iran's behavior, such as its human rights violations and its missile program. If diplomatic negotiations fail and the United States abandons the JCPOA, there is a greater risk of military conflict, global nuclear proliferation, and a new era of nuclear warfare. To prevent these consequences from occurring, the United States must rejoin the original JCPOA and engage in continued diplomatic negotiations with Iran to strengthen the nuclear agreement.

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