

Iran's leaders have repeatedly called for the destruction of the United States and plotted to assassinate U.S. leaders. Two weeks into his second administration, President Trump restored maximum pressure on Iran to deny the regime a nuclear weapons capability and counter its malign influence abroad. Trump has also expressed interest in a negotiated deal with Iran. If the Trump administration chooses to negotiate, the United States must insist that any deal with Tehran include full, permanent, and verifiable nuclear disarmament of Iran.

In July 2015, the P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, plus Germany) agreed to the nuclear deal with Iran known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) quickly adopted Resolution 2231 endorsing the deal.

In 2018, President Trump exited the JCPOA, decrying its failure to prevent the regime from obtaining nuclear weapons. His successor, President Biden, subsequently sought to revive the JCPOA without success, while Iran massively expanded its nuclear program into the threshold nuclear weapons status it has reached today. As President Trump contemplates returning to negotiations with Iran, it is vital to understand the shortcomings of the previous deal.

Key Flaws of the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal

The JCPOA deviated from the “Gold Standard” of nuclear cooperation agreements, which prohibits countries from enriching uranium or reprocessing plutonium. Instead, the deal legitimized Iran's capacity to enrich, imposing only temporary restrictions on Tehran's nuclear quest. It left a vast nuclear infrastructure in place and was short-term in duration, set to fully expire after only 15 years. As restrictions on Iran's nuclear program lifted, Iran was allowed multiple pathways toward becoming a nuclear threshold state. These major flaws rendered the deal ineffective as a means of preventing Iran from achieving a nuclear weapons capability:

1. Iran Legitimized as a Nuclear Threshold State

Setting aside decades of the international community's objections to Tehran's nuclear program, the JCPOA suspended and eventually would have eliminated the open-ended requirement in UNSC Resolution (UNSCR) 1737 (2006) that Iran “suspend ... all [uranium] enrichment-related and [plutonium] reprocessing activities, including research and development.” The deal paved the way for the program's expansion such that Iran now has the ability to produce enough fuel for a nuclear bomb within days.

2. Provisions Set to Quickly Expire or “Sunset”

The JCPOA's restrictions contained preset expiration dates or “sunset” that failed to permanently block Iran's pathways to nuclear weapons. The sunsets began to take effect in 2016 and, had the deal remained in effect, would have culminated in a complete end to restrictions by January 2031, including those limiting uranium enrichment and plutonium production. For example, the JCPOA imposed a cap of 300 kilograms of 3.67 percent low enriched uranium (LEU) until January 2031, after which Tehran could enrich as much as it wanted, even to weapons grade.

3. Intact Infrastructure, Allowing Ongoing Enrichment and Advanced R&D

Instead of irreversible dismantlement, the JCPOA allowed Iran to retain its uranium enrichment facilities — the underground plant at Fordow and two at Natanz — together containing thousands of early-generation centrifuges

and some advanced machines. The JCPOA also permitted Iran to carry out limited research and development activities on advanced-generation (fast) gas centrifuges for uranium enrichment, store more than 1,000 previously manufactured advanced centrifuges, operate limited quantities of the advanced machines, and, by 2024, manufacture and eventually operate thousands of new advanced units per year. This infrastructure enabled Iran to quickly rebuild and expand its uranium enrichment program once the United States withdrew from the JCPOA in May 2018.

4. No Disclosure of Prior Weaponization, Weak Inspections and Verification

The JCPOA failed to require an intensive IAEA investigation to definitively determine the possible military dimensions of Tehran's nuclear activities (weaponization and missile-delivery research and development) and whether those activities had ceased. The regime succeeded in maintaining secrecy over past and possibly ongoing nuclear weapons efforts, details of which were revealed in mid-2018 when Israel seized a vast archive of Iranian nuclear documents that detailed extensive progress toward building nuclear weapons. Tehran was also not required to ratify the IAEA's Additional Protocol (AP) — joined by 141 other countries — which provides the IAEA with more intrusive inspection and access rights at nuclear and associated sites.

5. No Missile Production Restrictions and Limited Testing Prohibitions

The JCPOA did not address Iran's ballistic missile programs. It was silent on missile production caps, eliminating certain classes of weapons, enshrining range caps, and other useful arms control measures. UNSCR 2231 (2015), which endorsed the JCPOA, watered down a previous UN prohibition on ballistic missile tests and transfers.

6. Lifting Arms Exports/Imports and Missile Embargoes

The JCPOA through UNSCR 2231 facilitated the 2020 lifting of a UN embargo on international military trade with Tehran, allowing Iran to freely build up its military and support its terrorist proxies. Further, the JCPOA facilitated the 2023 lifting of a UN embargo on acquiring ballistic missile components and technology, as well as testing, although Iran had previously violated both embargoes while the UNSCR was in force.

7. Sanctions Relief That Expanded Iran's Support of Terrorism

The deal quickly relinquished leverage over Iran by providing immediate, rather than gradual, sanctions relief. After Iran took initial steps to implement the deal, the regime gained access to up to \$150 billion, which was used to bolster its state sponsorship of international terrorism, including terrorist proxies Hamas and Hezbollah.

For more on the suggested elements of a nuclear deal with Iran that would repair these flaws, see:

Iran's Nuclear Disarmament: The Only Deal That Protects U.S. and Allied Security

Full monograph available at: <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2025/03/14/irans-nuclear-disarmament/>



**Iran's Nuclear Disarmament:
The Only Deal That Protects
U.S. and Allied Security**

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