

Statement from Nuclear Nonproliferation Specialists in Support of U.S. Reentry into the Iran Nuclear Deal

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The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is an effective, verifiable agreement that successfully addressed a decades-long crisis over Iran's nuclear program and is a net plus for international and U.S. nuclear nonproliferation efforts. This multilateral nuclear deal was unanimously endorsed by the UN Security Council in Resolution 2231, which urges full implementation of the JCPOA and calls upon member states to refrain from actions that undermine the agreement.

When President-elect Joseph Biden takes office on January 20, returning the United States to compliance with its JCPOA obligations alongside Iran must be an urgent priority. Biden wrote in a September 2020 CNN commentary that “[i]f Iran returns to strict compliance with the nuclear deal, the United States would rejoin the agreement as a starting point for follow-on negotiations.” We strongly support this approach.

The negotiation of, unanimous UN Security Council support for, and full implementation of the JCPOA dramatically reduced the risk posed by Iran's nuclear program and advanced the security interests of the United States, its EU3+3 partners, states in the region, and the entire international community. Failure to return to compliance with the nuclear deal increases the likelihood that the JCPOA will collapse, possibly triggering destabilizing nuclear competition in the region and increasing the likelihood of military confrontation. Furthermore, failure to honor the negotiating process, the agreement, and the UN Security Council resolution that endorsed the JCPOA will make it more difficult to reduce the long-term nuclear proliferation risks in the region and beyond.

More than three years of Iran's compliance with the JCPOA from January 2016-May 2019 demonstrated its nonproliferation benefits. Taken together, the array of restrictions on uranium enrichment ensures that Iran's capability to produce enough weapons-grade uranium sufficient for one warhead would be approximately 12 months for a decade or more. The JCPOA also effectively eliminated Iran's ability to produce and separate plutonium for at least 15 years. Just as importantly, the JCPOA mandates unprecedented international monitoring and transparency measures that make it very likely that any possible future effort by Iran to pursue nuclear weapons, even a clandestine program, would be detected promptly.

President Donald Trump's imprudent decision to abandon the JCPOA and reimpose sanctions in May 2018 has jeopardized this critical agreement, isolated the United States from key allies and partners, and undermined international nonproliferation efforts. Following the Trump administration's “maximum pressure” campaign and systematic efforts to deny Iran any benefits to remaining in the JCPOA, Tehran has taken a series of steps to deviate from its obligations under the accord. These developments have raised the prospect of a new war in the region.

Iran's breaches of the deal are concerning. They also appear to be calibrated responses designed to pressure the remaining JCPOA parties to meet their commitments to deliver on the sanctions-

relief agreed to in the accord. Iran's uranium enrichment capacity and its uranium stockpile remain far below the pre-JCPOA levels, and Iran continues to cooperate with the more intrusive verification measures put in place by the accord. Almost all the violations reported to date are reversible.

There is a short window of opportunity following inauguration day for coordinated diplomatic action to fully restore the JCPOA's restrictions on Iran's nuclear program and begin to deliver on the economic and civil nuclear cooperation benefits for Tehran envisioned by the accord.

Attempting to leverage the U.S. sanctions put in place by the Trump administration to pressure Iran to accept additional commitments beyond what was agreed to in the JCPOA as a condition for U.S. return to compliance would be a risky, imprudent strategy. The United States should first ensure full compliance with the JCPOA, and then address new issues beyond the JCPOA through follow-on negotiations.

Returning to the nuclear deal provides the United States and other parties to the JCPOA a solid basis for pursuing follow-on negotiations on a longer-term framework for Iran's nuclear program. It also creates space to address other vital U.S. security interests related to Iran's actions in the region. While critical restrictions and monitoring provisions in the JCPOA are permanent as is Iran's enforceable commitment under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty not to develop a nuclear weapon, limits on uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing activities phase out after about 10-25 years (5-20 years from today). Pursuing a JCPOA follow-on agreement with Iran and/or additional arrangements negotiated at the regional level would address concerns about Iran's nuclear program as restrictions mandated by the JCPOA expire.

Restoration of the JCPOA's nuclear restrictions and its economic benefits for Iran stands the best chance of blocking Iran's potential pathways to nuclear weapons, providing incentive and encouragement not to do so, and creating space for further diplomacy.

We strongly urge the incoming Biden administration to end the Trump administration's failed policy of JCPOA withdrawal that has resulted in Iran advancing its nuclear program and undermined global efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. We urge all JCPOA parties to meet their respective obligations under the terms of the agreement and all states to support full implementation of the accord.

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