



AVOIDING THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS OF A BAD IRAN NUCLEAR DEAL

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The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which the Obama administration and European negotiators naively hoped would curb Iran’s nuclear program, was a catastrophic failure. The Obama administration’s weak-handed negotiations not only failed to halt Iran’s nuclear ambitions, but also paved the way for Iran to become a legitimate nuclear weapons threshold state. Worse, the deal rewarded and fueled the Islamic Republic’s malign behavior with billions of dollars in sanctions relief and lifting arms embargoes. Recognizing these critical flaws, President Trump slammed the JCPOA as “the worst deal ever negotiated” and wisely withdrew from it in 2018, opting instead for a successful “maximum pressure” campaign that severely weakened Iran’s economy and strengthened U.S. leverage for future negotiations.

The Biden administration’s return to Obama-era appeasement has brought Iran closer than ever before to producing a nuclear weapon. Recent International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reports indicate that Iran now possesses a large enough stockpile of 60% highly-enriched uranium to build seven nuclear weapons—a stockpile that doubled over the last four months alone. This rapid progress was enabled by the Biden administration’s policies, which boosted Iran’s accessible foreign exchange reserves from a minuscule \$4 billion at the end of the Trump administration to nearly \$34 billion by the end of Biden’s term. Iran earned over \$100 billion from the export of oil alone when President Biden failed to enforce U.S. sanctions.

Despite such troubling trend lines under the Biden administration, as a result of joint U.S.-Israeli military and other actions in the wake of the October 7 attacks, the Islamic Republic and its proxies now find themselves as weak as ever. Tehran’s air defenses are degraded, Hezbollah and Hamas and their other Iranian proxies are weakened, and the regime has lost a key ally with the fall of Assad in Syria. The Trump administration’s reimposition of maximum pressure and establishment of a credible military threat against the Iranian nuclear program have significantly strengthened America’s negotiating posture. As the United States engages in high-level negotiations with Iranian officials, these key lessons from the JCPOA must be considered to avoid repeating past mistakes.

Lesson #1: Iran Must Not Enrich Uranium at Any Level

The JCPOA allowed Iran to retain all its centrifuges (one-third operational) and enrich uranium to 3.67% (IAEA), two-thirds of the way to weapons grade fuel. This preserved Iran’s ability to ramp up enrichment at any time, which it did under the deal. The JCPOA’s sunset provisions on Iran’s key bomb-making technology ensured that Iran would have an internationally recognized, industrial-scale nuclear program by 2030. A nuclear-armed Iran was not a flaw, but a feature of the JCPOA. Any new agreement must mandate the complete elimination of Iran’s nuclear enrichment and weaponization programs, with no loopholes or sunset provisions that give Iran a patient pathway to a nuclear weapon or the capability to produce and deliver one.

Lesson #2: Do Not Ignore Iran's Missiles

The 2015 JCPOA failed to address the Islamic Republic of Iran's ballistic missile program. Worse, a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution enshrining the JCPOA subjected previously permanent international restrictions on Iranian ballistic missile tests and military transfers to eight- and five-year political timelines, which have now expired. According to U.S. intelligence reports, Iran is home to the largest ballistic missile arsenal and drone inventory in the Middle East. Treating these weapons as tools of conventional deterrence rather than Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)-delivery vehicles ignores their role in Iran's military nuclear program. Washington must prohibit all tests and transfers of these systems and ensure the dismantlement of those meeting and exceeding international standards of being a "nuclear capable" platform.

Lesson #3: Monitoring Must Be Done on American Terms, Not Iranian Terms

The JCPOA's "managed access" framework allowed Iran to evade scrutiny. Military sites went unmonitored by the IAEA, and inspectors were forced to petition Iran's mullahs to visit sensitive sites and wait over two weeks—ample time for Iran to cover its tracks. In 2018, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu revealed the Mossad's discovery of a clandestine Iranian nuclear archive, exposing Iran's illegal dual-use research for nuclear weapons and delivery systems. Iran also hid undeclared nuclear material, activities, and sites. Future agreements must include unambiguous, intrusive verification mechanisms to counter Iran's history of deception.

Lesson #4: American Strength Must Be Leveraged and Cannot Be Surrendered Prematurely

Instead of leveraging American strength, President Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry treated the Islamic Republic as an equal partner. They squandered leverage by conceding Iran's "right to enrich" uranium before negotiations began, a significant departure from the international consensus. This concession emboldened the regime to secure further concessions, including tens of billions of dollars of sanctions relief, the lifting of arms embargoes that restricted the Iranian ballistic missile program, and nothing addressing Iran's support of terrorist proxies. President Trump was right to slam the deal "one-sided" and withdrew in 2018. The United States, with considerable help from Israel, has restored substantial leverage through maximum pressure sanctions, strikes on Iranian proxies, and regional power projection. Negotiators must avoid premature concessions that forfeit this advantage.

Lesson #5: Sanctions Relief Funds Terror

The JCPOA's sanctions relief provided Iran billions in cash, which it swiftly funneled into its vast terror network including Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis. By easing restrictions on Iranian financial institutions, the Obama administration enabled Iran to expand its Axis of Resistance with impunity. The consequences are clear: months after the Biden administration unfroze \$6 billion in a 2023 hostage deal, Tehran-backed Hamas launched its October 7 attack, killing nearly 1,200 Israelis and over 40 Americans while taking hundreds hostage. Sanctions relief without ending the Islamic Republic's support for proxies will fund terrorism that threatens American lives.

Lesson #6: Iran's Other Malign Behaviors Cannot Be Ignored

The JCPOA ignored Iran's ballistic missiles program, support for terrorists, extremists, and regional proxies (such as Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis, the Taliban, and al-Qa'ida), cyberattacks against the United States and Israel, horrific human rights violations, and hostage-taking. This allowed Iran to maintain its nuclear program while expanding other destabilizing activities, including plots to assassinate U.S. citizens, including former officials and President Trump. Negotiations must use U.S. leverage to curb Iran's destructive behaviors and protect Americans.

Lesson #7: No Terrorism Sanctions Relief for Nuclear Concessions

Sanctions targeting Iran's support for terrorism, such as those on the Central Bank of Iran, must not be lifted in exchange for nuclear concessions. These sanctions are critical to curbing Tehran's funding of terrorist proxies like Hamas and Hezbollah, which directly threaten U.S. and allied security. The removal of sanctions on Iran as part of the JCPOA did not empower ordinary Iranians, but rather filled the pockets of corrupt clerics, radical regime officials, and terrorist groups. Trading terrorism-related sanctions for nuclear promises risks empowering the regime's terror network while failing to ensure lasting nuclear compliance, as seen in the JCPOA's failures. Any agreement must keep terrorism sanctions intact to maintain pressure on Iran's malign activities.

Trump's Iran Policy: Stay the Course

In his first term, President Trump abandoned the fatally-flawed JCPOA and its weak policies. From pulling out of the JCPOA to the elimination of Qasem Soleimani, the Trump administration's first term proved that when dealing with the regime in Iran, the use of pressure yields critical results and lessens the likelihood of war. This is why he began his second term by rejecting Biden's approach and restoring his "maximum pressure" campaign, backed by a strong show of force in the Middle East. As negotiations proceed, President Trump must not abandon the tough, principled approach guided by these seven lessons and reflected in his first term.