



## Washington Has a Clear Choice on the Future of Iran Nuclear Deal

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When it comes to foreign policy, the Trump administration has been engulfed in scandal and intrigue from day one. From the resignation of Michael Flynn, to a botched Yemen raid, to a U.S. bombing campaign in Mosul, Iraq that killed up to 200 civilians, to unrelenting controversy over Russian meddling in our election, it's difficult to even keep up.

With all these distractions, it is easy to forget that there are important issues that demand thoughtful attention. High among these is the Iran nuclear deal. Not only must the Iran deal compete for attention with other controversies swirling around the White House, it has to withstand antagonism from hawks who refuse to acknowledge its success.

At the annual American Israel Public Affairs Committee conference this week, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell criticized the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) for “bestow[ing] a windfall of billions for the Iranian regime to distribute to its proxies.” At the same conference, House Speaker Paul Ryan described the deal as “an unmitigated disaster” that is “dangerous for the United States and for the world.”

Actually, most of the tangible benefits in sanctions relief have gone to improving the economy for every day Iranians. And far from being a “dangerous” and “unmitigated disaster,” the deal has been successful in rolling back Iran’s nuclear program and in easing regional tensions.

The rhetorical abuse visited upon the JCPOA doesn’t bode well for the survival of the deal. And even the relative moderates in the Trump administration – people like Secretary of Defense

James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, frequently described as the “grown-ups,” in contrast with the opposing bloc of “ideologues” – seem more hawkish than pragmatic on Iran.

In other words, the Trump White House exists in an echo chamber of negativity toward the JCPOA. The deal’s survival depends on deliberate administration support and a measured understanding of its benefits.

Sanction relief is an important part of this. The Trump administration needs to work hard to ensure that Iran sees the full benefits of sanctions relief in exchange for Iran rolling back its nuclear program, as it has done.

Unfortunately, both the Senate and the House are working to impose additional sanctions on Iran. The legislation would target people involved in Iran’s ballistic missile program and foreign entities who do business with them, while also applying terrorism sanctions to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC).

But concerns about Iran’s missile program and support for terrorism are distinct from the JCPOA. The nuclear deal was narrowly conceived as a non-proliferation agreement. Iran’s recent ballistic missile tests, which have drawn so much fire from critics of the deal, did not violate the agreement.

More to the point, Iran’s missiles aren’t a serious security threat. Iran is militarily weak compared to all of its neighboring rivals and is easily deterred from attacking its adversaries with these missiles.

As for applying terrorism sanctions to the Revolutionary Guards, this amounts to a pointless redundancy that will not yield positive results, but may make things much worse. The IRGC is “already one of the most sanctioned entities in the world” and these additional measures will have negligible impact on its activities. New sanctions could even undermine anti-ISIS operations, as the IRGC and Iranian Shiite militias are battling ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Indeed, American military and intelligence officials have warned such sanctions “could endanger U.S. troops in Iraq and the overall fight against the Islamic State, and would be an unprecedented use of a law that was not designed to sanction government institutions.”

Imposing new sanctions on Iran that are unrelated to the JCPOA and have almost zero chance of producing the desired results is needlessly antagonistic. In fact, Iran’s cheeky response this week to new U.S. sanctions was to impose “its own sanctions regime on U.S. military companies involved in supporting Israeli settlements.” This tit-for-tat dynamic risks eroding trust between Iran, the United States, and the other signatories to the deal (the U.K., France, Russia, China, and Germany), creating a disincentive for Iran to comply with the deal’s restrictions.

Most worryingly, this may even be the intention of those who oppose the deal. They recognize that pulling out of the JCPOA unilaterally would be too costly for America diplomatically, but if they can provoke violations on Iran’s part, they can destroy the deal and avoid blame.

Both the White House and Congress need to understand that the future of the Iran nuclear deal is a matter of choice. The United States can choose to uphold the deal and ensure promised sanctions relief for Iran. Or it can choose to undermine the agreement by inflating the threat from

Iran and provoking tension over peripheral issues. The first choice holds back nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. The second risks disastrous conflict between the United States and Iran.

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