



Iran

Summary and Key Talking Points

Policy Proposals

1. Rather than return to the flawed 2015 nuclear deal, intensify sanctions on Iran until the regime agrees to a stronger and longer agreement that would force Iran to give up its nuclear weapons ambitions permanently.
2. Stop turning a blind eye to China's imports of Iranian oil and sanction the Chinese and other companies involved in that trade.
3. Deploy strong U.S. military forces in the region to bolster deterrence against terrorism and an Iranian nuclear breakout.
4. Work with allies like Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council to roll back Iranian influence.
5. Hold congressional hearings to publicize and condemn Tehran's human rights violations.

Quick Facts

1. The 2015 nuclear deal did a better job of dismantling U.S. sanctions than it did of dismantling Iran's nuclear program. This was underscored by the ease and speed with which Iran exceeded the limits set by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) after the U.S. withdrew in 2018.
2. Iranian Revolutionary Guards provided funding, weapons, and training to militia groups that killed more than 600 U.S. troops in Iraq.
3. Since leaving the nuclear deal in May 2018, the U.S. has applied sanctions to more than 1,000 Iranian individuals and entities.

Power Phrases

A Regional and International Threat

- Iran's radical Islamist regime poses the greatest long-term Middle Eastern threat to the U.S. and its allies.
- Iran has developed a network of terrorist proxy groups to attack U.S. military forces and allies in the Middle East.

Nuclear Ambitions

- Iran has built up the largest ballistic missile force in the region and a huge nuclear infrastructure that it does not need for civilian purposes, which makes sense only if Tehran plans to arm the missiles with nuclear warheads.

- The 2015 nuclear deal slowed but did not halt Iran's nuclear progress. It was a diplomatic speed bump but not a stop sign against Iran's nuclear ambitions.

A Free Iran, a Stable Region

- A free Iran is the best hope for peace and security in the volatile Middle East. U.S. policy should clearly reflect that the U.S. stands with the Iranian people, not with the repressive regime in Tehran.

The Issue

Iran's radical Islamist regime poses the greatest long-term Middle Eastern threat to the United States and its allies. Although Iran's conventional military forces pose only a limited military threat, the regime has compensated for this by developing a network of terrorist proxy groups to attack U.S. military forces and allies in the Middle East. Iran also has built up the region's largest ballistic missile force, an investment that ultimately makes sense only if Tehran plans to arm the missiles with nuclear warheads.

The Obama Administration's 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), made a bad situation worse by giving Iran sanctions relief that seriously outweighed its limited and easily reversible nuclear concessions. The JCPOA legitimized Iran's covertly built uranium enrichment facilities at Natanz and Fordow, allowing them to remain with operating limitations that eventually would expire. In addition to weakening the long-standing U.S. non-proliferation goal of restricting access to sensitive nuclear technologies, the JCPOA did too little for too short a period to curb Iran's nuclear program. Key restrictions on uranium enrichment would expire after 10 to 15 years, leaving Tehran free to increase enrichment to an industrial scale and position itself for a nuclear breakout. The JCPOA also ignored such other threatening activities as Iran's support for terrorism, regional interventions, and ballistic missile development.

President Donald Trump, who had criticized the nuclear deal during his 2016 election campaign, pushed for renegotiation of the flawed and risky agreement. After Iran and other signatories balked, President Trump withdrew from the JCPOA on May 8, 2018, restored nuclear sanctions lifted by the deal, and imposed new sanctions. His Administration launched a "maximum pressure" strategy to force Iran to return to the negotiating table and agree to a more restrictive deal. In his May 8, 2018, remarks on the JCPOA, President Trump acknowledged that Tehran opposed new negotiations but added that "they are going to want to make a new and lasting deal...that benefits all of Iran and the Iranian people. When they do, I am ready, willing, and able."

Rather than focusing narrowly on the nuclear issue as the Obama Administration did, the Trump Administration laid down markers on the entire range of Tehran's activities to deter and penalize the regime's aggressive regional interventions in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, as well as to hold the regime accountable for its export of subversion and terrorism. For its part, Tehran, adopting a policy of "strategic patience," never officially withdrew from the deal. Understanding that the agreement only delays Iran's nuclear ambitions until the regime opts to discard its nuclear commitments as it has done repeatedly in the past, Tehran sought to outlast the Trump Administration in the hope that a new President would be open to unconditional renewal of the 2015 deal.

On May 8, 2019, the first anniversary of the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani warned that Iran would also abandon the agreement unless the other parties to the deal—China, Russia, Britain, France, and Germany—are able to protect Iran from U.S. sanctions. Rouhani threatened to resume enriching uranium to higher levels prohibited by the accord if a 60-day deadline to receive much greater sanctions relief was not met. He also announced that Iran would stop exporting excess enriched uranium and heavy water from its nuclear program, as stipulated by the nuclear deal, and threatened to expand Iran's violations of the JCPOA incrementally every 60 days unless the remaining parties to the deal—especially Britain, France, and Germany—found a way to protect Iran from U.S. oil and bank sanctions.

In July 2019, Iran began to enrich its uranium to 4.5 percent, exceeding the 3.67 percent limit set by the JCPOA. In September, it violated restrictions on research and development and began to install prohibited advanced centrifuges. In November, it began uranium enrichment operations at the Fordow enrichment facility, a fortified underground site designed to produce enough enriched uranium for one to two nuclear weapons annually according to Iranian nuclear documents stolen by Israel and revealed in 2018. On January 5, 2020, Tehran announced that it would no longer be bound by any restrictions on its nuclear program. This should have been the last straw for Britain, France, and Germany, which had remained in the deal despite Iran's escalating violations. On January 14, they announced that they would hold Iran accountable for its violations of the deal and initiated a dispute mechanism built into the agreement that could lead to U.N. sanctions against Iran after a process that could last for as long as 65 days. However, they failed to press the matter and announced in early February 2020 that they would "continuously postpone" referring Iran's JCPOA violations to the U.N. Security Council as long as Iran allowed international inspectors to monitor its nuclear program.

Iran's dictatorship also mounted a veiled campaign of intimidation to raise the costs of the Trump Administration's campaign of maximum pressure. Iran was behind mine attacks on tankers transporting Arab oil on May 12 and June 13, 2019, and the shooting down of a U.S. Navy drone on June 20. After a pause, Tehran launched a bold attack on September 14, 2019, targeting Saudi Arabia's oil infrastructure in Abqaiq and Khurais with seven cruise missiles and 18 drones. Although almost half of their oil exports were temporarily disrupted, the Saudis quickly repaired the damage and declined to retaliate.

The United States deployed additional warships, bombers, stealth fighters, missile defense units, and more than 14,000 troops to deter and defend against Iranian aggression between May and December 2019. Iran, however, continued to orchestrate rocket attacks by Iraqi militias on U.S. troops stationed at Iraqi military bases in a direct challenge to President Trump's red line against killing Americans. After 11 rocket attacks in two months failed to spill American blood, the Iran-backed Kataib Hezbollah militia launched a rocket attack on December 27 that killed an American citizen. On December 29, the U.S. retaliated with air strikes against five Kataib Hezbollah bases and weapon storage sites in Iraq and Syria. Kataib Hezbollah and other Iran-backed militias responded on December 30–31 by mobilizing a mob that besieged the U.S. embassy in Baghdad and tried to set it on fire.

As the crisis escalated, President Trump ordered a drone strike that killed the leader of Kataib Hezbollah and Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds (Jerusalem) Force—the elite special operations branch of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Under Soleimani, the Quds Force had founded surrogate militias and terrorist groups such as Kataib Hezbollah and the original Lebanon-based Hezbollah and had directed them to attack Iran's enemies as part of Tehran's shadow war. When Soleimani arrived at Baghdad's airport on January 3, 2020, undoubtedly planning to orchestrate more attacks on U.S. personnel in Iraq and elsewhere in the region, President Trump ordered the preventive strike that stopped Soleimani from killing more Americans and enhanced deterrence of Iran's aggressive regime by driving up the perceived costs and risks of further proxy attacks on Americans.

Iran responded with a January 8, 2020, ballistic missile attack on two Iraqi bases where U.S. troops were stationed, but it failed to kill any Americans. Later that day, however, Iranian missiles accidentally downed a Ukrainian airliner, killing 176 people, most of whom were Iranians. That tragedy boosted anti-government protests inside Iran that had been percolating since 2017 because of Iran's growing economic problems, international isolation, abuses of human rights, and repressive policies.

Iran temporarily deescalated its confrontation with the United States, perhaps fearing that the Trump Administration would launch another devastating retaliatory attack. Following the November 2020 election of Joe Biden as President of the United States, however, Tehran resumed its nuclear brinkmanship by escalating its uranium enrichment to 20 percent and curbing international inspectors' access to its nuclear facilities. In April 2021, Iran began to enrich its uranium to 60 percent and deployed advanced IR-9 centrifuges that were prohibited until 2025 under the JCPOA.

President Biden entered office committed to reviving the JCPOA and addressing its weaknesses in a follow-on agreement. His Administration conducted seven rounds of negotiations with Iran in Vienna, Austria, that were hosted by the European Union, but so far, the two sides have failed to reach an agreement. Tehran demanded that Washington lift all sanctions imposed by the Trump Administration, not just nuclear sanctions, and insisted that sanctions must be lifted before Iran resumed compliance with the JCPOA. Iran also demanded that Washington must guarantee not to withdraw from the agreement again—something that no President could do.

After the June 2021 election of ultra-hardliner Ebrahim Raisi as Iran’s president, negotiations were suspended, and Iran further escalated its violations of the JCPOA. By mid-September, Iran had accumulated enough enriched uranium to produce one nuclear weapon in one month in a worst-case scenario—and two more weapons within five months, according to the Institute for Science and International Security. After dragging its feet for many months, Iran agreed to resume negotiations in late November, and by late March, negotiations appeared to be close to the finish line. The final obstacles to reviving the 2015 nuclear agreement appear to be Iran’s insistence that it be given a guarantee that a future Administration would not withdraw from an agreement and that Washington should remove its designation of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. That demand, if granted, would give Tehran even more benefits than it received under the original nuclear deal, which only lifted nuclear sanctions.

Meanwhile, Iran has directed its proxy militias in Iraq and Syria to continue their attacks on U.S. troops who are deployed there to support continued operations against ISIS terrorists. Iran-backed Iraqi militias launched a drone strike on November 7, 2021, in a failed effort to assassinate Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi. Iran also launched a missile strike against a Kurdish businessman’s house near the U.S. consulate in northern Iraq on March 20, 2022. Tehran asserted that the businessman had ties to Israeli intelligence and claimed that the attack was a retaliation for previous Israeli attacks. Iran’s shadow war against Israel and the U.S. could explode into open warfare in a future crisis.

Recommendations

Intensify sanctions on Iran until the regime agrees to give up its nuclear weapons ambitions permanently. Rather than return to the flawed JCPOA, Washington should seek a new nuclear agreement that permanently bars Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. At a minimum, this would require banning Iran from uranium enrichment activities; dismantling substantial portions of Iran’s nuclear infrastructure; imposing robust inspections on an “anytime, anywhere” basis and real-time monitoring of Iranian nuclear facilities; linking sanctions relief to Iranian compliance; ensuring that Iran comes fully discloses its past weaponization efforts; and establishing a clear and rapid process for reimposing all sanctions if Iran is caught cheating. To attain a new and more restrictive agreement with Iran, the Biden Administration should return to President Trump’s policy of maximum pressure, stop turning a blind eye to Chinese imports of Iranian oil, and impose sanctions on the Chinese and other companies that are involved in that trade.

Deploy strong U.S. military forces in the region to bolster deterrence against terrorism and an Iranian nuclear breakout. Ultimately, no piece of paper will block an Iranian nuclear breakout. The chief deterrent against Iran’s attaining a nuclear capability is the prospect of a possible U.S. preventive military attack. It is no coincidence that Iran halted many aspects of its nuclear weapons program in 2003 after the U.S. invasion and overthrow of hostile regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq. To strengthen deterrence against an Iranian nuclear breakout, the U.S. needs to rebuild its military strength in the region.

Work with allies to contain and roll back Iranian influence. The Trump Administration embraced America’s traditional role of backing its allies in the Middle East and defending their vital interests against Iran even if that means hurting Europe’s marginal commercial interests in trading with Iran. Preventing a single power

from dominating Persian Gulf oil resources has been a prime goal of U.S. Middle East policy since the Truman Administration. The U.S. must maintain a favorable balance of power in the region to deter and contain Iran. Washington should strengthen security ties with Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that are threatened by Tehran. Washington also should urge European allies to recognize that the JCPOA has effectively collapsed and reimpose nuclear sanctions on Iran. To encourage the regime to change course, the U.S. should lead an international campaign to impose clear and mounting costs on Iran for its hostile policies.

Put a high priority on missile defense. Iran’s ballistic missile force is the largest in the Middle East and poses a growing threat to Tehran’s neighbors. Washington should help Israel to strengthen its missile defenses and help the GCC countries to build an integrated and layered missile defense architecture to blunt the Iranian missile threat. The U.S. should also field missile defense interceptors in space that can intercept Iranian missiles in the boost phase, which would add a valuable additional layer to missile defenses.

Support human rights in Iran. The Obama Administration made a grave error in muting its criticism of Iran’s 2009 crackdown on the opposition Green Movement and Iran’s chronic abuses of human rights. In the long run, a free Iran is the best hope for peace and security in the volatile Middle East. Congress should make it clear that the U.S. stands with the Iranian people, not with the repressive regime of the ayatollahs. It should hold hearings to publicize and condemn Tehran’s violations of human rights, expose the corruption of regime officials, publicize the activities of opposition groups, and help those groups to communicate with the Iranian people.

Facts + Figures

FACT: Iran’s radical Islamist regime sees itself as the vanguard of a global Islamist revolution.

- Since coming to power in the 1979 revolution, Iran’s radical leaders have denounced the United States as the world-devouring “Great Satan” and led chants of “Death to America.”
- The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is the sword and shield of Iran’s Islamist revolution and reports to the Supreme Leader. Iran’s president and legislature have limited powers, and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is the ultimate arbiter of all important issues.

FACT: Iran’s dictatorship is the world’s leading state sponsor of terrorism.

- Tehran has close ties to the Lebanon-based Hezbollah, which it organized and continues to finance, arm, and train. At Iran’s direction, Hezbollah bombed the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, on October 23, 1983, killing 241 U.S. military personnel. Hezbollah also bombed the U.S. embassy in Beirut and seized American hostages in Lebanon that Tehran eventually released in exchange for arms during the Iran–Contra affair.
- The Pentagon assessed in April 2019 that Iranian Revolutionary Guards had provided arms, funding, training, and sophisticated mines to Iraqi militia groups that killed at least 603 U.S. troops in Iraq from 2003 to 2011—about 17 percent of the total deaths of U.S. military personnel in Iraq during that time.
- Tehran also supports a wide variety of Palestinian terrorist groups, including Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine–General Command. Increasingly sophisticated rockets, missiles, and drones transferred to Palestinian terrorist groups by Iran were launched against Israel during the May 2021 Gaza war.
- Iran also has mobilized a Shia “foreign legion” consisting of militia fighters from Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Pakistan that have been deployed in Syria to support Bashar al-Assad’s regime, which is Iran’s closest regional ally.

- Iranian Revolutionary Guards and proxy groups in Syria repeatedly have launched missiles, rockets, and drones to attack Israel, which has responded with hundreds of air strikes against Iranian and proxy forces.

FACT: With the largest ballistic missile arsenal in the Middle East, Iran has the capability to strike U.S. bases in the region as well as Israel, Egypt, Turkey, and a growing number of other U.S. allies.

- Iranian-supported Houthi rebels in Yemen have launched ballistic missiles and armed drones against Saudi and UAE cities, oil facilities, and military forces. Houthi rebels also have launched naval attacks, including remote-controlled boat bombs, against U.S. naval vessels and international shipping in the Red Sea.
- Experts predict that Iran could eventually develop an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capable of reaching the U.S., although it is not known how long this would take.

FACT: The JCPOA did a much better job of dismantling sanctions against Iran than it did of dismantling Iran’s nuclear program.

- The JCPOA amounted to little more than a diplomatic speed bump for the regime in Tehran, which reaped huge economic benefits from sanctions relief in exchange for making temporary and easily reversible nuclear concessions that it can discard when it serves its interests as it has done repeatedly.
- Under the terms of the deal, key restrictions on Iran’s uranium enrichment would begin to sunset after from 10 to 15 years, allowing Iran to ramp up its uranium enrichment to an industrial scale and sprint to a future nuclear breakout. The JCPOA gave Iran access to about \$100 billion in frozen funds and allowed it to boost its oil exports and expand its military spending.
- The Obama Administration handed Iran a better deal on uranium enrichment than previous Administrations gave to such U.S. allies as South Korea, Taiwan, and the UAE, which were denied that option. It was an even better deal than the Shah of Iran—an American ally—received before the Iranian revolution in 1976 from the Ford Administration, which denied his request for an enrichment capability.

FACT: Under the Trump “maximum pressure” strategy, the U.S. increased sanctions to new levels.

- In August 2018, U.S. sanctions on Iran’s automotive sector and trade in gold and other precious metals were reimposed. In November 2018, sanctions on Iran’s energy, shipping, and financial sectors were fully restored at the end of a 180-day period that allowed foreign companies time to close down their operations in Iran.
- On April 8, 2019, the Trump Administration further tightened sanctions by designating Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a foreign terrorist organization. This gave the Administration additional tools for applying sanctions against the Revolutionary Guards and all foreign entities that do business with them, their subsidiaries, and their front companies. The designation enabled U.S. sanctions to hit harder at strategic sectors of Iran’s economy because the Revolutionary Guard is extensively involved in Iran’s oil, construction, and defense industries.
- The Administration followed up a month later by adding sanctions on Iran’s iron, steel, aluminum, and copper industries.
- Since leaving the nuclear deal in May 2018, the U.S. has applied sanctions to more than 1,000 Iranian individuals and entities.
- U.S. secondary sanctions force foreign firms to choose between Iran and the much bigger U.S. market. If they trade with Iran, they are denied commercial opportunities in the U.S. and risk being hit with U.S. legal penalties.

FACT: The Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act of 2015 requires the President to submit any nuclear-related agreement with Iran to Congress for review within five days. Congress then would have the opportunity to reject the agreement and block sanctions relief through a joint resolution of disapproval passed by majorities in the House and the Senate. The law also requires the President to inform Congress every 90 days about whether Iran is complying with the deal and provide a certification that the agreement will prevent Iran’s nuclear program from becoming a security threat, among other stipulations.

Additional Resources

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