

# Trump Broke Iran Policy. Let Him Fix It.

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross)

May 11, 2018

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/tramb-akhlw-balsyast-tjah-ayran-wlyh-aslahha\)](/ar/policy-analysis/tramb-akhlw-balsyast-tjah-ayran-wlyh-aslahha)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

## The administration doesn't seem to have a day-after strategy for drawing the Europeans back into the fold after essentially rejecting months of negotiations with them.

I don't know if U.S. President Donald Trump is a fan of the Pottery Barn rule of "you break it, you bought it." But it now applies to his policy toward Iran. True, he inherited the challenge of dealing with an Iran on the march in the region. But he also inherited a nuclear deal. Despite all its flaws, the nuclear deal limited Iran's ability to "break out" and build a nuclear weapon until after the year 2030.

As someone who served in the U.S. government during the first term of the Obama administration and had responsibilities on Iran, I think it's fair to say that the nuclear deal fell far short of what we contemplated as acceptable. At the time, I and other U.S. national security officials believed that the size and character of the Iranian nuclear infrastructure had to be dramatically downsized, with no advanced centrifuges and with fewer than 1,000 of the first-generation IR-1 centrifuges permitted. Only such a transformation, leaving a very limited nuclear program, would demonstrate that the Iranians had truly changed their intentions.

After the election of President Hassan Rouhani in 2013 and back-channel discussions indicating that a deal was possible—although not the one we had previously envisioned—then-President Barack Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry, and the negotiators came to the conclusion that what was possible in terms of reductions, limitations, and transparency was better than the alternative of no deal and the prospect of a war.

When the Obama administration sought to sell the Iran deal, I never bought the argument that the Iranian pathways to a bomb had been blocked forever. How could they be fully obstructed when the Iranians were legally allowed to develop a very large nuclear industrial base with no limits on the numbers or quality of the centrifuges permitted

after 2030? Moreover, as we now know from the recent Israeli intelligence coup, the Iranians, while denying that they had ever done work on nuclear explosive devices, secretly preserved all their bomb-making work, including graphics, computer modeling, simulations, and testing of neutron triggers. They did so even though they committed in the nuclear deal to never pursue, acquire, or develop a nuclear weapon or engage in any such design work. If the Iranians had given up their intentions to have a bomb someday, why would they preserve all this documentation?

The answer is self-evident: The Iranians deferred their nuclear weapon options; they did not give them up. Clearly, some of Trump's criticisms of the deal were correct. Before scrapping the deal earlier this week, the Trump administration used those criticisms as leverage to get European leaders to address some of the agreement's flaws. Trump administration officials correctly recognized that the Europeans would try hard to keep the United States from walking away from the deal and that they could pressure the British, French, and German governments to support sanctions on Iran's ballistic missile program and Tehran's destabilizing activities in the region—perhaps finally getting the Europeans to designate all of Hezbollah, and not just its military wing, as a terrorist organization.

The British, French, and Germans also were ready as part of an understanding with the Trump administration to declare publicly, contrary to Iran's view, that the deal gave inspectors the right to inspect their military bases. The sunset provisions that would have lifted the limitations on Iranian centrifuges and enrichment in 2030 were a hard nut to crack for the Europeans because they represented the core trade-off in the deal; however, even here, the Europeans were ready to declare that additional limitations needed to be negotiated for the post-2030 period. Had the president sought to use the Israeli revelations, I believe he could have moved the Europeans further on the sunset provisions and inspections.

But Trump's ultimate objective was not to leverage the Europeans to pressure Iran for a better deal. So what, then, is his goal?

There is no doubt some of his advisors, such as John Bolton, have long favored regime change in Tehran. They argue that the signs of dissonance and alienation in Iran, with continuing demonstrations and even thousands chanting the late Reza Shah's name at a [soccer match \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2018/05/02/banned-from-mens-soccer-matches-in-iran-these-women-dressed-as-men-to-sneak-in/?utm\\_term=.24e83cff062b\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2018/05/02/banned-from-mens-soccer-matches-in-iran-these-women-dressed-as-men-to-sneak-in/?utm_term=.24e83cff062b), make this a perfect time to tighten the economic noose around the regime's neck. Regime-changers contend that the Iranian government is hanging by a thread and now is the time to cut it off financially and let the ensuing economic collapse bring the Islamic Republic down.

Trump certainly sees the Iranian regime as horrid and has no illusions about the threats it poses to the region and the world. His rhetoric might even lead listeners to believe that he supports regime change. But consider the conclusion of his [speech \(https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/us/politics/trump-speech-iran-deal.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/us/politics/trump-speech-iran-deal.html) announcing the U.S. exit from the nuclear deal on May 8: Trump acknowledged that Iran's leaders "will naturally say that they refuse to negotiate a new deal...and that's fine. I'd probably say the same thing if I was in their position. But the fact is, they are going to want to make a new and lasting deal, one that benefits all of Iran and the Iranian people. When they do, I am ready, willing, and able."

These are not the words of a regime-changer. They are the words of someone who believes he can strike a deal—even with this regime. Ironically, had Trump worked to isolate the Iranians by focusing on their deception on nuclear weapons and brought the Europeans along, he might have had a chance to succeed. But the British, French, and German governments immediately issued a strong tripartite statement emphasizing their "continuing commitment to the JCPOA," while also urging "the US to ensure that the structures of the JCPOA can remain intact, and to avoid taking action which obstructs its full implementation by all other parties to the deal." Not only are America's key European allies going to stick to the deal, they apparently also intend to resist the Trump administration's imposition of secondary sanctions on the parties sticking to the deal—both to incentivize the Iranians to remain in

the agreement and to protect European Union companies.

For those of us who felt it was always essential for the onus to remain on the Iranians in the event of the deal's failure, this comes as no surprise. It was always going to be far easier to generate collective pressure on the Iranians if they walked away from the deal; unfortunately, it is the United States that has now abandoned the deal—and it has done so alone.

There is now a very real risk that the United States will not have partners to join it in pressuring the Iranians in a way that might change their behavior and bring them back to the negotiating table to address the problems Trump wants to fix. Perhaps South Korea and Japan will join the United States, but the Chinese, Indians, Russians, and the EU likely will not. The Trump administration doesn't seem to have a day-after strategy to draw the Europeans back into the fold after essentially rejecting months of negotiations with them. Moreover, given that it was Washington and not Tehran that abrogated the deal, it will be difficult to counter Iran's likely posture of victimization that seeks to place the blame on the United States.

The sad reality is that Iran will play the victim on the nuclear issue even as it escalates tensions in the region, working principally through its proxies. In the wake of Trump's decision on the Iran deal, it was not surprising that Iran retaliated against the Israelis for their strike on April 9 that killed Quds Force officers. In this case, it took Gen. Qassem Suleimani just one day before launching Iranian and Hezbollah rockets from Syria against Israel. The four rockets that penetrated Israeli airspace were destroyed by Iron Dome missiles, and the remainder hit within Syria. What the Iranians hoped to show was not just that they could retaliate against Israel but also that there were costs to the U.S. decision, and they hoped to contrast their ability to act with Washington's reliance on tough talk.

Whatever else Trump's withdrawal from the Iran deal may mean, one thing is clear: He has shattered the Obama-era approach to Iran and Trump now bears full responsibility for whatever Iran does going forward. If Iran is able to threaten the region's stability by expanding its military footprint or resuming its nuclear program, it will be up to the Trump administration to show it has a policy for blunting both.

*Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.* ❖

*Foreign Policy*

---

## RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆  
Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



## BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



## ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### [Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

## TOPICS

[Proliferation \(/policy-analysis/proliferation\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](#)