

The Failure of the Iran Nuclear Agreement & the Leader Most Responsible

By

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5 October 2025

One of the many campaign promises that Donald Trump made before the 2016 US presidential election was that if he became president, he would withdraw the United States from an international treaty with the Islamic Republic of Iran ("Iran"). This treaty was and is the Iran Nuclear Agreement, also technically known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action ("JCPOA"). After some two years of negotiation, the JCPOA agreement was signed on 14 July 2015 between Iran and all of the permanent members of the United Nations' Security Council (i.e., Great Britain, France, Russia, China, and the United States); Germany; and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs. The president of the United States at this time was President Barack Obama. On the signing of the 159-page agreement, President Obama declared, "It blocks every possible pathway Iran could use to build a nuclear bomb while ensuring – through a comprehensive, intrusive, and unprecedented verification and transparency regime—that Iran's nuclear program remains exclusively peaceful moving forward." This was a rare moment in history when all members of the UN Security Council agreed on something but on this occasion, they did.

The JCPOA came into effect on 16 January 2016 following the International Atomic Energy Agency's verification—a pre-condition stated in the treaty—that Iran had shipped 25,000 pounds of enriched uranium out of the country and dismantled and removed 2/3rds of its centrifuges (see below).

Background of the JCPOA

What was the purpose of the JCPOA? In 2015, US intelligence believed that without an agreement in place, Iran would be able to produce enough nuclear material for a weapon in only a few months. The aim of the JCPOA was to stop or, at the very least, slow down Iran's development and attainment of nuclear abilities (i.e., nuclear weapons) by putting new, more strict conditions on it. There was a strong possibility that if Iran developed a nuclear weapon, the Middle East could become a tinderbox with Israel already possessing nuclear weapons.

Under the terms of the JCPOA, Iran agreed to dismantle much of its nuclear program including restricting the number and type of centrifuges in operation; the level of uranium enrichment; and the size of its enriched uranium stockpile. Iran also agreed to open its facilities to more extensive international inspections in exchange for the removal of billions of dollars' worth of oil and financial sanctions along with the release of about US\$100 billion of Iranian funds that had been frozen by the US and many European nations. Neither the sanctions removal nor the return of the Iranian funds would occur until the International Atomic Energy Agency ("IAEA") verified Tehran had completed these specified requirements.

Technically, a nuclear weapon requires either (enriched) uranium or plutonium. Uranium enrichment is also required when it is used for nuclear power, although not to the same purity. Thus, uranium enrichment is a dual-use technology required for both civilian and military purposes. The process of enriching uranium uses centrifuges to separate out the most suitable isotope for nuclear fission, called U-235. The key strategies used to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the world include limiting the number of operating uranium enrichment plants and by controlling the export of nuclear technology and fissile material (i.e., material capable of undergoing nuclear fission). (See, "Dual Use: Dealing with Uranium Enrichment", by Jonas Schneider & Dr. Oliver

Why did Iran agree to this US-led JCPOA? As mentioned above, Iran had strong economic reasons to negotiate and sign this agreement. There were the harsh sanctions in place affecting both the sale and purchase of Iranian oil. Also, the frozen Iranian assets in the hands of other countries amounted to billions of US dollars. It must be mentioned that Iran was also one of the signers of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons that came into force in 1970; a time when few countries possessed nuclear abilities. This treaty was signed by 191 states for the sole reason of limiting nuclear weapons to the small number of states which already possessed them. Although this treaty was agreed to and signed by the then Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, it appears to have little influence on the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini who came to power in Iran following the Iranian Revolution of 1978-1979. It was after Ayatollah Khomeini's return to Iran in February 1979 that Iran became known as the "Islamic Republic of Iran".

When the JCPOA treaty was being negotiated, there were mixed opinions as to its benefits. Certain Gulf countries and Israel were critical of the JCPOA. Saudi Arabia said the deal failed to guarantee the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear program; its restrictions were only temporary (i.e., 15 years); and it strengthened Iran by improving its economic standing and capabilities. In general, the Gulf States disagreed because of the secretive nature of the talks; members of the Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC) were totally left out of the negotiations. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated Israel opposed the treaty because it was "too lenient" towards Iran. His statement setting out why Israel believed it was too lenient contained several inaccuracies including inflating the number of Iran's centrifuges (by 32 times), and ignored his own government's intelligence assessment of the deal. One commentator said, "Even dismantling Iran's civilian program does not satisfy Netanyahu's appetite." The commentator went on to opine that it was Iran's competitive regional status and rising power that most concerned Netanyahu. (, "Why Saudi Arabia and Israel Oppose the Iran Nuclear Deal" by al Jazeera, 14 April 2015.) Ironically, one reason the US wanted a nuclear agreement with Iran, was the US's fear that once Iran developed a nuclear weapon Israel might make a "pre-emptive" military strike against Iran as it had done against Iraq and Syria.

Withdrawal of the United States by President Trump From the JCPOA

What happened to the JCPOA? Donald Trump, true to his word, withdrew the United States from this treaty in 2018 when he was president, ignoring the sage advice of America's allies who had urged him to stay in the agreement and build upon it. President Trump never stated any specific reasons against the JCPOA, only general ones. He insisted that the agreement was "the worst deal in history". He argued that the JCPOA was "so horrible" it had to be discarded to move forward. Trump stated, "It is clear to me that we cannot prevent an Iranian nuclear bomb under the decaying and rotten structure of the current agreement. The Iran deal is defective at its core. If we do nothing, we know exactly what will happen."

The leaders of France, Germany and the United Kingdom noted their "regret and concern" at President Trump's decision, calling on Iran to maintain its commitments under the deal. Unfortunately, several things made this very difficult. After withdrawing the US from the JCPOA, President Trump re-imposed all previous sanctions on Iran and imposed new sanctions under a maximum pressure campaign led by him. This pressure included efforts to drive Iran's oil exports down to zero. These new sanctions applied not only to Iran but to any and all countries and companies doing business with Iran. The sanctions cut Iran off from the international financial system, rendering the JCPOA's economic provisions null and void. In 2020, there were several deadly attacks on prominent Iranians including one by the US under President Trump where a

precision missile was fired into Iran, targeting and killing a top Iranian military leader.

It is important to note here that in the past, the US did not formally withdraw from its international treaties although it might disregard them. But, under Donald Trump, the US has withdrawn from the Paris Treaty (on climate change), the JCPOA, the World Health Organization ("WHO") (during Covid), and the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). By his actions, Trump has demonstrated priority over America's sovereignty and economic self-interest over multilateral cooperation. The implications of this shift are profound, affecting global governance, international stability, and the balance of power among major geopolitical actors. With the United States' proving to be unreliable, other states are much less likely to want to cooperate with it.

What about Iran? Did it adhere to the conditions of the JCPOA? According to the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, "Iran significantly reduced its nuclear program and accepted strict monitoring and verification safeguards to ensure its program is solely for peaceful purposes." Under the JCPOA, Iran had agreed not to enrich uranium above 3.67% purity. Following the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, Iran adhered to the treaty for more than a year with one difference. After sanctions were re-imposed, Iran resumed its enrichment at a 20% level which was one used in research reactors. In April 2021, Iran produced smaller quantities of uranium with 60% purity. (See, "Iran Nuclear Agreement: IAEA Inspectors Find Uranium Particles Enriched to 83.7%" by Bethany Bell & David Gritten, BBC News Report, 1 March 2023.) Following the US killing of Iran's top military leader in 2020, the Iranian government announced it would no longer abide by any of the operational restraints on its nuclear program under the JCPOA.

The US Under President Joseph Biden Reinstates Talks with Iran

When Joseph Biden became US president in January 2021, the US government attempted to re-enter the JCPOA with Iran. There were some two years of on-and-off talks with the Iranians in an effort to have them again agree to the terms of the JCPOA but no resolution or compromise could be reached. In June 2022, Iran reported that it would be removing 27 surveillance cameras from its nuclear facilities. This followed the IAEA Board censuring Iran for not answering questions regarding uranium traces found at 3 undeclared sites. Although the cameras were functional at this time, Iran had reportedly been withholding the footage for the past year—perhaps as a negotiation tool in talks with the US government. After 27 surveillance cameras were removed, some 40 cameras remained. (See, *Ibid.*) In late 2022, the negotiation talks between the US and Iran completely stalled.

The IAEA inspectors reported in February 2023 that it had found uranium particles enriched to 83.7% at the Iran Fordow nuclear facility, indicating Iran was enriching trace amounts of uranium to nearly weapons-grade levels, sparking alarm with President Biden as well as international concern. The concern was that while highly-enriched uranium used in research is 20%, weapons-grade enriched uranium is 90% and above. Following publication of the IAEA report and the international reaction to it, the IAEA said that it was in discussions with Iran. "The issue is whether it was a blip in the reconfigured cascades or deliberate. The agency has asked Iran for an explanation," one of the diplomats told Reuters. Earlier in February, the IAEA criticized Iran for failing to inform it of a "substantial" change to the interconnections between the two cascades, or clusters of centrifuges enriching uranium to up to 60% at Fordow. Several diplomats said the change meant Iran could quickly switch to a higher enrichment level. Iran defended itself saying, "So far, we have not made any attempt to enrich uranium above 60%. The presence of particles above 60% enrichment does not mean production with an enrichment above 60%", said Behrouz Kamalvandi, spokesperson for Iran's Atomic Energy Organisation. (See, "IAEA Says It is in Discussions with Iran After Report of Enrichment." by Francois Murphy, Reuters News,

20 February 2023). On 7 October 2023, Israel was attacked by Hamas-led fighters resulting in some 1,200 Israelis being killed and an additional 250 Israelis kidnapped. The US attention (and the world's) moved to this new crisis. Around this same time, certain provisions of the JCPOA also began to expire.

The 2023 talks between the IAEA and Iran about level of uranium enrichment led to a partial reversal by Iran. They agreed with the IAEA reinstalling some of the monitoring devices (including cameras) and the installation of new monitoring devices at Fordow and the Natanz pilot plant. (See, "Iran's Nuclear Timetable: the Weapon Potential", Iran Watch, 11 June 2025.)

As Donald Trump was sworn in for a second presidential term in January 2025, his attention again turned to Iran. Did he recognize that his earlier action of withdrawing from the JCPOA would have adverse consequences? Commentator Tom Collina made the observation that although "Trump promised a 'better deal, instead we got an increasingly costly blunder that may be impossible to fix." (See, "Killing the Iran Nuclear Deal was One of Trump's Biggest Failures" by Tom Z. Collina, Responsible Statecraft, 8 May 2024.)

President Trump Declares Iran Should Not be Allowed to Develop a Nuclear Weapon

On 7 March 2025, several news services including ABC News and Reuters reported on President Trump's interview with Fox Business Network the day before. During that interview, President Trump stated he had sent a letter on Wednesday (5 March 2025) to the Ayatollah Khamenei in Iran urging negotiations on nuclear weapons. His stated reason for doing so was because "Iran's nuclear capacities are reaching a critical point". "We can't let them have a nuclear weapon". Trump said he told him, "There are two ways Iran can be handled: militarily, or you make a deal." The New York Times on 8 March 2025 also reported this communication between Trump and Khamenei. Iran's Ayatollah Khamenei strongly rebuffed Trump's message to Iran, reporting President Trump had demanded Iran better negotiate with the US or face potential military action. Khamenei said, "The US's offer to negotiate is not to solve issues but to put new demands on Iran."

Trump's new instigation led to discussions between the US and Iran beginning with weekend talks on 12 April (in Oman) and 19 April (in Rome) 2025. But, to what end? On 19 April 2025, CNN reported that Iran in recent weeks had been vocal about "its concerns about striking a nuclear deal with Trump." Iran had "voiced objections to any deal that fully dismantles its nuclear program as opposed to only limiting its uranium enrichment to civilian-only use as stipulated by the JCPOA." CNN also reported that conflicting remarks on the negotiations had been made by different US officials, thus, muddying the waters as to what actually were the objectives of the US/President Trump in restarting these talks.

The United Kingdom reported in May 2025 that Iran had signaled that it was willing to come to an agreement on its nuclear program. At the same time, the US Administration announced it would be instigating further sanctions against Iran during the US-Iran talks. Not surprisingly, Iran criticized these new sanctions. (See, "US-Iran Nuclear Talks 2025", Research Briefing, House of Commons Library, 14 May 2025.) On May 27, President Trump stated that both sides were close to finalizing the talks. This view was contested by an advisor to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei saying Trump's desired control over the Iranian nuclear program was a "fantasy". (See, "Araghchi Debunks 'Imminent' Iran-US Deal", Breaking the News, Wikipedia, '2025 United States-Iran Negotiations')

On the night of 22 June 2025, President Trump (without Congressional approval) ordered the US Air Force and Navy to bomb several Iranian nuclear sites on Israel's behalf (i.e., Netanyahu's). These US bombings against Iran were illegal as they were

against international law including The Charter of the United Nations. The attack on Iran by the US obviously set back the negotiations with Iran. Iran has since announced that it was prepared for further talks but only once the sanctions already in place were lifted and its right to a civilian nuclear program was agreed.

The Snapback Mechanism of the JCPOA

In mid-August, a new twist appeared in this story of the JCPOA. The twist was a provision in the JCPOA known as a “snapback” mechanism. The BBC News reported on 13 August 2025 that France, Germany and the United Kingdom (‘the E3’) had agreed to impose the JCPOA’s “snapback” mechanism if Iran failed to resume talks by the end of August. The “snapback” provision provided for the reinstatement of previous sanctions against Iran unless Iran agreed to limit its nuclear program. Under the JCPOA, any current member of it had the right to call on this remedy. The presence of a “snapback” mechanism in the treaty reflects the amount of thought and care that was taken in negotiating and agreeing the text of the JCPOA. Under the provisions of the JCPOA, it had to be triggered by the 18th of October 2025. Naturally, the US had no right to apply the snapback mechanism since it is no longer a party to the treaty. Plus, the US under Donald Trump had already reimposed sanctions against Iran. (See, “United Kingdom, France and Germany Ready to Reimpose Sanctions on Iran over Nuclear Programme”, by Ruth Comerford, BBC News, 13 August 2025.)

On the 14 August 2025, The Times of Israel reported that the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and his top clerics have reached a consensus to resume negotiations with western powers, viewing them as vital to the Islamic Republic’s survival, according to insiders. (See, “Khamenei has Resolved to Back Negotiations with Western Powers”, Reuters, The Times of Israel.) This was ruled out by the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on 25 August in Tehran when he made his first full public appearance since June. Khamenei dismissed the E3’s threat and did not show any willingness to resume negotiations with the US or restart its co-operation with the IAEA. (See, “Iran Leader Rules Out Direct Talks with US” by Najmeh Bozorgmehr, Financial Times, 25 August 2025.)

The UN Security Council Report on 28 August 2025 noted that the US had resumed its “maximum pressure” policy against Iran even as the US and Iran started their bilateral talks. The E3 had warned that unless Iran returned to serious negotiations by the end of August they would trigger the “snapback” mechanism. This timing would ensure the 30-day process for this mechanism would be concluded by October when Russia (an ally of Iran) would assume the Security Council’s presidency. It would also allow Iran the opportunity to address the E3 concerns over the Iranian nuclear programme.

On the 19 September in accordance with UNSCR 2231, the UN Security Council (“UNSC”) voted on a resolution that would have maintained sanctions-lifting on Iran. The Security Council voted ‘no’ on this resolution. This meant, too, that the Security Council not protesting the use of the snapback mechanism by the E3. (See, United Nations Security Council Report, posted 28 August 2025.) On 28 September 2025, the United Kingdom government published a press release stating the E3 had informed the UNSC by letter that it was triggering the snapback mechanism under the JCPOA. (See, UK Government Press Release, published 28 September 2025). The E3 also urged other UN members to impose sanctions against Iran. (*Ibid.*)

The European Council reported on 29 September 2025 that it agreed with and would join France, Germany and the United Kingdom in reimposing earlier, restrictive measures against Iran. These measures included both those measures adopted by the UN Security Council since 2006 along with its successive resolutions and those adopted by the European Council’s autonomous measures concerning: a) Travel bans for individuals, asset freezes for individuals and entities plus the prohibition of making

funds or economic resources available to those listed; and b) Economic and financial sanctions covering the trade, financial and transport sectors as detailed below.

--TRADE: Prohibition against arms export to Iran and a ban on transfer of any items, materials, goods and technology that could contribute to Iran's enrichment-related and reprocessing activities and ballistic missile programmes.

Also, bans on imports, purchase and transport of crude oil, natural gas, petrochemical and petroleum products and related services; the sale or supply of key equipment used in the energy sector; sale or supply of gold, other precious metals and diamonds; certain naval equipment; and certain software.

--FINANCIAL: The European Union is reimposing the freezing of assets of the Central Bank of Iran and of major Iranian commercial banks.

--TRANSPORT: The European Union is reinstating measures to prevent access to EU airports by Iranian cargo flights and to prohibit the maintenance and service of Iranian cargo aircraft or vessels carrying prohibited materials or goods.

(See, "Iran Sanctions Snapback: Council Reimposes Restrictive Measures, European Council Press Release, published 29 September 2025. Also, all the EC's regulations on the sanctions on Iran are listed in this press release.) Note that the European Council's measures are more extensive than the UN Security Council's measures.

The United Kingdom has stated, "it intends" to bring in legislation to impose further sectoral measures, in-line with its partners it will target finance, energy, shipping, software and other significant industries. (See, "United Kingdom and the European Union Reimpose Iranian Sanctions Following UN Snapback" by Tom Cummins, Ashurst, 2 October 2025.)

To Conclude

Over two years went into the negotiations for the JCPOA before it was signed in 2015 by all the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, Germany, the High Representative of the European Union and Iran. It was an effective international treaty, putting in place stringent regulations and conditions on Iran in an effort to thwart its ability to develop nuclear weapons. Iran was complying with all aspects of the JCPOA. Then in 2018, President Donald Trump decided to withdraw the United States from the JCPOA. This decision was not based on any specific or legitimate reason. According to many experts, if all parties had adhered to their pledges under the JCPOA, the deal almost certainly could have achieved the goal of containing Iranian nuclear development far longer than a decade of nuclear restrictions. Donald Trump is once again the president of the United States, having come a full circle. Although many countries are now following the E3's actions and reintroducing sanctions against Iran, the cat seems to already be out of the bag. That is, the Iran is now well-past the initial enrichment level of 3.67% the JCPOA allowed. There have been reports in the last few years of Iran reaching 60%, maybe 84% or higher enrichment levels. Please do not forget that the JCPOA was there to stop Iran achieving a nuclear weapon. It has failed to do this. This failure can be directly traced to one major event and one leader, i.e., President Donald Trump and his decision to withdraw the United States from the JCPOA in 2018.

The End