

# How Iran Sees Its Standoff With the United States

## And What Trump Should Do to Solve the Problem He Created

By [Seyed Hossein Mousavian](#)

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A woman walking in Tehran, Iran, July 2019

Wana News Agency / Reuters

**M**y old mother is very ill, and so I have spent the last couple of weeks with her in Iran. My stay here has afforded me the opportunity to closely follow both public and official opinion during a time of rising tensions between the United States and Iran.

“What will happen to the nuclear agreement?” ordinary people have asked me. “Why did the United States violate the deal, even though Iran remained faithful to it?”

Iran’s economic situation has deteriorated since the U.S. administration of President Donald Trump reimposed sanctions after withdrawing from the deal. Government dysfunctions are partly responsible for the malaise, but Iranians nevertheless blame the United States for it. They do so because they are convinced that the party that did not

keep its end of the nuclear bargain was the Trump administration, not the government of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani.

Washington's reversal on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the nuclear deal is known, has turned Iranian citizens' distrust on the United States and presented Iranian officials with stark, unwanted choices. The result of 12 years of intensive negotiations between Iran and six world powers, the JCPOA was designed to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon through intrusive inspections that would provide a level of transparency [unparalleled](#) in the history of nonproliferation. Over the past two years, the UN's nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), issued 15 reports confirming Iran's full compliance with the terms and conditions of the [JCPOA](#).

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What did the United States do in return? Not only it did not fulfill its commitments to lift nuclear related sanctions and facilitate normal business with Iran but it withdrew from the deal and rewarded Iran's goodwill by imposing stringent new economic sanctions and unleashing a torrent of hostile rhetoric. In this manner, the United States responded to Iran's flexibility and cooperation with a "[maximum pressure](#)" campaign: U.S. sanctions on Iran are more comprehensive even than those on North Korea, which withdrew from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003. To the grave disappointment of the Iranian people and government, Europe has proved too [inept](#) and spineless to mitigate the effect of U.S. withdrawal by honoring its commitments under the JCPOA.

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**NO MORE "CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT"**

The experience of the last three years has been a bitter one for those Iranians who had

invested their hopes not only in the nuclear deal but in improving relations with the West and complying with international nuclear nonproliferation regimes.

As a consequence of recent developments, Iranian officials have started to entertain the idea of a [gradual](#) withdrawal from the JCPOA. The public has also grown receptive to this option, since the economic benefits of the agreement were abruptly cut short when the Trump administration unilaterally withdrew. More broadly, Iranian officials are calling into question the [strategy](#) of “constructive engagement and cooperation” with the West. Policymakers in Iran now see advantage in cultivating [alliances](#) with the economic and political powers of the East, such as China and Russia, instead. Public opinion, which for the last century had favored strengthening political and economic ties with Western powers, also now [looks favorably](#) on a [shift](#) toward the [East](#).

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## **The Iranian public mood largely reflects the official one.**

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Moreover, Iran sees increasingly little benefit to remaining a signatory to the NPT. Iranian policymakers predict that if Iran withdraws from the JCPOA, the United States will accuse it of violating the NPT in order to get Europe’s support in [referring](#) Iran’s nuclear file to the Security Council. For the first time since it became a signatory in 1970, Iran is now seriously [considering](#) withdrawing from the NPT. The more transparency Iran has shown, the country’s officials feel, the more economic sanctions it has received. Hence, for Iran, compliance with the NPT yields no economic or political benefit—just pressure and penalties.

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The Iranian public mood largely reflects the official one on this issue. The double standards

on nuclear proliferation are visible even to ordinary people in Iran, and Iranians resent them. One common complaint is that Benjamin Netanyahu, whose country possesses hundreds of nuclear warheads and is not a member of NPT, has become the Middle East's nuclear police, directing false allegations against Iran, which is a member of NPT and does not have a nuclear bomb. Many Iranians feel that the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia have [banded together](#) not only to confront Iran but to change its regime.

The United States has further undermined its standing with Iranians by designating Iran's elite Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization. From 1980 to 1988, members of many Iranian households volunteered with the Basij and the IRGC to defend their country against an outright war of aggression initiated by Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Among these young men are highly regarded martyrs, whose portraits are painted in murals all over Iranian cities. Many are wounded veterans. My own brother and two cousins lost their lives safeguarding Iran's territorial integrity in that war.

For these reasons and others, many Iranians see Trump's policies and actions not only as hostile to the interests of the Iranian government but as an assault on the integrity of the country itself. I personally witnessed Iranians cheering when the IRGC shot down the U.S. drone from Iranian airspace over the [Strait of Hormuz](#).

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## **A REGIONAL SOLUTION**

With little hope remaining that the JCPOA can be salvaged, and still less that Israel will ever agree to an entirely denuclearized Middle East, the maximum pressure policy of the United States and Israel practically pushes Iran to consider a policy of nuclear deterrence by balancing its capabilities against Israel's. In this magazine in 2012, the American political scientist Kenneth Waltz even gave credence to such a strategy, suggesting that a nuclear-armed Iran would "probably be the best possible result: the one most likely to restore stability to the [Middle East](#)," because it will create an equilibrium of power in the

region.

But one major obstacle stands in the way of a nuclear-armed Iran: in 2003, the country's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, publicly issued a fatwa, or religious ruling, that prohibits the possession and accumulation of nuclear [weapons](#). Other Shiite jurists have issued similar fatwas. Even if Iran withdraws from the JCPOA and NPT, Ayatollah Khamenei's fatwa will prevent the country from obtaining nuclear weapons. Whether the supreme leader would reconsider his ruling if Iran were attacked remains unclear.

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**If the United States is serious about nonproliferation, it should work with Iran, the other countries in the Middle East, and the world powers to regionalize the principles of the JCPOA.**

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At the moment, Iran is countering the threat the United States and its allies pose with a posture of "[resistance](#)." And the Trump administration's unremitting hostility leads Iran's state managers and its public to see Iran's resistance to U.S. pressure as legitimate. The United States and its allies are [waging](#) war on Iran's economy, politics, and security, Ayatollah Khamenei has announced. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [said](#) in June that the United States is "considering a full range of options," including military options, to address rising tensions with Iran. In response, the Iranian military establishment, too, is preparing for all eventualities, including by organizing "resistance units" all across the Middle East and Africa to confront the United States.

For all that, a negotiated solution is still possible. Leaders of countries such as Japan and France are working toward [finding](#) one. But Iran cannot simply trust their promises. Too many promises have been made and broken. Iran would need to see tangible evidence of good faith. If Trump seeks a diplomatic solution to the crisis his administration

unnecessarily caused, for example, he can hardly expect to achieve one without a change in his hawkish team of national security advisers. Additionally, Washington must call a cease-fire to the economic, political, and cyber war that it is waging against Iran.

Trump has said repeatedly that he wants to negotiate with Iran in order to prevent it from obtaining a nuclear weapon. Building from Ayatollah Khamenei's fatwa, a comprehensive agreement could be reached that would apply to the entire Middle East, forbidding all of the region's countries from producing, stockpiling, or using nuclear weapons and all other [weapons](#) of mass destruction, including chemical and biological ones. If the United States is serious about nonproliferation, it should work with Iran, the other countries in the Middle East, and the world powers to regionalize the principles of the JCPOA, which include intrusive transparency measures and broad limits insuring that nuclear material not be diverted toward weaponization. A denuclearized Middle East would be a great, historic legacy—one that is only achievable if the United States abides by the terms and conditions of the JCPOA. 🌐

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