

IRAN'S WILLINGNESS TO ENGAGE IN NUCLEAR NEGOTIATIONS: POSSIBLE REVIVAL OF THE JOINT COMPREHENSIVE PLAN OF ACTION?

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Iran's nuclear program is again at the center of global debate, especially amidst the evolving global scenario of rising tensions between Iran and the West. Similarly, the revival of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) has been central to the debate on Iran's nuclear program. The establishment of JCPOA in the year 2015 was a watershed moment in the history of nuclear negotiations when world powers and Iran reached this key agreement.¹ This agreement, which aims to act as an impediment to Iran's nuclear development while evading sanctions, experienced a major blow in 2018 with the U.S. withdrawal announced by the Trump administration. Since the United States' withdrawal, several initiatives have been taken to revive the agreement; however, no successful outcome has been reached, leaving the JCPOA in limbo.

The negotiations for JCPOA were initiated in the year 2003, resulting in a 170-page document. After over a decade of negotiations, it served as a significant step forward not only in the history of the Treaty on the Nuclear Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) but also in international relations.² The success of this agreement was short-lived due to the U.S. withdrawal. However, hope for the revival of the JCPOA was restored in 2021, when the Biden administration expressed commitment to

¹ Seyed Hossein Mousavian, "The Rise and Fall of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 6, no. 6 (2023): 32-47.

² Ibid.

revitalizing various international agreements from which the Trump administration had withdrawn.³ The Administration also took diplomatic initiatives to ensure the compliance of both Iran and the U.S. with the terms of the agreement.⁴ The negotiations eventually began in January 2022, in Vienna, between Iran and the P5+1, however, this too did not yield a successful outcome.⁵ Iran already held a pessimistic view on negotiating with the West as Iran's Supreme Leader, Seyyed Ali Khamenei, had previously stated that the discussions were another “act of deception” by the U.S. to disarm Iran from its “elements of power.”⁶

The current year sparked a glimmer of hope once again when Iran's Supreme Leader, new President, and Foreign Minister expressed interest in negotiating with the West over its nuclear program. In August 2024, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei signaled openness to renewing negotiations with the U.S., stating that there exists “no harm” in engaging with “the enemy.”⁷ However, it is important to note that he remained firm in his stance on not placing complete trust in the U.S., as he stated, “There is no harm in that, but do not place your hopes in them.”⁸ Similarly, according to the Iranian Foreign Minister, Seyed Abbas Araghchi, “Tehran is ready to open talks on Iran's nuclear program, should others prove willing.”⁹

Moreover, in September 2024, while addressing the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian conveyed his wish to initiate a “constructive” chapter in Iran's international relations.¹⁰ He stated that Iran is willing to cooperate with Western countries regarding its nuclear program. Conveying his openness to engage with the participants of the nuclear deal, he also highlighted that discussions regarding other issues could be touched upon if the commitments of

³ Lindsay Maizland, “Biden's First Foreign Policy Move: Reentering International Agreements”, *Council of Foreign Relations*, January 21, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/bidens-first-foreign-policy-move-reentering-international-agreements>.

⁴ Justin Sink and Mario Parker, “Diplomacy is Back: Biden to Reverse Trump's Foreign Policy Moves,” *Financial Review*, February 5, 2021, <https://www.afr.com/world/north-america/diplomacy-is-back-biden-to-reverse-trump-s-foreign-policy-moves-20210205-p56zsu>.

⁵ Alishba Khan, “Failure of Revival of JCPOA? Implications for Regional Stability,” *Institute of Strategic Studies*, September 19, 2022, 1-4.

⁶ “Leader: U.S. Negotiations offer is a Deception Aimed to Strip Iran of its Defense Power,” *Tehran Times*, June 26, 2019, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/437462/Leader-U-S-negotiations-offer-is-a-deception-aimed-to-strip>.

⁷ Jon Gambrell, “Iran's Supreme Leader Opens Door to Negotiations with US over Tehran's Nuclear Program,” *AP News*, August, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/iran-nuclear-deal-khamenei-us-tensions-bc11763f45041ac84171ebc3866f1273>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “Iran Ready to Resume Nuclear Negotiations Immediately: Foreign Minister,” *Aljazeera*, September 23, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/9/23/iran-ready-to-resume-nuclear-negotiations-immediately-foreign-minister>.

¹⁰ “Iran's President Pezeshkian says Tehran Ready to Improve Ties with West,” *Aljazeera*, September 25, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/9/25/irans-president-pezeshkian-says-tehran-ready-to-improve-ties-with-west>.

the agreement are sincerely fulfilled.¹¹ Therefore, despite the concerns, these statements emphasize Iran's willingness to come to the negotiating stage.

Furthermore, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)'s Director General Rafael Grossi, in an interview with *Al Arabiya*, expressed his concerns regarding Iran's continued increase in highly enriched Uranium.¹² On September 9, he pointed out the dire need to resolve the challenges linked to the Iranian obligations under the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement.¹³ He emphasized that addressing these challenges is important for the Agency to ensure that the Iranian nuclear program is fully peaceful. According to Chief Grossi, Iran has not met its responsibilities under the Safeguards Agreement and did not abide by its obligations under the JCPOA for around three-and-a-half years.¹⁴ However, following the recent UNGA session, Grossi expressed his hope to pay a visit to Tehran in October as he noticed great willingness on the part of Iranian officials to cooperate with the Agency in a more impactful manner.¹⁵

As nothing remains static in international relations, the current war in Gaza coupled with the Israeli attacks in Lebanon, the loss of Iranian allied military commanders in Israeli strikes, and Iran's recent ballistic missile attacks on Israel, have accentuated the hostility between Iran and the West, ally of Israel. This, as a result, has undermined the possibility of negotiations once again. Throughout history, Iran's nuclear program has been perceived to pose a major threat to the national and collective security of Western nations and Israel.¹⁶ Iran has constantly received criticism from the West and its allies for developing nuclear weapons, which Iran has claimed to be not true. The current scenario worries former American officials and analysts as they believe it could provoke Iran to rapidly develop nuclear weapons.¹⁷ According to them, there now lies a possibility for Iran to make use of its potential nuclear status to deter its enemies.¹⁸ Additionally, a nonproliferation expert, Gregory Koblentz,

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "IAEA Chief on Reviving Iran Nuclear Deal, Preventing Russia-Ukraine Nuclear Disaster," *Al Arabiya*, September 2, 2024, <https://english.alarabiya.net/webtv/programs/special-interview/2024/09/01/iaea-chief-on-reviving-iran-nuclear-deal-preventing-russia-ukraine-nuclear-disaster>.

¹³ Esra Tekin, "IAEA Chief Stresses Importance of Resolving Safeguards Issues Linked to Iran's Nuclear Program," *Anadolu Ajansi*, September 10, 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/iaea-chief-stresses-importance-of-resolving-safeguards-issues-linked-to-iran-s-nuclear-program/3325881#>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ John Irish, "IAEA Chief sees Willingness from Iran to Re-engage on Nuclear File," *Reuters*, September 25, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iaea-chief-sees-willingness-iran-re-engage-nuclear-file-2024-09-24/>.

¹⁶ Mousavian, "The Rise and Fall of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action."

¹⁷ Susannah George and Joby Warrick, "Facing Military Setbacks, Tehran may look to the Bomb, Analysts Fear," *The Washington Post*, October 5, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/10/05/iran-nuclear-capability-israel/>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

asserted that the possibility of Israel targeting Iran's nuclear facilities has increased this time, especially if they are of the view that Iran has reinitiated the development of nuclear weapons.¹⁹

The crisis at present demonstrates the dire need for a revived JCPOA as in the absence of an agreement, the U.S., but more specifically Israel, will remain suspicious about Iranian nuclear aspirations and act based on their threat perceptions. This would further exacerbate tensions as Israel could launch a pre-emptive strike on Iranian nuclear assets.²⁰ Therefore, a revived JCPOA is essential for regional and global peace and the implications of its absence are well reflected in the current volatile situation in the Middle East.

Six years after the Trump administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA, the prospects for its revival remain bleak despite Iran's recent willingness to negotiate. The ongoing crisis in the Middle East coupled with the recent setbacks that Iran has experienced, serve to deteriorate the relations between Iran and the West. The Middle East is crippled with one crisis after another which bodes ill for the likelihood of nuclear confrontation, emphasizing the increased need for peaceful negotiations. Although a JCPOA is essential to address the issue of Iran's nuclear weapons and to prevent pre-emptive strikes from its adversaries, the lack of consensus with the West and more importantly, the uncertainty of the Israeli response to Iranian ballistic missile strikes, paints a grim picture for any negotiations any time soon.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Khan, "Failure of Revival of JCPOA? Implications for Regional Stability."