



# Statement on Improving the Potential for a Diplomatic Resolution to the Iran Nuclear Challenge

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**A STATEMENT BY:  
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The challenge of preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon—a commitment made by successive presidents of both parties—has reached a critical moment. Diplomacy appears to be moving backward, as Iran’s representatives in Vienna make new maximal demands while retracting previous concessions, even as its scientists are crossing dangerous enrichment thresholds. Secretary of State Antony Blinken was right to say that the United States will not accept an approach in which Iran stalls in the talks while it advances its nuclear program. Indeed, the Vienna negotiations are in danger of becoming a cover for Iran to move toward achieving a threshold nuclear weapons capability.

We strongly support the Biden Administration’s preference for using diplomacy to ensure that the

Iranian nuclear program remains solely for civilian purposes. Only by diplomatic agreement can there be a mutually acceptable resolution of this problem, which is especially important as the world grapples with the urgent challenges of Russia’s threats to Ukraine and an increasingly aggressive China.

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While the United States has recognized Iran’s right to civilian nuclear power, Iran’s behavior continues to indicate that it not only wants to preserve a nuclear weapons option but is actively moving toward developing that capability. Indeed, as the director-general of the International Atomic Energy Association, Rafael Grossi, has stated, Iran’s decision to enrich uranium to 60 percent and to produce uranium metal has no justifiable civilian purpose.

It is important to recall that the limit for Iranian enrichment enshrined in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the diplomatic agreement the return to which is the goal of the Vienna talks, was 3.67 percent. That was set to be well below the dividing line of 20 percent enrichment, which separates low and highly enriched uranium and whose crossing was widely seen as an indicator of Iranian intent to move toward weapons’ grade enrichment. For many of us, including those who supported the JCPOA, enrichment to 20 percent was a red-line for the United States that would trigger severe consequences.

Today’s more ominous reality is that Iran now enriches to 60 percent and is threatening to move to 90 percent; moreover, on its current path, experts say Iran could accumulate, in a matter of months, enough uranium enriched to 60 percent and enough technical knowledge about the enrichment process that would make constraints, as currently conceived, largely irrelevant. Its action should set off alarm bells not only because of their inherent danger but because they indicate that Tehran does not fear there will be any consequences for taking these steps.

Without convincing Iran it will suffer severe consequences if it stays on its current path, there is little reason to hope for the success of diplomacy.

And given the speed with which Iran is moving forward with its nuclear program, such consequences cannot be limited to political isolation, condemnatory resolutions in international fora and additional economic sanctions, all of which are a necessary part of an American strategy toward Iran but are not sufficient at this stage to convince Iran’s leaders that the price they will pay requires them to alter their course.

Therefore, for the sake of our diplomatic effort to resolve this crisis, we believe it is vital to restore Iran’s fear that its current nuclear path will trigger the use of force against it by the United States. The challenge is how to restore U.S. credibility in the eyes of Iran’s

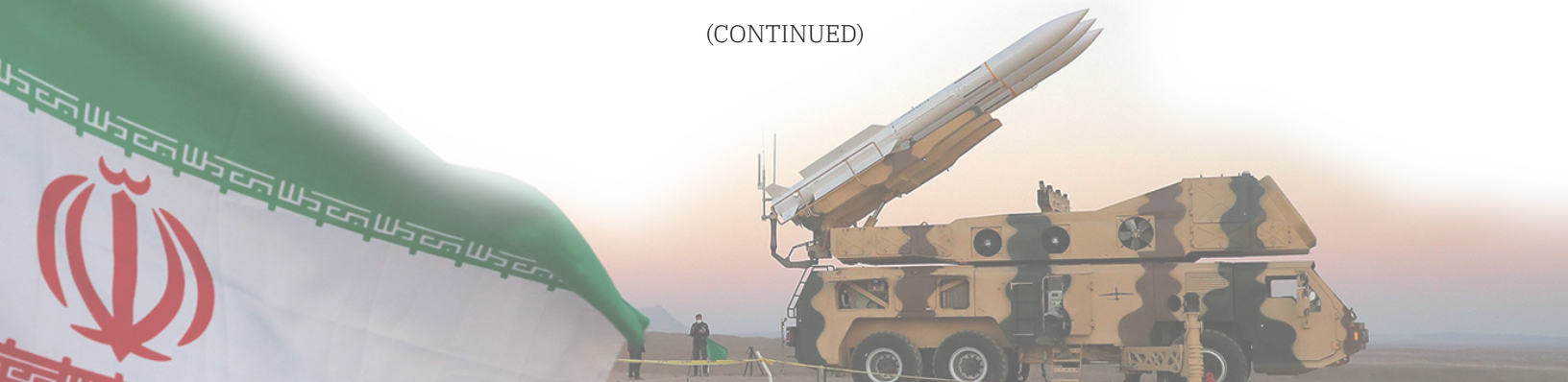
leaders. Words—including formulations that are more pointed and direct than “all options are on the table”—are also necessary but not sufficient.

In that context, we believe it is important for the Biden administration to take steps that lead Iran to believe that persisting in its current behavior and rejecting a reasonable diplomatic resolution will put to risk its entire nuclear infrastructure, one built painstakingly over the last three decades.

Such steps may include orchestrating high-profile military exercises by the U.S. Central Command, potentially in concert with allies and partners, that simulate what would be involved in such a significant operation, including rehearsing air-to-ground attacks on hardened targets and the suppression of Iranian missile batteries. Also important would be to provide both local allies and partners as well as U.S. installations and assets in the region with enhanced defensive capabilities to counter whatever retaliatory actions Iran might

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choose to make, thereby signaling our readiness to act, if necessary. Perhaps most significantly, fulfilling past U.S. promises to act forcefully against other Iranian outrages, such as the drone attack by Iran-backed militias against the U.S. base at al-Tanf in Syria and Iran's illegal capture of merchant ships and killing unarmed seamen, might have the salutary impact of underscoring the seriousness of U.S. commitments to act on the nuclear issue.

Let us be clear—we are not urging the Biden Administration to threaten “regime change” or to advocate for a “regime change” strategy under cover of non-proliferation. This is not about hostility toward Iran or its people. In fact, we urge the U.S. government to provide humanitarian support, including COVID-19 vaccines and other medical assistance, now—regardless of the diplomatic impasse. But it is essential to break that impasse and stop the dangerous advance of the Iranian nuclear program.

We believe a diplomatic agreement that fully and

verifiably ensures Iran's nuclear program is solely for peaceful purposes remains the best way to address the Iran nuclear challenge. In so doing, it is also the best way to prevent a cascade of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, in which other countries in the region feel compelled to match Iranian capabilities, with disastrous consequences for regional security and global nonproliferation norms.

To avoid military conflict—by us or any other actor that believes itself threatened by an Iranian nuclear weapons capability—we need to maximize the prospects for such an agreement. To achieve this goal, offering incentives to Iran will be essential, both to influence the debate in Tehran and to demonstrate to the world—especially China, Russia, Britain, France, and Germany, who are negotiating with Iran—how much the United States wants an agreement. But no less essential than clarifying what Tehran stands to gain is restoring Iran's fear that it will suffer severe consequences if it refuses. The time to act is now. ❖

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