

Letting Iran Go Nuclear

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Articles & Testimony

Tehran's program continues to gallop ahead, and the United States is doing very little about it.

Why is the Biden administration taking such a blase attitude toward Iran's nuclear program? While still a candidate, Joe Biden wrote one foreign policy op-ed. It was on Iran. Biden declared it a "priority to set Iran policy right." He expressed deep concern that Donald Trump's decision to exit the 2015 nuclear deal—the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—gave Iran the opening to amass a huge stockpile of enriched uranium, thereby cutting down its time to nuclear breakout from a year to "just a few months." Biden then vowed to rejoin the agreement "if Iran returns to strict compliance."

That diplomatic approach has essentially governed U.S. policy ever since—Washington remains ready to re-enter the nuclear deal whenever Iran says okay. But Iran hasn't said okay, at least not yet. In the meantime, the situation has gotten much worse.

Since Biden took office, the Iranians have gone on an enrichment blitz. They blasted through the JCPOA's limitations, enriching to 20 and then 60 percent purity using centrifuges far more advanced and sophisticated than those allowed under the original agreement. The result, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency, is that Iran has produced nearly four thousand kilograms of enriched uranium, including 55.6 kg at the 60 percent level.

Should Iran decide to use that uranium for military purposes, it could make a dash to 90 percent enrichment in just a matter of weeks, potentially producing enough fissile material for multiple nuclear devices. And while most experts believe it would take significantly longer to build deliverable bombs, no one really knows the status of Iran's "weaponization" program: It is easy to hide computer simulations and laboratory testing, and there have been no comprehensive inspections of known facilities—let alone unknown facilities—for more than a year and a half.

In sum, a nuclear threat is much worse today than it was when Biden took office. Oddly, Washington hasn't really

done much about it.

On the diplomatic front, the administration has sweetened its offer to entice Iran into a new nuclear deal. While it quite rightly held firm on Iran's demand to remove the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps from an official list of "foreign terrorist organizations," Washington has given ground on many other items.

On the nuclear side of the agreement, the United States has purportedly agreed to allow Iran to keep, in storage, thousands of advanced centrifuges it has made contrary to the terms of the original deal. By U.S. negotiators' own admission, the cumulative result of such concessions is that a new deal would only restore Iran's "breakout" time to six months, which is half of what it was when the United States pulled out of the JCPOA in 2018. And on economic matters, the new deal purportedly gives Iran immediate access to a certain amount of blocked assets, before it even exports most of its massive stockpile of enriched uranium for safekeeping in a third country. It also gives Iran a way around prohibitions on financial transactions with the IRGC, which controls a sizable chunk of Iran's economy, by offering international firms the option of doing business with companies in which the IRGC has partial ownership (though not a controlling interest).

None of this, however, seems to have convinced Iran to sign on to the new JCPOA. Even with these added incentives, Iran is still holding out on an agreement. Indeed, according to the most recent reports, Tehran has actually hardened its position.

Why would Iran reject a better offer now than the one it accepted seven years ago, knowing that constraints on its nuclear program—known as "sunsets"—begin to expire in just thirty months? There are a handful of possible explanations—or a combination of possible explanations. Perhaps Iran has made such enormous technological progress it doesn't want to pause its nuclear program. Perhaps existing sanctions are not nearly as painful as we suspect, with Iran earning enough from semi-clandestine oil sales that the advantages of a new deal aren't significant enough to exchange current reality for future uncertainty. Perhaps Iran's reluctance for a new deal reflects ongoing debate at the highest levels of government. Or perhaps Iran is simply waiting for an even sweeter offer coming from Washington.

Regardless of the exact reason why, the menacing reality is that Iran's nuclear program is galloping ahead—and the United States is doing very little about it. Its incentives don't seem to be working. And the Biden administration is reluctant to pursue either of the two most widely discussed forms of pressure: tightening sanctions or making real the potential of a military alternative. The former would mean penalizing China, which buys most of Iran's oil—a step that could push Beijing to be more bellicose in East Asia while constricting the global oil supply and potentially adding to inflation. And the latter would raise anxiety about armed conflict in the Gulf, which the administration says it is keen to avoid.

The result has been a stunning passivity in U.S. policy toward the Iran nuclear issue. The administration may publicly decry the worrisome progress Iran is making toward a nuclear weapons capability, but it is also doing remarkably little about it.

Here, let me add a personal word: I oppose a return to the JCPOA—it's deeply flawed—and I especially oppose the sweetened terms the United States has since offered to entice Iran to accept a watered-down version. I believe whatever nonproliferation benefits there may be to the deal are far outweighed by the huge advantages Iran would reap, from legitimizing its flagrantly illegal nuclear progress to receiving substantial financial rewards that would fuel subversion and terrorism throughout the Middle East. In my view, we are already in the post-JCPOA world. Now, our focus should be to coordinate with our European and Middle East allies on strategies to deter Iran from further nuclear advancement.

But the Biden administration is taking a different view—it believes a new nuclear deal is worth the cost. In fact, it

argues that a new nuclear deal is the only way to stop Iran’s runaway nuclear progress. But it isn’t doing much to compel Iran to accept a new deal.

Here’s a suggestion. If the Biden administration wants to avoid the pain of tightening sanctions or the fear of military action, there is a third way to raise the cost to Iran of refusing to accept a nuclear deal: threaten to revoke the fundamental concession at the heart of the original JCPOA. That is the recognition of Iran’s “right to enrich.”

More than anything else, Iran’s greatest achievement in the original JCPOA was gaining international legitimacy for its demand to a right to enrich. This same claim Washington has insisted other countries, like the United Arab Emirates, had to give up if they wanted nuclear cooperation with the United States.

If the Biden administration really wanted to threaten Iran, it would put the “right to enrich” back on the bargaining table. The most effective way to do this would be to secure a commitment from a separate JCPOA signatory—most likely Britain—that it would trigger the agreement’s “snap back” mechanism by a date certain, effectively blowing up what remains of the JCPOA if Iran does not agree to return to the deal.

Again, I never liked the original JCPOA, and I certainly don’t like the diluted version that the Biden administration is offering Iran now. But I like American passivity even less. If Washington truly believes that a new nuclear deal is the most effective way to stop Iran’s runaway nuclear program, it’s not good enough just to wait for Iran to accept a deal whose value shrinks with every day that it sits on the bargaining table. We must act, and now.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute. This article was originally published [on the American Purpose website \(https://www.americanpurpose.com/articles/letting-iran-go-nuclear/\)](https://www.americanpurpose.com/articles/letting-iran-go-nuclear/). ❖

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