

Trump Can Make the Most of a Bad Iran Deal

by [Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](#)

Sep 13, 2017

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/bamkan-tramb-alastfadt-aly-abd-alhdwd-mn-atfaqin-ayrany-syy\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](#)

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

In concert with its European allies, the United States should close loopholes, increase intelligence cooperation, and push international inspectors to interpret their mandate more broadly.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said last month that United States policy toward Iran shouldn't begin and end with the nuclear deal. Washington's issues with that country are far wider, Mr. Tillerson said, citing Iran's meddling in Syria and Iraq, and its support for terrorist groups like Hezbollah.

The secretary of state is certainly right about that. But he elided an important point: Without a stable approach to the nuclear deal, questions about its fate will distract from and ultimately hobble broader American diplomacy on Iran and other crucial issues in the Middle East.

President Trump -- who campaigned on promises to tear up the nuclear deal -- has indicated that in mid-October, when the next 90-day deadline for recertifying Iran's compliance with the agreement arrives, he will find that Iran has violated it. This could lead to the deal's collapse.

But there seems to be little evidence that Iran is actually cheating in any significant way. The Iranians appear to be exploiting loopholes in the deal and trying to get away with what they can when it comes to the deal's limits on certain nuclear activities like the production and storage of heavy water. Likewise, they seem to be ignoring injunctions on missile launches levied by the United Nations but not actually included in the nuclear agreement itself.

None of these appear to constitute a material breach of the agreement. The problem the United States faces is not Iranian compliance, but the very terms of the agreement. Mr. Trump isn't wrong when he says it's a "bad deal." It's too narrow in scope, permitting Iran to work on its missile and centrifuge technology even while uranium enrichment is paused. More worrying, it's only temporary. Some of its strictures begin to phase out in less than a

decade, during which time Tehran can expand its power in the Middle East, just as the United States' tools for trying to keep it in check -- in particular, sanctions -- are limited.

But like it or not, the clock is not so easily turned back. Any realistic Iran policy must take this as its starting point. Rather than ripping up the deal or simply acquiescing to it, the Trump administration should strengthen both the deal and the policy framework of which it is a part. Stability on the issue of the nuclear agreement will eliminate a distraction and create leverage to rally international support for a better Middle East strategy.

That's why the United States should work with allies to more strictly interpret the existing text of the accord. Along with Britain, France and Germany -- sometimes known as the EU3 -- the United States should close any loopholes being exploited by Iran, increase intelligence cooperation on Iran's nuclear activities and push international inspectors to interpret their mandate more broadly. These allies should also agree to enforce United Nations rules that aren't included in the agreement, like those strictly limiting Iran's arms trade.

Working with these same allies, the United States should also tackle issues omitted from the nuclear deal, like Iran's missile program. Through a package of sanctions, export controls, interdictions and missile defense, they should aim to prevent Iran from acquiring an intercontinental ballistic missile and from continuing to export missile technology.

The United States and the EU3 should also address the problem of the nuclear deal's expiration date by jointly declaring now that they intend to expand and extend the agreement, rather than allow Iran's nuclear activities to suddenly increase when it expires. In parallel, they should seek to strengthen global nonproliferation efforts so that even if nuclear restrictions specific to Iran cannot be extended, Tehran faces more challenges to weaponization when the deal does lapse.

All of this must go hand in hand with a larger strategy to counter Iranian aggression in the Middle East. Iran's leaders appear to be increasingly self-confident, perceiving success in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. And Iran is steadily expanding its network of proxies. To reverse these trends, the United States must move from generalities about countering Iran to specific aims -- for example, preventing Iranian forces from entrenching in the Golan Heights, or deterring the use of anti-ship cruise missiles in the Bab el Mandeb Strait off Yemen's coast. American officials need to communicate these boundaries to Iran and back them up with a range of tools, including sanctions, diplomacy and limited military force if necessary.

These measures require help from America's allies, who are not eager to fiddle with the nuclear agreement or face up to the problem of Iran's regional policies. This is where diplomacy comes in. Allies in Europe and elsewhere know the deal is controversial in Washington, and they take seriously Mr. Trump's threats to stop honoring it. Policy makers in Washington should make clear that their allies' cooperation with efforts to strengthen the deal and counter Iran are required to avoid that outcome. The United States cannot subordinate its entire policy toward Iran or the Middle East to the preservation of the nuclear accord. And it shouldn't shoulder sole responsibility for addressing Iran's threats while Europe enjoys the deal's benefits.

Even then, this would constitute only the start of a policy for addressing the challenge of Iran. Iran is adept at exploiting chaos, which is endemic in the Middle East. Washington will need sound approaches to the wars in Syria and Yemen, Iraq's fragility and other regional challenges like the fight between Qatar and its neighbors. But none of this will be possible if there is an international crisis every time there's a new deadline for certifying compliance or waiving sanctions.

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute. ❖

New York Times

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

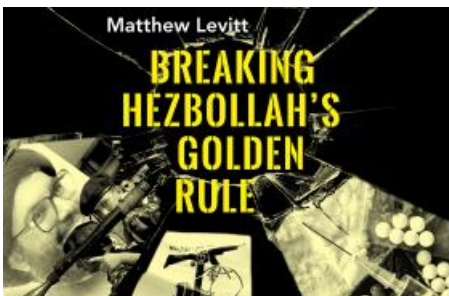
[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

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)