

POLICY MEMO

Seven Myths about the Iran Nuclear Deal

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In 2015, President Barack Obama worked with three European powers, the European Union, Iran, China, and Russia to conclude the Iran nuclear deal, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). In 2018, President Donald Trump formally withdrew the United States from the deal. Instituting his policy of “maximum pressure,” Trump imposed crippling economic sanctions that punished Iran not just for its ongoing nuclear weapons program but also for, among other things, its regional aggression and support for terrorism worldwide.

Earlier in 2018, Israeli agents conducted a dramatic operation in Tehran, breaking into a secret warehouse and capturing a trove of Iranian nuclear files. These documents revealed a more advanced and comprehensive nuclear weapons program than had been previously known. The nuclear archive also showed Iranian officials’ plan for concealing nuclear weapons efforts under the guise of civilian research and development, and how Iranian officials systematically deceived the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

As a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Iran is required to cooperate with IAEA inspectors to verify the peaceful nature of its program. After the Israelis shared the nuclear archive with the IAEA, its inspectors found traces of uranium at several undeclared sites. Despite being obligated to do so, Tehran has refused to explain the presence of the uranium or reveal its current location. Iran’s requirements under the NPT are wholly separate from the JCPOA, but Tehran is using the Biden administration’s profound desire to return to the nuclear deal to bring political pressure on the IAEA to close the book on Iran’s violations.

A fair-minded observer of Iran’s relations with the IAEA cannot but conclude that Tehran has never wavered from its intention to build a nuclear weapons capability and that its publicly declared “civilian” nuclear activities are an effort to hide its nuclear bomb program in plain sight. From the very inception of the JCPOA, however, the deal’s supporters have spun myths that disguise these self-evident truths. After Trump left the deal, those same supporters continued

to recite the old myths while adding some new ones about the purported comparative advantage of the JCPOA over maximum pressure.

As President Biden prepares to bring the United States back into the JCPOA, and as the public, the press, and Congress consider the deal's terms, we identify the seven most pernicious myths and explain the reality that they seek to conceal.

Myth 1: “The JCPOA was working.”

Reality: The Iran deal allows Tehran to keep and expand a massive nuclear infrastructure it built solely for developing nuclear weapons.

The JCPOA:

- Permits Iran to maintain and expand nuclear facilities and capabilities that are unnecessary for producing peaceful nuclear energy.
- Gives Iran access to hundreds of billions of dollars that was previously subject to sanctions. As a result, Iran's defense budget jumped by more than 30 percent in the years immediately after the deal's conclusion. Iranian support for terrorist organizations, including Hamas and Hezbollah, also grew.
- Already lifted the UN arms embargo on Iran in 2020 and is scheduled to lift the missile embargo in 2023.
- Sparked a Middle Eastern nuclear arms race, as Iran's neighbors began pursuing the same nuclear capabilities the deal promises Iran.

Myth 2: “Returning to the JCPOA will block Iran's paths to a nuclear weapon.”

Reality: The JCPOA ensures that Iran will have critical capabilities that it needs to make nuclear weapons, in accordance with longstanding plans it has developed and continues to revise.

After the United States left the JCPOA in 2018, Iran violated its terms in multiple ways—such as by enriching uranium to 60 percent purity, stockpiling tons of enriched uranium, and experimenting with uranium metallurgy. These violations have two things in common: (1) they have no plausible purpose other than for the development of nuclear weapons; and (2) the nuclear infrastructure guaranteed by the JCPOA is what made them possible. Iran is now within weeks of having enough fissile material for five nuclear devices.

In sum, the speed and ease with which Iran could violate the deal's terms at a time of its choosing prove that the deal never blocked its paths to a nuclear weapon.

Myth 3: “President Trump's decision to leave the deal and pursue his maximum pressure policy prompted Iran to increase uranium enrichment levels.”

Reality: Iran did not resume 20 percent enrichment until after President Trump lost the 2020 presidential election. Iran's nuclear violations and other escalatory steps toward the United States are not retaliation against Trump; they are negotiating tactics against Biden.

Iran resumed enriching uranium to 20 percent in January 2021, by which time then President-elect Biden had clearly indicated that he would abandon the Trump administration's maximum pressure policy and would seek a speedy return

to the JCPOA framework. While the Biden administration consistently tried to conciliate Iran, Tehran increased enrichment further to 60 percent. During that time its proxies attacked American troops in Syria; its agents attempted to kidnap journalist Masih Alinejad on American soil with the intention, almost certainly, of killing her; and its Qods Force conducted plots to kill former American officials, including, among others, former National Security Advisor John Bolton and Hudson Distinguished Fellow and former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Iran is an aggressive power that seeks to undermine the American-led order in the Middle East. A credible military deterrent backed by strong economic and diplomatic pressure is the only way to moderate its behavior. Conciliation from Washington breeds contempt in Tehran.

Myth 4: “Israel’s security establishment overwhelmingly supports US participation in the Iran Deal.”

Reality: The political leadership, security experts, and the general public in Israel all see the JCPOA as dangerous and strongly oppose it.

Successive Israeli governments, with very different political complexions, have unequivocally opposed the JCPOA and believe that returning to it is worse than having no deal. Prime Minister Yair Lapid recently reiterated, “In our eyes, [the deal] does not meet the standards set by President Biden himself: preventing Iran from becoming a nuclear state.” He went on to say, “Israel is not against any agreement. We are against this agreement, because it is a bad one.”

Israel is a democracy in which diverse opinions and assessments abound. Deal supporters routinely cherry-pick the views of some unelected Israeli security experts to bolster

their case. These experts are the exceptions who prove the rule. On August 31, 2022, an organization representing 5,000 senior Israeli security officials sent a letter to President Biden rejecting the nuclear deal as “catastrophic” and stating that “a credible military threat in combination with crippling economic sanctions and the political resolve to act militarily, if necessary, is the most effective manner to address the Iranian threat.”

Myth 5: “The JCPOA does not expire.”

Reality: All meaningful restrictions that the JCPOA imposes on Iran expire quickly.

By January 2031, the JCPOA permits Iran to enrich uranium without limitation. The regime will do so using advanced centrifuges in underground facilities that it previously hid from the IAEA, in violation of its obligations under the NPT. Iran will then be able to enrich enough uranium for an arsenal of nuclear weapons in a matter of days. As President Obama put it in a moment of candor, by around 2028 Iran will “have advanced centrifuges that can enrich uranium fairly rapidly, and at that time the breakout times would have shrunk almost down to zero.”

In 2023, the terms of the JCPOA will lift the UN missile embargo on Iran. In 2025, the JCPOA’s snapback mechanism will expire. The snapback allows the United States or any of its negotiating partners to reimpose binding UN sanctions and restrictions on Iran’s nuclear program if Iran fails to meet its obligations. Its expiration will effectively remove the main source of international, non-military pressure on the regime.

While arguing that Iran’s nuclear program will remain limited after 2031 and will still be subject to international oversight, deal advocates have frequently pointed to the restrictions that the NPT imposes, conveniently ignoring the fact that Iran is a serial and brazen violator of the NPT.



Myth 6: “The IAEA repeatedly affirmed that it saw no violations of the deal by Iran prior to Trump’s withdrawal from the JCPOA.”

Reality: Iran blindfolded the IAEA by strictly limiting where it can inspect.

Iran’s violations of its obligations under both the JCPOA and the NPT are well documented. They include the assembly and concealment of the nuclear archive and the possession of undeclared, unexplained nuclear materials. Many of these violations have taken place in locations that Iran concealed from the IAEA, attempted to sanitize before inspection, or prevented the IAEA from inspecting altogether. The IAEA cannot document violations in places it cannot see or access.

Before, during, and after Iran’s “compliance” with the JCPOA, the IAEA reported that, because of Tehran’s refusal to cooperate regarding undeclared nuclear activities and materials, the agency cannot provide assurances that the Iranian nuclear program is peaceful.

Myth 7: “A majority of Americans—including Jewish Americans, Democratic voters, independents, and even most Republicans—support reviving the Iran Deal.”

Reality: Americans overwhelmingly reject the deal.

Deal advocates have always relied on deception and overstatement to sell the JCPOA. They continue to do so in survey wording as part of an effort to create an artificial impression of public support. Support appears when survey questions misrepresent the JCPOA. For example, a frequently cited recent survey asked respondents about “a renewed nuclear deal with Iran which would prevent the expansion of Iran’s nuclear program.” The JCPOA, however, explicitly allows the expansion of Iran’s nuclear program. The pollsters are asking if the public supports an imaginary deal that does the exact opposite of what the JCPOA’s terms allow or forbid. When a survey presents the terms of the JCPOA factually, the American people resoundingly reject them, as they did in 2015.



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