

## The Urgency of Now: The Administration and Congress on Time Running Out For Iran Deal

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*With the Biden administration warning that time is running out for the United States to rejoin the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear agreement with Iran, Congress is becoming anxious about the status of ongoing negotiations and demanding oversight of any deal that comes out of Vienna. On February 1, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Menendez announced his growing concerns on the Senate floor; on February 8, thirty-two Senate Republicans sent a letter to the president demanding he send any deal to Congress for approval – as required by law. Under pressure from both chambers, the White House’s lead Iran negotiator Rob Malley briefed the House and Senate foreign relations committees on February 8 and 9, respectively, behind closed doors. Reactions by members of Congress to those briefings were decidedly mixed, highlighting different conclusions being drawn in Washington from Iran’s continued nuclear advances.*

### The Administration on Urgency of Negotiations

The Biden administration has warned for months there is a [closing window](#) for the United States and Iran to mutually reenter the JCPOA, given ongoing and irreversible Iranian nuclear advances. Since December, it has said there are only weeks remaining, yet it has continued negotiating regardless. Most notably:

- On December 22, National Security Advisor [Jake Sullivan](#) first stated, “the U.S. deadline to reach an agreement will come **within weeks**.”
- On January 13, Secretary of State [Antony Blinken](#) said, “we have, I think, **a few weeks** left to see if we can get back to mutual compliance.”
- In a February 5 interview, [Malley](#) said, “we only have **a few more weeks** to go at the current pace of Iran’s nuclear advances to get back into the deal or unfortunately we’re all going to face a very different reality.”
- On February 9, Press Secretary [Jen Psaki](#) said, “a deal that addresses the core concerns of all sides is in sight but **if it is not reached in the coming weeks**, Iran’s ongoing nuclear advances will make it impossible for us to return to the JCPOA,” adding, “our talks with Iran [have reached](#) an **urgent point**.”
- Also on February 9, senior unnamed administration [officials](#) said they believed they had until the end of the month to try to reenter the deal, noting that “this session is the critical one. We are genuinely in the **very final stretch**.”

## Congressional Democrats on Urgency of Striking a Deal

On the one hand, some members of Congress agree with the administration's argument that the Trump-era "maximum pressure" campaign enabled Iran's nuclear advances, and that a quick JCPOA return offers the best prospects for putting the Iranian nuclear program back in a box. In the wake of Rob Malley's closed-door hearings, notable statements from members of Congress included:

- Senator [Chris Murphy](#) (D-CT): "I see no way to stop Iran's progress other than reentering this deal. And I left the briefing more certain than ever that we better be serious about trying to get back into an agreement."
- Senator [Tim Kaine](#) (D-VA): "[I]t was very easy to predict when the U.S. walked out of the deal that Iran ... would resume their activities and get closer again to a breakout moment. And that's exactly what happened."
- Senator [Ed Markey](#) (D-MA): The briefing "laid out how aggressive Iran has been in the reactivation of their uranium enrichment program and how close they are now to actually being able to have enough material for a bomb."

## Bipartisan Majority on Urgency of a New Approach

Nevertheless, it appears a larger bipartisan majority of Congress believes Iran's recalcitrance at the negotiating table, its nuclear advances, and its regional aggression show that time has run out for the administration's current approach of open-ended diplomacy. Key quotes from members of both parties include:

- Senate Foreign Relations Chairman [Bob Menendez](#) (D-NJ): "They should walk away when they see there's not a good deal to be had. I don't know what the timing of that is, but whenever that is, the window is closing fast."
- Senate Foreign Relations Ranking Member [James Risch](#) (R-ID): "I've never been optimistic. I fought the last one [JCPOA]... You're just not dealing with people who want to be reasonable."
- Senator [Ben Cardin](#) (D-MD): While Biden was "dealt a very difficult hand" by President Trump's 2018 decision to leave the JCPOA, "a bad deal is worse than no deal."
- Senator [Rick Scott](#) (R-FL) said, "I think the Iran deal is a horrible deal."
- Senator [Marco Rubio](#) (R-FL): "I think the only deal that's possible is a bad one. And that's what I fear — that the administration wants a deal so badly that they'll enter into a really dangerous one."

Either way, Congress remains keen to keep a close eye on further developments. Representative [Claudia Tenney](#) (R-NY) spoke for many of her colleagues with her statement: "Special Envoy Malley works for the American people, and he should answer to them as well. Secretary of State Blinken committed to having an open and transparent relationship with Congress, and it's vitally important that he uphold that commitment."