

Iran: time to avoid another failed U.S. policy.

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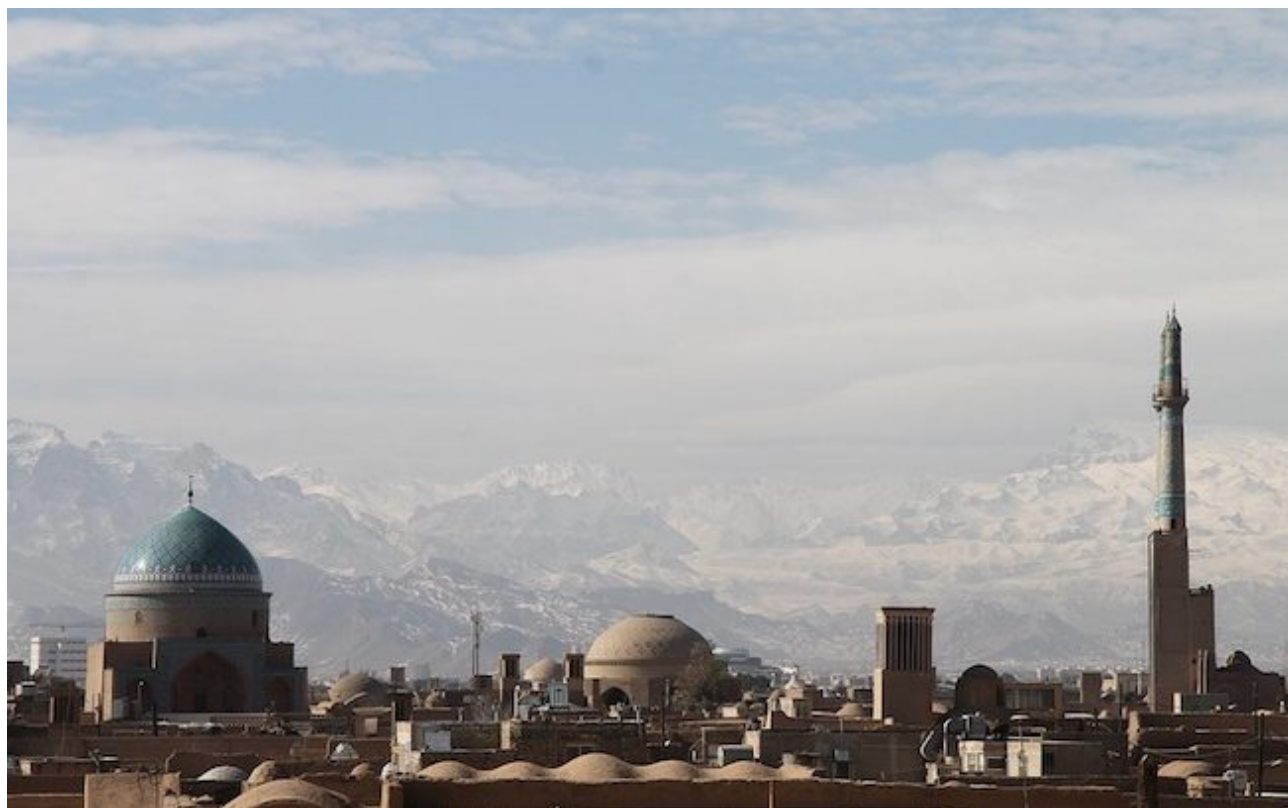


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By Raphael Benaroya

Not much has been going right for the Biden Administration. Foreign and domestic policies have undermined our national security, world leadership, and power to deter hostile adversaries around the world. U.S. policies and actions have showed weakness to friends and foes alike. Our allies have lost faith in America's commitments and resolve, and our emboldened adversaries have stepped up their acts of aggression.

These recent U.S. policy debacles include:

- The disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan, which enabled the Taliban to return to power while taking over billions of dollars' worth of American weapons.
- The failure to respond forcefully to Iran's repeated attacks against its Persian Gulf neighbors and American bases in the region, which has caused our Middle East allies to lose trust and confidence in the U.S.
- Energy policies that have relinquished U.S. energy independence (or dominance) around the world, which has enabled Russia to use its energy resources as a weapon.
- Open border policies (and the consequent flood of over 2 million undocumented, unvetted, unvaccinated people into the U.S., including some on the terrorist watch list), which have overburdened America's education, healthcare, public safety, and justice systems.
- A series of misguided social, fiscal, and politically driven measures that have led to the highest inflation in 40 years, higher interest rates, and a growing likelihood of recession, hampering America's ability to confront China as it asserts economic and military power around the world.
- The failure to deter Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Before the attack, the Biden Administration grossly miscalculated the full extent of Russia's threat, was slow to send defensive weapons to Ukraine, and equivocated on sanctions against Russia, tying them to the extent of the invasion. Even more significantly, the U.S. unilaterally took options off the table, including combat troops and a no-fly zone, with President Biden openly stating that the U.S. has "no intention of fighting Russia." In a game of brinksmanship with Vladimir Putin, President Biden blinked first—and then kept on blinking.

Now, the ongoing U.S. negotiations on Iran's nuclear program have been nothing but humiliating. Our government acceded to Iran's demand that the U.S. not sit directly at the negotiating table. And to make matters worse, the U.S. allowed Russia and China to join our allies in representing American interests.

With the limited U.S. response before and after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Iran has pushed harder against America and its allies. For example:

- In January 2022, Iranian proxies launched some 85 rockets, missiles, and drones across the Middle East (compared only 13 such projectiles in January 2021).
- Iran-backed militias launched attacks in Iraq and Syria, including at the home of Iraq's speaker of parliament, Mohammad al-Halbousi.
- Iran-backed Houthi militants escalated their attacks on neighboring Gulf States, launching ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones. One of their targets was Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (UAE), where the U.S. maintains an airbase with about 2,000 American personnel. Another Houthi missile exploded in an Aramco oil depot in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, during the nearby Saudi Arabian Grand Prix auto race.
- In early April, 2022, Iran and its paramilitary partners shelled a base used by U.S. forces in Syria, wounding four American soldiers, and launched another rocket attack that hit an Iraqi oil field.

- All the while, Iran has continued to wage cyberwarfare against Israel. Authorities are concerned that Iranian-backed cyber espionage groups, like MuddyWater, will increasingly focus its malice on U.S targets.

Why has Iran risked escalating its military aggression during the nuclear agreement negotiations, even before it saw America's weak reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine?

Perhaps it is because the U.S. has signaled similar weakness in its position on the nuclear agreement. The Biden Administration has been saying—for months—that “time is running out,” with the window for reaching a deal just “weeks” away. Clearly, when the U.S. allows adversaries to cross red lines without consequences, it cannot expect those adversaries to change their behavior. Indeed, the behavior inevitably worsens.

What is the U.S. so desperate to achieve with the proposed agreement with Iran, anyway? The new deal seems more like a face-saving echo of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) than an effective nuclear arms control pact. It is clear that the proposed agreement will not prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power. It is deeply flawed and toothless! Here is why:

1. U.S. and European officials agree that Iran is only a short time—perhaps just weeks—away from reaching the “breakout point” of enough enriched uranium fuel for a nuclear weapon. The proposed agreement does not eliminate the possibility of Iran possessing a nuclear weapon. The best it can do is defer that eventuality for a short time(assuming Iran adheres to the terms of the agreement).
2. Under the agreement, Iran's restrictions on building advanced centrifuges lapse in two years, at which point Iran will be able to enrich uranium much faster than it can today.
3. The deal imposes no limits on Iranian's generation of enriched uranium after 2030, effectively giving Iran unrestricted capacity at that point to develop nuclear weapons. Furthermore, the agreement does not force Iran to disclose details of its past efforts to develop nuclear weapons (which even the 2015 JCPOA did).
4. The agreement lifts the sanctions that the West currently imposes on Iran, giving Iran renewed access to large financial resources. This financing will surely enable and incentivize Iran to accelerate its campaign of military aggression against U.S. interests and allies in the Middle East (as did the vast amount of cash that the Obama Administration handed over to Iran in conjunction with the JCPOA).
5. The agreement allows Iran to stockpile its enriched uranium in Russia, which would benefit financially from the arrangement.
6. If Iran prevails in its demands, the agreement will delist the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO)—though this point is in contention.

I am not alone in pointing out these fatal flaws. The Jewish Institute for National Security of America (JINSA) sent a letter to President Biden and Congress—signed by 46 former U.S. generals and admirals—making the same points. That letter called for “diplomacy that would

genuinely end the threat posed by Iran's military nuclear program and counter Iran's regional aggression"—and lamented that the contemplated agreement does neither.

But this criticism touches only on what is reported to be *in* the agreement. Some important provisions are glaringly *absent* from it, such as:

- No obstacles to prevent Iran from developing intercontinental ballistic missiles, the primary delivery platform for nuclear loads.
- No restrictions on the military aggression of Iran and its proxies against U.S. interests and allies in the Middle East. In fact, the Biden administration has already lifted the FTO designation and corresponding sanctions against the Houthis in Yemen.
- No limits on Iran's use of the monies to be freed up by sanction relief. Without such limits, Iran is sure to increase its financing of its militant proxies in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Gaza.
- No mention of Iran's design to destroy Israel—an act Iranian leaders have described as “one nuclear bomb away.”
- No curbs on Iran's cyber warfare campaign against U.S. and its allies.
- No concrete actions to release foreign nationals currently held in Iran.
- No demands against Iran's egregious domestic human rights conduct, which includes imprisonment of activists and execution of dissenters.

To be fair, several U.S. administrations, past and present, have recognized that a nuclear Iran presents a threat to the region and the world, which could trigger a nuclear arms race in the Middle East, and have vowed to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. All of those administrations have, instead, enabled Iran to advance its nuclear program. But it is baffling why the current administration is putting so much stock in the deeply flawed agreement now on the table—especially in light of the recent increase in Iran's overt military actions.

The Iran nuclear talks are currently paused, reportedly due to Iran's demand that the U.S. lift the FTO designation from the IRGC and the U.S. demand for non-nuclear concessions in return. (One ridiculous concession demanded by the U.S. is said to be that Iran must promise not to target U.S. officials. Really?!)

Iran seems eager to resume negotiations, and why not? As it stands, the deal assures Iran's nuclear capability (within a few years, at worst), frees it immediately from the restraints of financial sanctions, and does nothing to curb its regional military aggression.

Unfortunately, it seems that the U.S. has only two options at this point, and both are bad. Either complete the weak, flawed agreement on the table now, or pull out of the negotiations indefinitely. Both options lead to a nuclear Iran, which will make it less vulnerable to pushback by the West in the future and help it advance its malicious agenda the Middle East. (Look at what nuclear weapons have enabled North Korea and Russia to get away with.)

But walking away from the agreement as it stands today would send a strong message to Iran and could produce a better outcome for the U.S., **IF** it takes the following additional measures

to oppose Iran with clarity and resolve.

The U.S. should:

1. Clearly acknowledge and support the rights of Middle East states (including Israel) to defend themselves against Iranian actions or threats—preemptively if necessary.
2. Engage with Middle East states to develop a new joint regional security architecture that leverages the recent progress in Israel-Arab relations to counter Iran and its military proxies.
3. Warn Iran that its attacks on U.S. interests and personnel will have serious consequences (and take action as necessary to ensure those consequences).
4. Increase pressure on Iran through all available diplomatic and economic channels, including additional sanctions.

Of course, the U.S. should also leave the door open to Iran to restart negotiations—though only as a reward for Iran's good behavior.

Accepting a nuclear Iran through the proposed agreement, however, would signal another sign of American weakness and serve as one more example of failed U.S. policy.

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