

Nonproliferation policy in Iran: From success and failure

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action was an historic agreement that established significant constraints on Iran's nuclear program. The successful negotiations were made possible by the Obama administration's willingness to yield on the enrichment issue, allowing Tehran to retain a limited program under strict IAEA monitoring. This was the key incentive that paved the way for the complex negotiations among the US, European states and Russia that produce the agreement.

Under the terms of the JCPOA Iran agreed to reduce its stockpile of enriched uranium by 98 percent, shut down two-thirds of its centrifuges, significantly curtail its remaining enrichment capacity, eliminate its ability to produce plutonium, and accept the most comprehensive and intrusive weapons inspection system ever negotiated. In response to the confirmation of Iranian acceptance of these terms, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2231 (July 2015) lifting sanctions. The resolution created the legal framework for member states to engage in economic trade, investment, banking, and travel with Iran. The termination of sanctions was the quid pro quo that motivated Iran to accept these strict limitations to its nuclear program.

The record shows that Iran complied with the terms of the JCPOA. (Walsh, J. 2018, June 6). In testimony before the US Congress, officials from the Department of Defense, the State Department, and the US intelligence community stated that Iran was abiding by the agreement. In April 2018, the State Department observed that Iran is "transparently, verifiably, and fully implementing the JCPOA" and had not committed a material breach of the agreement. (United States Department of States, 2018.)

The IAEA issued more than a dozen reports on Iranian compliance from 2016 through 2018 and found no evidence of major Iranian violations of the agreement. The reports described Iranian measures for fulfillment of its obligations under the agreement. Typical was the IAEA report on June 6, 2018, which came right after the announcement of US withdrawal from the

agreement. The report made clear that, contrary to claims by the White House, Iranian officials were continuing to fulfill their obligations. Its findings included the following:

- Iran's stockpile of uranium enriched to 3.67 percent uranium-235 was 123.9 kg, below the 300 kg limit set by the accord;
- Iran's stockpile of heavy water 120.3 metric tons was also below the 130 metric ton limit set by the deal;
- no more than 5,060 IR-1 centrifuges were installed at Natanz for uranium enrichment;
- Iran enriched uranium only to 3.67 percent uranium-235, the limit set by the deal;
- Iran's research and development activities using advanced centrifuges were in line with the state's long-term plan; Iran continued to implement the additional protocol to its safeguards agreement and was complying with rigorous procedures for verification established in the JCPOA.

Many senior US government officials and nuclear experts urged the White House to continue to comply with the agreement. In September 2017, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph Dunford, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that Iran was complying with the JCPOA and that withdrawal would have "unfortunate" ripple effects. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell described the JCPOA as "a pretty good deal" with a "very rigorous verification regime." These and other security concerns were brushed aside in the decision to withdraw from the accord. Positive assessments of Iranian compliance also came from the governments of Britain, France, and Germany. Conservative British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said breaking the agreement would be a "mistake." Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak said that Iran "kept the letter of the agreement quite systematically." (All quotes from Walsh, 2018).

In October 2017 Trump charged that Iran "has committed multiple violations" of the agreement and was preventing IAEA inspectors from doing their job. The

website FactCheck.Org thoroughly debunked the claims. IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano issued a statement that “the IAEA has had access to all locations it needed to visit. ... As I have reported to the Board of Governors, the nuclear-related commitments undertaken by Iran under the JCPOA are being implemented.” (Kiely, 2017, October 13).

Evidence and informed opinion notwithstanding, on May 8, 2017 the White House officially reneged on the Iran deal and announced US withdrawal from the JCPOA. US sanctions were reimposed and intensified. It was a day of infamy in the history of nuclear nonproliferation.

Iran continued to comply with the JCPOA into 2019, but in the face of continuing sanctions and hostility from Washington, Tehran abandoned its policies of nuclear restraint. In recent years it has not only breached the limits established in the previous agreement but significantly increased the scale of its enrichment program. Tehran has produced substantial amounts of higher enriched uranium, bringing their stockpile closer to levels that could be further enriched for the production of nuclear weapons.

The US policy of rejecting the JCPOA has had negative effects on regional security that persist to this day. The choice to replace cooperative disarmament with renewed sanctions and diplomatic hostility prompted Iran to retaliate with the resumption and intensification of its uranium enrichment program. The ensuing cycle of mutual recrimination and escalating threats provided the basis for the Israeli-US armed attacks of June 2025 and pose a continuing risk of additional armed conflict in the region