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Disarming the Bomb

Distilling the Drivers and Disincentives for Iran's Nuclear Program

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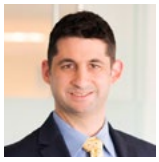

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About the Middle East Security Program

The CNAS Middle East Security program explores and recommends policy choices to advance U.S. national security objectives in the Middle East in an environment where the majority of U.S. military resources and attention will shift to other regions. The program identifies strategies and tools to promote regional stability and security, advance partnerships and alliances, and anticipate emerging challenges. Additionally, the program examines the strategic choices facing U.S. partners and adversaries in the Middle East region to better understand and anticipate their decision-making in a fast-evolving strategic landscape.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

The United States and the international community must consider how to constrain Iran's pursuit of a nuclear deterrent in a post-JCPOA world, in which Iran has never been closer to achieving a bomb.

Executive Summary

Negotiations to return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), known commonly as the Iran nuclear deal, reached an impasse this past year. Further, Iran made parallel decisions to brutally crack down on a nationwide protest movement and to inject itself into the conflict in Ukraine by furnishing Russia with weapons. These decisions may have rendered the impasse insurmountable. U.S. President Joe Biden has not retreated from the U.S. policy that it will never allow Iran to obtain a nuclear weapon. However, Iran's maximalist demands at the negotiating table, along with its domestic and foreign activities, have made it politically impossible for the United States and Europe to pursue further negotiation. Further complicating the situation and perhaps rendering the JCPOA increasingly obsolete, critical provisions of the original deal will expire in 2025 and 2030.[1] The United States and the international community must consider how to constrain Iran's pursuit of a nuclear deterrent in a post-JCPOA world, in which Iran has never been closer to achieving a bomb.

The CNAS Middle East Security Program designed and ran a scenario exercise in October 2022 to identify key factors that might accelerate or decelerate Iran's nuclear program in 2024. Additionally, the exercise explored how Iran, the United States, Israel, and the Gulf nations could prioritize their own national security objectives with respect to Iran's nuclear program, along with the potential actions each might take to accomplish those objectives.

The exercise examined two scenarios. Scenario 1 explored key countries' policy actions and perspectives if the United States and Iran failed to reenter the JCPOA. Scenario 2 explored key countries' policy actions and perspectives if the United States and Iran successfully renegotiated a return to compliance with the JCPOA and faced the imminent expiration of elements of the deal.

Overall observations from the exercise suggest that Iran's leadership's primary concern is self-preservation. Pursuing a nuclear program is secondary and ultimately serves to advance the primary objective (self-preservation). U.S. policymakers face many challenges in rallying partners against Iran while prioritizing a negotiated approach to curtail Iran's nuclear program. Additionally, Gulf states attempting to coexist near a dangerous and mercurial neighbor are in a precarious position. Instead of limiting or halting Iran's nuclear program directly, policymakers could use existing tools to convince Iran's leaders that pursuing nuclear capability endangers the regime, which contradicts the nuclear program's purpose. Potential tools include public and private messaging, as well as preparing military action that targets the regime and is predicated on continued nuclear advancement.

Moreover, the exercise highlighted how Iran's malicious activities impede the policy decision-making of its neighbors. The United States should develop an integrated security architecture in the region to establish greater defensive military capability and interoperability among its partners, thus reducing their susceptibility to coercion through Iranian military action.

This report analyzes the key themes and insights from the scenario exercise and offers policy recommendations to prevent Iran from pursuing a nuclear weapon.

Introduction

On July 14, 2015, Iran, the European Union (EU), and the U.N. Security Council's five permanent members, China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, plus Germany—known as the P5+1—signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to restrict Iran's nuclear program in exchange for relieving many U.N., U.S., and EU economic sanctions on the regime. The nuclear deal imposed binding limitations on Iran's uranium enrichment program for 10 to 15 years and expanded international verification and monitoring of Iran's nuclear fuel cycle.[2] In addition, U.N. Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2231 endorsed the nuclear deal and provided the Security Council with the authority to monitor the deal's implementation.[3] See Appendix B for the major JCPOA provisions, areas covered, and critical sanctions timeframes.

All parties remained in compliance with the JCPOA until May 8, 2018, when then-President Donald Trump officially withdrew the United States from the agreement. The Trump administration argued the deal was deeply flawed from the start, citing Iran's continued support to regional proxies and terrorist organizations and weapons development. Essentially, while Iran may have been in technical compliance with the JCPOA, it was not in compliance with the spirit of the deal.[4] Unilaterally, the United States restored sanctions previously removed under the JCPOA and began implementing sanctions under a new policy—the maximum pressure campaign. The campaign sought to force Iran to negotiate a more comprehensive deal by imposing far-reaching sanctions.[5] Sanctions implemented under the maximum pressure campaign would limit Iran's ability to purchase U.S. dollars and to trade in gold, aluminum, steel, and other key resources.[6] Additionally, the campaign sought to drive Iran's oil exports down from 1.5 million barrels a day to zero.[7]

Although the United States withdrew from the deal, the other signatories remained within the agreement framework. In January 2019, Britain, Germany, and France established the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX) to enable European nations to continue humanitarian trade with Iran amid U.S. sanctions[8] and following Iran's suspension from SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication), a Belgium-based international financial messaging service.[9] Along with establishing INSTEX, European signatories publicly supported the continuation of the JCPOA.[10]

Following the U.S. withdrawal, Iran remained compliant with the JCPOA for about a year.[11] However, as the United States ramped up sanctions, the Iranian regime deliberately and incrementally fell out of compliance with its JCPOA commitments. Over the next two years, Iran continued advancing nuclear activities, exceeding proscribed limitations on enriching and stockpiling uranium, resuming operations at the Arak facility, and installing advanced centrifuges.

Tensions between the United States and Iran continued to escalate. In multiple incidents in 2019, Iran attacked and seized oil tankers docked in the Gulf of Oman and transiting the Strait of Hormuz.[12] In September 2019, Iran attacked and damaged Saudi Aramco oil infrastructure in Abqaiq and Khurais, two oil facilities located in Saudi Arabia, using uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs), loitering munitions, and cruise missiles, though Iran denied orchestrating the attack.[13] U.S.-Iran tensions rose from December 31, 2019, to January 1, 2020, when militias in Iraq with close ties to Iran staged a violent protest at the gate of the U.S. embassy in Baghdad against a recent U.S. strike on an Iran-backed militia compound.[14] On January 3, 2020, the U.S. military launched a Hellfire missile at a vehicle and killed the intended target, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) Commander Qasem Soleimani,[15] with President Trump stating that Soleimani was planning large-scale attacks on U.S. embassies.[16] Iran retaliated on January 8, 2020, by firing ballistic missiles at the Ain al-Assad and Irbil bases in Iraq, which hosted hundreds of U.S. troops.[17]

Over the next two years, Iran continued advancing nuclear activities, exceeding proscribed limitations on enriching and stockpiling uranium, resuming operations at the Arak facility, and installing advanced centrifuges.

Amid this escalation and during the 2020 U.S. presidential campaign, then-candidate Joe Biden expressed his intention that if elected, he would seek to return the United States into compliance with the nuclear deal if Iran also became compliant with the agreement's terms.[18] Despite these overtures, Iran continued expanding nuclear enrichment activities. On December 2, 2020, Iran's parliament and Guardian Council passed

legislation to increase enrichment levels up to 20 percent and announced that it would suspend the Additional Protocol if sanctions were not lifted after 60 days.[19] Two days later, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) released a report that the Natanz enrichment facility would add three additional IR-2m cascades.[20] Then–Iranian President Hassan Rouhani stated that restoring the 2015 nuclear deal was possible without negotiations, claiming that Iran's recent actions did not violate the JCPOA.

Following Biden's election victory, his administration chose to pivot its approach and immediately opened the door for negotiations with Iran. In January 2021, newly appointed National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan announced that the United States would begin negotiations on Iran's ballistic missile program after both parties returned to compliance with the deal. This negotiation would require the cessation of U.S. sanctions related to Iran's nuclear program and a demonstrated decrease in uranium enrichment levels and enrichment-related activities by Iran. Weeks later, the IAEA released a report that Iran planned to begin researching uranium metal production to fuel the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR).[21] The TRR is Iran's light water research reactor that is under the Tehran Nuclear Research Center.[22] Since its creation, the TRR produced medical isotopes and highly enriched uranium (HEU) fuel.[23] This was a direct violation of the JCPOA, which prohibits the production and acquisition of uranium metal for 15 years. In early February 2021, Sullivan announced that the administration was "actively engaged with the European Union" with the goal of restoring the JCPOA.[24] That same month, the National Security Council principals committee convened to discuss Iran, with a particular focus on the United States pursuing a swift return to the deal before Iran's June presidential elections.[25]

Iranian leadership continued to approve increased levels of enrichment. On February 22, 2021, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stated that Iran may enrich uranium up to 60 percent purity despite U.S. pressure on the Iranian nuclear program to decrease enrichment levels.[26] The following day, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif announced via Twitter that Iran would suspend the implementation of the Additional Protocol.[27] Two months later, the Joint Commission on the JCPOA—under EU guidance and comprised of China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and Iran—met for its first session in Vienna to facilitate a return to the JCPOA. No deal was reached after five additional rounds of negotiations in June 2021. That same month and immediately after taking office, then–Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett criticized newly elected Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi for Iran's increased nuclear activity and urged the United States to abandon negotiations.[28] For five months, Iran took a hiatus in returning to talks until November 2021 when it met again with the P5+1 and the EU in Vienna.[29]

In February 2022, 33 Republican senators wrote a letter to President Biden urging him to seek congressional approval to revive the JCPOA. This came days after the Biden administration issued waivers allowing Russian, Chinese, and European companies to work with Iran's nuclear program to pursue nonproliferation efforts to make weapons development more challenging at Iranian nuclear sites. Despite Russia's invasion of Ukraine during the same month, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price reiterated that the United States and Russia would continue to cooperate on nuclear negotiations.[30] For the most part,

On April 15, 2021, representatives from Iran and the EU convened in Vienna to discuss a possible plan to revive the JCPOA. (EU Delegation in Vienna via Getty Images)

Russia's invasion of Ukraine did not disrupt these talks. However, the Russia-Ukraine conflict would impose on nuclear negotiations months later when reports surfaced that Iran was supplying weapons and training to aid Russia in the conflict.

In May 2022, U.S. Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that Iran could potentially develop a nuclear weapon without a restored JCPOA. Additionally, a return to the agreement could increase Iran's nuclear breakout time from a few weeks to one year under the constraints of the deal.[31] Two IAEA reports followed, indicating that Iran had not explained the presence of uranium at three undeclared sites and that it possessed 43 kilograms of uranium enriched to 60 percent and 238 kilograms of uranium enriched to 20 percent.[32] Mohammad Eslami, head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, vehemently rejected the IAEA's findings and resisted efforts by the IAEA to further investigate the existence of uranium at undeclared nuclear sites.

In September 2022, two IAEA reports explained that Iran had not complied with the IAEA's safeguards investigation since the prior quarterly report and that its stockpile of enriched uranium continued to grow.[33] Following demands from Iran's negotiators that any return to the JCPOA must include the termination of any ongoing IAEA investigations (which were triggered by Iran's participation in the Non-Nuclear Proliferation Treaty, not by the JCPOA), U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated any near-term agreement with Iran now seemed unlikely.[34] That same month, David Barnea, director of the Mossad, Israel's foreign intelligence agency, noted that a restored JCPOA would not give Iran immunity from Mossad operations, including on Iranian soil.[35] However, this threat had little effect as Iran continued to enrich uranium, reaching 60 percent purity at its Fordow plant in November 2022.[36]

Beyond Iran's diplomatic intransigence, other events involving Iran began to obscure nuclear negotiations, making dialogue both impolitic and potentially self-defeating. In mid-September 2022, young Iranians across the country began protesting the death of Mahsa (Jina) Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish-Iranian woman, beaten to death by Iran's morality police after being detained for improperly wearing her headscarf. In Ukraine, Russia began using Iranian-manufactured loitering munitions—the Mohajer-6, Shahed-131, and Shahed-136—to target critical infrastructure in Ukraine, including its power plants.[37] While the United States was aware of these transfers from Iran,[38] there were no public accounts of these weapons being used in the Russia-Ukraine conflict until this time. According to reports, Moscow and Tehran reached an agreement to construct drones on Russian soil to increase Russia's stockpile of killer drones.[39] European countries and the United States have claimed that the increased production of these drones violates UNSCR 2231, the same provision that endorsed the JCPOA.[40] In light of Iran's continued UAV proliferation to Russia and brutal crackdown on domestic protests, the United States has tabled negotiations for a revived nuclear deal. However, the United States has not ruled out the prospect of engaging in diplomacy with Iran in the future.[41]

Beyond Iran's diplomatic intransigence, other events involving Iran began to obscure nuclear negotiations, making dialogue both impolitic and potentially self-defeating.

Whether or not the United States and Iran can agree to return to compliance with the JCPOA, critical provisions of the nuclear deal will sunset in the coming years. The deal prescribes that in October 2023, also known as Transition Day, the U.N. will lift missile restrictions, the EU will lift its remaining nuclear sanctions, and the United States will lift sanctions from certain entities.[42] On October 2025, also known as Termination Day, UNSCR 2231 would expire, ending the sanctions "snapback" mechanism that enables parties to declare the other out of compliance with the deal.[43]

The Scenario Exercise

In October 2022, the CNAS Middle East Security program designed and ran a scenario exercise to identify key factors that could contribute to the acceleration or deceleration of Iran's nuclear program in 2024. Additionally, the exercise explored how Iran, the United States, Israel, and Gulf nations might prioritize their own national security objectives with respect to Iran's nuclear program, and the potential actions each might take to accomplish those objectives. This scenario exercise consisted of two scenarios set in 2024. Scenario 1 focused on a "No Return to the JCPOA" situation, while Scenario 2 focused on a "Return to the JCPOA" situation. Participants representing four country teams were tasked with identifying the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic decisions they would likely make in response to these scenarios. Participants in the exercise consisted of 14 experts, including current and former U.S. government employees, as well as current and former officials of foreign governments, think tanks, private industry, and academia. These

experts were divided into four teams based on expertise: the United States, Iran, Israel, and the Gulf states.

Full descriptions of Scenario 1 and Scenario 2 are in Appendix A. Scenario 1 focused on a "No Return to the JCPOA" situation, where the United States and Iran failed to negotiate reentry into the deal. In this scenario, the domestic protests against the Iranian regime and further sanctions from the United States and EU factored into the reentry's failure. Other factors into the failure of negotiations included Iranian-made drones reportedly used by Russia in its war with Ukraine, increased activity by the IRGC and U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) in the region, Israel's discontent with Iran's enrichment process, and increasing Saudi-Israel intelligence sharing. The framework of this scenario prepared the participants to consider the priorities and actions of their respective teams in a world in which the JCPOA is never restored.

Scenario 2 focused on a "Return to the JCPOA" situation, where the United States and Iran successfully reentered the nuclear deal. In this scenario, the Iranian government successfully ended the antigovernment protests that started in September 2022,[44] and media attention faded by the end of the year. Additionally, the IAEA's investigation was inconclusive in finding violations of Iran's safeguard obligations. Scenario 2 also highlighted that UNSCR 2231 would expire in 2025, ending constraints on Iran's arms transfers and sunsetting snapback sanctions. The framework of this scenario prepared the participants to analyze what a post-JCPOA world would look like despite successfully reentering the deal.

Limitations of the Scenario Exercise

Rather than predict the future, the intent of the scenario exercise was to provide insight into the potential responses of two relatively plausible futures from the countries represented by the participating teams. CNAS selected specific variables to incorporate into the scenarios that background research indicated most directly correlated with the exercise's research focus: the factors driving Iran's nuclear program. The CNAS team omitted or limited variables from consideration that would make the exercise too complex, including combining Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states into one team.

Young Iranians protested the regime in 2022 following Mahsa (Jina) Amini's death at the hands of Iran's morality police. These protests garnered international attention, with many world leaders condemning and sanctioning the regime for its brutal and repressive response. The regime's response to the protests contributed to the decision by the Biden administration to pause efforts to seek a negotiated return to the JCPOA. (Getty Images)

The scenario exercises did not specify political leaders. With elections in the United States and Israel pending the month following the exercise, the research team understood that fractious politics and various political personalities could bring policy shifts. CNAS researchers encouraged the players to consider their respective teams' national interests in their decision-making, as well as what actions might be most reasonably considered with a degree of national consensus (or in the case of the United States, bipartisanship) and to act accordingly. In the case of Iran and other illiberal governments, players were encouraged to act as if the leadership behavior was status quo to present day. Additionally, CNAS researchers chose not to assign specific political leadership roles within each team (such as prime minister, foreign minister, president) but rather instructed the players to work collectively to determine their teams' actions, while noting any significant disagreements.

Neither the EU, individual European nations, Russia, nor China were represented as teams during the exercise, leaving the United States and Iran as the only signatories of the JCPOA represented. This decision limited the scope of the exercise to ensure an adequate number of players on each team for robust internal deliberation (which CNAS captured with notetakers).

Several major real-life developments related to Iran preceded the exercise. This exercise occurred approximately five weeks after protests began in Iran, following the death of Mahsa Amini. Days before the exercise, it was publicly reported that Tehran had signed a deal with Moscow to provide Russia surface-to-surface ballistic missiles and UAVs for use in its conflict with Ukraine.[45] These developments may have contributed to players' considerations when making decisions, similar to how these events reportedly impacted actual foreign policy decision-making on nuclear talks with Iran.[46]

Key Insights from the Scenario Exercise

The authors distilled key insights that emerged from the teams' actions, strategies, and prioritization of objectives across both scenarios within the exercise. These themes might offer policymakers useful heuristics or assumptions when considering how regional actors might respond to specific policy choices or situational outcomes. Additionally, CNAS researchers observed clear dynamics that illustrated the character of engagement between certain teams. The characterization of these relationships enabled insight into the dynamics shaping the engagement of the states represented in the scenario.

Iran

Iran prioritized regime preservation; the nuclear program existed in service of that goal.

The Iran team's highest priority was the preservation of the regime. It identified the preservation of the nuclear program as a secondary priority. Throughout the exercise, the Iran team used the nuclear program to garner international legitimacy and respect. The team used public pronouncements, alluding to nuclear advances, to push back against the United States' and others' efforts to isolate and constrain the regime. The Iran team avoided making explicit threats but intimated that it had the options and the resolve to respond to any threats to its sovereignty.

However, the Iran team demonstrated ambivalence toward its nuclear program. Efforts to advance the nuclear program ultimately served the primary objective of ensuring the regime's security and continuation and were not an essential objective in and of itself. Additionally, the Iran team believed there was greater interest in preserving a pathway to the bomb than in obtaining the bomb itself, which brought both benefits and greater risks. Along the pathway to the bomb, the Iran team had the flexibility to speed up or slow down development and could modulate its research and development effort to extract the greatest benefit from a negotiated settlement with the U.S. team or to throttle tensions. The Iran team held reservations about completing development of a weapon for fear of becoming "the dog that caught the car." The team feared the possible consequences that might follow in the wake of developing a nuclear weapon, such as a military attack from the United States or Israel, or global isolation, similar to North Korea.

Iran drove hard bargains.

In contemplating an extension of the JCPOA, the Iran team prepared to maximize negotiating positions to extract the most concessions from the West, in exchange for continued compliance. It planned to resist the extension of sunset clauses and as a negotiation tactic, the team prepared to diminish the value of any realized benefits from previous JCPOA sanctions relief and to revel in the freedom of action Iran would enjoy following the lapse of the deal. Additionally, the Iran team demonstrated skepticism that it would materially benefit from a "longer, stronger deal." The Iran team sought to aggressively advance the nuclear program as provisions ended while suing for fewer limits, safeguards, and oversight in any future agreement.

Iran propagated and exploited ambiguity around its nuclear program and took more risks.

Throughout the exercise, the Iran team was purposely ambiguous about advancements toward a nuclear weapon, while flouting the deal and pursuing covert advances in its nuclear program. The Iran team believed this ambiguity would prevent direct action from the U.S. team or Israel team and keep the international community focused on other, seemingly more pressing, global issues, such as great-power competition with Russia and China. Additionally, this use of ambiguity divided thinking on the appropriate counteractions to Iran's nuclear activities.

Iran engaged both diplomatic carrots and military sticks.

The Iran team pursued positive regional engagement through diplomatic engagements with Europeans and Gulf states while continuing its malign regional activities. Overall, the Iran team sought a balance of maximizing legitimacy while preserving coercive potential.

The United States

The United States pursued transparency.

The U.S. team focused on creating public transparency regarding Iran's nuclear program. Broadly, the U.S. team sought to build global and regional coalitions focused on extending transparency over Iran's nuclear activities and its unconventional, gray zone activities in the region. The team used transparency to isolate Iran and limit the public deniability and ambiguity surrounding its activities, which Tehran exploits to enable its nuclear program's expansion, missile development, and proliferation of weapons to regional partners and proxies. The U.S. team pursued a blended approach of inviting diplomatic talks while engaging in military exercises with regional partners to deter Iranian action.

The United States was open to all means of preventing an Iranian nuclear weapon but favored diplomacy.

The U.S. team maintained focus on the goal to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, whether or not a deal was renewed or extended. The U.S. team prepared to prevent Iran from obtaining a weapon across several lines of effort. The U.S. team prioritized cohesion in the international community to maximize the effect of its tools. It continued to prefer and sequence diplomatic engagement before pursuing military action, while building up the integrated defensive military capabilities of regional partners.

Israel

Israel leveraged ambiguity to preserve its response options.

The Israel team maintained public ambiguity about the breadth and scope of any military response it considered to thwart Iran's nuclear program. While the Iran team sought to avoid making decisions that would provoke an attack from Israel, the Israel team projected ambiguity about a potential military strike to inject greater uncertainty into Iranian decision-making. The Israel team's public message suggested it could strike narrowly to set the nuclear program back, or execute a broader military campaign directed at the regime. The team purposely projected ambiguity in its military actions, believing the risk of unintended escalations was worth any additional benefit it provided in deterring Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon and threatening Israel.

Israel, when more isolated, became more aggressive.

The Israel team did not trust Iran to negotiate in good faith. It believed that Iran would stretch negotiations to exploit time, using publicized, incremental advances in its nuclear program to extract concessions, stall, and then push for more concessions, in an indefinite cycle or until it made the decision to build a weapon. The Israel team scrambled diplomatically to convince the United States and the international community of the futility of returning to or extending the JCPOA. The Israel team stressed that anything less than a "longer, stronger" deal (one without sunsets that would also restrict potential delivery systems of nuclear devices, in addition to the development of fissile material and the devices themselves) would have no meaningful counterproliferation value to the international community. The Israel team became increasingly active militarily against Iranian military units and proxies engaged in weapons development and proliferation. These actions intended to both disrupt operations and deter Iran from pursuing nuclear advances.

Gulf States

Gulf states balanced their relationships and hedged.

In dealing with Iran, the Gulf team prioritized the pursuit of near-term regional stability. It took a more holistic view of Iran policy, choosing to consider Iran's behavior in the region more generally rather than focus primarily on Iran's nuclear program. Through positive direct engagement, the Gulf team sought to appease Iran and limit

Iran's use of regional proxies to impose costs on the Gulf states. It also sought to enfranchise the Iran team as an economic partner and as a member of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), believing that engagement with Iran would prevent the Iran team from targeting the Gulf states with gray zone activities.

Persistent instability and uncertainty in the region led the Gulf team to expand and diversify the purchase of arms from Europe, China, and Israel. While making gestures of public diplomacy to the Iran team, they also sought to accelerate their own exploration of nuclear deterrent capabilities and expanded security dealings with the Israel team. However, the Gulf team viewed a military confrontation with Iran as the worst possible outcome and sought to balance provocation with engagement. It was widely observed, that in neither scenario were there any conditions in which Iran would cease using its "malign activities" throughout the region.

Interteam Dynamics

The authors noted some distinctive characteristics of interaction between certain teams.

Teams sought to preserve ambiguity of their own decisions while forcing transparency on adversaries.

The teams were all generally ambiguous in public messaging to preserve decision space for themselves, while pressing their adversaries to be transparent to constrain their decision space. For example, the Iran team sought to preserve a shroud of ambiguity around its nuclear program, while the U.S. team attempted to ensure greater transparency of Iran's nuclear activities. The U.S., Israel, and Iran teams all found refuge in ambiguity, particularly when issuing responses to the actions of the others. The Iran team avoided making specific threats to the other teams. Similarly, the Israel team remained publicly vague about how it might respond to Iran continuing down the path toward a nuclear weapon. In addition to preserving their own decision space, the teams used ambiguity to inject greater uncertainty into the decision-making of their adversaries, potentially increasing the deterrent value of public messages intimating a coming response.

The Gulf and Iran teams balanced diplomacy and force.

The Gulf and Iran teams independently crafted a parallel approach to dealing with each other. The Iran team engaged the Gulf team through diplomatic channels, while also attempting to coerce compliance through proxies' acts of aggression. The Gulf team engaged diplomatically, while continuing to develop independent military capabilities and bi- and multilateral security partnerships to defend against the Iran team's military adventurism.

U.S. and Israel team coordination reduced the risk of unilateral military action.

The exercise revealed that a deficit in coordination between the U.S. and Israel teams on how to collectively approach the issue of Iran's nuclear program increased the risk of unilateral military action by the Israel team. The Israel team was more prone to take matters into its own hands militarily when it felt the U.S. team's pursuit of a diplomatic solution was emboldening the Iran team to become more intransigent in negotiations or act out regionally. The Israel team took a more restrained posture when it perceived that the U.S. team was acting in close coordination with it.

Recommendations for Policymakers

U.S. policymakers should identify actions they could take, in coordination with Congress and partners and allies, that would inject uncertainty and, ultimately, cause Iranian regime leaders to believe that further nuclear program advancement imperils the regime, rather than preserves it. Thus far, discussion of the use of force has largely been limited to strikes directly on Iran's nuclear facilities for the purpose of setting back the program.[47] However, strikes on Iran's nuclear program may have the counterproductive effect of demonstrating to the regime that nuclear deterrence is essential, due to the overmatch that the United States and its partners hold in conventional military capability. Instead of a strike on Iran's nuclear program, it should be stressed that further advancement risks military action targeting Iran's regime.

The administration should consider what tools it can employ to make the nuclear program radioactive to Iran's leadership. A renewed U.S. strategy to reshape the regime's calculus could include a range of activities:

Shift the public messaging.

President Biden has publicly stated that U.S. policy is to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.[48] However, a shift in rhetoric could put the burden back onto the regime if the president were to communicate that continued advancement toward a nuclear weapon directly endangers Iran's leaders and government. President Biden or senior members of his foreign policy staff could

also publicly contemplate what might be required from Congress in the form of an Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) targeting Iran's military leadership and senior clerical elite due to their unwillingness to abandon the nuclear program, as a means of further footstomping the point that the regime's future is jeopardized by its dalliances with a bomb.

Update the private, direct messaging.

U.S. leaders should consider sending private messages to Iran's political and military leaders indicating its resolve to see them removed from power should they not abandon the nuclear program. As recently as early 2020, the United States demonstrated the military capacity to target individual Iranian leaders, such that direct messaging to individuals with the power to determine the future of Iran's nuclear program could have a very persuasive and coercive effect.[49] Having demonstrated that the capability exists to target Iran's military leaders, augmenting that demonstrated capability with a shift in public messaging, the United States could convince Iran's leaders that Iran's nuclear program is a millstone around their necks, rather than an insurance policy that ensures their survival.

Define success, in coordination with partners and allies.

U.S. policymakers, foreign partners, and allies should reach an internal consensus on what actions Iran's regime should take to comply. Because of the advancements Iran has made since 2018, simply abandoning any current enrichment efforts or research that would advance Iran's ability to weaponize is likely insufficient. Instead, identifying a mechanism to roll back Iran's program may be necessary, such that the IAEA could employ verification mechanisms to alert the international community of any noncompliance with enough notice to enable action before Iran can complete a weapon.[50] Reaching these conditions would require sustained compliance from Iran, so if the United States were successful in convincing Iran to "abandon the program," it might realistically return to a diplomatically negotiated process, rather than complete capitulation by the regime. A return to a negotiated process that has the support of U.S. partners in the Middle East—in which the United States has demonstrated to Iran it has the resolve to strike and threaten the regime—would likely yield greater concessions from Tehran, than one in which Tehran believed the costs of failing to reach agreement were absorbable.

Develop a Middle East regional security architecture.

In the exercise, the Iran team sought to intimidate regional adversaries by arming and enabling its proxies to engage in gray zone attacks. To limit the risk to regional partners, the United States should develop greater defensive military capacity and integrated capabilities among its Middle East regional partners. With CENTCOM in the lead, the United States should establish integrated air and missile defense systems and joint maritime intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance capabilities. These capabilities should enable Israel and U.S. Gulf partners to neutralize ballistic missiles and loitering munitions proliferated by Iran, interdict Iranian weapons smugglers operating in the maritime space, counter Iran's offensive cyber capabilities, and ensure navigational freedom in critical commercial waterways around the Arabian Peninsula.

While creating new opportunities, this proposed shift in strategy also includes significant risks. Public messaging from the United States that directly threatens the regime may create more public discourse about the American public's willingness (or lack thereof) to engage Iran in direct military hostilities. Any discussion of a potential AUMF would likely generate fierce debate or rebuke from some congressional leaders, as there continues to be significant political dispute about the continuation of the current 2001 and 2002 AUMFs that authorized hostilities against al Qaeda and Iraq, respectively. Iran might also push back, either in rhetoric or deeds. Finally, it must be clear to policymakers that any U.S. military action taken against Iran—regardless of the target—risks an Iranian military response and an escalation into war.

Conclusion

This scenario exercise identified trends and strategic considerations that could inform real-world policy planning. The exercise revealed that unity of effort, goals, and greater strategic cohesion between the United States, Israel, and Gulf state teams reduced the risk of miscalculation or unanticipated escalation with Iran. The absence of clarity and cohesion among these teams gave the Iran team greater control in nuclear negotiations and empowered Tehran to coerce and constrain its neighbors by blending diplomatic engagement with destabilizing and destructive direct and indirect military action. The exercise suggested that the Iran team saw its nuclear program as a tool in service of the regime's survival. The Iran team made calibrated advances in the program to build influence and generate more decision space for itself. Where the U.S. team sought to obtain greater transparency in the Iran team's nuclear activities as a means of limiting its decision space, the Iran team sought to manufacture ambiguity over its activities, to obfuscate them and benefit from its adversaries' uncertainty.

With the understanding from the exercise that Iran perceives its nuclear program as a tool of regime preservation, the United States should consider modifying its Iran strategy to focus on reshaping Iranian leaders' views of the nuclear program from a benefit to a liability for regime continuity. The United States should engage Iran in public and private messaging, refocus its military toolkit on regime leaders and entities of state power, and closely coordinate with partners and allies to project collective strength and unity of action. To better neutralize regional instability caused by Iran's provocation, both directly and through proxies, the United States should redouble efforts to develop a multilateral, regional security architecture that includes Israel and the United States' Gulf partners.

Appendix A: Scenario Exercise Descriptions

Scenario #1 – No Return to JCPOA

It is September 14, 2024.

It has been over six years since former President Trump withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018, and there has not been a return to mutual compliance under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). President Biden, who pledged to reenter the JCPOA, has faced significant challenges in returning to the deal.

Efforts to negotiate a reentry to the deal, began in 2021 between U.S., Iranian, and European diplomats but failed. The death of Kurdish-Iranian Mahsa (Jina) Amini in 2022 ignited a massive protest movement throughout Iran. Iran's violent response to the protests led the United States and European Union to further sanction Iranian government entities and Washington pivoted away from pursuing a return to the nuclear deal.

Beginning in August 2022, Iranian-made drones were reportedly used by Russia in its war with Ukraine, with evidence indicating that some were used against civilian populations. In October 2022, further reports of sales of surface-to-surface missiles to Russia emerged. Despite claims by the Iranian foreign minister that Iran remains neutral in the war and has not and will not provide weapons to either side, the international community has responded with calls for increased sanctions and export controls. In violation of U.N. Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2231, France and the United Kingdom have accused Iran of violating the ballistic missile prohibitions.

Due to increased tensions, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have increased their activities in the region. In 2023, the U.S. Navy Fifth Fleet hosted its largest ever exercise with regional partners in the Gulf of Oman, sending over 3,000 military personnel to participate. Iran responded with its own naval drills the very next week, complete with a statement by the IRGC naval commodore claiming that "US bullying will be met with the strength of martyrs."

In addition to elevating the budget of the IRGC and its various paramilitary wings, Iran's government has become increasingly obstinate with international regulators and watchdogs. Following Iran's removal of 27 International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) cameras at various nuclear sites in 2022 Iran blocked the agency from conducting regular inspections at its Natanz and Fordow fuel enrichment plants. U.S. officials and regional partners have elevated security concerns following Persian-language reporting in June 2024 that Iran has begun enriching uranium to 90 percent purity.

Israel has been the loudest in expressing alarm at Iran's enrichment progress. As a response to the reports of Iran's increasing enrichment levels, Israel's prime minister promised the Israeli public that Iran "would not be allowed to write the epitaph of the Jewish state or its people, nor will its advances be tolerated peacefully."

Beginning with his visit to the region in 2022, President Biden has worked to incrementally develop a regional security framework with the Abraham Accord signatory Gulf states, Egypt, Jordan, and Israel to "address regional threats," which includes, but does not overtly seek, countering Iran. While a formal international agreement has yet to be announced, covert advancements have been made in the Saudi-Israeli intelligence sharing relationship. The Kingdom ended its exclusion of Israeli products from tariff concessions with its Gulf neighbors, and began indirect collaboration with Israel on regional food and water security. The Iranian supreme leader has publicly decried Arab engagement with the "usurping, despotic Zionist regime" as a betrayal of Palestinians, but his rhetoric has failed to slow the momentum toward Saudi-Israeli normalization or greater Israeli regional integration.

U.S. elections are looming, and Democrats have continued President Biden's tough rhetoric on Iran. The Republican presidential nominee has criticized Biden for attempting to return to the JCPOA and having failed to slow Iran's nuclear advance or deter its activities in the Middle East region and Europe.

Scenario #2 – Return to JCPOA

It is September 14, 2024.

It has been over six years since former President Trump withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018. Since September 2022, Iran has experienced widespread antigovernment protests pertaining to women's rights, repression, corruption, and economic issues. The Iranian government successfully crushed the bulk of the protests and global media attention faded by the end of the year. Additionally, following the conclusion of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) investigation in January 2023, IAEA did not conclusively find Iran had violated its agreements. Through a series of diplomatic meetings, the United States and Iran agreed to reenter the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in June 2023. After a 90-day implementation process, both countries successfully returned to full compliance in September 2023.

Iran's economic outlook has marginally but steadily improved since the deal's reimplementation. However, citizens are continually frustrated at the regime's inability to invest in deteriorating infrastructure, cuts to food and fuel subsidies, and failure to address regional water and electricity shortages. The Iranian president has continually increased the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and military budgets.

The signatories of the Abraham Accords have incrementally deepened their security relationships. Israel received four KC-46A aerial refueling tankers from the United States in January 2023, extending the range of its air force. Israel, UAE, Bahrain, and the United States have held joint multidomain military exercises in the Arabian Sea, purposed with ensuring freedom of navigation in strategic waterways and enhancing collective maritime domain awareness. Israel has established nascent intelligence sharing agreements with Bahrain and UAE. Additionally, through U.S. engagement, Israel intends to share ballistic missile defense technology with UAE.

The Gulf states have consistently seen economic growth at their 2022 levels and have invested significantly in sustainable energy. UAE has led the region in nuclear energy development and it is forecasted that the Barakh plant will produce 85 percent of the country's clean energy by 2025. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are attempting to replicate UAE's nuclear energy program. The IAEA has monitored these discussions, noting that extra safeguards are required to ensure nuclear safety and security in the region. GCC nations have prioritized the goal of making nuclear power their main source of energy by 2032. Since 2022, UAE has invested over $10 billion in Israeli companies, primarily focused on cybersecurity and sustainable energy development. Over 2,000 Israeli companies have begun working in and through UAE.

Saudi Arabia is covertly negotiating its own bilateral agreement with Israel. Publicly, Saudi Arabia has participated in exercises orchestrated by U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) in conjunction with other Gulf partners. It continues to pursue significant military reforms while working to develop enhanced ballistic missile defensive capabilities. The conflict in Yemen remains largely stalemated and has been subject to perennial ceasefires that have enabled an inconstant flow of humanitarian aid. Yemen remains the most significant global humanitarian crisis.

In 2025, the U.N. Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2231 will expire, ending constraints on Iran's arms embargo, centrifuge production and nuclear research, and sunsetting the snapback sanctions mechanism. The international community is interested in securing mechanisms to extend constraints on Iran's nuclear program and to seek ways to deter Iran's perceived malign activities in the Middle East region.

Appendix B: Major JCPOA Provisions[51]

Area Covered	Provision
Enrichment	■ Iran will maintain a total enriched uranium stockpile of no more than 300 kg of up to 3.67 percent enriched uranium hexafluoride (or the equivalent in different chemical forms) for 15 years. ■ Iran will not produce, seek, or acquire separated plutonium, highly enriched uranium (defined as 20 percent or greater U-235), uranium-233, or neptunium-237 for 15 years. ■ Based on its own long-term plan, for 15 years Iran will carry out its uranium enrichment–related activities, including safeguarded R&D, exclusively in the Natanz enrichment facility.
Centrifuge	■ After eight years, manufacture of up to 200 IR-6 and 200 IR-8 centrifuges without rotors. ■ Iran will be begin phasing out its IR-1 centrifuges in 10 years. During this period, Iran will keep its enrichment capacity at Natanz at up to a total installed uranium enrichment capacity of 5060 IR-1 centrifuges. Excess centrifuges and enrichment-related infrastructure at Natanz will be stored under International Energy Agency (IAEA) continuous monitoring. ■ Iran will continue to conduct enrichment R&D in a manner that does not accumulate enriched uranium. Iran's enrichment R&D with uranium for 10 years will only include IR-4, IR-5, IR-6 and IR-8 centrifuges as laid out in Annex I, and Iran will not engage in other isotope separation technologies for the enrichment of uranium as specified in Annex I. Iran will continue testing IR-6 and IR-8 centrifuges and will commence testing of up to 30 IR-6 and IR-8 centrifuges after 8.5 years.
Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant	■ Iran will not conduct any uranium enrichment or any uranium enrichment–related R&D and will have no nuclear material at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant for 15 years. ■ Iran will convert the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant into a nuclear, physics, and technology center. International collaboration, including in the form of scientific joint partnerships, will be established in agreed areas of research. ■ 1044 IR-1 centrifuges in six cascades will remain in one wing of Fordow. Two of these cascades will spin without uranium and be transitioned, including through appropriate infrastructure modification, for stable isotope production. The other four cascades with all associated infrastructure will remain idle. All other centrifuges and enrichment-related infrastructure will be removed and stored under IAEA continuous monitoring as specified in Annex I.

Arak Heavy Water Reactor	▪ Remove and disable the original core of the Arak Heavy Water Reactor after adoption of the JCPOA. ▪ There will be no additional heavy water reactors or accumulation of heavy water in Iran for 15 years. All excess heavy water will be made available for export to the international market. ▪ Iran intends to ship out all spent fuel for all future and present power and research nuclear reactors for further treatment or disposition as provided for in relevant contracts to be duly concluded with the recipient party.
Monitoring	▪ Iran will allow the IAEA to monitor the implementation of the voluntary measures for their respective durations, as well as to implement transparency measures, as set out in this JCPOA and its Annexes. These measures include: a long-term IAEA presence in Iran; IAEA monitoring of uranium ore concentrate produced by Iran from all uranium ore concentrate plants for 25 years; containment and surveillance of centrifuge rotors and bellows for 20 years; use of IAEA approved and certified modern technologies including online enrichment measurement and electronic seals; and a reliable mechanism to ensure speedy resolution of IAEA access concerns for 15 years, as defined in Annex I.
U.S. Sanctions	▪ On Implementation Day, the United States commits to cease the application of, and to seek such legislative action as may be appropriate to terminate, or modify to effectuate the termination of, all nuclear-related sanctions, including financial and banking measures, insurance measures, energy, shipping, precious metals, and the automotive sector.
EU Sanctions	▪ On Implementation Day, the EU and its member states will adopt an EU regulation, taking effect as of Implementation Day, terminating all provisions of the EU regulation implementing all nuclear-related economic and financial sanctions related to Iran's nuclear program
U.N. Sanctions	▪ For five years, the heavy arms embargo will remain in place. ▪ For eight years, the ballistic missile restrictions will remain in place. ▪ For 10 years, sanctions are subject to snapback by veto of a resolution calling for the continuation of suspension.

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