

# Assessment of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action: Strategic Consequences for U.S. National Security

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*JINSA's Iran Strategy Council*

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# Executive Summary

The final agreement on Iran's nuclear program, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), has potentially grave strategic implications that directly threaten to undermine the national security of the United States and our closest regional allies. By allowing Iran to become a nuclear threshold state and enabling it to become more powerful and expand its influence and destabilizing activities – across the Middle East and possibly directly threatening the U.S. homeland – the JCPOA will place the United States in far worse position to prevent a nuclear Iran. This study aims to analyze and understand the likely impact of these consequences on U.S. national security, to help policymakers craft and implement a response.

We assess:

- The JCPOA will not prevent a nuclear Iran. No later than 15 years, the deal's major nuclear restrictions will lapse, Iran will stand on the brink of nuclear weapons capability, and once again the United States will likely have to devote significant resources and attention to keeping Tehran from attaining nuclear weapons.
- The JCPOA will give Iran the means to increase support for terrorist and insurgent proxies, aggravate sectarian conflict and trigger both nuclear and conventional proliferation cascades. It will provide the expansionist regime in Tehran with access to resources, technology and international arms markets required to bolster offensive military capabilities in the vital Persian Gulf region, acquire long-range ballistic missiles and develop other major weapons systems.
- Our long-standing allies feel betrayed – even angry – with the JCPOA, seeing it as a weakening of U.S. security guarantees and reversal of decades of U.S. regional security policy. The mere fact that such perceptions persist, regardless of their veracity, will undermine U.S. credibility, threatening to turn them into a self-fulfilling prophecy.
- Simultaneously, sequestration is diminishing the ability of the United States to respond to Iranian aggression, mitigate security threats emanating from Iran and protect U.S. regional allies. Leaving it with fewer and older ships and planes as well as fewer and less well-trained troops, these cuts will severely damage the U.S. military's ability to project power in the region, even as the Iranian threat grows.
- The United States is in a far better position to prevent a nuclear Iran today, even by military means if necessary, than when the JCPOA sunsets. The strategic environment will grow much more treacherous in the next 15 years. Comparatively, Iran will be economically stronger, regionally more powerful and militarily more capable, while the United States will have a smaller, less capable fighting force, diminished credibility and fewer allies.

Contrary to the false choice between support for the JCPOA and military confrontation, the agreement increases both the probability and danger of hostilities with Iran. Given the deleterious strategic consequences to the United States, implementation of the JCPOA will demand increased political and military engagement in the Middle East that carries significantly greater risks and costs relative to current planning assumptions.

# JCPOA Consequences for Iran's Strategic Posture

## *Improved Iran Military Capabilities*

The JCPOA will enable Iran to improve its unconventional military capabilities to challenge the strategic position of the United States and its allies in the Middle East. Iran will be able to revitalize its defense industrial base in the short term, even if it devotes only a fraction of the \$100 billion or more that will be unfrozen as part of the agreement – more than the government's entire budget for the current fiscal year – to military spending. It is also set to acquire advanced S-300 air defenses from Russia at the end of this year. Over the medium term, the removal of economic sanctions and the United Nations arms embargo will allow the regime to acquire other advanced technologies and weapons from abroad. And, once sanctions against its ballistic missile program sunset, Iran could more easily develop weapons capable of reaching targets in the Middle East and beyond – including Europe and the United States.

Iran has historically been at a serious disadvantage against the United States in conventional military power, most notably when the use of overwhelming U.S. force in the region compelled it to reverse course dramatically and agree to a ceasefire in the Iran-Iraq War in 1988 and to suspend its nuclear program in 2003. Indeed, Iran lacks large numbers of sophisticated conventional capabilities, including armored forces, air support and fighter aircraft and large surface ships. This likely will remain true for the foreseeable future.

Despite its deficit in conventional capabilities, Iran poses an asymmetric challenge to U.S. military assets and interests in the region. Iran learned from hard experience that it could not match the United States in a direct military confrontation. It also understands the United States relies heavily on unfettered access to close-in bases across the Middle East to keep the region's vital and vulnerable sea lanes open, conduct combat operations and deter aggression against its allies. Therefore, it has spent more than a decade pursuing a strategy to disrupt or deter the United States from projecting superior forces into the region, or to prevent those forces from operating effectively if deployed. For example, Iran could seek to do so by sealing off the Persian Gulf at the Strait of Hormuz; degrading U.S. freedom of maneuver and military lines of communication; blocking the flow of oil through the Gulf; and targeting naval and commercial vessels, military bases, energy infrastructure and other vital sites inside and outside the Gulf.

Iran has acquired and developed various capabilities to execute this asymmetric strategy, including anti-access/area denial (A2/AD). It possesses the region's largest arsenal of short (SRBM) and medium-range (MRBM) ballistic missiles, as well as a growing arsenal of cruise missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), to target military and energy installations throughout the Gulf, including U.S. ships. It also has a sizable fleet of fast attack craft, submarines and large numbers of torpedoes and naval mines for choking off Hormuz and attacking the aforementioned targets. The S-300 air defense systems could stymie U.S. air operations around the Gulf, in addition to complicating any strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. Russian or Chinese-sourced anti-ship cruise and ballistic missiles could give Iran an even greater standoff capability, allowing it to target U.S. naval assets beyond the Persian Gulf. Iran is also devoting attention to cyber warfare against the battle networks of U.S. forces and the critical infrastructure of its adversaries in the region.

The JCPOA will provide Iran with access to the resources, technology and international arms markets it needs to execute its asymmetric and A2/AD strategy more effectively. We expect it will take full advantage of the opportunity. Iran could simply make or buy more of what it already has, particularly missiles, launchers, submarines and surface warfare ships. It could also upgrade crucial capabilities. Improved precision guidance systems would enable Iran's ballistic and cruise missiles to target individual ships and installations around the Gulf much more accurately, as would new missile boats, submarines and mobile launchers. If combined with longer-range radars, it could expand this increased threat across wider swathes of the region. Better UAVs or multirole aircraft – not to mention additional advanced air defenses – could permit it to contest U.S. air supremacy over the region. It could also augment its stealth and electronic and cyber warfare capabilities with new technologies from abroad.

Iran might also invest in entirely new capabilities to disrupt and deter operations not only around its immediate vicinity, but also across the region more broadly. These could include long-range strike, satellite, airlift and sealift capabilities as well as the development of long-range ballistic missiles.

### *Increased Support for Proxies*

The JCPOA also will provide Iran with greater resources to funnel to Shia militias and other dangerous groups across the region. The regime's official defense spending was only \$16 billion in 2014. While the real figure – including military support for Hezbollah and Syria's Assad regime – is likely much higher, the infusion of new revenues in the coming years will create opportunities to significantly expand involvement throughout the Middle East (and possibly farther abroad).

As President Obama acknowledged in a speech at American University in August, "Some of that [sanctions relief] money will flow to activities we object to. We have no illusions about the Iranian government, or the significance of the Revolutionary Guard and the Quds Force. Iran supports terrorist organizations like Hezbollah. It supports proxy groups that threaten our interests and the interests of our allies – including proxy groups who killed our troops in Iraq. They try to destabilize our Gulf partners."<sup>1</sup> The incoming Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph Dunford, was even blunter about Iran's proclivities. "My expectation," he told the Senate Armed Services Committee, "is that Iran will continue the malign activity across the Middle East that we have seen over the past several years."<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the strategic consequences for the United States and its allies could be severe. Even with sanctions in place, Tehran has steadily deepened its involvement in the Syrian Civil War, propping up Assad so extensively that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Hezbollah have become two of the strongest military forces in the country. Once sanctions are lifted, Iran's leadership could try to tip the scales decisively in the regime's favor after years of stalemate. This would strengthen Hezbollah, not only in Lebanon, but also in its new front with Israel along the Golan Heights and, possibly, even beyond the Middle East. As the arms embargo is relaxed, Iran could also supply these allies with increasingly sophisticated capabilities from its own augmented arsenals. Iran's greater largesse could also attract the attention of Hamas, with whom it has longstanding ties, especially given the group's acute need for foreign assistance and military aid after the 2014 Gaza War.

At the same time, Iran has already begun expanding its deep preexisting political, religious and military ties with Iraq as it prosecutes the conflict against Islamic State there. With increased

resources, Tehran could further consolidate control over the Shia-dominated central government, Iraqi security forces and many of the most powerful sectarian militias. This would effectively entrench large parts of the country – including some of the Middle East’s most productive oilfields – as an exclusively Iranian sphere of influence and fracture Iraq into smaller states.

Using more covert forms of support, an emboldened Iran could also seek to increase its leverage in strategic areas around the Arabian Peninsula with fragile sectarian balances. Iran has made no secret of its hostility to the policies of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain toward their Shia populations, and Tehran has been suspected of supporting sectarian opposition groups in these countries. Were Iran to escalate its efforts to foment or capitalize on internal conflict in these countries – as it has recently in Yemen – vital U.S. allies in the Gulf could effectively become encircled by Iran and potentially bogged down in proxy conflicts around the rim of the Arabian Peninsula.

Combined with improved military capabilities, these developments could enable the Iranian regime to realize a long-held ambition to bring the region’s Shia populations into its orbit and create a “Shia crescent” from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean. This would have the potential to erase the decades-old balance of power between Iran and its adversaries in the Middle East, replacing it with a level of Iranian dominance not previously seen.

### *Cascading Instability*

The United States’ regional allies have already voiced serious concerns about the strategic implications of the JCPOA for their own security and what it says about the perceived willingness of the United States to abandon the decades-old balance of power and its leadership in the region. Most importantly, Saudi Arabian officials, despite accepting the deal, have explicitly threatened – and other regional allies have suggested – they would pursue their own nuclear arsenals in response to Iran attaining nuclear weapons. Many of us have served in the region, and we take those remarks very seriously. Unlike in the Cold War, when the spread of nuclear weapons among U.S. allies reinforced deterrence, a proliferation cascade in the Middle East would undermine it, with Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, Israel and potentially others trapped in an inherently unstable multilateral nuclear imbalance.

As former U.S. Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and George Schultz commented recently: “Traditional theories of deterrence assumed a series of bilateral equations. Do we now envision an interlocking series of rivalries, with each new nuclear program counterbalancing others in the region?”<sup>3</sup> Will the U.S. nuclear umbrella now extend over the Middle East or will mutual assured destruction become the new norm? Whatever the outcome, the risks for the United States increase dramatically.

A second-order consequence of nuclear weapons proliferation in the Middle East is directly related to the pursuit of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) by extremists throughout the region and beyond. The risk that they might succeed in acquiring components, radioactive material, technical expertise and even entire weapons will increase exponentially as the number of nuclear programs in the region expands. Such a failure to prevent the spread of nuclear technology in the Middle East could potentially weaken or topple the global non-proliferation regime. The nightmare scenarios of WMD and terrorism on the soil of the United States and its allies will become more probable.

Furthermore, though the Gulf Arab monarchies' defense spending far outstrips Iran's, and will likely continue to do so, their military forces would be highly vulnerable to Iran's unconventional capabilities. Iran's naval and missile forces in the Gulf could pose substantial threats to military bases, energy infrastructure and shipping lanes, many of which are situated in proximity to Shia-majority areas that Iran could attempt to destabilize. U.S. allies would undoubtedly try to win a conventional arms race with Iran, thereby not only raising the risks and potential costs of any conflict, but also encouraging them to look elsewhere than the United States for assistance. Indeed, a number of U.S. allies have already begun to strengthen relations with Russia.

Finally, increased Iranian support for proxy forces could deepen the emerging and already destabilizing sectarian rift opening across much of the Middle East. Tehran's policies in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen have sharpened dividing lines within these countries, promoting radicalization of Sunni groups and drawing in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates. Any efforts by Iran to augment its activities in these areas could be expected to provoke a response – much like it already has in Yemen – which would increase the threat of a broader and even more intractable conflict.

## JCPOA Consequences for U.S. Strategic Posture

### *U.S. Capability*

The United States military is and remains the most capable fighting force in the world. However, it is severely overtaxed on a global level and under-resourced going forward. That is unlikely to change anytime soon. In absolute terms, the U.S. armed forces are vastly superior to those of Iran and will remain so 15 years from now. But the relative capabilities between the two militaries is already shrinking, and will only decline further over the JCPOA's term.

Taken purely from a budget perspective, Iran's defense spending will almost certainly increase over the next decade due to significant influx of resources generated by the lifting of sanctions. However, U.S. military spending has seen sharp cuts during the last three years and is slated to suffer additional reductions. In 2011, Congress enacted close to \$500 billion in cuts to defense spending over the succeeding ten years. It also set in place a process, known as sequestration, which forced another almost \$500 billion in reductions. In sum, by 2021 the Department of Defense will have received nearly \$1 trillion less than it projected was necessary to defend the country.

Sequestration, according to General Ray Odierno, the recently retired Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, "will challenge us to meet even our current level of commitments to our allies and partners around the world.... Ultimately, sequestration limits strategic flexibility and requires us to hope we are able to predict the future with great accuracy, something we have never been able to do." General Dunford issued a similarly dire warning about the impact of these cuts: "The readiness of the Joint Force, the modernization of the Joint Force, will suffer what I would describe, and without exaggeration, as catastrophic consequences."<sup>4</sup>

Seen from a capabilities perspective, sequestration will be even more damaging to the ability of the United States to project force in the Middle East. The capabilities that will be most important in confronting Iranian aggression and potentially preventing a nuclear Iran – long-range strike, standoff, forward staging and counter-A2/AD capabilities – are among those that will suffer the greatest decline. “The missions that have the highest risks,” Adm. Jonathan Greenert, the Chief of Naval Operations, told Congress, “are those missions requiring us to deter and defeat aggression, and the mission to project power despite an anti-access, area denial challenge.... In terms of warfighting, the sequestered Navy of 2020 would be left in a position where it could not execute those two missions I referred to.”<sup>5</sup> In only the most visible demonstration of sequestration’s impact on the Navy, the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt will depart the Persian Gulf this fall and will not be replaced for another several months, marking the first time in years that a carrier will not be in the region.

U.S. airpower faces similar challenges from sequestration. According to General Mark Welsh, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force, “when we deployed to Operation Desert Storm in 1990, the Air Force had 188 fighter squadrons. Today, we have 54, and we’re headed to 49 in the next couple of years. In 1990, there were 511,000 active duty airmen alone. Today, we have 200,000 fewer than that. And as those numbers came down, the operational tempo went up.” Of those 54 squadrons, “just under 50 percent ... are fully combat ready,” and many of the aircraft in operation are decades old.<sup>6</sup>

These adverse effects have occurred over just three years of sequestration. With little apparent political appetite to reverse these cuts, there are likely to be six more years to come. As the total number of U.S. naval and air assets declines and the end strength of our ground troops is slashed, there will be fewer assets available for stationing in and deployment to the Middle East. Moreover, those assets that will be available to U.S. commanders will be older, less frequently serviced and operated by personnel with fewer training hours than today. At the same time, Iran will be ramping up its military expenditures and modernizing its capabilities.

In other words, during the course of the JCPOA, as Iran gains the resources and access to develop its military capabilities, those of the United States will be significantly reduced. As Iran bristles with more and newer arms, the United States will have fewer and older ones to counter them. Iranian influence in the region will increase in direct proportion to the perceived decline in U.S. capability.

Yet, the President has made clear that the JCPOA does not preclude the need to maintain a robust military deterrent against Iran. “[I]f 15 or 20 years from now,” he cautioned, “Iran tries to build a bomb, this deal ensures that the United States will have ... the same options available to stop a weapons program as we have today, including – if necessary – military options.” The United States might still have the military option when the JCPOA expires, but it will face a far more dangerous and difficult one than it would today. This deal creates a strategic environment in which Iran can pursue nuclear weapons capability at a much lower level of risk.

Should the worst happen – should Iran threaten the security of our allies, should it decide, after 15 years, to sprint for a nuclear weapons capability – the U.S. armed forces will rise to the challenge, but they will do so with less manpower, fewer capabilities, more antiquated platforms and a lower level of readiness than they have now or have had in a very long time. Such action would also occur against the backdrop of a much more heavily militarized, and perhaps even nuclearized, Middle East, heightening the danger of miscalculation and spillover conflict.

In short, the JCPOA both increases the possibility of direct military confrontation with Iran and makes any such confrontation much more perilous. Contrary to the Obama Administration's position that the JCPOA should only be viewed in the context of what it does to limit Iranian nuclear capability, the reality is that the JCPOA will have a significant negative impact on U.S. security interests in the region, which the United States must be prepared to act upon.

## *U.S. Credibility*

Credibility is the bedrock of deterrence. American credibility flows not only from the prowess of U.S. armed forces, but also from the perception, of both our allies and enemies, that those capabilities will be used to protect U.S. interests, counter aggression and defend allies anywhere in the world, at any time. If U.S. military strength or commitment to alliances is seen as weakened, our adversaries might feel emboldened and our partners could feel compelled to seek protection elsewhere.

With U.S. military capability visibly deteriorating under sequestration, our credibility is already coming under question. Therefore, it will be even more important for U.S. leaders to remain sensitive to the perception of U.S. commitment to its regional allies and determination to protect them, lest it erode any further.

Some lawmakers have argued that rejecting the JCPOA would weaken the deterrent value of the U.S. military option by alienating European allies. Perhaps, but our Middle Eastern partners appear much more concerned about what accepting the deal communicates about the value of U.S. security guarantees. Those perceptions, whether or not they are true, matter much more for the stability and peace of the region.

Preventing a nuclear Iran has been a priority U.S. national security objective for over a decade. It has been paired with, and integral to, a more comprehensive regional strategy, one that has prioritized defeating terrorist threats and guaranteeing the security of U.S. allies. Some U.S. allies have made clear they believe this deal will not prevent a nuclear Iran and, that by proceeding with the JCPOA, the United States is disrupting the regional balance of power and endangering them. As described above, other regional partners have noted that the deal empowers Iran to redouble its destabilizing regional activities, making the Middle East a more dangerous place. There is anger – even a sense of betrayal – among U.S. allies in the region.

Regardless of their accuracy, these perceptions that the JCPOA entails a reversal of U.S. commitments to protect our allies are dangerous for several reasons. First, if allowed to persist, they will drive these partners to seek security by other means. This could take the form of taking matters into their own hands, as Israel previously has done or Saudi Arabia decided to do earlier this year by unilaterally launching an air campaign against Iranian-backed rebels in Yemen. Such actions, if not backed by the overwhelming force of the U.S. military, could spark reprisals that spiral into wider regional conflict. Alternatively, our regional allies might seek other guarantors of their security. Whether this means accepting Iranian hegemony or allying with other powers – such as Russia or China – the result would be detrimental to U.S. influence and interests in the region.

Second, U.S. ability to project power in the Middle East depends, at least in part, on the cooperation and support of these allies. Basing and overflight rights are critical to maintaining and deploying a deterrent force. The perception that we are no longer committed to our allies'

security could risk the revocation of those rights and spark a vicious cycle of destabilization. If a country feels that U.S. forces based in its territory will not be used to defend its interests and security, why allow the forces to be there at all? If U.S. forces lose their access to bases, airspace and territory, making it harder to operate in the region, their ability to defend those same partners will be compromised.

Our Middle Eastern allies have made perfectly clear what the JCPOA means to them: the weakening of U.S. security guarantees and reversal of decades of U.S. regional security policy. The mere fact that such perceptions persist, regardless of their veracity, undermines U.S. credibility, threatening to turn them into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

## Challenges for the United States

As Iran's power waxes and increasingly complicates the United States' freedom of action across the JCPOA's term, the United States must lead. Iran cannot be allowed to alter the calculus of future U.S. presidents forced to deal with an Iranian breakout that has become costly and politically contentious. Maintaining our position in the Middle East to prevent a nuclear Iran will demand increasing resources, posture and attention, far more than is necessary today. Because the implications of the JCPOA are much greater in scope than its architects have acknowledged, the United States must face the realities of the agreement with immediate action along several key lines of effort:

1. On a political level, the United States must strengthen its fraying ties with regional allies through sustained multilateral engagement to assemble a regional coalition to hold the line against Tehran. This demands greater – yet simultaneously more subtle – cooperation with U.S. partners in the region in the realms of missile defense, intelligence, air and maritime security. The global implications of the JCPOA warrant a vastly expanded global coalition, and resources for substantial diplomatic initiatives must be forthcoming.
2. The United States will need to undertake a significant diplomatic effort to convince Russia and China, Iran's most likely suppliers, not to sell advanced weapons to Tehran as the arms embargo and ballistic missile sanctions expire. Increasingly, friction between Washington and Moscow and Beijing over Ukraine and cyber attacks, respectively, likely will make both countries reluctant to entertain U.S. entreaties without significant tradeoffs.
3. The JCPOA cannot be managed passively while Iran mobilizes a strategy of continued support for terrorist organizations, regime destabilization and the killing of U.S. men and women in uniform. The United States must develop a comprehensive strategy to deal with the entirety of Iran's adversarial ambitions, despite having infused it with substantial resources and perhaps removing any threat of ever restoring meaningful international sanctions, embargoes or restrictions during the JCPOA.
4. On a military level, the most readily available means for the United States to preserve its edge against Iran will be recapitalization, investment and modernization of its forces. At a minimum this would require, as the bipartisan National Defense Panel recommended, returning the defense budget to baseline levels requested by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in 2012. This would mean raising military spending from the sequester-

capped level of \$523 billion to \$611 billion. These additional funds should be invested in rebuilding and retraining what is becoming a hollow force, as well as modernizing those capabilities most essential to deterring – and if necessary defeating – the growing threat from Iran under the JCPOA. Importantly, our military options are based on a joint operating environment completely altered by the JCPOA. Operational plans, force posture and logistics schema will need to be revamped as Iran has the wherewithal to improve air and maritime anti-access, complicate security of basing and precipitate rear-area operations across the region.

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