

# The right question to ask about the Iran nuclear deal

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**Correction:** An earlier version of this op-ed misstated the cap on Iran's heavy-water stockpile under the nuclear deal. It is 130 metric tons. This version has been updated.

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By **David Ignatius** Opinion writer September 14

The Trump administration, already struggling with a big nuclear problem in [North Korea](#), is about to raise another one by questioning the implementation of the [nuclear agreement with Iran](#).

A senior administration official said that President Trump will share his concerns about [Iranian compliance](#) with global leaders gathering next week for the U.N. General Assembly. The official said Trump wants tighter inspection of Iranian facilities and a reexamination of the “sunset clause” that would allow Iran to resume aspects of its nuclear program in 10 to 15 years.

Trump isn't proposing to reopen negotiations but instead is threatening to scuttle the deal altogether if Iran doesn't offer concessions. “He's willing to leave the agreement if we don't . . . fix the deal,” the official said. “He's willing to cut bait and walk away.”

Trump's position reflects his [oft-stated view](#) that the Iran nuclear pact is “the worst deal ever negotiated.” He has levied this attack without discussing whether U.S. interests would be served by scrapping one of the few successful counterproliferation agreements that exist .

An American rebuff to Iran, for example, would undermine whatever slim hope exists for negotiating a denuclearization agreement with North Korea. And despite White House talk of seeking a “united front” among allies, there's no sign of support among European nations, even those critical of Iranian behavior, such as France. [President Emmanuel Macron](#) said last month that while he's concerned about Iran's post-2025 status, “the 2015 agreement is what enables us to establish a constructive and demanding dialogue with Iran.”

Trump's apparent hope that Iran will offer unilateral concessions is questioned by Iran experts. “I don't believe Tehran would be ready at all to renegotiate the deal,” said Seyed Hossein Mousavian, a former Iranian official who now teaches at Princeton

University but remains in touch with his ex-colleagues. He called the idea a “nonstarter.”

Olli Heinonen, a former senior official at the International Atomic Energy Agency, said in an interview that the administration’s arguments for better Iranian compliance have some merit.

Heinonen argued, for example, that it is a “valid question” whether Tehran is abiding by the cap on its heavy-water stockpile of 130 metric tons when it allegedly still owns many tons more that have been shipped to Oman and stored there, awaiting buyers. He also said it is “legitimate” to question whether Iran is allowing full inspection of all potential nuclear-related facilities. And he agreed that the sunset provision should be “revisited,” rather than “just kicking the can down the road.”

Trump’s push for concessions on the nuclear agreement is accompanied by sharp criticism of Iranian behavior in regional conflicts. The senior administration official listed a string of what he termed Tehran’s “destabilizing” actions through proxies. He charged that Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen have threatened navigation in the Bab al-Mandab Strait with mines and missiles, and that they are installing ballistic missiles in Yemen that could target Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

The administration official also charged that Iran is building precision-guided missiles in Syria that could be used against Israel; sending Iraqi Shiite militias into eastern Syria to aid the regime there; and providing deadly “explosively formed penetrators,” or EFPs, to Shiite rebels in Bahrain. This last is an especially emotional issue for U.S. commanders because Iran-supplied EFPs killed many American soldiers in Iraq.

A second administration official provided links to 25 media reports to back up the first official’s allegations about Iranian behavior. Some of these appeared in Arab media outlets that are strongly anti-Iran; they couldn’t be confirmed independently.

The Trump administration’s dossier about Iranian activity is part of a new, get-tough strategy for dealing with Tehran, the first official said. Trump reviewed this approach with his advisers last Friday. He will make a final decision soon about Iran policies, including whether to recertify in October that Iran is complying with the nuclear agreement.

Bill Burns, who as deputy secretary of state helped launch the secret diplomacy that led to the Iran agreement, was blunt about what Trump may be setting in motion. “If we don’t certify the agreement, that will be perceived — rightly — as us beginning to walk away from it. That will put us in a weaker, not a stronger, position” in dealing with Iranian behavior.

The right question to ask is the same one as when the deal was being negotiated: Does this agreement, with all its flaws, make the United States and its allies safer than they would be with no agreement? This security metric, it seems to me, still favors keeping the deal.

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