



## Disarmament and International Security

**Topic Guide:** The question of restoring the Iran Nuclear Agreement

### Introduction

The Iran Nuclear Agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed in July 2015 by the five permanent members of the Security Council, Germany, the EU and Iran.

The aim of the Agreement was to restrict the Iranian nuclear program in exchange for billions of dollars' worth of sanctions relief. Iran complied with the Agreement and experienced a significant economic boost as oil exports (their primary source of income) returned to almost pre-sanction levels and over 100 billion dollars' worth of Iranian assets were unfrozen.

However, the deal has been in jeopardy since 2018, when Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew the US from the Agreement and reinstated banking and oil sanctions on Iran. In retaliation, Iran started to rebuild its previously muted nuclear program, much to the chagrin of Western powers eager to avoid a new nuclear competitor as well as another conflict in the Middle East.

Although President Biden has pledged to re-enter the Agreement, each side's unwillingness to compromise as well as events such as Iranian support of Russia against Ukraine have greatly delayed a new deal from being reached.

### General Information

The primary aim of the Iran Nuclear Agreement is to minimize the potential for conflict between Iran and its neighbouring states as well as to prevent its nuclear program from becoming a threat. Iran agreed to dismantle much of its nuclear program – including reducing production of enriched uranium or plutonium (both of which are used to make nuclear weapons) by 98% – and consented to receiving more extensive international inspections with the purpose of preventing the secret development of nuclear arms (as Iran had allegedly done before). In essence, an international monitoring scheme was put in place to keep every aspect of Iranian nuclear activity under surveillance, and in doing so to also be alerted to foul play on the part of Iran. In return for Iranian compliance, sanctions were dropped, resulting in an increase in Iranian oil exports and a significant economic boost.

However, following the US's withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Agreement in 2018 and reinstatement of sanctions, the Iranian economy has experienced a decline as the sanctions cut into a vital source of Iranian revenue, namely oil exports. In retaliation, Iran started exceeding its agreed-upon limits of nuclear activity, including increasing its stockpile of uranium and producing centrifuges to enrich uranium to the higher concentrations needed for nuclear weapons. In January 2020, following the targeted US killing of a top Iranian general, Iran announced that it would no longer limit its uranium enrichment.

JCPOA signatories have attempted to organize talks to bring Washington and Tehran back onto the agreement, and these appeared to be reaching an eventual conclusion but have been made more difficult due to events such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and also due to each side's unwillingness to compromise. Indeed, Iranian Foreign Minister Amir-Abdollahian recently accused the US of putting too much pressure on Iran and vowed not to make any concessions in the new Agreement.

The reason for urgency in this matter is largely due to Iran's growing expertise in nuclear manufacturing. Although many of its violations of the Nuclear Agreement are reversible, such as its increased stockpiling of enriched uranium, its newfound knowledge of nuclear weapons is not reversible and raises the potential of Iran becoming a threat to regional and global peace and security.

### UN Involvement

A UN resolution was passed in 2015 which ensured the enforcement of the JPCOA and granted the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) continual access to Iranian nuclear facilities with the aim of monitoring all nuclear activity in the State.

The IAEA, acting as the UN's nuclear watchdog, was given unrestricted access to Iranian nuclear facilities and was tasked with monitoring their nuclear program as well as issuing quarterly reports to the UN Security Council on the matter.

If one of the signatories suspects that Iran is violating the Agreement, the UN Security Council can vote on whether or not to continue sanctions relief.

### Further Reading

- Council on Foreign Relations: What Iran Nuclear Deal
  - <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-iran-nuclear-deal>
- Aljazeera News: Analysis: Are the US and Iran about to restore the nuclear deal?
  - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/23/analysis-are-the-us-and-iran-about-to-restore-the-nuclear-deal>
- Arms Control Association: The Logic of Restoring Compliance with the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal
  - <https://www.armscontrol.org/issue-briefs/2022-02/logic-restoring-compliance-2015-iran-nuclear-deal>
- US Institute of Peace, The Iran Primer: Biden Diplomacy on Iran
  - <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2021/apr/02/new-talks-timeline-diplomacy-under-biden>
- Washington Post: Desperate for allies, Russia cultivates ties with Iran and Saudi Arabia
  - <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/10/29/russia-iran-saudi-drones-oil/>