

30th Anniversary Address by Vice President Joe Biden

by [Joe Biden \(/experts/joe-biden\)](#)

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Joe Biden is the 47th vice president of the United States.



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Watch Vice President Joe Biden's address to the Institute's 30th anniversary gala dinner in 2015, where he detailed the administration's approach to the Iranian nuclear challenge.

Vice President Joe Biden delivered remarks at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy's Soref Symposium Gala Dinner on Thursday, April 30, as the organization celebrated [30 years of providing cutting-edge analysis \(/about/thirty-years-of-achievement\)](#) on a wide range of issues in the Middle East. [Download a White House transcript of the vice president's remarks \[PDF\] \(/uploads/Documents/testimony/BidenTranscript20150430.pdf\)](#).

Transcript of Vice President Biden's Remarks

As I was being introduced, I was thinking, Barbi, that I was -- I had already been here a total of 12 years before you were founded. (Laughter.) Oh, my God, it can't be the long, Barbi. (Laughter.)

Founding President Barbi Weinberg, who has been an incredible, incredible contributor to everything that's good; and to, Chairman Emeritus

Howard Berkowitz; and to, current Chairman Marty Gross; Executive Director Rob Satloff, and to so many others, I guess I should start -- not in my prepared remarks -- by thanking so many of you in the audience for the education of a public man. I have gone to many of you over all these years and sought your advice and gotten your counsel. And I mean that sincerely, and I appreciate it. And I want to congratulate you on 30 years of making real, serious contributions to the debates in this town and in this country, and quite frankly, ultimately around the world.

What I'd like to talk to you about tonight -- there's many things we could talk about. There's an awful lot going on in the Middle East to state the obvious. But I want to talk to you tonight about the potential for nuclear deal with Iran because it's fraught with so many questions, so many possibilities, and so many concerns.

We all know the risk that a nuclear-armed Iran would pose -- a regional arms race; a major blow to the prohibition against nuclear proliferation; the risk that a future crisis could escalate into a nuclear war; and a shield behind which Iran would surely hide and its proxies further destabilize the region and threaten Israel.

Let me make something absolutely clear. I know I'm always characterized as a friend of Israel and sometimes it's not suggested in as positive a way as I feel it. But Israel is absolutely right to be worried about the world's most dangerous weapons falling in the hands of a nation whose leaders dream openly of a world without Israel. So the criticism that Israel is too concerned I find preposterous. They have reason to be concerned. And the fact of the matter is that I think we should get beyond the notion that there's anything remotely acceptable about Israel not being concerned.

And quite frankly, that's why the President, President Obama, decided for the first time -- people forget this -- to make it an explicit, declared policy of the United States of America, no such policy existed before President Obama uttered it -- that all instruments of American power to prevent -- not contain, not contain -- to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran would be used to prevent that from happening.

And he made sure that something existed that didn't exist before, that our military had the capacity and the capability to execute the mission, if it was required. When we took office, we understood the threat, like all of you. But we also understood that no approach to date had done anything other than move Iran closer to a nuclear weapon. Nothing had addressed Iran's march.

As a matter of fact, when we took office, the United States did not have the international support we needed to deal with Iran. If time permitted, I could quote for you quote after quote from around the world that we -- the United States, many in the international [sic] felt that we, the United States -- rightly or wrongly -- the United States was the problem, not Iran was the problem. That limited our options considerably, our ability to generate international pressure. We were viewed in the Middle East before we took office as the isolated party.

In the interim, nearly every aspect of Iran's program raced ahead.

So we embarked on a new strategy which had two purposes. One was to unite the world behind our approach making it clear that a genuine diplomatic path existed for Iran; and secondly, putting in force what few believed could happen -- sanctions -- sanctions that would bring them to the negotiating table.

And we created space to do two things. First, it allowed us to change how the world viewed the problem even if there were no sanctions and we had to act. By letting the world know that we were extending the hand -- if they wanted to negotiate -- created a different environment in which we could operate, demonstrating a willingness to explore diplomacy in good faith meant that, whatever action we might ultimately be required to take to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran, we'd be able to take it with significantly greater support -- international support, support from the rest of the world. We accomplished that.

Second, we thought there was a chance that, just a chance with incredibly tough sanctions that Iran might actually take meaningful action to address the world's concerns about their nuclear program.

So after Iran initially rejected the President's outstretched hands, working with Congress and our international partners, we put together not only the toughest sanctions regime in history, but one of the most broad-based. If we were honest with ourselves, a number of you would say -- acknowledge you were surprised that not only our allies joined us, but Russia and China joined us, which united the United Nations Security Council behind even tougher sanctions that the Council passed. It wasn't just the major powers of the P5+1, but energy-hungry nations like India, Japan, and South Korea. They did their part, as well. That's what made sanctions so profound.

And we kept faith with this approach for six and a half years. Soon, it was Iran -- not America -- that was isolated. And over time, our choices created the conditions that made diplomacy possible.

Meanwhile, inside Iran, sanctions helped shape the political climate that led Iranians to elect a leader who campaigned on the need to break Iran's international isolation.

Finally, Iran began to talk. And talks grew into an interim deal. When it did, people predicted the sky would fall; some of my best friends in the region; Iran would cheat and sanctions would crumble. But the deal held, and so did the sanctions. In fact, many at home and in the region who initially saw the interim deal as a historic mistake, I think was the quote, saw it as important part of stopping a nuclear-armed Iran.

And now we have a historic opportunity to forge an enduring peaceful solution. I know Jack Lew went through the parameters of the potential deal in detail. And I know I'm keeping you from your main course. (Laughter.) So I won't go into all the detail. But let me say, as you heard last night, we're pursuing a deal that would verifiably block each of Iran's paths to a bomb, through a break-out attempt from the known nuclear facilities at Natanz, Fordow, Arak; or a sneak out from unknown sites.

A lot of ink has been spilled on this deal. Some in favor, some against, some thoughtful, some misleading. So tonight, I want to directly address some of the concerns that I've heard.

First, some have worried that the President and administration are willing -- even eager -- to settle for a deal so badly that we'll sign a bad deal. The right deal is far better than no deal. But if what's on the table doesn't meet the President's requirements, there will be no deal.

And a final deal must effectively cut off Iran's uranium, plutonium, and covert pathways to the bomb. If it doesn't, there will be no deal.

The final deal must ensure a breakout timeline of at least one year for at least decade or more. If it doesn't, no deal.

And a final deal must include phased sanction relief, calibrated against Iran taking meaningful steps to constrain their program. If they do not, no deal.

And a final deal must provide verifiable assurances the international community is demanding to ensure Iran's program is exclusively peaceful going forward. If it doesn't, no deal.

The second argument I hear is that no deal is worth the paper it's written on, because Iran will simply cheat. And it's true that Iran could try to cheat, whether there's a deal or not. Now they didn't cheat under the interim deal -- the Joint Plan of Action -- as many were certain they would. But they certainly have in the past and it would not surprise anyone if they tried again. However, if they did try to cheat, under a deal that we're talking about, they would be far more likely to be caught. Because as this deal goes forward, we'll also put in place the toughest transparency and verification requirements, which represent the best possible check against a secret path to the bomb.

Iran will be required to implement the Additional Protocols, allowing IAEA inspectors to visit not only declared nuclear facilities, but undeclared sites where suspicious, clandestine work is suspected.

Folks, let me tell you what this deal would do in relation to intrusive inspections: Not only would Iran be required to allow 24/7 eyes on the nuclear sites you've heard of -- Fordow and Natanz and Arak -- and the ability to challenge suspect locations, every link in their nuclear supply chain will be under surveillance.

For the next 20 to 25 years, inspectors will have access to Iran's uranium mines and uranium mills, centrifuge production sites, assembly and storage facilities; all purchases of sensitive equipment will be monitored.

And, as part of the transparency requirements under the final deal, Iran will have to address the IAEA concerns about the possible military dimensions of Iran's past nuclear research.

No other option addresses concerns about potential for a covert Iranian program -- or Iranian cheating -- as well. More sanctions, as some are calling for, in the absence of international support, if the P5+1 doesn't support them, will result in the loss of sanctions, backsliding on the access we already have to Iran's program. Even military action is no panacea for a secret program -- if there is one -- since you can't target what you don't know exists. So this deal is not about trust. It's about verification.

And if at any point Iran breaks any of the commitments made in the agreement, which we have not arrived at yet. We have a framework. All these things in the framework we expect to be -- to have every t crossed and i dotted. If not, there will be no deal. They are much more likely to be detected if they were to cheat, and we'll have more time to respond, by snapping back sanctions or taking other steps to enforce compliance.

And there will be a clear procedure in the final deal that allows both the U.N. and unilateral sanctions to snap back without needing to cajole lots of other countries -- including Russia or China -- to support it. That will be written in the final deal.

And if Iran resumes its pursuit of nuclear weapons, no option available today will be off the table. As a matter of fact, the options will be greatly increased because we will know so much more.

Third, some have said that because some of the constraints in this deal expire over time, this deal "paves" Iran's path to a bomb. Let's get something straight so we don't kid each other. They already have paved a path to a bomb's worth of material. Iran could get there now if they walked away in two to three months without a deal.

Under the deal we're negotiating now, we radically alter that timetable. For the next 10 years, Iran's centrifuges would be cut by two-thirds, from 19,000 currently installed to 6,000. Only 5,000 of these would be enriching at Natanz; all the most -- all being only the most basic IR-1 models. There would be no enrichment permitted at Fordow.

Iran will also immediately be required to reduce by 98 percent the remaining stockpile of low-enriched uranium. And under the final deal contemplated, Iran also will be required to have no more than 300 kilograms of uranium enriched to below 5 percent for the next 15 years. You can't make a bomb out of that. That's a small fraction of what would be required if Iran enriched it further, up to 90 percent for a single nuclear weapon.

In contrast, without this deal, they already have enough material -- if further enriched -- for as many as eight nuclear bombs. Already, right now, as I speak to you. The result if the final deal is concluded, for a decade, breakout time for one weapon's worth of highly enriched uranium would be extended from the current two to three months to no less than a year. And for years after that, stockpile limitations and other constraints on Iran's enrichment program would produce a longer breakout timetable than exists today.

Under the proposed deal, the Arak reactor currently under construction will be redesigned to produce zero weapons-grade plutonium. And that's easy to see. The spent fuel will be required to be shipped out of Iran for the life of the reactor. And Iran will be barred from building the reprocessing capabilities needed to extract bomb-grade material from plutonium.

Taken together, these measures close off Iran's plutonium path forever. No other option -- not more sanctions and not military action -- would provide this kind of time.

And by the way, if we're viewed as walking away from what is considered a reasonable deal by our partners in favor of a unilateral, maximalist positions, we will lose international support that our sanctions regime depends on. Because unilateral U.S. sanctions long ago ceased to be enough to ratchet up the pressure. That's not what is hurting Iran so badly.

And as I said: If down the road, Iran resumes its pursuit of nuclear weapons, no option available today will be off the table to handle the threat. None. Our technological capability increases every day and the additional knowledge we'd acquire would be significantly more than we have now.

Take all this together, it's clear: Those who say the deal paves Iran's path to the bomb -- respectfully -- they don't get it. They're wrong. Remember what I said the path has already been paved. If they walk away today, in two to three months, they have enough highly enriched uranium, if they chose to, to make up to [sic] eight nuclear weapons. As a former respected Israel head of military intelligence, [sic] Mossad, wrote about the political framework we arrived at, he said:

"It contains important achievements for the major powers in terms of setting back the Iranian nuclear program and imposing key restrictions on future development of the Iranian nuclear program as well as unprecedented supervision."

He's a former head of Mossad [sic].

Finally, there is the myth that a nuclear deal between the United States and Iran enables Iran to gain dominance inside the Middle East. Folks, this isn't a grand bargain between America and Iran that addresses all the differences between us. This is a nuclear bargain between Britain, France, Russia, China, Germany, the EU, America, and Iran -- one that reduces the risk of nuclear war and makes the region and the world safer as a result.

It's not a bet on Iran changing its stripes. All of you know that Iran is not a monolith. There is significant debate within Iran about its future. Some want to dominate the region via militant proxies. Others want more normal relations with the outside world. Many of those helped elect

Rouhani.

But you see, that debate is being fought out inside Iran. It's not the premise upon which this deal is made. This deal is solid, worthwhile, and enforceable regardless of the outcome of that internal debate in Iran. And it's true we did not precondition the deal on Iran renouncing its proxies or recognizing Israel. And we don't ask Saudi Arabia to recognize Israel. But we passionately believe that Iran must eventually do those things. That's not the deal.

I've been involved in arms control negotiations since I was a 30-year-old kid when I came to the United States Congress in 1972 on the Foreign Relations Committee. Two of the last deals as a senator, I was delegated to go and negotiate with the Russians.

Just like arms control talks with the Soviet Union -- another regime we fundamentally disagreed with, whose rhetoric and actions were repugnant and unacceptable, whose proxies we forcibly countered around the world -- we negotiated to reduce the nuclear threat to prevent nuclear war.

Kennedy did not condition the Partial Test Ban Treaty on the Soviets surrendering Cuba. Nixon negotiated the SALT Treaty without conditioning it on the end of the Vietnam War and Russian support for the North Vietnamese. Reagan demanded that Gorbachev tear down the Berlin Wall, but it didn't condition talks in Reykjavik on the Soviets doing it first. And they all kept us safer. That's what we're doing today.

It's true, as Jack discussed yesterday with you, that should Iran act rapidly to restrict its program, Iran will have additional cash available to it. And despite good reasons to think most of it will go to urgent domestic needs, some or all of it may fund further mischief in the region. But if that occurs, it will not occur in a vacuum.

We are working continually to develop the means and capacity to counter Iran's destabilizing activities as we've demonstrated in places like the Straits of Hormuz every single day. And we're prepared to use force. Just listen to the news tonight about what we're now doing in the Straits.

We're sanctioning Iran's terrorist networks. We're strengthening our partners to push back against Iran's bullying. We're strengthening national institutions and militaries so they can't have -- they are not manipulated, or corrupted, or hollowed out by militias, clients, states within states in places like Iraq and Lebanon.

The one reason I am sanguine that -- deal or no deal -- Iran will not dominate the Middle East is what I've learned from years of working in Iraq. The people of the Middle East don't want to be dominated by anyone -- not us, not Iran, not anyone.

And a nuclear deal reinforces our efforts to push back against Iran interference and aggression. Because as dangerous and difficult as Iran is today, just imagine what and how emboldened, a nuclear-armed Iran would be and what escalation it would sponsor in support of terrorism and militancy.

As we produce this deal, we're also deepening our cooperation with Israel and our other regional partners, including in the Gulf, who are concerned about Iran's ambitions in the region, as we are.

With Israel, our security cooperation is as strong as it has ever been. It's true we disagree sometimes. But as I said last week at Israel's Independence Day celebration, we're family. I think it was Ambassador Dermer who essentially said the same thing. We drive each other nuts. But we love each other. And most of all we protect each other.

So let's get something straight: No President has done more for the security of Israel than President Barack Obama. And that's not going to change. It's not just the Iron Dome, or the record-shattering levels of U.S. assistance, or the President's repeated insistence that Israel has the right to defend itself like any other nation. It's not just the F-35 jets that will make Israel the only country in the region with a fifth-generation fighter aircraft. All that is, to use the words of Bibi Netanyahu, "unprecedented."

But I'm talking about something deeper: We have Israel's back. And we will continue to look for new ways to help Israel defend itself, and to send the unmistakable message that if you challenge Israel's security, you are challenging the United States of America. Just as the President said in Jerusalem, those who adhere to the ideology of rejecting Israel's right to exist, they might as well reject the Earth beneath their feet, the sky above them, because Israel is not going anywhere. So long as there is a United States of America, they are not alone. Period. (Applause.)

I think you all know me well enough to know I wouldn't be in an administration that did not mean it.

We're also working with Gulf States to expand their defensive capabilities, air and missile defenses, critical infrastructure protection, cyber defenses. That's the purpose of the meeting the President has called of Gulf leaders at Camp David.

And keep in mind, as I speak, there are 35,000 U.S. forces in the Gulf region to deter aggression and defend our partners. Deal or no deal, those forces remain. Our commitment to their external defense remains firm.

When it comes to Iran, the President said he would draw on all instruments of our national power to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. I have heard some speak cavalierly about how simple military strikes would be. "Why don't we just take them now and get it over with?" This is not only incredibly uninformed, but it's dangerous. There's nothing simple, minimal, or predictable about a war with Iran. If required, it will happen.

It's a risk we may yet have to take should Iran race for a bomb. But you should be ready, we should be ready -- even when strikes would achieve less at a greater cost than a deal we are debating today.

After a decade of learning the limits of what war can achieve in the Middle East, we owe it to ourselves -- and to our troops -- to fully explore what is possible through diplomacy. If the last 12 years haven't done anything else, I hope they instilled a bit of humility in all of us about nation-building. And so we do so knowing that the finest military in human history remains at the ready.

In closing, I want to offer a piece of advice: Don't underestimate my friend Barack Obama. Do not underestimate him. He has a spine of steel, and he is willing to do what it takes to keep America and our allies safe. And that's what we're doing in Iran.

Folks, there is no deal yet. The Iranians may yet refuse to agree to the detail the framework lays out in detail. If they do not, there will be no deal. And it will be Iran who rejected the agreement, and the sanctions -- international sanctions -- will stay in place and more will follow.

So, folks, make your judgment when the final deal is put before us. But be critical. Not only of the deal -- be critical of the criticism to see if it holds water.

Happy 30th anniversary, Washington Institute.

May God bless America and may God protect our troops. Thank you for having me. (Applause.) ❖

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