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Can Iran and the U.S. Breathe Life Back Into Nuclear Deal?

The possibility of the [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action](#) (JCPOA)—or the Iran nuclear deal—being revived, though difficult, seems to have [brightened](#) in February 2022. The U.S. may now also believe that the potential loss of Russian natural gas and oil due to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war needs to be offset by Iran returning to the global oil market. The nuclear deal could have been accomplished much earlier if not for the Biden administration’s [unwillingness](#) to commit to the “way forward” offered by Iran to stay in the deal for the remainder of Biden’s term as president, according to Responsible Statecraft. Former United States President Donald Trump had pulled [out](#) of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal in May 2018 on the premise that he could get a better deal than the one negotiated by his predecessor Barack Obama.

Meanwhile, faced with the current reality relating to the situation on the ground, which shows that Iran is [unlikely](#) to give up its missile capabilities or pull back from regional allies, Biden seems to have come around to the original deal.

Iran is unlikely to remove the more advanced centrifuges it now possesses and uses after the Trump administration unilaterally pulled out of the deal. Neither is Iran likely to get an assurance that Trump or a future U.S. president who follows his lead on foreign policy will not abandon the deal again after the 2024 presidential election in the United States. The rest of the world is thus forced to live in an era in which the United States, the

strongest military and economic power, is [no longer capable](#) of committing to treaties, whether on global warming or the nuclear deal with Iran.

Washington was not alone in its foolishness of pulling out of an agreement like the Iran nuclear deal that sought to impose the most stringent restrictions any country had accepted on its nuclear programs. It was egged on, if not instigated, by Israel, which wanted the United States to do what it could not: remove the possibility of Iran developing nuclear weapons and defang its missile capabilities. As most technologies required for nuclear weapons or missiles are dual-use, these restrictions would have converted Iran to a second-class industrial power.

A set of Israeli military experts have now come out saying that asking the United States to pull out of the Iran deal was [a huge blunder](#), and the best course for Israel now would be to work to reinstate the nuclear deal. A report published in January 2022 [by Ben Armbruster](#) in Responsible Statecraft, a leading United States website on international affairs, says, “The head of Israel’s military intelligence agency, Maj. Gen. Aharon Haliva, has said that the revival of the Iran nuclear agreement would be better for Israel than if it were to be allowed to collapse entirely.”

If Iran had succumbed to the United States and Israel’s demands, it would have given the Western powers complete military control over West Asia, including its oil. This would have been in line with former United States President Jimmy Carter’s 1980 declaration—[the Carter Doctrine](#)—that the Persian Gulf region was of vital interest to the United States, and the U.S. would brook no interference of any outside power in this region. The Carter Doctrine was similar to the neocolonial Monroe Doctrine of 1823, which declared that no foreign power could have any military presence in the Americas, the United States’ backyard.

[Trump’s reimposition of more than 1,000 sanctions on Iran](#) after walking out of the nuclear deal was a heavy economic blow for Iran. It was complemented by covert attacks on Iran’s nuclear infrastructure, which included the [sabotage of nuclear facilities](#) and [assassinations of nuclear scientists](#) in Iran. Major-General Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ Quds Force, was [assassinated](#) along with Iraq’s militia commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in a United States drone strike in Baghdad in 2020. Iran’s response to these sanctions and attacks [has been equally forceful](#): the country struck the [United States bases in the](#)

[region](#) in January 2020 using missiles, continued supporting the Lebanese political-militant group [Hezbollah](#) and the [Syrian government forces](#), and continued to exert its influence over Iraq. After a prior warning to avoid casualties, Iran's strikes on United States bases [showed](#) America's so-called anti-missile batteries are toothless against Iran's latest missiles. Iran was careful not to cause deaths, nor did it hit United States Navy ships in order not to start a war. But its asymmetric war capabilities showed that U.S. and Israeli strategic assets in the region were now within Iran's missile range, and anti-missile batteries could not protect these assets.

I have previously written about Iran developing [asymmetrical warfare](#) capabilities and the ability to use missiles, drones, and smaller naval boats to strike opponents. Supplying Hezbollah and other groups in West Asia such as Ansarullah or the Houthis in Yemen, with these kinds of technology has helped Iran vis-a-vis Israel and Saudi Arabia. The Houthis have shown they may suffer heavy losses against the militarily superior Saudi and the Emirati (UAE) forces, but they [have](#) missile capabilities to strike back. With Yemen, the argument of Houthi attacks hitting civilians rings hollow, as the [Saudis and Emiratis](#) have inflicted the [most savage attacks on civilians](#) that the world has seen in a very long time. Yemen's infrastructure has been [destroyed](#); the country has dealt with a cholera epidemic and faced a water crisis with no access to safe drinking water, and its schools, colleges, and health care facilities have been destroyed by sustained Saudi and Emirati bombings. Yemen's only recourse has been to [hit back](#) at Saudi and UAE facilities—refineries and airports—hoping to force them into peace talks and settle the war.

Trump and the Israeli leadership had assumed that the economic reverses of the sanctions would drive Iran to surrender its independent strategic nuclear role. Iran initially refrained from breaching the JCPOA agreement and asked the other [signatories](#), Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Russia, and China, to continue trading with it. Apart from China and Russia, the European countries who were part of the agreement gave "[lip service](#)" to continuing with the JCPOA and reduced their trade with Iran to a trickle. With the dollar functioning as the international currency, no other European country was willing to buck the United States sanctions in any serious way.

This is where Iran started to ratchet up its nuclear enrichment, both in quantity and quality: how much uranium-235 it would enrich and to what degree of purity. The Iran nuclear deal had the [following](#) key features:

- Iran's active centrifuges would have to [come down](#) to about 5,000 from the more than 19,000 centrifuges it had.
- Uranium enrichment was capped at 300 kg at 3.67 percent purity.
- No advanced centrifuges would be used beyond IR-1 and Iran would have to dismantle/mothball more advanced centrifuges.
- Iran would have to modify the Arak heavy reactor that could produce weapons-grade plutonium and convert it so that it could be used for peaceful purposes.

At the time of the agreement, Iran had [stockpiled](#) about 200 kgs of 20 percent enriched uranium gas (200 kg of uranium gas would be 133 kg of solid uranium), which was shipped out to Russia.

In terms of nuclear weapons development, converting uranium to [20 percent purity is nine-tenths of the work](#) required to reach weapons-grade uranium of 90 percent purity. The bulk of the work involved in building these weapons is therefore in achieving 20 percent purity, and the rest is relatively easy. In centrifuges, uranium gas is spun to separate U-238, the heavier isotope of uranium, from U-235, which is lighter and the fissile isotope used in the development of nuclear weapons. The separation is done by using a cascade of centrifuges and repeating the process continuously. This process is time- and energy-consuming and requires a high degree of automation. In Natanz, in Iran, the [Stuxnet malware and a cyberweapon](#) developed by the United States and Israel were used to destroy more than 10 percent of Iran's centrifuges by attacking its Siemens controllers. This attack was the [first use of a cyberweapon](#) in the world.

In [November 2021](#), Iran's atomic agency, the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, [said](#) that its stockpile of 20 percent enriched uranium had reached more than 210 kg, and 60 percent enriched uranium had reached 25 kg. The country also has put in a new generation of more advanced centrifuges and [efficient](#) IR-2m, IR-4, and IR-6 centrifuges. This capability is why there are arguments that Iran has reached breakout capacity as it has enough fissile material for a bomb and is more advanced in its bomb-making ability than it was during the original JCPOA as a consequence of Trump's folly.

The problem that the United States and its allies face now is how to put the nuclear genie they unleashed by walking away from the JCPOA back inside the bottle. Iran is willing to

accept most terms of the old deal but is unlikely to mothball its advanced centrifuges again, as it did earlier. It also knows the United States may be just a presidential election away from reneging on the deal, so the U.S.'s stakes in the nuclear deal are temporary. So, how much is Iran willing to sacrifice for sanction relief—though halting and piecemeal, as Obama showed—to get back to the negotiating table on the nuclear deal? For the sake of the world, everyone hopes that Iran will, and that Biden will live up to the United States' side of the bargain, at least for the few years he has left in office before the next presidential elections.

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