

A New Iran Deal Won't Prevent an Iranian Bomb

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Articles & Testimony

Tehran's program is far more advanced than in 2015, so only a credible threat of force will stop the regime from crossing the nuclear weapons threshold.

A decade ago, then-Israeli defense minister Ehud Barak would regularly come to Washington and hold high-level meetings with senior officials in the Obama administration. Iran's nuclear program was the central focus of those meetings, and I recall his frequent admonition: "You say there is time to deal with it, but I fear we will be told this until we are told, 'it is too late and there is nothing to be done but live with it.'" I was one of those in the U.S. government reassuring him that we would not let this happen. However, with [Rafael Grossi \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-nuclear-programme-is-galloping-ahead-iaea-chief-says-el-pais-2022-07-22/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-nuclear-programme-is-galloping-ahead-iaea-chief-says-el-pais-2022-07-22/), director of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), now saying the Iranian nuclear program "is galloping ahead," I fear that Barak's words may have been prophetic.

Iran now has two bombs worth of uranium enriched to [60 percent \(https://www.wsj.com/amp/articles/iran-expands-nuclear-program-as-talks-to-revive-2015-deal-falter-11662569582\)](https://www.wsj.com/amp/articles/iran-expands-nuclear-program-as-talks-to-revive-2015-deal-falter-11662569582) levels—close to weapons grade—and continues to [install and operate \(https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/irans-latest-advanced-centrifuge-deployment\)](https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/irans-latest-advanced-centrifuge-deployment) advanced centrifuges that can enrich it far more quickly than the first generation IR-1 centrifuges. The baseline of the Iranian nuclear program has advanced dramatically beyond where it would have been if Tehran was still observing the limits of the Iran nuclear deal, also known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). From that standpoint, former U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA created the justification for Iran to press ahead, and clearly, the "maximum pressure" campaign of the Trump years failed from that perspective.

Trump's failing approach on Iran's nuclear program left U.S. President Joe Biden with a difficult inheritance. But the Biden policy to this point has not succeeded either. For the last 18 months, the Iranian nuclear program has been

accelerating, and it includes large amounts of stockpiled enriched material and two items (60 percent enriched uranium and production of uranium metal) that, again in the words of Grossi, have “no justifiable civilian purpose (<https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/volume-168/issue-20/senate-section/article/S456-3>).” That reality means even if the JCPOA is reconstituted, Iran after 2030 would be in a position to move quickly to a bomb unless Iranian leaders come to believe that the cost of doing so is too high.

I understand the Biden administration’s desire to return to the JCPOA. It would stop the advance of Iran’s nuclear program, require it to ship out the excess enriched uranium Tehran has stockpiled (**19 times** (https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/iaea-irans-enriched-uranium-stockpile-now-over-19-times-the-limit-in-2015-deal/)) above the JCPOA limits), maintain less than one bomb’s worth of uranium enriched only to **3.67 percent** (<https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/JCPOA-at-a-glance>), end the production of uranium metal, and unplug their advanced centrifuges.

But Iran has now developed nuclear know-how, so it is already a threshold nuclear weapons state. And Iran will have zero breakout time when the JCPOA’s qualitative and quantitative limits on its nuclear program lapse at the end of 2030. A resurrected JCPOA essentially buys time until then. It would defer the Iranian nuclear threat, not end it, and as a result, much would depend on how the United States and others use the time bought.

At a minimum, Washington must use the time to take steps that will credibly raise the costs in Iranian eyes of moving toward a nuclear weapon after 2030 and increasing threats in the region. That won’t be a simple task because Iran will also be using that time—and the potentially hundreds of billions of dollars it could gain over the remaining life of the JCPOA—to bolster their regional proxies, build their ballistic missile arsenal further, and harden its nuclear infrastructure to make it less vulnerable to attack.

At this point, the latest Iranian positions appear to have made the EU mediators less hopeful about reaching an agreement to resurrect the JCPOA soon. Josep Borrell, the European Union’s foreign-policy chief, said on Sept. 5: “I am sorry to say that I am **less confident** (<https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-nuclear-eu-borrell-pessimistic/32019604.html>) today than 28 hours before...about the prospects of closing the deal right now.”

One thing is for sure: Iranian leaders did not treat the “final proposal” the European Union presented to the Iranians and the Americans as final. They treated it as negotiable, accepting it but with several conditions. The first was a carve-out from sanctions for Iranian businesses that do business with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The second was a right to resume all aspects of its nuclear program should the U.S. government withdraw from the JCPOA again—meaning that enrichment to 60 percent and production of uranium metal, which have no justifiable civilian purpose, would gain legal acceptance. Finally, the process of coming back into compliance with the JCPOA limits could begin but not be completed, unless the IAEA ended its investigation (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/eu-proposes-significant-concession-to-iran-to-revive-nuclear-deal-11660242907>) into three undeclared Iranian sites where it found traces of uranium. (Those traces indicated prohibited action and a clandestine program.)

The Europeans appear willing to accept the resumption of the JCPOA with the IAEA issue unresolved. Aside from permitting Iran to gain access to some frozen bank accounts on day one of the implementation process, it would also mean putting the ball in the IAEA’s court, knowing there is likely to be real hesitancy to act in a way that derails the agreement to implement the deal.

If this happens and Iran once again escapes any accountability for prohibited action, it may be very difficult to ensure that Iran does not have a clandestine nuclear program. Not only does the outside world collectively not know what Iran has been doing at these three undeclared sites, but because the IAEA has had no access (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-will-keep-iaea-cameras-turned-off-until-nuclear-deal-is->

[restored-tasnim-2022-07-25/](#)) to its monitoring cameras at declared sites for months, there could have been a diversion of enriched materials to secret sites and the agency would not know it.

Of course, the United States could reject Iran's conditions, and there may be no deal. But if so, what is the Biden administration prepared to do to stop the advance of the Iranian nuclear program? The current approach would have Washington increase economic pressure through stricter enforcement of sanctions—making it harder, for example, for Iran to sell its oil by cracking down on countries violating sanctions and buying Iranian oil. But it's unclear how responsive the Chinese will be, especially now, and the White House may not be keen to keep oil off the market given the price. Moreover, the economic price alone may not be enough to persuade Iranian leaders to give up what they seem to want: either a nuclear weapons capability or being a simple step away from having one.

The bottom line is without a deal, Iran will draw closer to having a bomb sooner rather than later. With a resurrected JCPOA, it becomes later rather than sooner—unless the Biden administration and its successors act to convince Iranian officials of the risks they are running, including by very explicitly conveying that Washington will use force to prevent it.

Regrettably, there are already voices in the foreign-policy community suggesting—much as Barak predicted—that Iran can't be stopped from developing a nuclear weapon and the world ought to simply [learn to live with it](#) (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/12/13/because-trump-left-nuclear-deal-we-might-have-learn-live-with-nuclear-iran/>). At the August meeting of the Aspen Strategy Group—a bipartisan group of leading foreign-policy professionals—one member of the group told me that a surprising number of participants were making this argument.

Although those making this case are willing to live with an Iranian nuclear bomb capability, they fail to see how others in the region are going to respond even as they draw false lessons from the Cold War about the prospect of stability in a nuclear-armed Middle East. For example, Israel—which believes a nuclear-armed Iran is an [existential threat](#) (<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/07/joe-biden-middle-east-israel-iran/670530/>) to the Jewish state—will become far more likely to launch major military strikes against the Iranian nuclear infrastructure if it sees the United States and others are ready to live with an Iran with nukes. Similarly, the crown prince of [Saudi Arabia](#) (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-iran-nuclear/saudi-crown-prince-says-will-develop-nuclear-bomb-if-iran-does-cbs-tv-idUSKCN1GR1MN>) has declared that if Iran has a nuclear weapons capability, the kingdom will get one as well. Will Egypt and Turkey be far behind?

Those who take comfort in the experience of the Cold War and the balance of terror that existed between the United States and the Soviet Union appear to think that the same logic or principles will apply in the Middle East as well. But they overlook at least two factors: First, both the United States and the Soviet Union had secure second-strike capabilities, meaning they could not be prevented from retaliating with their nuclear forces even if struck first. In the Middle East, apart from Israel—which reportedly has the capability to launch nuclear-armed missiles from submarines—it would take years to develop second-strike capabilities, leaving their nuclear forces highly vulnerable to a preemptive strike.

In a crisis, all actors would be on a hair trigger, making a nuclear strike and war all too possible. Second, even with the so-called reality of mutually assured destruction, the world came much too close to a nuclear cataclysm during the Cold War. Aside from the Cuban Missile Crisis, which brought humanity much closer to a nuclear war than anyone knew at the time, it's also now well-known that the Soviets misread a large-scale [1983 NATO exercise](#) (<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-1983-military-drill-that-nearly-sparked-nuclear-war-with-the-soviets-180979980/>), believing it was the prelude to an attack, and they were preparing a nuclear strike. Luck averted a nuclear exchange.

It's not even necessary to look to the past. Consider Russian President Vladimir Putin's threats today; he raised the **[alert status \(https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-03/news/putin-orders-russian-nuclear-weapons-higher-alert\)](https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-03/news/putin-orders-russian-nuclear-weapons-higher-alert)** of his nuclear forces, and that has raised fears that too much support for Ukraine could trigger the Russian use of nuclear weapons. That should show the world that the use of nuclear weapons is no longer unthinkable. If Iran develops a nuclear weapon, the odds are high it will produce a nuclear-armed Middle East—and the risk of a nuclear war in a conflict-ridden region will grow.

There, of course, will be one other consequence of an Iranian nuclear weapon: Those feeling that they, too, must have a bomb will grow in number and very likely extend beyond the Middle East—and that will spell the end of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The NPT has been one of history's most successful arms control treaties, keeping the number of nuclear-armed states far below what its authors originally expected.

Biden is right to say the United States will **[prevent \(https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/07/13/world/biden-israel-news\)](https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/07/13/world/biden-israel-news)** Iran from getting a nuclear weapon. Regrettably, the path he is pursuing risks making that posture more rhetorical than real. Although late, it is still **[not too late \(https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2022-07-06/united-states-needs-better-strategy-deter-iran\)](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2022-07-06/united-states-needs-better-strategy-deter-iran)** to prevent Iran from translating its threshold capability into a weapon. But it requires first and foremost that Iranian leaders believe they really are risking their entire nuclear infrastructure if they keep moving toward a bomb. Today, they do not believe Washington will ever use force against them. But U.S. officials can still change that perception by taking a number of steps.

First, Washington's public posture needs to change. It should emphasize that while Biden strongly prefers a diplomatic outcome, Iranian officials are acting as if they want a nuclear weapon and are using talks to create cover for pursuing it. They should understand that the United States will act at a certain point and take out their entire nuclear infrastructure—one they have invested in at great cost for several decades.

The U.S. secretary of state should make a speech on Iran. He should explain U.S. policy, including the pursuit of a diplomatic solution that would permit Iran civil nuclear power but not nuclear weapons. He should also explain why it is imperative that Iran not acquire nuclear arms.

Apart from threatening the future of the NPT and greatly increasing the risk of a nuclear war in the Middle East, the secretary should explain that Iran is a country that respects no rules or limits: It continues to try to assassinate former **[U.S. officials \(https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-62498193\)](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-62498193)** and **[dissidents \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/07/14/iran-journalist-kidnapping-alinejad/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/07/14/iran-journalist-kidnapping-alinejad/)** in the United States and elsewhere; it provides **[weapons \(https://www.state.gov/illegal-iranian-flow-of-weapons-to-yemen/#:~:text=On%20December%2020%2C%20the%20United,to%20the%20Houthis%20in%20Yemen.\)](https://www.state.gov/illegal-iranian-flow-of-weapons-to-yemen/#:~:text=On%20December%2020%2C%20the%20United,to%20the%20Houthis%20in%20Yemen.)**, **[funds \(https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/irans-islamist-proxies\)](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/irans-islamist-proxies)**, and **[training \(https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/soleimanis-shadow/vi-spinning-the-fatemioun-raising-an-army-of-disposable-afghan-diaspora-online/\)](https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/soleimanis-shadow/vi-spinning-the-fatemioun-raising-an-army-of-disposable-afghan-diaspora-online/)** to terrorist groups like the Houthis, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad; it uses proxy forces (Shiite militias) to undermine **[state authorities \(https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/iran-warning-update-iranian-proxies-may-attack-us-response-iraqi-political-crisis\)](https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/iran-warning-update-iranian-proxies-may-attack-us-response-iraqi-political-crisis)** (in Lebanon and Iraq); it threatens its neighbors and **[international waterways \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-summons-swiss-envoy-over-us-seizure-iranian-oil-isna-2022-05-27/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-summons-swiss-envoy-over-us-seizure-iranian-oil-isna-2022-05-27/)**; and it openly calls for the **[eradication of Israel \(https://www.iranintl.com/en/202208065484\)](https://www.iranintl.com/en/202208065484)**, a member state of the United Nations.

To reinforce the secretary's remarks, Biden should use his speech at the United Nations General Assembly this month to reemphasize that while Washington prefers a diplomatic outcome, Iran's approach suggests it wants nuclear arms, not civil nuclear power, and as a result, it is risking its entire nuclear infrastructure. A public posture of this sort will also signal that Washington is conditioning the environment internationally for possible U.S. military

action. Even before going public, the United States should inform its allies and use private channels to convey this message to Iranian officials.

Second, U.S. forces should be conducting exercises with U.S. Central Command that rehearse air-to-ground operations against hardened targets that necessarily must involve striking the air defenses that protect them. Iran pays attention to U.S. exercises and will understand the kind of attacks the Defense Department is preparing and simulating.

Third, Washington needs to continue to upgrade the defenses of its regional partners against missile and drone attacks. The aim is both to reassure regional partners and show Tehran that U.S. and allied forces can blunt its military responses or threats. (Much is being done on collective **early warning** (<https://www.axios.com/2022/07/20/central-command-middle-east-israel-saudi-defense>) of attacks in Centcom, and this needs to continue and expand into subgroupings within the region to do more to bolster active, integrated defenses. The whole will always be greater than the sum of the individual parts.)

Fourth, the Pentagon should accelerate the delivery of KC-46 refueling tankers to Israel. Israel's ability to credibly strike Iran's nuclear infrastructure requires more loiter time to ensure it can also take out hardened targets. It needs these aircraft to be able to carry out the kind of strikes necessary. Presently, the Israelis, who are slated to buy four **KC-46 tankers** (<https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/boeing-says-israel-buy-four-air-force-refuelling-planes-927-mln-2022-09-01/>), are not likely to get them before 2025. If the aim is to convince Iranian leaders that the military option is real and they are playing with fire if they continue to advance toward a weapon, Israel should get them much sooner. Indeed, providing them on an accelerated basis will signal to Iran that Biden is prepared to support Israeli action and will not restrain it.

So long as Iran doubts that the United States will use force against them or their nuclear infrastructure, there is little prospect of a diplomatic outcome that truly affects where its nuclear program is ultimately headed. Instead, sooner or later, Iran will draw closer to a weapons capability, and either the Israelis will act militarily with uncertain results or the Barak prophecy will materialize.

If Iran gets a nuclear weapon, so will Saudis and others in the region, and the NPT will unravel. That there are many serious people already beginning to argue for the outcome Barak feared should be a wake-up call. It's time to change it.

Dennis Ross, the William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute, formerly served in senior national security positions with the Reagan, Bush, Clinton, and Obama administrations. This article was originally published on the Foreign Policy website (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/09/a-new-iran-deal-wont-prevent-an-iranian-bomb/>). ❖

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