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Overview: The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

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On July 14, 2015, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, Germany, the EU, and Iran signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) - also known as the [Iran Nuclear Deal](#). The deal placed significant restrictions on Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief. On May 8, 2018, the Trump Administration unilaterally withdrew the U.S. from the JCPOA and reimposed sanctions on Iran. Iran maintained compliance with the deal for a full year after the U.S. withdrew, at which point it began to breach the limits on its nuclear program. Negotiations to bring the U.S. and Iran back into compliance have been ongoing since April 6, 2021, and a return to the deal or a new agreement could be imminent.

Overview of Current Talks

During the negotiations, Iran has consistently called for the U.S. to lift the sanctions it re-imposed on Iran, which have hurt Iran's banking and energy sector, and made it difficult for Iran to import vital resources like [food, fuel, and medicine](#). The U.S. has maintained that Iran must scale-back its nuclear program before lifting sanctions. It has been reported that the Joint Committee is close to finalizing a [20 page](#) agreement that focuses on sanctions relief and rolling back Iran's nuclear program.

Sanctions: Even with a return to the deal or a new deal, Iran will still be one of the most heavily sanctioned countries on the planet. When former President Trump withdrew the U.S. from the deal and re-imposed sanctions on Iran, he also imposed new sanctions that were inconsistent with the deal. Under the original deal, Iran saw relief from the following sanctions:

- UN and EU sanctions related to Iran's nuclear program
- U.S. economic sanctions on Iran's oil and banking sector
- U.S. sanctions on Iran's financial and trade institutions, such as its Central Bank
- Secondary sanctions on Iran's oil companies and economic institutions

Iran was still subject to the following sanctions:

- Sanctions on missile technologies and conventional weapons
- Terror sanctions related to Iran's classification as a state sponsor of terrorism
- Targeted sanctions on individuals who support Iran's engagement with terror networks
- Sanctions on Iran's ballistic missile program
- Sanctions related to human rights abuses
- Sanctions on Iran's support for proxies in Syria and Yemen

Iran's Nuclear Program: Iran has gradually been rebuilding its nuclear program since the U.S. withdrawal from the deal. The International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA)

most recent quarterly report found that Iran has accumulated [33.2 kg of enriched uranium up to 60% purity](#). This is the highest level of uranium Iran has enriched to date and is not far from the amount needed to build a nuclear weapon. Under the original deal, Iran was required to comply with the [following](#) nuclear restrictions:

- Reduce the centrifuges it produces enriched uranium with to [5,060 IR-1s](#)
- Cap its enrichment of uranium at 3.67%, which is far below weapons-grade
- Keep its stockpile of enriched uranium at or under 300 kilograms for 15 years
- Dismantle enrichment operations at various facilities
- Adhere to a strict monitoring program by the IAEA

Prisoner Release: While not directly related to the nuclear negotiations, the prisoner swap is seen as running parallel to the nuclear talks. There are currently [four](#) Americans detained in Iran, and [16 Iranians](#) detained in the U.S. Iran is seeking money and a release of Iranian prisoners in exchange for releasing American prisoners. U.S. Special Envoy for Iran, [Robert Malley](#), has said that the U.S. will not lift sanctions under a new deal until American prisoners are released. On March 16, 2022, Iran released British-Iranian [Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe](#), who had been detained in Iran since 2016.

Russia: As Russia continues to wage an unprovoked war in Ukraine, it has been hit with severe economic sanctions by the U.S. and Europe. Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, delayed negotiations by stating that Western sanctions on Russia were an [impediment](#) to Russian commitments under the JCPOA. Later Lavrov said he received written guarantees that Russia will be able to carry out its obligations under the agreement, which allowed negotiations to continue.

Potential Options

There are three possible outcomes of current JCPOA negotiations:

1. A full deal
2. An interim "less for less" deal
3. No deal at all

Full Deal: A full deal would restore the JCPOA with some modifications. It would lift U.S. sanctions as outlined in the deal and Iran would have to return to compliance with the deal's nuclear restrictions and allow for a strict IAEA monitoring program.

A full deal will likely include a key modification, which is the lifting of sanctions that the Trump Administration imposed that were inconsistent with the deal. Iran is unlikely to agree to a deal that doesn't include lifting these sanctions, because Iran would end up more sanctioned than under the original deal. President Trump did this [deliberately](#) to make it harder for a future president who supports the deal to restore the original agreement.

Iran is also seeking guarantees in a new deal that the terms of the agreement will not be violated by future U.S. presidents, and that the agreement will be enforced regardless of who is in the White House. Iran has also called for a new deal to include the delisting of Iran's [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) (IRGC) as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO), which U.S. officials are [considering](#). Even if the IRGC is delisted, it would still be heavily [sanctioned](#).

Interim “Less for Less” Deal: An interim “less for less” deal would have Iran agree to some nuclear restrictions, but not all, and the U.S. would lift some sanctions, but not all. Iran has [ruled out](#) this deal and the U.S. is no longer [considering](#) it either.

No Deal: If a deal is not reached, it could have severe consequences for peace and security and exacerbate a humanitarian crisis in Iran. Prior to the implementation of the JCPOA, Iran was 2-3 months from developing a nuclear bomb. The JCPOA pushed Iran’s “breakout time” to one year. A no-deal scenario would expedite Iran’s nuclear weapons program and enable them to enrich uranium to weapons-grade. No deal could lead to significant escalations in the region against [U.S. forces](#) and could also increase the risk of proxy warfare.

No deal would also continue the inhumane sanctions regime on Iran, which has led to [food inflation](#), an increased [cost of living](#), reduced access to food and medicine, and weakened Iran’s currency. Iran’s central bank has valued Iran’s rial at [42,000](#) per U.S. dollar, however, some unofficial markets state it is 250,000 per U.S. dollar.

Actions for Congress

A new deal would likely be subject to review by Congress under the [Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act of 2015](#) (INARA). INARA included the text of the JCPOA and was officially adopted by Congress in May 2015 upon receipt from President Barack Obama.

Because the text of the JCPOA would likely change to include lifting sanctions that Trump imposed that were inconsistent with the original deal, as well as new Iranian advances, this means that the text of INARA will change as well. President Biden will most likely submit the new deal to Congress, at that point it will trigger a 30-day congressional review period, which also gives Congress the opportunity to pass a [joint resolution of disapproval](#) against the agreement. If a joint resolution of disapproval fails to be enacted, either as a result of not passing both chambers or being vetoed by the president, the administration can move forward with implementing the deal.

Conclusion

The 2015 JCPOA brokered by the Obama-Biden Administration was considered a diplomatic success story. Countries around the world came together to non-violently address a global problem. Restoring the deal or agreeing to a new one will hopefully allow the U.S. and Iran to cooperate on other areas, such as the status of dual Iranian-American nationals who are unfairly detained in Iran and open the path to future diplomacy. A restored diplomatic agreement could also pave the way to tackle issues such as Iran’s ballistic missile program and its support for regional proxies. Abandoning talks makes it less likely that these concerns can be meaningfully addressed. If no deal is reached, Iran will come much closer to developing a nuclear weapon and tensions could escalate rapidly, in turn endangering human life.

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