

# Iran Nuclear Deal: A Testimony Against Strategic Coercion

Amna Bibi<sup>i</sup>

## Abstract

Since it came under international scrutiny in 2003, the Iranian nuclear program has been seen as one of the most serious threats to international peace and security. World powers have used a variety of strategies to bring Iranian nuclear activities under control and in compliance with the provisions of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Safeguards over the course of nearly two decades. From threats of military action to a spectrum of economic sanctions ranging from minor to practically crippling financial sanctions, political, and diplomatic isolation have been applied. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that was signed (in 2015) after twelve years of unstable relations, coercive sanctions, and turbulent negotiations, was the first significant breakthrough towards a denuclearized Iran and its normalization of relations with the rest of the world. JCPOA provided a robust verification framework and transparency in Iranian nuclear activities for the first time since 2003. Signing of JCPOA was possible because the dominant US foreign policy approach had shifted from realism to liberal institutionalism<sup>1</sup>. Subsequently the US foreign policy reverted to essentially a realist outlook under the Republicans. Trump administration's withdrawal from the treaty in 2018, was in the spirit of demanding more out of the treaty. It was done by re-imposing the crippling sanctions which essentially reversed the progress made until JCPOA was signed. It made Iran to retaliate by incrementally violate the provisions of the agreed deal, IAEA protocols and advancing the research and development of nuclear material. This paper delves deeper into the merits and efficacy of the agreement, analyses the factors that played a role in its derailment, and discusses the relative efficacy of diplomacy—a liberal institutional approach as opposed to strategic coercion.

## Keywords

Iran Nuclear Deal, JCPOA, Strategic Coercion, Diplomacy, Uranium Enrichment, Peace and Security, IAEA.

## Introduction

The current Iranian nuclear program was started by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1984. Since then, Iran has developed a large number of nuclear

---

<sup>i</sup> Amna Bibi is a recent graduate of Strategic Studies from the National Defense University, Islamabad.

installations with complete and advanced nuclear fuel cycle capabilities. IAEA found Iran non-compliant to the IAEA Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement in 2003. Being party to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) since 1970, Iran was subjected to severe international economic sanctions by the US, European Union, and the UN in 2005. With its swiftly developing capabilities, Iran's nuclear reactors could eventually be used for weapon-grade enrichment of Uranium, which became the main source of international criticism and scrutiny. At its peak, Iran possessed 20,000 gas centrifuges at three nuclear facilities in 2015 before JCPOA came into effect. This marked the first major breakthrough in the multilateral negotiations on the issue since 2003. Nevertheless, the United States, the principal participant in the accord, withdrew from the deal in 2018, resulting in the collapse of the previously agreed-upon framework. An internationally coordinated effort to re-instate the deal however started right after the collapse, which has yet to bear fruit.

The multilateral negotiations between P4+EU and Iran have not made much headway since June, 2021. After completing 6 sessions of preliminary talks in Vienna, to which the US has been participating indirectly, with the EU acting as the intermediary, the negotiations were stalled when the talks were suspended in the wake of the Iranian Presidential elections in July. Elections in Iran put in power a hard-liner conservative government led by former Chief Justice Ebrahim Raisi, replacing the moderate President Hassan Rouhani. In his inaugural address Ebrahim Raisi iterated his intention to only join the nuclear negotiations if the US lifted all the sanctions that were imposed after its unilateral withdrawal from JCPOA.

President Raisi's foreign policy focuses on strengthening bilateral diplomatic relations with regional nations and shifting the focus away from the US sanctions. He also showed appreciation for negotiations on the revival of the JCPOA, if it guarantee Iranian national interest. In his first UNGA speech on September 21, 2021 he criticized the US' unilateral withdrawal from the agreed framework of the deal, and spoke of distrust on the US among the Iranian people, caused by the unilateral withdrawal from the treaty. The Spokesperson of the Iranian Foreign Ministry, Saeed Khatibzadeh however, affirmed Iran's return to the Vienna talks in a matter of weeks, after the new Raisi administration had coordinated with other members and prepared an initial agenda<sup>2</sup>. The Biden

administration too has been proposing a mutual compliance framework, according to which the US is prepared to return to full compliance if Iran does the same.

A shifting interest towards regional ties, on Iran's part, not only indicates the erosion of trust in the US but also a manifestation of 'resistance' against the 'US tyranny', and developing economy by relying on internal resources and regional trade. This has come in the wake of March 2021 strategic agreement worth \$400 billion in investments, encompassing security, economy and trade, signed between Iran and China. The agreement spans over a period of 25 years, thus loosening the stranglehold of the US over Iranian economy<sup>3</sup>. In a bid to strengthen ties with states in the region Raisi's administration has been keenly striving to improve security and commercial ties with Russia. Iran is seeking a "big jump in relations" with Russia, as well as its cooperation in JCPOA's revival framework, according to the Iranian foreign minister who visited Moscow in October 2021<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, regional nexus between Iran and Russia is indispensable as both share a strategic alliance in the Caucasus, and play a cooperative role in the Central Asian region. They are also military allies in conflicts in Syria and Iraq.

On the other hand, US has been able to garner little support over its withdrawal from the JCPOA from the international community. It became evident from the defeat of the resolution, to extend the sanctions under JCPOA presented by the US at UNSC in August, 2020.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, Iran's incremental contravention of JCPOA restrictions is a matter of concern for the international community, fearing rapid escalation of conflict between the US and Iran, as well as Israel. On the sidelines of 1 November, 2021, G-20 summit, the leaders of EU3+US released a joint statement calling upon President Raisi to return to the JCPOA negotiations in good faith, in order to "*avoid a dangerous escalation, which is not in any country's interest*"<sup>6</sup>. Prior to this in August 2021, in a meeting with the Israeli PM, Bennet Naftali, US President Joe Biden affirmed the US' commitment to keep Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. He also underscored the possibility of resorting to severe coercive measures, given that the diplomatic efforts between the parties failed to reach any agreeable conclusion<sup>7</sup>. However, based on the history of coercive approaches before and after the JCPOA, it cannot be said with certainty that reverting to coercive measures would impel Iran's compliance.

## **Strategic Coercion**

Coercive strategy or strategic coercion refers to compelling or inducing an adversary to take the desired action, or roll back an action or actions already taken, either through 'brute force' or other political means. Thomas Schelling, well known American economist first came up with the idea of "diplomacy of violence", through which a state's behavior is manipulated using military and political means in conjunction, to coerce compel or deter. The proponents of coercive measures against Iran justify it on the strength of coercion theory of Second Order Change, given by Joseph Engelbrecht. This theory argues that coercive measures can be used to create difficult situations for the targeted nations in unrelated domains, inducing a paradigm shift, which inevitably favors the desired outcome<sup>8</sup>. In case of Iran, the second order change is attributed to the election of Hassan Rouhani, a moderate, as Iran's president in 2013, succeeding the hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The economic sanctions, and diplomatic isolation imposed on Iran between 2005 and 2010 through UNSC resolutions 1737, 1747, and 1803 which were confined to nuclear sanctions, and the sweeping resolution 1929 encompassed trade, economy, finance and diplomacy. These sanctions instigated severe socio-economic crisis, leading to public unrest, and a shift in public opinion in support of Hassan Rouhani's moderate and pragmatist approach towards the nuclear issue. This eventually opened the doors of opportunity for P5+1 to successfully negotiate JCPOA.

However, it is pertinent to mention that despite a transition to a moderate regime, the core principles of Iranian security strategy remained unchanged. It is evident from the fact that Iran continued to strictly confine the negotiations to the nuclear issue, while shutting the doors to any talks related to its Ballistic Missile Program, and its involvement in the regional security environment. Thus a second order change of regime in this scenario, does not translate into a major change in the general underpinnings of Iranian objectives.

Investigations following IAEA's detection of Iranian clandestine nuclear program in 2003 for the first time, categorically concluded that Iran had never actually attempted to develop nuclear weapons, and its activities were only restricted to enhancing the developmental capabilities. Some critics also argue that the abandonment of contracts on the transfer of

peaceful nuclear technology and establishment of reactors by the international community under the pressure of US, after 1979 Iranian revolution forced Iran to initiate and develop its indigenous nuclear program by using covert means. Iran was legitimately entitled, under the provisions of NPT, to continue its nuclear program for peaceful purposes.

## **Institutionalism**

Institutionalism<sup>9</sup> on the other hand, refers to the pluralist, liberal ideas of cooperation, achieved through the establishment of multilateral institutions governed by agreed norms, rules and regulations, which may or may not be formally codified in law<sup>10</sup>. Institutions act as focal points for coordination; provide information channels, facilitate the general reciprocity between the parties, and lend credibility to commitments. It is through these attributes, that proponents of institutionalism claim that institutions, in effect, influence the behavior of states. Recognizing that the international system is anarchic; lacking hierarchal authority in its government, and constituted by rational 'egoistic' actors (states). Institutionalism finds its roots in significance of the common interests of these actors. The cooperation that results thus, depends upon two main variables; the power gradient between the parties, and the nature of interests. In the words of Robert O. Keohane, institutions are "*utilitarian and rationalistic*<sup>11</sup>", instructed by the realist objectives of the individual actors, where "*Institutionalist theory shows under what conditions realist propositions are valid*<sup>12</sup>" – absorbing realism into its general framework. Institutionalism in this sense, puts realism under regulation. The efficacy of regulations, however, varies with the dynamics of power and interests. The power disparity inherent in the JCPOA, became apparent with Trump's withdrawal from the agreement, as the interests diverged with the change of administration in the US. It is in such scenarios, that realism overcomes the overarching regulatory framework.

However, looking at the other side of the picture, whether realism overbear the institutional regulations on Iran, it is perfectly logical for Iran to build nuclear weapons against security threats and ensure its survival in an anarchic international world. Going by the principles of realism, a nuclear armed Iran would bring in balance of power in the Middle Eastern region, against the de-facto nuclear armed Israel,

resulting in regional stability – A proposition that is unacceptable to the US.

Here, institutionalism provides a middle ground, opposing further proliferation of nuclear weapons under the general provisions of the nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, but promoting a peaceful pluralistic cooperation between the opposing parties over mutually agreeable interests. Changing the lens through which the conflicting parties see each other: from power competition (realism) to achieving mutually beneficial absolute gains through cooperation (institutionalism) would however be pre-requisite for such an approach. In an anarchic world where ‘information’ is crucial in maintaining security; and averting war has become the chief purpose of strategy as asserted by Bernard Brodie<sup>13</sup>, communication channels and confidence building become pillars of stability, and institutions become highly relevant.

### **What is JCPOA**

The Iranian clandestine nuclear program came under international focus in 2003, and with that the arduous process of multilateral negotiations aimed at bringing Iran into compliance with IAEA nuclear safeguards also began. It finally came to a conclusion in July 2015, in the form of a detailed 159 page joint agreement between the P5+1 (US, UK, France, Russia, China, and Germany), and the EU and Iran. It is called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or informally the Iran Nuclear deal. The deal was endorsed by the UNSC resolution 2231, on October 18, 2015, and exactly 90 days after its finalization date, Iran came into full compliance with the IAEA safeguards. Iran granted full access to IAEA inspectors to its nuclear facilities for future monitoring, by January 16, 2016. Signing of JCPOA allowed lifting of sanctions against Iran which were imposed by the US, EU, and UN<sup>14</sup> (under UNSC resolutions 1696, 1737, 1747, 1803, 1835 and 1929).<sup>15</sup>

Dating back to 2003, these multilateral talks were initially convened between EU-3 (the United Kingdom, Germany and France) and Iran, and later joined by the United States, Russia and China in 2006. Faced with sanctions, distrust, and stalemate, these negotiations were a huge challenge only to be overcome by a moderate and flexible diplomatic approach towards a complex problem.

## **Concessions**

Under the JCPOA obligations, Iran was required to fulfill the following key conditions:

- Cap its Uranium enrichment levels at 3.67 percent for 10 years.
- Maintain its nuclear stockpile under 300 kg at all times for 15 years, and dilute or ship out the already existing excess Uranium stockpiles (getting rid of 98% of its pre-existing stockpile of 12,000 kg).
- Confine its enrichment activities to a single facility at Natanz, and to dismantle or surrender all the excess centrifuges beyond 5,060 I-R1s to the IAEA, as well as restrict research and development on advanced centrifuges.
- Convert Fordow underground nuclear plant into a nuclear physics and technology center, with Uranium enrichment suspended for 15 years.
- Iran was allowed to keep 1044 centrifuges at Fordow nuclear facility to generate radioisotopes for medical and agricultural purposes.
- It also barred the storage of heavy water in excess of 130 metric tons and the building of any heavy water reactor - the deal made sure of it by "removing and disabling the original core of Arak reactor" -- to limit plutonium production from 10 kg per year to around 1 kg per year, removing the possibility of amassing weapons-grade Uranium.
- Iran agreed to ship out the spent fuel from Arak heavy water reactor, for the *lifetime of reactor*.
- Iran also agreed to a permanent implementation of the Subsidiary Arrangement Code 3.1 and Additional Protocol to its IAEA safeguards.

The Additional Protocol and Subsidiary Agreement were added to strengthen and close the loopholes in the IAEA comprehensive safeguards agreement. The loopholes could be used for circumventing the safeguard constraints and illicitly pursue the Research and Development in nuclear weaponization. States are required to provide design information for any new nuclear facility as soon as construction is approved under the modified Subsidiary Agreement 3.1. The Additional Protocol expanded

the IAEA's access beyond the declared sites, and allowed it to conduct surprise inspections without prior notice of declared as well as non-declared sites –making it more effective in identifying any clandestine nuclear facilities<sup>16</sup>.

The deal also included a 25-year monitoring period for Iranian Uranium mines, and a 20-year inspection period for its centrifuge manufacturing facilities as well as access and oversight of undeclared facilities. Iran was explicitly forbidden from engaging in activities related to nuclear weaponization under the terms of the agreement.<sup>17</sup>

On the Adoption day of JCPOA i.e. January 16, 2016, IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano made public the official report confirming the emplacement of necessary monitoring and verification measures, and Iran's full compliance to the deal stating: "*The Board of Governors has authorized the Director General to implement the necessary verification and monitoring of the Islamic Republic of Iran's nuclear-related commitments as set out in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)...(and) confirm(s) that the Agency has verified that Iran has taken the actions specified in paragraphs 15.1–15.11 of Annex V of the JCPOA*"<sup>18</sup>. From the Adoption day onwards, IAEA has released quarterly verification and monitoring reports, which have been commensurate with Iran's compliance to the JCPOA obligations.

## Incentives

The IAEA certification, in turn, prompted lifting of all nuclear related unilateral and multilateral sanctions by the US, UN, and EU, including sanctions on Iran's financial, energy, oil, shipping, automotive and other sectors. Nonetheless, sanctions relating to terrorism, human rights violations, and missile activities remained intact, and the door to additional sanctions on non-nuclear grounds was also kept open. Thus, in essence, the JCPOA was able to achieve the optimal results which could have been achieved, over the leverage of the respective party's bargaining chips, i.e., political isolation and crippling economic pressure on Iran and a non-nuclear Iran for the P5+1(especially), and the rest of the world (generally).

Should the IAEA conclude that Iran's nuclear activities remained peaceful over a six-year period beginning with the UNSC's adoption of the JCPOA



in October 2015, the US would be obligated to seek domestic legislative action to either modify or terminate its nuclear-related sanctions against Iran. Similarly, it required EU to end its arms embargo over Iran, as well as restrictions over ballistic missile transfer –along with the UN. The deal also recognized Iran's right of Uranium enrichment for peaceful purposes under the provisions of NPT.

On the contrary, if any member of the party detects non-compliance, the treaty holds provision of submitting a veto resolution to the UN Security Council –leading to a sanctions *snap-back*<sup>19</sup>.

Furthermore, despite being a landmark deal, JCPOA has been widely criticized for the sunset clauses, arguing that the deal would only delay the Iranian nuclear program, while pumping money into the Iranian economy which, Iran could use to fuel terrorism in the Middle East.

The US President Obama expressed his utter confidence in the efficacy of the deal that he had achieved despite severe resistance from his Republican opponents in the Congress. In a televised address, he said, “This deal meets every single one of the bottom lines we established when we achieved a framework earlier this spring. Every pathway to a nuclear weapon is cut off. And the inspection and transparency regime necessary to verify that objective will be put in place”. He also emphasized the importance of soft talk and diplomacy “Tough talk from Washington does not solve problems, hard-nosed diplomacy, leadership that has united the world's major powers, offers a more effective way to verify that Iran is not pursuing a nuclear weapon”<sup>20</sup>. Obama also pointed out the danger of arms race that would follow in a contrary scenario where there is no deal, no lasting constraints over the Iranian nuclear program, and no way to find out its nuclear activities in the absence of a monitoring and verification framework<sup>21</sup>.

Israel as well as other Arab and Gulf states showed reservations over the nuclear deal. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu categorically rejected the deal saying that Israel would not accept a deal unless Iran recognizes the right of existence of Israeli state as a preliminary condition. The deal drew intense criticism from Israel and some Arab states because it did not guarantee 'destroying' Iran's nuclear capabilities and simply shuts them down. Iran could, they believe, resume nuclear activities after some time and possibly pursue nuclear weapons

development. The lifting of economic sanctions would help Iran make its economy recover, which could be used to fund proxies in the region. Thus making it a win-win situation for Iran. Netanyahu articulated his concerns over JCPOA by saying that it would legitimize Iran's illegal nuclear activities and that *"The deal would not shut down a single nuclear facility in Iran, would not destroy a single centrifuge in Iran and will not stop R&D on Iran's advanced centrifuges... The deal would greatly bolster Iran's economy. It would give Iran thereby tremendous means to propel its aggression and terrorism throughout the Middle East. Such a deal does not block Iran's path to the bomb. Such a deal paves Iran's path to the bomb."*<sup>22</sup>

## US Withdrawal

On 8<sup>th</sup> May, 2018, the US President Donald Trump announced US withdrawal from the JCPOA agreement suggesting that the core assumption of the agreement of 'Iran wanting to pursue nuclear energy for 'peaceful' purposes only', was a complete 'lie'. Trump cited the deal's sunset clauses, as well as the absence of Iran-sponsored terrorism and its ballistic missile program from the JCPOA agreement, as the primary reasons for withdrawal. Along with the withdrawal from the agreement, Trump also reinstated the economic sanctions over Iran. A week prior to this announcement, Benjamin Netanyahu held a press briefing in Tel Aviv, where he claimed to have obtained 100,000 documents from "Iran's secret atomic archives". The documents, according to the Israeli news, were collected by the Israeli intelligence over the years and contained exclusive reports on Iranian covert pursuit of nuclear weapons prior to 2003 under a project code named 'Amad'<sup>23</sup>. Trump seemed to be impressed by Netanyahu's presentation and referred to it in his speech saying that "Last week, Israel published intelligence documents — long concealed by Iran — conclusively showing the Iranian regime and its history of pursuing nuclear weapons". However Trump, already, before becoming the President, had criticized the nuclear deal with Iran calling it "disproportionate and inappropriate" and had promised to modify the deal in US' favor if he became the President. Following Netanyahu's Press briefing, the US then Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo revealed that Israel had earlier shared the documents with the US. The former President of the US, Barack Obama criticized Trump's decision as a grave mistake and said that scrapping the deal with Iran could leave the US with a—"losing

choice between a nuclear-armed Iran or another war in the Middle East”<sup>24</sup>. Despite, IAEA and the US compliance reports on the Iran’s nuclear deal, showing that Iran has been in full compliance with the terms of agreement, some American scholars argued that Iran did not comply with the agreement fully, because Iran was supposed to reveal all of its research on nuclear weapons. They base their argument on the evidence presented by the Israeli PM Netanyahu<sup>25</sup>.

Other parties to the agreement, including the EU and UN, opposed and criticized US withdrawal and showed concerns on the possible implications on the Middle Eastern conflict. EU announced to continue dealing with Iran<sup>26</sup> but that would not make any significant difference compared to the damage inflicted by the US’ sanctions. The E3 (France, the United Kingdom, and Germany) established INSTEX barter system to continue dealings with Iran outside of the US financial system. The system was only used for supply of food, medical equipment and medicine, which were already exempted from the US sanctions<sup>27</sup>. On the other hand, Israel, Saudi Arabia and some Gulf States showed appreciation for Trump’s decision.

## **Iran’s Reaction**

A year later, in 2019, the US lifted the oil-export waiver from Iran, sanctioning Iranian oil exports to the US allies, as well as cooperation over transfer and storage of enriched Uranium and heavy water out of Iran, and the construction of Bushehr Nuclear Reactor units. By late July 2020, Trump administration had terminated all the waivers granted for cooperative nuclear projects including conversion of Arak reactor, Fordow facility conversion, and provision of supplying enriched Uranium for the Tehran Research Reactor; except for operating nuclear reactor at Bushehr. In response, Iran announced that it is no longer bound by the JCPOA limitations and has since been incrementally violating the limitations imposed by the treaty. The IAEA reported the first breach on July 1, 2019, when Iran breached its Uranium stockpile limit, as well as Uranium enrichment cap of 3.67 percent on July 8, 2019 by enriching beyond 4.5 percent at Natanz facility; followed by violating heavy water stockpile limit on Nov. 17, 2019. The IAEA reported the breach of barrier imposed on the Research and Development of advanced centrifuges on Sept. 7, 2019, and by Sept. 25, Iran had started to stockpile enriched

Uranium obtained from the newly installed advanced centrifuges. On Nov. 5, 2019, Iran announced to start Uranium enrichment up to 4.5 percent at the Fordow facility, where it was prohibited to conduct any enrichment activities for 15 years under JCPOA. On Jan 5, 2020 Iran declared that it will no longer be bound by the JCPOA's operational restrictions, but vowed to follow the agreement's safeguard measures. Iranian foreign minister however iterated that these breaches of limitations could be reversed if EU and other signatories fulfill their commitments with Iran as agreed under JCPOA.

In December 2020, the Iran's Guardian Council ratified the legislation specifying the phased steps to be taken unless the sanctions are revoked. These steps comprise:

- Immediately ratcheting up the enrichment of U-235 to 20 percent, and storing at least 120 kg of enriched Uranium yearly. Increasing their enrichment capacity and monthly Uranium output to 500 kg.
- Suspension of implementation of the Additional Protocol of IAEA safeguards if sanctions are not lifted within 2 months.
- Within 3 months of ratification, employ advanced centrifuges to enrich Uranium and conduct research and development on new advanced designs, and use them to enrich Uranium.
- Inauguration of Uranium Metal Production Facility at the Esfahan fuel fabrication plant in 5 months.

In the following months Iran further breached the JCPOA limitations by resuming its centrifuge and heavy water nuclear reactor plants. As of May 2021, Iran had produced and accumulated 68.2 kg of 20 percent enriched Uranium, and informed IAEA that it will boost the enrichment to 60 percent after a sabotage attack was launched at the Natanz site (allegedly by Israel) in April 2021.

Iran also suspended the implementation of the Additional Protocol and other safeguards exclusive to JCPOA on Feb 23, 2021 and agreed to a bilateral accord with the IAEA on Feb 21, 2021 to allow necessary monitoring for 3 months. The accord was extended for another month after its expiration date, and terminated on June 24, 2021. Following the termination of the agreement IAEA lost its ability to monitor and service its surveillance equipment, until September 12, 2021, when Iran allowed "IAEA's inspectors to service the identified equipment and replace their

storage media, which will be kept under the joint IAEA and AEOI seals in the Islamic Republic of Iran”<sup>28</sup>.

In January 2020, US conducted a drone strike against Iran, killing the Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, Qassem Suleimani, which escalated tension between the two countries. Iran, in response, announced break away from JCPOA limitations, but also reiterated its willingness to negotiate<sup>29</sup>.

## **Role of Israel**

To ensure its security, Israel’s foremost objective is to stop its rival regional states from enhancing their power, and particularly work to prevent them from acquiring nuclear arms. Israel has been pursuing a strategy of pre-emption to disrupt the efforts of other Middle Eastern and Arab states to develop nuclear weapons. Israel conducted pre-emptive air-strikes against Iraqi nuclear reactor at Osirak in 1981, and Syria’s nuclear program at *Dair Alzour* in Sept. 2007. It has also pledged to use force against Iran if the latter is not coerced to abandon its nuclear program.

Israel has been concerned about Iran’s sophisticated nuclear power-plants and their ability to produce weapons grade Uranium.<sup>30</sup> These concerns were unequivocally articulated in 2012 by the former Israeli Prime Minister at UN General Assembly annual meeting, calling on UN to draw a “a clear red line... before Iran completes the second stage of nuclear enrichment to make a bomb”. He also warned of a possible air strike against Iran’s nuclear enrichment plants before Iran achieves the second stage Uranium enrichment capability. He pressed president Obama to give a military ultimatum to Iran to which Obama did not agree. Responding to the 2015 JCPOA, Israel reiterated its intent to take action on its own if the international community failed to take a hardline against Iran.

Iran and Israel have been arch enemies since 1979 after the Iranian revolution. Iran has since denounced Israel as a Jewish State and an illegal Zionist regime. Iran and Israel have engaged in a low-intensity conflict for the last four decades, and Syria has been the center stage of Israel-Iran proxy conflict for the past few years. Israel accuses Iran of sponsoring terrorism by supporting Hezbollah<sup>31</sup> in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine

against Israel. On the other hand, Iran accuses Israel of supporting anti-state groups in Iran and for assassinations of a number of Iranian nuclear scientists<sup>32</sup>. Israel was also accused of Cyber-attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities in collaboration with the US. In 2010 'stuxnet' a cyber-worm was discovered which was alleged to have infiltrated over 15 nuclear facilities, and sabotaged at least 1000 centrifuges in Iran's Natanz Enrichment Plant<sup>33</sup>. This particular plant is the largest, the most advanced and sophisticated nuclear facility in Iran and had been suspected of being used for nuclear weapons development<sup>34</sup>.

In March 2015, just months prior to the finalization of JCPOA, Israeli PM Netanyahu made an emergency trip to USA to address the joint session of Congress in Washington DC. In his address he warned against the JCPOA saying that *"the greatest danger facing our world is the marriage of militant Islam and nuclear weapons"*, and that this deal will *"all but guarantee"* Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons. The Republican, the party in majority in the Congress, strongly supported Israeli Prime Minister's assessment of Iranian nuclear program. Despite extreme pressure from Israeli PM, President Obama chose diplomacy to resolve issues, and took the option of negotiations to make a nuclear deal with Iran. Iran abided by the terms of the agreement and did not embark on making nuclear weapons. In 2013 the US Defense Secretary, Leon Panetta stated that Iran might be trying to maximize its nuclear capability but is not pursuing nuclear weapons. The US Chief of Staff Gen. Dempsey too supported a negotiated settlement of the problem. He stated that although US military can provide a number of options to the president to take out Iranian nuclear program, but he would suggest that US should try to influence Iran through other means<sup>35</sup>.

However, critics of the agreement point at potentially two destabilizing factors that have remained unaddressed. One that Iran does not recognize Israel's right to exist as a state, and second that Iran would retain its ability to make nuclear weapons at some stage. In order to prevent Iran from making nuclear weapons Israel may decide to carry out military actions against Iran's nuclear facility(ies). If so happens the consequences would be catastrophic. Experts also observe that Israel does not have the military capability to completely destroy the underground enrichment infrastructure of Iran<sup>36</sup>. The US' Boeing Massive Ordnance Penetrator (MOP) is the only conventional weapon that may have some chance of

penetrating the Fordow facility, built 80 meters deep in a mountainous area. Some Air-Strike experts, and experts on Iranian nuclear program are even skeptical about the US' ability to destroy nuclear facility at Fordow. Thus a military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities may only delay, but not destroy its nuclear-program. Iran would be able to retrieve its systems after repairs and would then have a strong rationale to pursue the development of nuclear arms.

Critics argue that 1981 Israeli military expedition against Saddam Hussein's nuclear reactor turned out to be counter-productive because, Iraq was not building nuclear weapons in that facility nor was the Osirak facility designed for nuclear weapons development. This was confirmed by later investigations by the IAEA and French inspectors. However, Israeli airstrikes prompted Saddam to pursue nuclear weapons covertly. The French experts who were building the Osirak reactor had to leave and there was no one to oversee nuclear activities in Iraq. Reports suggest that after eight years i.e. in 1990's, Iraq was on the verge of acquiring its first nuclear bomb<sup>37</sup>.

Contrary to Israeli government's stance, Israeli military personnel, former and present, acknowledge the usefulness of the JCPOA deal that had effectively slowed down Iranian nuclear program by ten or twenty years. Some Israeli security experts also accuse Netanyahu of not wanting a deal at all, thus perpetrating greater conflict<sup>38</sup>.

### **Analyzing the Extreme Pressure Campaign**

The Iranian response to Trump's abrogation of the deal and re-imposition of sanctions is not surprising, as has been obvious by the record of Iran standing its ground in opposition to the strict US sanctions from 2003 to 2013. Most critics argue that although sanctions might not have been able to bring Iran into compliance, they did play a vital role in influencing the internal political dynamics of Iran leading to regime change, which resulted in bringing Hasan Rouhani -a moderate- into power. This change, at the political level, in Iran provided an opportunity for P5+1 to successfully negotiate JCPOA. However, it is important to note that the response of any Iranian regime towards coercion (be it hardliners like Ebrahim Raisi, the current president, or Hassan Rouhani, a moderate) has been unequivocally –resistance. It is only when the US resorted to liberal

institutionalism foreign policy approach, seeing Iran, not as a problem that needs to be contained but an opportunity, that they were able to agree on a deal. The US' desire to draw greater dividends from JCPOA under president Trump, brought the issue back to where it was before the deal. Even if ballistic missile program, terrorism, and human rights violations are included in the agenda of the negotiations it will still leave the issue of sunset clauses unaddressed. Iran, on the other hand, categorically rejects any review of the agreed-upon provisions of JCPOA, and demands lifting of all sanctions (nuclear related as well as otherwise) imposed after the implementation day of JCPOA, before Iran comes into full compliance of the deal. Even then the progress being made in Research and Development, in no way can be reversed. The US decision to unilaterally withdraw from the deal without any consequences has further eroded Iranian trust of the US. For the time being, both countries are locked in a diplomatic standoff in which both sides are sticking to maximalist demands and waiting for the other side to moderate its stance. A successful implementation of JCPOA could have served as a step forward in integration of Iran as a member of international community. Furthermore building trust and stronger communication channels, could have proven to be stepping stones for de-escalating conflicts and initiating talks over other contentious issues.

## **Conclusion**

Iran returned to Vienna talks on 30 November, 2021, following the EU deputy secretary general's visit to Tehran in in October 2021. The US still stays away from the talks, and Iran has refused to hold any direct talks with the US. On the other hand, it is impossible for Biden administration to simply roll back all the sanctions and revive JCPOA. The domestic constraints (strong Republican opposition in the Congress), as well as pressure from Israel, and shared agenda of getting more out of JCPOA renegotiations, have made the process on a new deal, more complex.<sup>39</sup> Iran's domestic political posturing has also added complications to the process. The Iranians have hinted at seeking financial compensation from the US for the losses it has suffered as a result of its pulling back from the deal. They also want a binding clause, that bars America from withdrawing from the agreement again, included in the agreement. While much of it is public posturing and rhetoric, it still has a negative impact on



the difficult negotiation process. Trump's actions, while stepping back from the deal, were so calibrated that it made a return to the deal extremely difficult for the new administration. The nuclear related sanctions were made undistinguishable from other sanctions, as Trump re-categorized certain economic sanctions into terrorism related sanctions. For instance, Iranian Central Bank was sanctioned under terrorism clause, by arguing that it is used to funnel money to the terrorist organizations in the Middle East. Furthermore, Biden administration would need 2/3rds support in the Congress to get a new deal approved, which it does not have.<sup>40</sup> Republican party has made clear their demands of renegotiating the deal with Iran. They want non-nuclear related issues in the deal. The US special envoy for Iran had also previously stated the need for Iran to step back from its maximalist demands of requiring US to take the first step and repeal all the sanctions, and instead take a step by step approach with proper verification measures in place on both sides. A moderate, flexible approach by both sides, as stipulated by the liberal institutionalism, would be the only way forward with these negotiations. However, any expectations of getting more then addressing the concerns that hinder its re-enforcement, would be misplaced. Even putting the already existing deal back on track through adjustments in the sunset clauses would be arduous and time consuming. The discussion on these issues will however help lay the foundations for further talks over regional security issues i.e. terrorism and ballistic missile program as the institutional framework of the agreement would facilitate coordination, and establishment of information channeling, leading to greater confidence and trust among the negotiating parties.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> Hunt, Liam. "The anchor of the system: The Iran deal and the decline of realism in US foreign policy." *International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis* 72, no. 3 (2017), 318-337. Accessed February 22, 2022. doi:10.1177/0020702017723356.

<sup>2</sup> Masterson, Julia. "Iran Edges Toward Resuming Nuclear Talks." Arms Control Association | The Authoritative Source on Arms Control Since 1971. Last modified October 2021. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2021-10/news/iran-edges-toward-resuming-nuclear-talks>

- <sup>3</sup> DW (Tehran). "Iran, China sign 'strategic' deal in Tehran." n.d. Accessed February 22, 2022. <https://www.dw.com/en/iran-china-sign-strategic-deal-in-tehran/a-57025741>
- <sup>4</sup> Motamedi, Maziar. "Iran looking for 'big jump' in Russia relations with Moscow talks." Aljazeera (Tehran, Iran), October 6, 2021. Accessed February 22, 2022.
- <sup>5</sup> Aljazeera. "UNSC dismisses US demand to impose 'snapback' sanctions on Iran." August 25, 2020. Accessed February 22, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/8/25/unsc-dismisses-us-demand-to-impose-snapback-sanctions-on-iran>
- <sup>6</sup> Biden on Iran at G20 Summit." United States Institute of Peace. Last modified November 1, 2021. <https://iranprimer.usip.org/>
- <sup>7</sup> Aljazeera. "Bennett 'happy' as Biden touts 'other options' against Iran." August 27, 2021. Accessed February 22, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/27/bennett-happy-as-biden-touts-other-options-against-iran>
- <sup>8</sup> Sullivan, Mark P. The Mechanism for Strategic Coercion: Denial or Second Order Change? Air University Press, 1995. Accessed February 22, 2022. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep13891>
- <sup>9</sup> Duffield, John. "What Are International Institutions? 1." International Organization 9, no. 1 (2017), 57-78. Accessed February 22, 2022. doi:10.4324/9781315251981-3.
- <sup>10</sup> The idea was first presented by Robert O. Keohane in his book "After Hegemony" published in 1984, pertaining to the mutually symbiotic economic cooperation between states, based upon complex interdependence.
- <sup>11</sup> Keohane, Robert O., and Lisa L. Martin. "The Promise of Institutional Theory." International Security 20, no. 1 (1995), 39. Accessed February 22, 2022. doi:10.2307/2539214.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Brodie, Bernard. "The Development of Nuclear Strategy." Strategy and Nuclear Deterrence 2, no. 4 (1985), 3-22. Accessed February 22, 2022. doi:10.1515/9781400856121.3.
- <sup>14</sup> Davenport, Kelsey. "The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance." Arms Control Association | The Authoritative Source on Arms Control Since 1971. Last modified January 2022. <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/JCPOA-at-a-glance>
- <sup>15</sup> "UN Documents for Iran." October 2021 Monthly Forecast: Security Council Report. Accessed February 22, 2022. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/iran/>
- <sup>16</sup> Davenport, Kelsey. "IAEA Safeguards Agreements at a Glance." Arms Control Association | The Authoritative Source on Arms Control Since 1971. Last modified June 2020. <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/IAEASafeguards>
- <sup>17</sup> Davenport, Kelsey. "The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance." Arms Control Association | The Authoritative Source on Arms Control Since 1971. Last modified January 2022. <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/JCPOA-at-a-glance>
- <sup>18</sup> General, Director. Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015). IAEA, 2016. Accessed February 22, 2022. <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gov-inf-2016-1.pdf>
- <sup>19</sup> Davenport, Kelsey. "The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance." Arms Control Association | The Authoritative Source on Arms Control Since 1971. Last modified January 2022. <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/JCPOA-at-a-glance>

<sup>20</sup> Statement by the President on Iran. Washington D.C.: The White House Office of the Press Secretary, July 16, 2015. Accessed February 22, 2022. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/07/14/statement-president-iran>

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Iran framework: PM Netanyahu after cabinet meeting. Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015. Accessed February 22, 2022. <https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/Iran/Nuclear/Pages/Iran-framework-PM-Netanyahu-after-cabinet-meeting-3-Apr-2015.aspx>

<sup>23</sup> Prusher, Ilene. "Benjamin Netanyahu's Iran Deal Speech Might Have Convinced the Only Person Who Matters." TIME, May 2, 2018. Accessed February 22, 2022. <https://time.com/5262607/netanyahu-trump-iran-deal-speech/>

<sup>24</sup> Liptak, Kevin, and Nicole Gaouette. "Trump withdraws from Iran nuclear deal, isolating him further from world." CNN, May 2018. Accessed February 22, 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Prusher, Ilene. "Benjamin Netanyahu's Iran Deal Speech Might Have Convinced the Only Person Who Matters." TIME, May 2, 2018. Accessed February 22, 2022. <https://time.com/5262607/netanyahu-trump-iran-deal-speech/>

<sup>26</sup> DW. "EU to reactivate 'blocking statute' against US sanctions on Iran for European firms." May 17, 2018. Accessed February 22, 2022. <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-to-reactivate-blocking-statute-against-us-sanctions-on-iran-for-european-firms/a-43826992>

<sup>27</sup> DW. "INSTEX: Europe sets up transactions channel with Iran." January 31, 2019. Accessed February 22, 2022. <https://www.dw.com/en/instex-europe-sets-up-transactions-channel-with-iran/a-47303580>

<sup>28</sup> Joint Statement by the Vice-President and the Head of Atomic Energy Organization of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency. Tehran, Iran: IAEA, 2021. Accessed February 22, 2022. <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/pressreleases/joint-statement-by-the-vice-president-and-the-head-of-atomic-energy-organization-of-the-islamic-republic-of-iran-and-the-director-general-of-the-international-atomic-energy-agency>

<sup>29</sup> Laub, Zachary, and Kali Robinson. "What Is the Status of the Iran Nuclear Agreement?" *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 7, 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/background/what-status-iran-nuclear-agreement>.

<sup>30</sup> Martinez, Michael. "Netanyahu asks U.N. to draw 'red line' on Iran's nuclear plans." CNN, September 28, 2012. Accessed February 22, 2022. <https://edition.cnn.com/2012/09/27/world/new-york-unga/index.html>

<sup>31</sup> ARAB NEWS (Jerusalem). "Israel accuses Iran of pushing Hezbollah missile plants in Lebanon." August 29, 2019. Accessed February 22, 2022. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1547001/middle-east>  
BBC. "Stuxnet 'hit' Iran nuclear plans." November 22, 2010. Accessed February 22, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-11809827>

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Bruno, Greg. "Iran's Nuclear Program." Council on Foreign Relations. Last modified July 17, 2008. <https://www.cfr.org/background/irans-nuclear-program>

<sup>35</sup> Cronk, Terry M. Defense.gov News Article: *Joint Chiefs Chairman Calls Iran 'Disruptive' to Region*. Washington D.C.: The U.S. Department of Defense, 2013. Accessed October 13, 2021. <https://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=119185>.

---

<sup>36</sup> Raas, Whitney, and Austin Long. "Osirak Redux? Assessing Israeli Capabilities to Destroy Iranian Nuclear Facilities." *International Security* 31, no. 4 (2007), 7-33. Accessed February 22, 2022. doi:10.1162/isec.2007.31.4.7.

<sup>37</sup> Ramberg, Bennett. "Osirak and Its Lessons for Iran Policy." Arms Control Association | The Authoritative Source on Arms Control Since 1971. Accessed February 23, 2022.

<https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2012-05/osirak-its-lessons-iran-policy>

<sup>38</sup> "The Iran Deal: AIPAC Does Not Speak for Israel." Molad. Last modified August 3, 2015.

<https://www.molad.org/images/upload/files/MoladAipacstatement.pdf>

<sup>39</sup> Wintour, Patrick. "Iran nuclear talks to resume with world powers after five-month hiatus." *The Guardian*, November 28, 2021. Accessed February 22, 2022.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/28/iran-nuclear-talks-to-resume-with-world-powers-after-five-month-hiatus>

<sup>40</sup> Party Divisions of the House of Representatives, 1789 to Present. Office of the Historian: United States House of Representatives, n.d. Accessed February 22, 2022.

<https://history.house.gov/Institution/Party-Divisions/Party-Divisions/>