

# THE WEEK

## The arguments for and against the Iran Nuclear Deal

February 10, 2022

Talks to revive the Barack Obama-era agreement have reached ‘critical stage’

Iran and the US have launched into a fresh round of negotiations in Austria aimed at salvaging Tehran’s 2015 nuclear deal with world powers.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a framework of restrictions on Iran’s nuclear programme, was effectively scrapped in 2018 when Donald Trump reimposed “punishing sanctions on Iran’s economy”, Reuters reported.

Tehran “responded by breaching many of the deal’s restrictions and pushing well beyond them”, the news agency continued, and has repeatedly insisted that “it is up to Washington to make the first move by agreeing to lift sanctions” in order to resolve the row.

The latest

Talks in Vienna resumed on Tuesday after a ten-day break. But Iran has “refused to sit at the table with American diplomats, opting instead to negotiate via intermediaries” until Washington takes first steps towards what Tehran considers a “good agreement”, CNN reported.

Iran indicated last month “for the first time that it would be open to direct negotiations”, which would be considered “a significant development” in the effort to reintroduce key elements of the JCPOA, according to the broadcaster.

The two sides “have bridged some gaps since the start of the eighth round of talks in November last year but differences remain”, said Al Jazeera, with key sticking points including exactly “what sanctions the US must lift”.

“I think this will probably be the final round of the talks,” Tehran-based foreign policy analyst Diako Hosseini told the news site. “What we can deduce so far is that chances of the talks being

successful is more than their failure, unless the sides overstep in their final efforts to gain more concessions.

“All sides need to understand that a potential agreement would be less beneficial for Iran and the US than the 2015 deal, but under current circumstances, returning to the deal and keeping the window of diplomacy open is the best realistic option.”

Envoys from Iran, China, Russia, France, Germany, the UK and the US are all working towards a breakthrough in Vienna.

But they have repeatedly warned that they have made “limited progress since they resumed in November after a five-month hiatus prompted by the election of hardline Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi”, Reuters said.

## *I*

Pro: no nuclear weapons

The text of the original agreement stated that the US would drop hugely damaging sanctions on Iran’s oil and financial sectors in exchange for “limits on Iran’s nuclear production capability and fuel stockpile over the next 15 years”.

Under the terms of the deal, “international restrictions on Iranian arms exports would remain in place for up to five years and the ban on ballistic missile exports could remain for up to eight years”, the Cato Institute think tank’s Christopher Preble explained.

Tehran had also “been building a heavy-water nuclear facility” that world powers insisted should be “dismantled because of the potential military use”, the BBC reported. Spent fuel from such a reactor “contains plutonium suitable for a nuclear bomb”.

As a compromise, “Iran said it would redesign the reactor so it could not produce any weapons-grade plutonium, and that all spent fuel would be sent out of the country as long as the modified reactor existed”, the broadcaster continued.

So all the wrangling resulted in a deal that largely “limited the Iranian programme to reassure the rest of the world that it would be unable to develop nuclear weapons”, said The Guardian.

## *2*

Con: loss of influence

The US “paid a tremendous cost for what can only be described as a narrow – if understandable – focus on the minutiae of Iran’s nuclear programme” under then president Barack Obama’s deal with Tehran, according to Shadi Hamid, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institute research group.

In an article in The Atlantic, Hamid argued that getting the deal over the line meant “dissociating” Iran’s nuclear ambitions from its “other activities in the region”, lessening US power to put an end to Tehran’s destabilising acts. US allies in the region were left feeling that Washington “hasn’t done nearly enough to counter Iran’s ambitions in the region”.

“Iran, due to its deteriorating economy, needed a deal more than the United States did,” Hamid continued. “Too much was subsumed and compromised” by Obama “due to the desire for a deal, an administration priority that took precedence over nearly everything else”.

Trump agreed that the deal “fell short of addressing Iran’s regional behaviour or its missile programme”, The Guardian said. He was “emboldened by a group of Iran hawks in his inner circle”, including John Bolton and Mike Pompeo.

### 3

Pro: oil supplies

Iran’s economy was in a dire state when the deal was agreed, in part because the Middle Eastern country was unable to widely export its key natural resource, oil. But after the deal was agreed, government officials from major nations began visiting Iran to explore opportunities.

What followed was “the movement of huge supplies of oil from Iran, which was thought to be sitting on large stockpiles due to years of imposed sanctions”, Investopedia said. And this in turn “drastically improved” the economic situation for Iranian citizens.

The resumption of the talks in Austria this week fuelled hopes of “more oil exports” from Tehran, with oil prices sliding “more than 2% from recent seven-year highs”, Reuters reported.

### 4

Con: untrustworthy regime

A mainstay of Trump’s attacks on the deal was the suggestion that “Iran was cheating on the agreement” by maintaining covert nuclear facilities, The Guardian reported.

In 2015, then Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who had previously said the agreement gave Iran a “path to the bomb”, unveiled “tens of thousands of secret files” that he said proved Tehran was developing nuclear weapons, USA Today reported.

He alleged that “Iran lied when it said it never sought to develop nuclear weapons”, and then “cheated by failing to reveal all its weapons programme information to an international watchdog group charged with monitoring the deal”, said the news site.

At the time, European guarantors of the agreement “pushed back against this, saying the documents underlined the importance of keeping it”, The Guardian reported.

Israel argues that the economic growth that lifting sanctions would bring is “a platform to fund and nurture a nuclear-capable, religious-extremist country”, Investopedia said, and that “a strengthened Iran could hinder peace and security in the region”.

## 5

Pro: bargaining power

Greater economic cooperation with Iran would increase US influence in Tehran, and the deal also served to slow down North Korea’s missile testing.

The two pariah states have a “long history of cooperation”, said Mark Fitzpatrick, former executive director of the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies.

Iran “acquired Scud missiles from North Korea during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s,” he explained, and went “on to acquire the North Korean Nodong and Musudan systems in the 1990s and 2000s, respectively”.

This mutual cooperation “is a reason for ambitious diplomacy”, according to Fitzpatrick. “Resumed missile cooperation” between Iran and North Korea “lends itself to alarmism, but also offers further reasons to negotiate with Iran over its missile programme”.

## 6

Con: likely to fail

According to United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI), a pressure group led by a former Democratic senator and an ex-US ambassador, the 2015 deal was a failure from day one, because it “fails to guarantee the peaceful nature of Iran’s nuclear programme”.

The group argues that clauses in the original agreement give “Iran a clear pathway to nuclear weapons”, and cites the so-called “sunset clause” that would end “restrictions on its uranium-enrichment and plutonium-processing capacities” between 2026 and 2031.

Far from ensuring regional stability, “the deal emboldens and enriches an extremist anti-American terror state thereby furthering Iran’s expansionist and destabilising activities”, UANI argues.

And getting a new deal off the ground may also prove difficult for Joe Biden. Republican senators have “pledged to thwart a new Iran nuclear deal” if the president “does not present its terms to Congress for approval”, Al Jazeera reported.

The 33 lawmakers “opposed the initial 2015 deal”, the broadcaster said. A letter sent by leader Ted Cruz stated that they would use the “full range of options and leverage available” to ensure the government adhered to US laws governing any new agreement.