

# Ending Iran's Nuclear Weapons Program Is Not Enough

by [Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Senior Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

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**Tehran cannot enjoy the economic benefits it seeks while under sanction, but some sanctions will necessarily remain in place as long as it continues sponsoring terrorism, leaving negotiators with little choice but to address issues beyond the nuclear program.**

If negotiations with Iran continue on their current trajectory, they are guaranteed to either fail or produce a subpar deal, one less comprehensive than the pact negotiated under the Obama administration in 2015 that was excoriated as "**[unacceptable \(https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-ending-united-states-participation-unacceptable-iran-deal/\)](https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-ending-united-states-participation-unacceptable-iran-deal/)**" by Donald Trump. But it would fail for reasons different from what most people assume.

The debate swirling around the Trump administration's current negotiations with Iran focuses on whether the talks can curtail or terminate Iranian uranium enrichment. But stopping Iran from building a bomb should not be the sole basis for judging whether the negotiations have succeeded. Iran's sponsorship of terrorism should be central to the talks as well.

Yet addressing Iran's support for terrorism—which includes its involvement in the Oct. 7, 2023, terror attack on Israel by Hamas and its stoking of regional turmoil by the Houthi rebels in Yemen and Hezbollah in Lebanon—has apparently not factored into the current negotiations with Iran. It should.

President Trump himself has said as much. Although special envoy Steve Witkoff has been confusing about the priorities for the negotiations—will a deal merely limit or terminate Iran's uranium enrichment?—the goals articulated by the president after he signed a National Security Presidential Memorandum in February reinstating "maximum pressure" on Iran were sparkling clear. As a **[White House fact sheet](#)**

[\(https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/02/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-restores-maximum-pressure-on-iran/\)](https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/02/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-restores-maximum-pressure-on-iran/) stated, those goals included not only denying Iran “all paths to a nuclear weapon” but also “countering Iran’s malign influence abroad.”

Iranian support for terrorism was also a central component of Trump’s decision in 2018 to pull out of the Obama deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA. At the time, the White House [pointed \(https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-ending-united-states-participation-unacceptable-iran-deal/\)](https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-ending-united-states-participation-unacceptable-iran-deal/) to Iranian activities in Syria, Yemen, Iran, and Lebanon and the need to address Iranian aggression as reasons for pulling out of the deal.

That White House statement also noted that Iran was misusing the financial windfall it received as part of the JCPOA, which freed up billions of dollars in [frozen Iranian funds \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-hostage-deal-clarifying-6-billion-transfer\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-hostage-deal-clarifying-6-billion-transfer). Rather than spending those billions to help the Iranian people, Iran “has [funded \(https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-ending-united-states-participation-unacceptable-iran-deal/\)](https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-ending-united-states-participation-unacceptable-iran-deal/) a military buildup and continues to fund its terrorist proxies,” including Hezbollah and Hamas, the statement said.

Five years later, minutes of Hamas meetings seized in Gaza now reveal that a senior Hamas official traveled to Iran, where he discussed planning for “[the big project \(https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/12/world/middleeast/hamas-israel-war.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/12/world/middleeast/hamas-israel-war.html)” that became the Oct. 7 attack and sought Iranian funding and support for the attack. US officials concluded that Iran was “[broadly complicit \(https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2023/10/10/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-and-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-9/\)](https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2023/10/10/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-and-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-9/)” in the attack by virtue of its longstanding financial and material support of Hamas.

Today, key Iranian proxies Hezbollah and Hamas are severely degraded, though both still pose ongoing threats to Israel. And a US-led air campaign targeting the Houthis has yet to constrain the group’s continuing rocket and drone attacks in the Red Sea and on Israel. In its latest annual threat assessment, the US intelligence community [determined \(https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2025-Unclassified-Report.pdf\)](https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2025-Unclassified-Report.pdf) that “Tehran will continue its efforts to counter Israel and press the United States to leave the region by aiding and arming its loose connection of like-minded terrorist and militant actors.”

The moment is right, then, for the Trump administration to use all the leverage it has to pressure Iran to give up both its nuclear program and its terrorist program. That leverage consists mainly of sanctions imposed on Iran not only because of its nuclear enrichment program, but also because of its human rights abuses and support of terrorist groups. If Iran truly wants full integration into the international financial system, it must be willing to abandon both enrichment and terrorist funding.

But so long as the deal is limited to the nuclear portfolio, and does not cover Iran’s other illicit activities, some sanctions will remain in place. That is because there is a wide array of international sanctions on Iran which are intended not only to stop its nuclear and missile programs, but also punish it for its support of terrorism, human rights abuses, and other issues. And so long as those other sanctions remain in place, Iran will face the same frustrations it did after the 2015 JCPOA was signed.

Consider Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s 2016 Nowruz [address \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/khamenei-intensifies-his-anti-americanism-weakens-president-rouhani\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/khamenei-intensifies-his-anti-americanism-weakens-president-rouhani), in which he attacked the United States (and blamed Iranian President Rouhani) for failing to deliver on its promise of economic benefits for Iran: “Our banking trade, our efforts to return wealth from their banks, various kinds of businesses that require financial services, all of these are still facing problems. When we

investigate the issue, it becomes obvious that [the banks] are afraid of the United States. Americans said ‘we lift the sanctions.’ On paper they have actually lifted. But through different ways they try to prevent sanctions relief from bearing fruit.”

That same year, then-Secretary of State John Kerry tried (and failed) to assure (<https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2016/05/25/479462791/john-kerrys-awkward-push-for-investment-in-iran>) European banks they would not be penalized for doing business with Iran allowed under the JCPOA. But as former senior Treasury official Stuart Levey, then in his role as chief legal officer for a major European bank, responded (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/kerrys-peculiar-message-about-iran-for-european-banks-1463093348>) in an op-ed, “Governments can lift sanctions, but the private sector is still responsible for managing its own risk.” And at the end of the day, he noted, “No one has claimed that Iran has ceased to engage in much of the same conduct for which it was sanctioned, including activity supporting terrorism and building and testing ballistic missiles.”

The JCPOA was doomed to fail because of this internal contradiction, even if President Trump had not pulled the United States out of the deal in 2018. Unless the president plans to capitulate to Iranian terrorism and unilaterally terminate all Iran sanctions, even without an Iranian commitment to cease sponsoring terrorism or engaging in other malign activities, then the same problem will face these new negotiations.

Iran cannot enjoy the economic benefits it seeks while under sanction, and some sanctions will remain in place so long as Iran continues to engage in these illicit activities. The only way to square this circle is to expand negotiations to include not just nuclear weapons but Iranian sponsorship of terrorism as well.

*Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of its Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence. This article was originally published on the Boston Globe website (<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2025/04/24/opinion/iran-nuclear-weapons-terrorism-trump/>). ❖*

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