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What the Next Iran Deal Can Learn from the JPOA

by Richard Nephew **(/experts/richard-nephew)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Richard Nephew (/experts/richard-nephew)

Richard Nephew is the Bernstein Adjunct Fellow at The Washington Institute and former U.S. deputy special envoy for Iran.

Brief Analysis

The June MOU and the 2013 JPOA are not perfect analogues, but the deliberately limited terms and careful specificity of the latter agreement hold prudent lessons for both Washington and Tehran as they contemplate a potential new round of direct negotiations.

On August 2, President Trump announced that he was stepping back from commencing a massive military escalation against Iran, citing his deference to the concerns of regional states and the reports of new progress being made toward a deal. Since then, diplomacy has seemingly stepped up, with talk of a near-term agreement between Iran and Oman concerning usage of the Strait of Hormuz. Tehran claims it will not reopen the strait until the United States takes steps to return to the June memorandum of understanding (MOU), such as lifting the blockade on Iran's non-humanitarian trade and rescinding sanctions on oil sales. If Tehran sticks to that position, then it will need to resume direct negotiations with Washington.

In that case, what approach should the Trump administration take toward negotiating a new deal, and what can it do to make sure this arrangement lasts longer than the first MOU? To have even a modicum of success, U.S. officials should set their sights on a simpler, clearer deal that prioritizes two key elements: **reopening the strait (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/reaching-viable-management-arrangements-strait-hormuz)** and surrounding waterways to international passage, and getting an accurate, up-to-date picture of where Iran's nuclear program actually stands in order to reduce fears that a breakout is imminent.

Immediate Steps

To start, the administration should take an honest, open look at the MOU that Trump signed at Versailles to see what went wrong. That document's imprecise language and over-expansive issue set added to the degree of difficulty presented by an already formidable task.

Fortunately, there is a good example of a previous interim-style deal that Washington can draw on for inspiration and details. In November 2013, China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Iran announced the **Joint Plan of Action (JPOA) (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/sites/default/files/pdf/IranP5plus1jointplanofaction131124en.pdf)** (not to be confused with the much broader JCPOA reached in 2015). Early in the talks that produced the JPOA, Iranian and U.S. negotiators (including the author) realized that they were not going to be able to get through all the issues needed to reach a complete settlement of U.S.-Iranian concerns—not even if they stuck solely to Tehran's nuclear ambitions and desire for sanctions relief. The risk from spoilers or bad luck was too great, so the decision was made to push for a shorter, smaller agreement that could create space for further talks while reducing tensions.

Of course, the Versailles MOU and the JPOA are not perfect analogues—not least because of this year's Iran war. Yet several important lessons can be drawn from comparing the two.

Lesson 1: Pick your scope carefully. Unlike the JPOA, the MOU encompassed too many issues, such as ending the conflict in Lebanon, reopening the Strait of Hormuz, lifting the U.S. blockade, hinting at the structure of Iran's postwar reconstruction, addressing the nuclear issue, outlining future sanctions relief, and so forth. Negotiators made their work more difficult by including commitments on behalf of parties not involved in the MOU (like Beirut), and by adding language that was immediately prone to differing interpretations regarding Hormuz.

Lesson 2: Make your agreement easy to explain and straightforward to implement. Some parts of the Versailles MOU pass this test. For example, both the JPOA and the MOU committed Iran and the United States to freeze their respective nuclear and sanctions programs where they were. Yet sharp differences emerge on other issues, and the MOU suffered for them.

For example, after the agreement was announced in June, the United States tried to argue that Iran had accepted significant nuclear concessions and had agreed to submit the entire program to inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Yet the actual text of the MOU **provided no such commitments (https://www.npr.org/2026/06/18/nx-s1-5863027/us-iran-trump-memorandum-of-understanding-full-text)**, and Iran denied that they were part of the negotiations. By contrast, the JPOA described at length how Iran would reverse its nuclear program, with specific language detailing how it would cooperate with IAEA verification efforts and dilute its most highly enriched stocks of uranium immediately.

The MOU's language on sanctions relief was clearer and more specific than the nuclear provisions. For example, it committed the United States to a blanket waiver of all manner of sanctions on Iranian oil sales—a concession that became even more generous when the administration issued **General License X (https://ofac.treasury.gov/media/936206/download?inline)** soon afterward. The MOU also permitted Iran to access billions of dollars from restricted funds abroad, without limits and "made fully usable for payment to any ultimate beneficiary" designated by Tehran. Yet here again, the administration sent mixed signals about U.S. adherence to the deal by publicly arguing that Iran had accepted sharp limitations on the restricted funds. Implementation of the MOU's relief provisions would have been naturally delayed anyway due to the complicated nature of such processes, but Washington gave Tehran reason to view any holdup as a trap or a sign of bad faith.

By contrast, the JPOA's terms on sanctions relief were far more limited in scope. The United States agreed to "establish a financial channel to facilitate humanitarian trade" with specified parties, effectively giving Washington a veto over who could be paid and from what accounts. Likewise, the JPOA paused rather than ended reductions on oil sales, limiting Iran to "an agreed amount of revenue held abroad," which ended up being $700 million per month. Tehran accepted this language, so when implementation issues emerged later, they were seen as a technical problem to sort out rather than a major political breach between the two sides.

Lesson 3: Manage external expectations better. The Versailles MOU suffered from inaccurate characterizations attached to it during the negotiating phase. Before the deal was complete, the Trump administration stated that the result would be a "[performance-based (https://x.com/JenniferJJacobs/status/2066314698539278359?s=20)](https://x.com/JenniferJJacobs/status/2066314698539278359?s=20)" approach in which Tehran would only get relief in exchange for taking steps, and that [significant Iranian concessions (https://x.com/MattMcBradley/status/2065168310514434545?s=20)](https://x.com/MattMcBradley/status/2065168310514434545?s=20) would be included, such as "removal of enriched material, dismantling of enrichment infrastructure, limiting missile production, and ending Iran's support for its terrorist proxies in the region." These far-reaching characterizations were repeated in high-profile [White House press releases (https://www.whitehouse.gov/releases/2026/06/president-trumps-iran-agreement-is-america-first-in-action/)](https://www.whitehouse.gov/releases/2026/06/president-trumps-iran-agreement-is-america-first-in-action/) issued shortly after the agreement was signed.

In the end, however, the MOU's actual text said very little about specific Iranian concessions. The result was a kind of whiplash for those who had watched the talks carefully—a sense intensified when the MOU very specifically described the future sanctions relief that had been promised to Iran. The agreement essentially put the entirety of the U.S. sanctions program against Iran on the table; it even seemed to concede that all of these sanctions would be terminated in any final deal with Tehran.

By contrast, the JPOA outlined the expectations for future talks in general terms only. More important, it limited the scope of near-term talks to the highest-priority issues at play in 2013—namely, offering potential relief from nuclear sanctions (not all sanctions) while restructuring the nuclear program to be consistent with practical, peaceful, civilian needs rather than military needs. The JPOA was also explicitly described as a six-month deal and a basis for future talks—nothing more. The task now is to find similarly circumscribed language appropriate for 2026.

Toward a Better Next Deal

Depending on how the latest pause in hostilities goes, U.S. officials may soon have another shot at direct negotiations with Iran, likely building on the Versailles MOU. To avoid repeating the mistakes of that agreement, the Trump administration should focus on three tasks.

First, pick one or two issues and convince Iran to concentrate on them as well, rather than trying to address all of the complaints and concerns that exist between the two parties. New talks are more likely to bear fruit if they address the immediate source of the current crisis—the escalation to war this spring and the blockage of international waterways since then—while also reducing the chances of another major crisis emerging down the road.

The source of that potential future crisis is likely some combination of Iran's missile, drone, and nuclear programs. Coming to terms on missiles or drones seems unlikely and would distract from the more immediate and achievable goals stated above. Yet reaching limited arrangements that improve transparency on Iran's nuclear status may be doable—especially since the IAEA has lots of experience inside that country and standard procedures for inspecting nuclear programs (unlike with missiles and drones, which would require a whole new organization or mechanism to conduct effective verification). This issue has particular urgency because U.S. authorities do not appear to know how many enrichment centrifuges Iran has left, where they are, or what they might be doing, raising a very real risk of long-term nuclear crisis.

Second, focus on getting the next text right, regardless of how limited it may be. In 2013, there was at least minimal confidence between the United States and Iran despite decades of acrimony. This enabled the JPOA's framers to include bits of creative ambiguity in places where it might help future talks, while being far more specific about language and underlying concepts related to tasks that needed to be done immediately. Even then, the two sides still needed many weeks (November 2013-January 2014) to sort out residual implementation questions.

Today, the parties are nowhere near that level of minimal mutual confidence, so the language of any new agreement has to be even clearer, and its steps even more rigorously sequenced. Again, not everything has to happen at once. For example, the United States and Iran could agree to immediate steps that specifically articulate what they each will do in the Strait of Hormuz right away, while also setting a date for future implementation of other steps.

Third, keep messaging and confidence-building efforts centered on the deal's minimum requirements: maintaining the ceasefire and reopening blocked waterways. Some of this effort could come through greater messaging discipline, though that may be difficult given the current U.S. political environment. Both sides should also concentrate on restarting their stalled confidence-building measures, such as the deconfliction cell that U.S. Central Command and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) were supposed to create in June.

Another potentially useful measure would be to open an escrow account into which Iranian oil revenues restricted abroad could be pooled and then released to Tehran on a monthly basis—provided sea traffic remains uninterrupted. To help reassure Iran, control over this account could be granted to a third party (perhaps Pakistan, which has played a leading role in mediation this year). Negotiators could also formulate some well-defined conditions for use of this money (e.g., solely for humanitarian purposes).

None of the above will be easy in light of what has happened between the parties to date. Given the regional and global stakes, however, it is worth taking another shot at diplomacy—provided negotiators are willing to learn from their recent mistakes.

Richard Nephew is the Bernstein Adjunct Fellow with The Washington Institute and former U.S. deputy special envoy for Iran. ❖

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