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**Trump’s Iran Policy Has Become a Disaster for the U.S. and Israel**

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The judges have voted and the results are in: President Donald Trump’s decision to tear up the Iran nuclear deal in 2018 — a decision urged on by his secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, and Israel’s prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu — was one of the dumbest, most poorly thought out and counterproductive U.S. national security decisions of the post-Cold War era.

But don’t just take my word for it.

Moshe Ya’alon was the Israeli defense minister when the nuclear agreement was signed, and he strongly opposed it. But at a conference last week, he said, according to [a summary by Israel’s Haaretz newspaper](https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium.HIGHLIGHT-netanyahu-mossad-years-late-israel-hear-truth-trump-iran-1.10416718)[,](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium.HIGHLIGHT-three-years-late-israelis-finally-hear-the-truth-about-trump-1.10416718) “as bad as that deal was, Trump’s decision to withdraw from it — with Netanyahu’s encouragement — was even worse.” Ya’alon called it “the main mistake of the last decade” in Iran policy.

Two days later, Lt. General Gadi Eisenkot, Israel’s top military commander when Trump withdrew from the deal, offered a similar sentiment, which [Haaretz reported](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/the-iran-deal-was-a-mistake-withdrawing-from-it-was-even-worse-1.10403339) as “a net negative for Israel: It released Iran from all restrictions, and brought its nuclear program to a much more advanced position.”

It sure has. The International Atomic Energy Agency recently reported that Iran has amassed a stock of enriched uranium hexafluoride that [independent nuclear experts](https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/analysis-of-iaea-iran-verification-and-monitoring-report-november-2021/) calculate is sufficient to produce weapons-grade uranium for a single nuclear bomb in as little as *three weeks.*

Thanks, Donald. You showed them!

Up until Trump walked out of the Iran deal negotiated by President Barack Obama — even though international inspectors said Iran was still adhering to it — Iran’s breakout time to produce enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon was *one year*, and Iran had agreed to maintain that buffer for 15 years. Now it’s a matter of weeks. It would still take Iran a year and half or two years to manufacture a deliverable warhead, U.S. officials believe. But that is cold comfort.

After [a five-month hiatus](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/29/world/europe/iran-sanctions-nuclear-talks.html), negotiations to restore compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or J.C.P.O.A., as the nuclear deal is called, resumed in Vienna on Monday between Iran and China, France, Germany, Russia and Britain — with the U.S. participating from another room because it is no longer a party to the accord.

Pessimism abounds. Iran’s new hard-line government wants to see the U.S. and the European Union lift all financial sanctions on Iran — not just those related to its nuclear activities but also those related to its human rights abuses and malign regional adventures. It also wants assurances that if it does resume compliance with the accord — and gives up the fissile material it has amassed since Trump tore up the deal — that the next Republican U.S. president won’t rip it up again. Those demands cannot be met.

So what happens next? No one knows. These negotiations have become like a giant poker game, with the various players — including, implicitly, Israel — eyeing one another’s pile of chips and trying to figure out who is bluffing and who is ready to go all in and call the other’s bluff. All I can do for you today is go around the table and try to read everyone’s eyes.

The Iranian negotiators are out to prove that they can get a better deal than their supposedly wimpy predecessors had gotten. And they certainly have more chips, in the form of fissile material, to play with now that Iran is only weeks away from becoming a threshold nuclear-weapons state —just a few turns of the screw from having a bomb whenever it wants one, but technically not a nuclear power.

But wait, I also detect some beads of sweat on the brow of the Iranian player. After all, what will the Iranian people say if the regime has to tell them that after three years of living under all the stress of tighter sanctions and a pandemic, they can look forward to endless sanctions and the Omicron variant. Sure, China will buy some of Iran’s oil so the government can keep the lights on. But with Iran already facing huge [water shortages](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/21/world/middleeast/iran-protests-drought-violence.html) fueled by climate change, if the regime won’t negotiate an end to sanctions, the Iranian street could blow up at any time. The Iranian hand is weaker than it looks.

Meanwhile, the Israeli player is grimacing, holding his cards really tightly and simultaneously twiddling his F-35 chips and his Dolphin-class submarines in the Persian Gulf outfitted with [nuclear-armed cruise missiles.](https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/israel-submarine-capabilities/) His eyes keep darting back and forth between the Iranian player and Joe Biden — unsure who to worry about most.

For years the Israelis have been hearing American presidents say that they will not permit Iran to get a bomb. At first, they celebrated Trump’s withdrawing from the deal and reimposing sanctions. Why not? They thought that would both weaken Iran’s effort to get a bomb and its attempts to push precision-guided missiles aimed at Israel to its Hezbollah allies in Lebanon and Syria. But that’s not what happened.

It turns out that Trump and Pompeo overplayed their hand. Had they been savvy, they would have told the Iranians that the U.S. would restore the deal and lift sanctions if Iran would just agree to forgo enrichment to levels needed for a nuclear weapon for, say, 25 years — rather than the original 15 years. (I would have applauded that.) But, instead, they demanded changes in Iran’s behavior so sweeping that the regime understood that the sanctions would never end.

The Iranian leaders let Trump and Pompeo know that they were *homicidal, not suicidal.* And they went out and got China to buy their oil and started enriching enough uranium to make themselves a threshold nuclear state.

Alas, Trump and Pompeo had no plan B if Iran called their bluff. For all of Trump’s bluster, he not only was not going to bomb Iran, he wouldn’t even retaliate when the Iranians lashed out with cruise missiles and blew up one of Saudi Arabia’s biggest oil facilities. Everyone in the neighborhood took note.