

# **After “Maximum Pressure”: Formulating an Effective US Strategy on Iran**



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## *After “Maximum Pressure”: Formulating an Effective US Strategy on Iran*

On March 2, 2023, the J Street Policy Center convened a symposium on the topic of how the Biden Administration can most effectively address the concurrent crises of Iran’s advancing nuclear program, its other destabilizing activities in the Middle East, provision of drones to Russia and brutal crackdown on its own citizens. The assembled experts were asked to consider all the tools at the disposal of the US and its partners — including diplomacy, smart power, economic pressure, multilateral action and the use of force — and suggest what a properly calibrated, comprehensive US strategy toward Iran should look like.

After a salon discussion with US Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley, symposium participants discussed and found consensus on a number of points, including the urgency of prioritizing nuclear de-escalation, the need to pave the way for more substantial diplomatic progress with prisoner releases and initial complementary steps by the US and Iran, and the risks of military escalation and the use of force. Based on the discussion and an analysis of the developments in the region shortly after the symposium, most notably the Saudi-Iran agreement to re-establish normal diplomatic relations, the J Street Policy Center puts forward seven recommendations for US government action.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS (IN BRIEF)

### ***1. Maintain proactive diplomacy on prisoner release.***

Securing the release of Americans wrongly held by Iran is a clear US interest in its own right, a moral imperative, a means of keeping lines of diplomacy with Iran, and reaffirms the tangible benefits of that diplomacy.

### ***2. Seek initial nuclear de-escalation through complementary, though not formally agreed, mutual steps.***

The United States should respond to Iran’s recent move to restore some transparency measures on its nuclear activities with appropriately calibrated de-escalatory steps of its own, such as easing of sanctions measures that most directly impact ordinary Iranians. Iran, for its part, could take steps to freeze (or roll back) its most proliferation sensitive activities.

**3. *Seek a narrow multilateral non-proliferation agreement following positive outcomes on prisoner releases and initial de-escalatory steps.***

Tangible results from the coordination of prisoner releases and the arrangement of mutual de-escalatory steps can provide a more constructive platform on which to pursue an agreement that may be less than a full restoration of the JCPOA, but which meets the essential immediate need of the United States and its partners to meaningfully re-block Iran's progress toward nuclear weapons capability.

**4. *Make clear to Iran that acting in good faith on nuclear de-escalation in addition to ending its supply of drones and other offensive arms to Russia will help it avoid snapback.***

The United States should encourage the European parties to the Iran deal to leverage the snapback mechanism ahead of the approaching October 18th sunset of the UN restrictions on Iran's missile activities. They should make clear to Iran that it should not only end its supply of drones to Russia, but also take meaningful de-escalatory steps and negotiate toward a narrow agreement in good faith if it wants to provide solid ground for Europe to avoid using snapback to maintain the missile restrictions and restore other multilateral restrictions on Iran.

**5. *Support the human rights and well-being of Iranian civilians with careful sanctions calibration and enhanced opportunities.***

The Biden Administration should better calibrate an overbroad US sanctions architecture resulting from Trump's "maximum pressure" policy that is currently not only hurting ordinary Iranians, but actually hindering the struggle for their rights against a repressive regime. The United States and its European allies could empower regular Iranians vis-a-vis their government by allowing them to receive remittances, find work with Western companies as freelancers, and store their money abroad.

**6. *Maintain military deterrence, but do not escalate.***

The deterrent force of overwhelming US military power and consistent warnings that the United States rules no options out in preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon continues to be sufficient without a more aggressive military posture in the region or new security commitments to Saudi Arabia and its allies in the Gulf. The Biden Administration should not allow itself to be played off against Russia and China by Gulf autocracies with mercurial strategic positioning and their own troubling records of fomenting regional instability and violating human rights.

**7. *Encourage regionally-led diplomacy on a range of issues.***

While eschewing further military entanglement in a region with increasingly fluid international dynamics, the United States should encourage countries that are re-establishing or forming new diplomatic ties with one another, including via the Abraham Accords, to harness that momentum into further convenings on a range of security issues of mutual concern. The United States should offer its good offices as prudent, keeping the focus on regionally-led talks to hedge against Russia or China assuming a greater role in facilitating diplomacy than America and its democratic allies.

## I. INTRODUCTION



COURTESY US DEPARTMENT OF STATE

*Officials from the P5+1, the European Union, and Iran announce the framework of the JCPOA*

The Trump Administration's May 2018 unilateral abandonment of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) restraining Iran's nuclear program and his administration's "maximum pressure" campaign of ever-increasing sanctions and selective military measures — including the assassination of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps General Qasem Soleimani — were followed by a series of Iranian moves that have hurt the essential security interests of the United States and its allies in the Middle East and Europe. About one year after the US abrogation of the agreement, Iran resumed and eventually massively advanced its most sensitive nuclear activities, rendering it closer to being able to build a nuclear weapon than ever before. Meanwhile, the Iranian regime's hardliners who had opposed the nuclear agreement and were empowered and emboldened by the American abrogation of it ramped up their destabilizing activities in the region and beyond, launching missiles against US troops and increasing support for terrorist proxies, including those threatening Israel.

While Joe Biden campaigned on a return to the JCPOA, his administration took several months to pursue indirect diplomacy on the nuclear issue, maintaining and in some cases adding to the previous administration's sanctions on Iran. Weakened domestically by US abandonment of the agreement and ongoing US sanctions, the Iranian administration that had negotiated the deal lost to hardline opponents. After a further year of sporadic negotiations, Iran's new administration backed away from near-agreement on a restored nuclear deal, while also provocatively providing drones to assist Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and brutally cracking down on the protest movement bravely led by Iranian women seeking freedom from the regime's oppressive theocratic rule.

Looming in less than six months on October 18, 2023 is “Transition Day” under the JCPOA and United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231, when the UN is scheduled to lift its multilateral restrictions on certain Iranian missile-related activities.<sup>1</sup> How the remaining parties to the nuclear agreement will handle this deadline remains to be seen, with European countries currently weighing use of the “snapback” mechanism to officially terminate the JCPOA in order to prevent the sunset of the missile restrictions — a move which would also restore the full range of the UN-authorized multilateral sanctions on Iran.

With the US government concluding that Iran is now able to produce enough fissile material for one bomb in about twelve days,<sup>2</sup> and that in the absence of sanctions relief, “Iranian officials probably will consider further enriching uranium up to 90 percent”<sup>3</sup> (i.e. weapons grade uranium), the United States and its partners face a rapidly escalating crisis over Iran’s nuclear activities. Other countries in the region are also considering moves to match Iran’s nuclear capabilities, including seeking weapons if Iran does<sup>4</sup> — an outcome that would profoundly challenge US nonproliferation and regional security interests.

On March 2, 2023, the J Street Policy Center convened a symposium on the theme of “After ‘Maximum Pressure’: Formulating an Effective US Strategy on Iran” to discuss how the Biden Administration can coherently address these concurrent crises in a way that best serves the interests of the United States and our allies. The assembled experts (see Section IV) were asked to consider all the tools at the disposal of the US and its partners — including diplomacy, smart power, economic pressure, multilateral action and the use of force — and suggest a properly calibrated, comprehensive strategy toward Iran.

Some of the specific questions debated were:

- Is there still an opening for a return to the JCPOA or other de-escalation of the nuclear crisis via diplomacy?
- Does compartmentalizing diplomacy on the nuclear issue — or any other single issue — still make sense, or should diplomacy aim to achieve progress on multiple portfolios, or even toward a comprehensive understanding on the full range of key issues?
- What are the prospects for multilateral steps to isolate and pressure the Iranian regime? How can those steps be best targeted toward bad actors, rather than ordinary Iranians?
- What steps can the United States take to meaningfully support ordinary Iranians protesting for fundamental rights without compromising their movement?
- Are there “smart power” elements that the United States should be employing, but hasn’t due to the existing sanctions architecture or other barriers?
- What steps should the US be seeking from its allies and partners in the Middle East to help advance US and regional interests, while avoiding an arms race and greater instability between Saudi-aligned and Iranian-aligned actors?

## II. SUMMARY OF SYMPOSIUM DISCUSSION



*US Special Envoy to Iran Rob Malley*



*Arms Control Association Chairperson Tom Countryman and Stimson Center Distinguished Fellow Barbara Slavin*

PHOTOS COURTESY J STREET

The symposium discussion had two components: a salon discussion with US Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley moderated by Laura Rozen, editor/reporter of the Diplomatic substack,<sup>5</sup> followed by an open discussion among the assembled experts. The symposium was on-the-record, and a recording of the discussion is available online.<sup>6</sup>

**Special Note:** *The symposium took place about a week before news of the agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia to re-establish normal diplomatic relations.<sup>7</sup> While this report takes that and other developments since March 2nd into account, the symposium discussion summarized below obviously does not.*

### ***Special Envoy Robert Malley’s Remarks:***

Special Envoy Malley made clear in his opening comments that the Biden Administration remains committed to the objective of ensuring that Iran does not acquire a nuclear weapon. While affirming that the “original sin” of former President Donald Trump’s abandonment of JCPOA has led to Iran now having a greater nuclear capacity than it would have otherwise had, Malley nevertheless said that the administration is not

currently focused on restoration of the JCPOA or a similar broad deal in light of three developments in the last six months: 1) the Iranian regime walking away from a nearly-concluded nuclear agreement in August/September 2022; 2) the regime’s brutal crackdown on the Women, Life, Freedom protests sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini; and 3) revelations about Iran’s supply of drones and drone operators to Russia for use in Ukraine, including to commit atrocities against Ukrainian civilians.

Consequently, the Biden Administration’s agenda is presently focused on countering all of these Iranian activities, as well as on trying to secure the release of American citizens held as prisoners by Iran. At the same time, Malley said, the administration remains open to the possibility of different diplomatic paths toward de-escalating Iran’s nuclear activities, but is “not going to beg for a deal.”

When asked about the US position on possible Israeli military action against Iranian nuclear targets, Malley reaffirmed that the Biden Administration agrees with Israel on the need to make sure that Iranian officials “understand the consequences” of deciding to acquire a nuclear weapon — a decision that US intelligence agencies believe Iran has not made. At the same time, Malley was clear that any decision to resort to military force would be a very consequential one, as the US experience with the post-9/11 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has shown.

On human rights, Malley emphasized that the administration had sanctioned not only top regime officials, but also “reached down to the provincial level” to sanction those directly involved in suppression and imprisonment of protesters across the country. Regarding American prisoners, Malley related that active diplomacy is taking place to secure their release, but that the administration is prudently not discussing details as a prudential matter.

## CONSENSUS VIEWS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The participating experts held an open discussion following Special Envoy Malley’s remarks and departure. There was a general consensus on a number of lines of analysis and policy positions, most notably:

- **Preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons via de-escalation of the nuclear crisis should be the key US objective vis-a-vis Iran.** With Iran enriching and stockpiling uranium enriched to the 60 percent level (and the IAEA detecting some particles at the 84 percent level), Iran has the capacity to produce enough weapons grade uranium for one bomb in less than twelve days, and enough for several nuclear weapons within a matter of weeks. While US and allied states’ intelligence agencies continue to assess that Iran has not made the decision to weaponize — a process which could take several months or even more than a year — Iran’s continued amassing of near-weapons grade fuel in the absence of the JCPOA’s rigorous monitoring and inspections regime constitutes a nuclear crisis in and of itself.

- **Release of detained Americans; protection of US troops in the region and Israel from conventional attack by Iran or its proxies; defending (to the extent possible) the human rights of the Iranian people; and ending the two-way arms transfer between Iran and Russia** were all also noted as important US objectives vis-a-vis Iran.

- In terms of strategy for achieving these objectives, there was consensus around the idea that **the United States does not need a single, comprehensive framework in its approach to Iran** (à la “maximum pressure”). Participants felt it would be more productive for the United States to identify where it could make progress and focus on meeting those goals.



COURTESY NANKING2012

*Arak Heavy Water Reactor Facility in Iran*

- Despite nearly five years of “maximum pressure” and the most significant domestic challenge to its rule in more than four decades, **the Iranian regime has not collapsed and is the actor the United States must deal with.**
- On the nuclear file, **revival of the JCPOA or a single long-term, phased, formal nuclear deal like it is virtually impossible at this point** because of Iran’s (and other parties’) lack of trust in US adherence to any agreement beyond the current Biden Administration.
- **Agreeing and adhering to a broad negotiated agreement covering all or even just multiple areas of concern — nuclear, terrorism and destabilization, conventional arms transfers, human rights — is even less likely** given the gap in trust and complexities of the domestic politics of the United States and other relevant parties. The unlikelihood of ever reaching such an all-in-one agreement is precisely the reason opponents of diplomacy with Iran have, even prior to the JCPOA, demanded it as the only acceptable outcome of negotiations.
- Rather, participants coalesced around a **compartmentalized but multi-pronged approach** first raised by International Crisis Group’s Ali Vaez of: 1) securing substantial **prisoner releases**; 2) mutual — though not agreed — **de-escalatory steps** by Iran regarding its nuclear activities on the one hand, and by the US and Europe regarding sanctions on the other; and 3) **working toward a narrow deal on the nuclear issue.** While the concept of “confidence building measures” was discussed, the consensus was that term didn’t accurately reflect the point of these steps, which are meant to deliver tangible results from de-escalation, rather than instill confidence between parties that have good reason not to trust the other. These steps could overlap to some extent and should



not be conditional on one another, but certainly progress on one would bolster the prospects for progress on the others.

- The experts felt the **US and its partners should be encouraged to use Iran’s own foreign-sequestered sovereign funds to secure concessions** in these various steps. Whether getting prisoners freed or halting its most problematic nuclear activities, spending Iran’s own money to make Americans and our allies safer is leverage that the United States should use despite inevitable rightwing attacks falsely portraying these Iranian funds as US taxpayer money.
- The participants also agreed that the objectives of nuclear de-escalation and human rights protection would benefit from **US sanctions on Iran that are more narrowly targeted** — as well as increased in some cases — on relevant officials, while the sanctions that had the greatest impact on Iranian civilians are eased. Experts presented ideas for increasing younger rights-oriented Iranians’ access to communications technology, financial opportunities and student visas by more carefully calibrating US sanctions.
- **Military deterrence is necessary to keep Iran from making the decision to acquire a nuclear weapon, but it demonstrably exists and has for years.** Iran knows a dash for a bomb would likely lead to a war, which is one of the major reasons it hasn’t made such a decision. US military presence and overwhelming capability is already a given in Iran’s calculus. Israeli experts noted that Israel also has the means to attack relevant nuclear sites itself if necessary — though such strikes could at best delay rather than destroy an Iranian nuclear weapons program — and if anything is hampering Israel’s deterrent impact, it’s a perceived lack of focus in light of its ongoing domestic crisis, rather than lack of capability.



COURTESY SHUTTERSTOCK

- **Adding US military presence, weapons or defense commitments in the region to “counter” the Iranian nuclear threat therefore would be unnecessary and counterproductive,** increasing the chance for error and escalation, potentially leading to a costly war of choice that would dwarf the invasion of Iraq<sup>8</sup> and violate the UN Charter.
- **Concern that recent “Abraham Accords” normalization agreements between Israel and Arab-majority countries would be used to advance a military buildup that exacerbates regional tensions,** rather than realizing the accords’ potential as an opportunity for constructive engagement and regional integration beyond just Israel and the Gulf autocracies that reduces such tensions.

### *Areas lacking consensus:*

- There were **differing views on the role the P5+1 could play** at this point, given how dynamics between the parties had shifted following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and growing tensions between the US and China. Some experts viewed the P5+1 as "the only game in town," both because of the UN Security Council's role as the implementing forum for the JCPOA, and because Iran won't budge without backing and assurances from Russia (and to some extent China). Other experts felt that Russia is too actively playing a spoiler role vis-a-vis Iran in response to isolation over its Ukraine invasion, while China is aggressively trying to grow its influence in the region, and that they should be replaced with other actors.
- Relatedly, participants offered **differing views on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a possible alternative forum for diplomacy**. While experts agreed that the GCC should act as a forum for addressing regional security issues, there was a split on whether it would be effective as a convenor on the nuclear issue. There did seem to be some consensus that giving some GCC countries a seat at the table in a "P5+1 Plus" configuration for nuclear talks could be productive.

## SIGNIFICANT REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS SINCE THE SYMPOSIUM

Approximately one week after the discussion summarized above, news broke of the agreement reached between Iran and Saudi Arabia under the auspices of China to re-establish normal diplomatic relations. The Biden Administration welcomed the accord as a positive step toward reducing regional tensions, while making clear that Saudi-Iran rapprochement has been in the works for about two years, with China merely providing good offices for the final talks.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, advocates of “maximum pressure” and closer military ties between the United States and Saudi-aligned Gulf autocracies decried the agreement as undercutting “Saudi-American and Saudi-Israeli normalization” and undermining efforts to build a regional coalition to “confront” Iran.<sup>10</sup> Strident opposition by the hawkish camp may explain why a purported enumeration of Saudi Arabia’s conditions for normalizing relations with Israel was leaked just days prior to finalization of the Saudi-Iran deal,<sup>11</sup> possibly in the hopes that the Saudi wish list regarding its own nuclear activities and security guarantees vis-a-vis Iran and its proxies would throw a wrench in Saudi-Iran talks.

Predictably, the prescription<sup>12</sup> of those who have long opposed diplomacy with Iran is for the United States to counter what they describe as Saudi Arabia’s drift toward Iran and China by fulfilling Riyadh’s demands for NATO-esque security guarantees and leeway on its nuclear activities. Addressing the developments in the context of arguing for a new “grand strategy” involving record new military spending to counter Russia and China, arch-neoconservative John Bolton wrote, “We must address the unease our Middle East friends feel about American resolve and, consistent with longstanding U.S. policy, exclude Moscow from regional influence, along with Beijing.”<sup>13</sup>

While symposium participants did not have an opportunity to discuss these developments, they roundly criticized the familiar assumptions about the merits of military build-up, the use of force and ever-closer alliance with Gulf autocracies underpinning these hawkish prescriptions. Several characterized the extensive cost in treasure and lives<sup>14</sup> as a consequence of US military adventurism in the Middle East over the last two decades as an historic foreign policy failure which harmed American interests in myriad ways, including by empowering Iran vis-a-vis Iraq. As noted above, participants felt that US deterrence has long been established with regard to Iran’s calculus on whether to weaponize its nuclear material, with the US confirming again in April 2023 that Iran has not decided to do so.<sup>15</sup> Not one symposium participant argued for significant US military build-up in the region, and many noted that any such action would represent the “maximum pressure” policy’s continued failure to de-escalate and otherwise secure American interests.

In addition to the Saudi-Iran deal and related developments, another potentially significant shift occurred in early April, when Iran agreed to increase transparency around its nuclear activities by allowing the IAEA to restore some of the verification and monitoring procedures it had in place until June 2022.<sup>16</sup> This concession does not change the fact of Iran’s massive advancement in uranium enrichment volumes and levels since 2019, but as Iran’s first reversal of escalatory steps since Trump’s abrogation of the JCPOA, it creates an opening for de-escalatory steps by the United States and its partners that could lead to further such moves on both sides.

## III. RECOMMENDATIONS

**D**istilling and drawing on the insights of the symposium’s participants, as well as consultations with other experts, the J Street Policy Center makes the following recommendations, which do not necessarily represent the views of particular symposium attendees:

### ***1. Maintain proactive diplomacy on prisoner release.***



COURTESY ESHAN IRAN

*Evin Prison in Iran*

Securing the release of Americans wrongly held by Iran is a clear US interest in its own right, a moral imperative, and a means of keeping lines of diplomacy with Iran — even if indirect — open and functional. Success in freeing US citizens would not only fulfill a duty to the prisoners and families involved, but also be an important victory for diplomacy, reaffirming its tangible benefits after the Trump Administration’s sabotage and Iran’s backsliding.

The US and its partners should not hesitate to use Iran’s own foreign-sequestered sovereign funds to secure prisoner releases, if necessary, as it has in the past. The administration and supporters of diplomacy should be loud and clear that doing so would involve spending Iran’s own money — not US taxpayer funds — to free our people.

### ***2. Seek initial nuclear de-escalation through complementary, though not formally agreed, mutual steps.***

In close consultation with European and other international partners, the United States should expressly take note of Iran’s recent move to restore some transparency measures on its nuclear activities and respond with appropriately calibrated de-escalatory steps of its own. These could start with easing of sanctions measures that most directly impact ordinary Iranians’ ability to access basic essentials and streams of commerce essential to civilian industries.

On the Iranian side, international nuclear nonproliferation experts recently suggested in a letter to President Biden that Iran could take steps to “ensure that the IAEA has sufficient access and insight to monitor Iran’s activities and to freeze (or roll back) Iran’s most proliferation sensitive activities, such as the further accumulation of uranium enriched to 60 percent and introduction of additional advanced centrifuge cascades.”<sup>17</sup>

With Iran already having begun to make concessions to the IAEA on inspections and monitoring, the US and its partners must not miss the opportunity to get past a largely political barrier that has stymied diplomacy for more than two years — namely, the question of who moves first. The insistence by Iran and some of its sympathizers that the United States needs to make the initial move as the party that first abrogated the JCPOA has now been rendered moot, and it would be malpractice to squander this opening.

***3. Seek a narrow multilateral non-proliferation agreement following positive outcomes on prisoner releases and initial de-escalatory steps.***

Every stakeholder from the various parties — officials, lawmakers and ordinary citizens — will likely want to see renewed “proof of concept” in diplomacy following the Trump Administration’s abandonment of the JCPOA in 2018 and the escalation triggered by its subsequent “maximum pressure” policy. Tangible results from the coordination of prisoner releases and the arrangement of mutual de-escalatory steps can provide some sorely needed new evidence of the efficacy and benefit of diplomacy, even given the degraded trust between and among the parties to the JCPOA.

Once banked, those achievements can provide a more constructive platform on which to pursue an agreement that may be less than a full restoration of the JCPOA, but which meets the essential immediate need of the United States and its partners to meaningfully re-block Iran’s pathway toward nuclear weapons. One of the most difficult parts of achieving such an agreement will be the duration of the restraints to which Iran is willing to again be subjected. One of the terrible ironies of Trump’s abrogation of the JCPOA is that the experience of an American President simply reneging on US commitments makes that agreement’s permanent and even multi-year limits on Iran’s activities nearly impossible to restore. Iran is unlikely to agree to constraints that last beyond the Biden administration’s current term, absent mechanisms that disincentivize and spell out the consequences of US violation of the agreement. Any agreement emerging from this process may therefore be “narrow” most notably in its duration, and possibly need to be reconfirmed following the next US election (arms control agreements often have clauses relating to mutual agreement on extensions).

At the same time, the likely limited scope and duration of such an agreement somewhat lowers the stakes for the parties involved, and so would be more conducive to alternate forums of negotiation to the P5+1 that might better suit present P5+1 circumstances. This raises the possibility of a negotiating format that does not include Russia, such as a “G7 Plus” framework that could include Gulf Cooperation Council



COURTESY IAEA IMAGEBANK

*IAEA nuclear safeguard inspectors training*

countries with which Iran has recently moved to improve relations. Some of the terms, obligations and guarantees of a narrow deal might even reflect mutual concerns about nuclear activities among countries in the region — as opposed to being solely comprised of reciprocal obligations between Iran and outside powers. If successful, this format could be further “regionalized” in a forum to address issues beyond the nuclear file (see Recommendation #7).

**4. Make clear that Iran should act in good faith on nuclear de-escalation, in addition to ending its supply of drones and other offensive arms to Russia, to help it avoid snapback.**

COURTESY SHUTTERSTOCK



*Display of drone technology in Iranian Military Museum*

While the Trump Administration famously (though inadvertently) demonstrated that the United States is unable to trigger the snapback of UN-authorized multilateral sanctions on Iran following its abrogation of the JCPOA,<sup>18</sup> European parties to the agreement still have the ability to use this self-destruct mechanism built into the agreement. The question of whether they will do so will sharpen in the approach to the agreement’s “Transition Day” on October 18, when UN restrictions on Iran’s missile activities will sunset unless snapback is triggered, restoring a wide range of UN sanctions and limits on Iran, including those suspended as part of the JCPOA.

have leading into this key deadline, asking them to make clear to Iran that not only should Tehran end its supply of drones and other offensive arms to Russia to provide solid ground for European parties to forego snapback, but also take meaningful de-escalatory steps and negotiate toward a narrow agreement in good faith. Using this leverage in this way would help address two of the three most problematic Iranian actions in recent months: its rapidly accelerating enrichment program and outrageous participation in Russia’s war of aggression and its war crimes in Ukraine.

The United States should encourage its European partners to make the most of the leverage they

**5. Support the human rights and well-being of ordinary Iranians with careful sanctions calibration and enhanced opportunities.**

The Iranian regime’s brutal crackdown on the Women, Life, Freedom protests — the third of Iran’s especially troubling actions in the past six months — must be addressed in any US approach to Iran that genuinely seeks to uphold the values to which we aspire on the world stage. The Biden Administration has rightly spoken out clearly and repeatedly in opposition to Iran’s atrocities against its own people,

sanctioning human rights violators in the regime, while also acknowledging the practical limits of what the United States is able to do to protect the protestors, whom the regime already falsely accuses of being US-backed provocateurs.

While the Biden Administration has already taken some steps to facilitate Iranians' access to communication technology,<sup>19</sup> there is more that can be done to better calibrate an overly broad US sanctions architecture resulting from Trump's "maximum pressure" policy that is currently not only hurting ordinary Iranians, but actually hindering the struggle for their rights against a repressive regime.<sup>20</sup> The United States and its European allies could empower regular Iranians vis-a-vis their government by allowing them to receive remittances, find work with Western companies as freelancers, increase their access to student and academic visas, and store their money abroad (which, perversely, only Iran's most powerful elites are currently able to do). Such calibrated sanctions exemptions and more proactive US government guidance could help make Iranians — 90 percent of whose households depend on some amount of cash transfers from the government — less financially dependent on the regime and able to engage in more robust political action.<sup>21</sup>

## 6. *Maintain military deterrence, but do not escalate.*



COURTESY US NAVY

*US Navy ships in the Persian Gulf*

The deterrent force of overwhelming US military power and consistent warnings that the United States rules no options out in preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon has been a fact for decades. With US and allied foreign intelligence agencies continuing to assess that Iran has not made the decision to weaponize its nuclear program, there is no need to alter this posture.

The US should also maintain its commitment to Israel's security against threats posed by Iran by continuing to provide the substantial assistance it pledged under the Memorandum of Understanding agreed to under President Obama — including an unprecedented \$500 million each year in missile defense aid and access to top US technology that guarantees Israel's Qualitative Military Edge in the region.

A substantial increase in the US military presence in the Middle East, however, would be a dangerous escalatory gamble that could lead to unintended consequences, including hostilities via miscalculation or overreaction. Accordingly, the Biden Administration should be skeptical of calls by those who have long opposed diplomacy with Iran for a more aggressive military posture in the region or new security commitments to Saudi Arabia and its allies in the Gulf.

Such caution is especially warranted following Saudi Arabia's agreement with Iran, which has shown Riyadh's own strategic positioning to be much more flexible than those arguing for closer US-Saudi military cooperation had realized. The Biden Administration should not allow itself to be played off against Russia and China by Gulf autocracies with their own troubling records of fomenting regional instability and violating human rights. The Biden Administration should also be particularly cautious about providing Saudi Arabia and its allies access to or operational information on cutting-edge systems that could end up in Russia or China's hands.

## 7. *Encourage regionally-led diplomacy on a range of issues.*



COURTESY U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

*US Secretary of State Antony Blinken hosts a working breakfast with foreign ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Yemen*

While eschewing further military entanglement in a region with increasingly fluid international dynamics, the United States should encourage countries that are re-establishing or forming new diplomatic ties with one another — whether Saudi Arabia and Iran or Israel and Arab-majority states — to harness that momentum into further convenings on a range of issues. The Abraham Accords, if built upon as a platform for broad regional integration rather than as a precursor to a US-dependent military alliance, offers a constructive framework for such engagement (for example, see the J Street Policy Center's report: "Israeli-Arab Normalization and Advancing Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Resolution").<sup>22</sup>

Ambitious, regionally-led diplomacy on issues of mutual concern can empower those in the region and reduce their reliance on the maneuvering of outside powers. The United States could, of course, offer its good offices as prudent, keeping the focus on regionally-led talks to hedge against Russia or China assuming a greater role in facilitating diplomacy than America and its democratic allies.

This was the essence of the vision put forward by Daniel Benaim and Jake Sullivan — now Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Arabian Peninsula Affairs and National Security Advisor, respectively — eight months before the Biden Administration took office: the establishment of a regional dialogue to "reduce tensions, create pathways to de-escalation, and manage mistrust."<sup>23</sup> Benaim and Sullivan expressly envisioned such a forum as part of "a phased approach that delivers nuclear progress up front and creates space to address regional challenges over time... that will ultimately allow for sustained reductions in its military presence, while safeguarding important interests in a region that still matters for the United States for years to come." The regional reshuffling reflected in the Saudi-Iran deal, other recent dialogue between Iran and Gulf countries and the Abraham Accords presents a perfect opportunity to explore such a diplomatic initiative.



## IV. PARTICIPATING EXPERTS

The following experts participated in the March 2, 2023 symposium on which this report is based. Participation in the symposium does not constitute endorsement by the participants or their affiliated organizations of the J Street Policy Center or any policy positions taken by it or J Street, including those in this report.

Andrew Albertson, Foreign Policy for America

Mike Amitay, Open Society Foundations

Jeremy Ben-Ami, J Street

Tess Bridgeman, NYU Law RCLS/ Just Security

Giorgio Cafiero, Gulf State Analytics

Tom Collina, Ploughshares Fund

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Yasmine Taeb, MPower Change Action Fund

Ali Vaez, International Crisis Group

Allen Weiner, Stanford Law School

## V. ENDNOTES

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