

# The Right Way to Pressure Iran

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

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[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.



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## Instead of decertifying the nuclear deal, and thus isolating the United States from its allies, Washington should impress upon Tehran the immense costs of producing a weapon.

**T**here is little doubt about where President Trump stands on the nuclear deal with Iran. During the campaign, he called the agreement -- what we in the diplomacy business know as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action -- one of the worst deals ever negotiated. Recently, after his administration certified that Iran was fulfilling the terms of the JCPOA, something Congress requires to be done every 90 days, he said, "If it were up to me, I would have had them noncompliant 180 days ago."

Clearly, as President, it can be up to him, and he is signaling that we will not certify in October when the administration must again offer its judgment. The problem for the Trump administration is that the International Atomic Energy Agency, which monitors the Iranian nuclear program, has just again found that the Islamic Republic is fulfilling its obligations in the JCPOA. Thus, should the Trump administration go ahead and not certify -- essentially, setting the stage to walk away from the deal -- it will isolate the United States from the IAEA and the other nations that negotiated the nuclear understanding with Iran.

Sending a signal of unhappiness with Iran is understandable, particularly given what Iran is doing in Syria and throughout the Middle East. But our aim at this point should be to isolate Iran, not ourselves. We want the world riveted on Iran's bad behaviors, and not what some of our allies will see as ours.

One can debate whether the JCPOA is, in fact, a good deal. After all, the six most powerful countries in the world -- the U.S., Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany -- were negotiating with the Iranians, and yet they often seemed as if they wanted the deal more than the Iranians. Still, the Iranians negotiated on their nuclear program, placing

strict limitations on it, after saying they would only do so if sanctions were lifted first. Instead, we did the opposite, intensifying sanctions. That is a lesson that should be applied now as Iran uses its Qods forces — the action arm of Iran's Republican Guards -- and Shia militias from as far away as Afghanistan in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East. If we see such actions as certain to deepen sectarianism and to be destabilizing -- and we should -- our policy now toward Iran should be geared toward making clear we can once again raise the price to the Iranians.

During the Obama administration, I would often argue that if we wanted to strengthen the hand of President Hassan Rouhani and the more pragmatic constituency in the Iranian elite struggles, we should demonstrate that what Qassem Soleimani, the head of the Qods forces, was doing in the region is costing Iran economically and politically. Unfortunately, today Soleimani, who was a shadowy figure in the past, parades around the region and appears highly successful as Iran shores up Assad, extends its presence in Syria and Iraq with the use of Shia militias, and provides missiles and Hezbollah advisors to the Houthis in Yemen.

The Trump administration should be focused on a strategy for countering this Iranian behavior: showing this will cost the Islamic Republic, and proving that it will isolate itself and prevent any normalization with the international community.

Which brings us to this irony: The focus on the JCPOA -- whatever its genuine limitations -- won't deal with any of the current Iran threats, including the very real danger that Iran is positioning itself with the Shia militias to fill the vacuum after the defeat of ISIS in Raqqa.

At the very moment we need to convince our European allies to join us in raising the costs to the Iranians, the Trump administration would surely alienate them if it appears to walk away from the JCPOA. We certainly won't have more credibility in putting a spotlight on what Iran is doing with Hezbollah and the other Shia militias if we appear to be denying or contradicting the IAEA's findings on Iranian compliance on their nuclear program. Rather than making it easier for our allies to join us, we will make it harder.

The Trump administration has been reviewing its strategy toward Iran. It should. But it should not treat our approach to the JCPOA as a substitute for a broader strategy.

As someone who has concerns that the JCPOA legitimizes a large Iranian nuclear infrastructure and preserves a nuclear weapons option for the Islamic Republic, I believe we must take advantage of the time the deal bought to strengthen our deterrence so the Iranians have no doubt about what they will lose if they contemplate going for a weapon. That requires also building the legitimacy of our case against what the Iranians are doing -- and making our threats more believable as a result.

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

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