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 BLOG POST

An Iranian Nuclear Business Deal for Trump

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The Trump White House seeks to alter the Iran nuclear deal—formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—in three major **ways**: making permanent the JCPOA’s confidence-building measures on Iran’s nuclear program, preventing Iran from developing its civilian centrifuge program, and halting Iran’s ballistic missile program. Trump’s approach echoes Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s **call** at the U.N. General Assembly in September to “change it, or cancel it; fix it, or nix it”

with respect to the JCPOA. The Cotton–Corker bill circulating in the Senate is in **line** with advancing these aims—any of which would constitute an express violation of the deal. However, while the professed concern of the White House is the nature of the Iranian nuclear program after the JCPOA, the real core objective—which Trump has **openly** signaled—is to collapse the deal and pursue all-out confrontation with Iran across the region.

The White House should realize its three aims with respect to the JCPOA are impossible, foremost because the deal is a multilateral agreement backed by a UN Security Council resolution. Furthermore, each of the three objectives are illogical and counter to international laws and norms. With respect to the expiration of the JCPOA’s major provisions on Iran, the last of which “sunsets” in roughly 25 years, it is important to note that **no** other country has agreed to the provisions outlined in the JCPOA—which go beyond and are vastly more stringent than the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT). Making these provisions permanent would be akin to creating a new NPT just for Iran, a discriminatory and inherently humiliating demand that Iran would never accept.



Iran's Bushehr Nuclear Plant. Image courtesy of Tasnim News.

Likewise, preventing Iran from developing more advanced centrifuges is a futile endeavor. Iran’s current centrifuges are based on 50-year-old technology and their use for fuel production purposes—their core *raison d’être* for Iran’s uranium enrichment program—is economically infeasible. Additionally, for Iran to develop centrifuges for fuel production is its right under **Article IV** of the NPT, which entitles all signatory states access to peaceful nuclear technologies without discrimination.

Moreover, any endeavor to restrict Iran’s defensive capabilities, such as its ballistic missile program, is also wholly unrealistic. This is for seven principle reasons: First, during the 1980s Iran was a victim of a war of aggression by Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, in which the major global and regional powers **provided**

support to Hussein, including aiding and **abetting** his use of chemical weapons and thousands of ballistic missiles against Iran.

Second, the United States and other global powers on one hand **sell** hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of the most destructive military equipment to Iran's neighbors and on the other hand maintain a conventional arms **embargo** on Iran.

Third, the United States and Israel still **maintain** the option of military strikes on Iran, which regional states such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia have long **pushed for** behind the scenes.

Fourth, Iran's defense budget is far less than the regional and global states that routinely frame it as being an aggressive country. Iran's roughly \$15 billion defense budget is **one-fifth** of Saudi Arabia's military spending, and a pittance in comparison with the United States' **\$700 billion defense budget**.

Fifth, Iran is situated in an unstable region and some of the world's leading crises, whether in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Syria directly threaten its national security.

Sixth, Iran faces a serious threat from ISIS, Al Qaeda, and other Wahhabi-Salafist terrorist groups, which have launched attacks **inside** Iran.

Finally, Iran's military capabilities are defensive in nature and designed to deter foreign attack, as has been acknowledged by the **Pentagon**. Any U.S. insistence on weakening Iran's military capabilities signals a desire to make Iran an easier target, should the United States decide to attack. Consequently, Iran naturally views the preservation of its military capabilities as critical to maintaining its security, territorial integrity, and independence and will never put them up for negotiation.

Trump's three-pronged objectives over the JCPOA are destined to fail. However, a potential alternative exists for him on the deal and Iran. Given that mistrust between the United States and Iran are at a peak, it is imperative for steps to be taken that build trust between the two sides. The JCPOA is the first agreement that was borne out of multilateral and high-level direct U.S.-Iran negotiations. As such, the full and faithful implementation of the JCPOA is the prerequisite for developing trust. Thus far, Iran has abided by all its obligations under the deal and the United States has **not**.

If the Trump administration's concern is that after the JCPOA's major limitations expire by 2040, there is a possibility that Iran will move towards developing nuclear weapons, undermining the JCPOA is illogical, as this will end the JCPOA's stipulations today and not 2040. Instead, the Trump White House can view the long-term duration of the JCPOA as a way to gain confidence over the nature of Iran's nuclear program. The best way to do this is to pursue nuclear cooperation with Iran.

Before the 1979 Iranian revolution, scientists and engineers from the United States and Iran **worked together** in health care, energy, technology and security with mutual respect. Since the revolution, Iran has not opposed continuing such collaboration and has expressed interest in nuclear cooperation with the United States. After the deal, the United States has once already **purchased** heavy water from Iran.

It is logical that the two nations again work together to cooperate on peaceful nuclear projects. Such nuclear and technological collaboration would go a long distance in building trust and confidence between them. Iran already has major joint nuclear projects with Russia. However, if Iran collaborates with the United States in the nuclear field, this would be the best assurance regarding the civilian nature of the Iranian nuclear program. There is a precedence here as well: the United States is the other major nuclear state with a history of nuclear cooperation with Iran, including Republican President Gerald Ford's 1974 offer to **sell** nuclear power plants to Iran

As the world's largest nuclear facilities operators, U.S. corporations understand all aspects of nuclear programs. Employing those same corporations to partner and collaborate with Iran on nuclear projects would be a major confidence-building step that would secure trust between the two sides after the sunset provisions of the deal expire.

The people of Iran and the United States have never been enemies. Now is the time to seek a legitimate business-based compromise that can allow the United States and Iran to fully execute the JCPOA in full compliance with both the substance and intent of each of the deal's signatories while pursuing the long-term goal of eliminating the growth and proliferation of nuclear weapons and nuclear terrorism. To this end, Iran and the US can in parallel collaborate on eliminating the risk of proliferation in the region and establishing a Middle East free from all weapons of mass destruction.

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