

Expect More Iranian Aggression with New Nuclear Deal

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Supporters of reentering the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) have wrongly attributed Iran's malign regional activity to President Trump's withdrawal from the agreement, implying there will be a de-escalation once a new nuclear agreement goes into effect. However, data collected by JINSA indicates the greatest increases in Iranian violence come during periods of diplomatic engagement. For the 3.5 years the JCPOA was in effect, Iran attacked the United States and its partners more than three times as often as it did preceding the deal. In the 14 months since President Biden took office seeking to reenter the deal, Iranian aggression has nearly doubled compared to the second half of President Trump's term.

If the Biden administration insists on entering a new agreement, the United States and its regional partners will almost certainly face a wide-ranging escalation of Iranian violence. To compel Tehran to curb such heightened aggression, the United States will need to retaliate strongly, consistently, and repeatedly against Iranian attacks. Single reprisals, even when as daring as the U.S. strike on Quds Force commander Major General Qassem Soleimani—have not been enough to deter Iran.

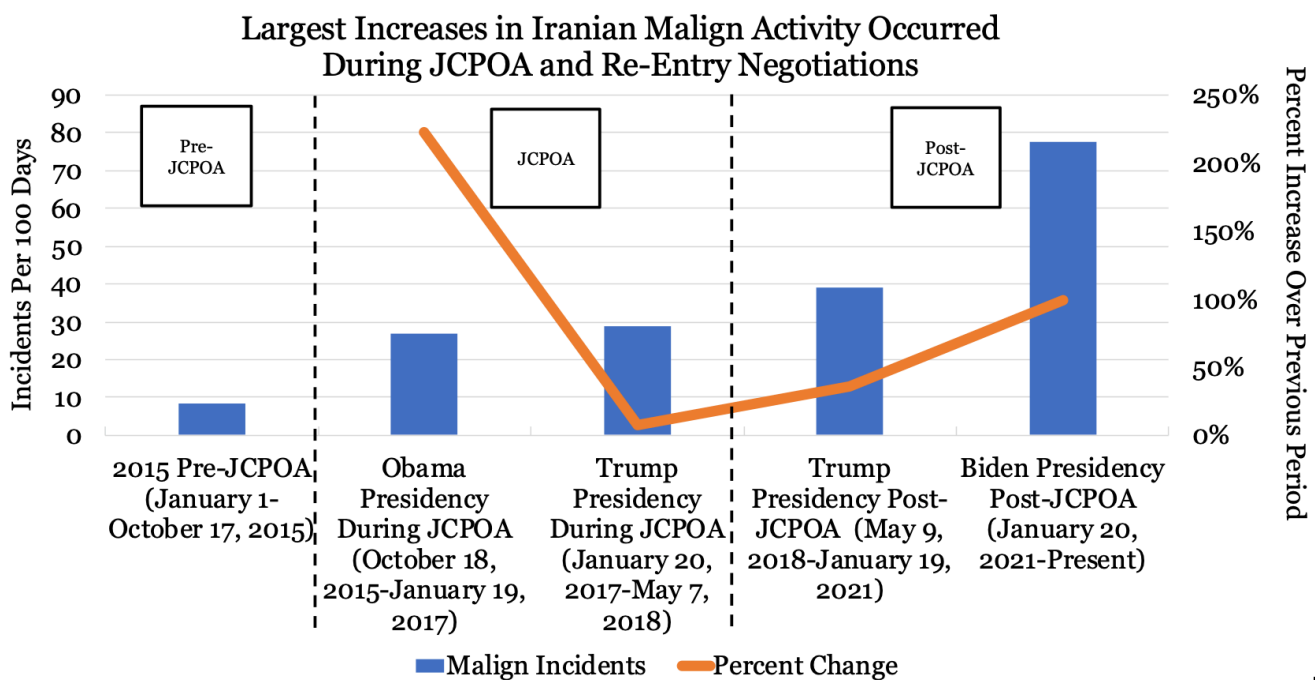
What Happened?

- A new nuclear agreement with Iran is imminent and supporters of the previous 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) have been implying that the deal may also diminish Iran's non-nuclear malign activities.
 - » Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT) [tweeted](#) on February 4, 2022, "When the Iran deal was in place, Iranian proxies in Iraq weren't shooting at U.S. troops. In fact, for a while they were fighting side by side against ISIS. As soon as we left the deal, the rockets started. Our soldiers were targets. One narrowly missed killing 100 of our guys."
 - » State Department Spokesman Ned Price stated during a [briefing on March 31](#) that "rather than Iran's proxies be subdued, we have actually seen them emboldened. And you can quantify that in a number of ways, but here's one important way: From 2012 to 2018, there were no significant attacks, there were no attacks against U.S. service members, diplomatic facilities in Iraq. That changed in 2018. And between 2019 and 2020, the number of attacks from Iran-backed groups went up 400 percent. This was in the aftermath of the decision to abandon the JCPOA. It was in the aftermath of the decision to apply the FTO designation to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. It was in the aftermath of the killing of Soleimani, the IRGC chief."

- » On January 12, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki [stated during a briefing](#) that “none of the things we’re looking at now—Iran’s increased capability and capacity, their aggressive actions that they have taken through proxy wars around the world—would be happening if the former president had not recklessly pulled out of the nuclear deal with no thought as to what might come next.”

Why Is It Important?

- Arguments suggesting that Iranian aggression is a result merely of the Trump administration’s JCPOA withdrawal are unsupported by facts. Although neither diplomacy nor sanctions have succeeded in curbing Iranian malign activity, **Tehran’s aggression has increased most significantly during periods of diplomatic engagement**—after the JCPOA was adopted and during the current negotiations.
 - » Following adoption of the JCPOA in October 2015, Iranian malign activity **more than tripled** compared to the first ten months of that year.
 - » It increased by **over a third** after Trump’s May 2018 withdrawal from the agreement.
 - » Iranian aggression **nearly doubled** once Biden entered office engaging in a new round of diplomacy to revive the deal.

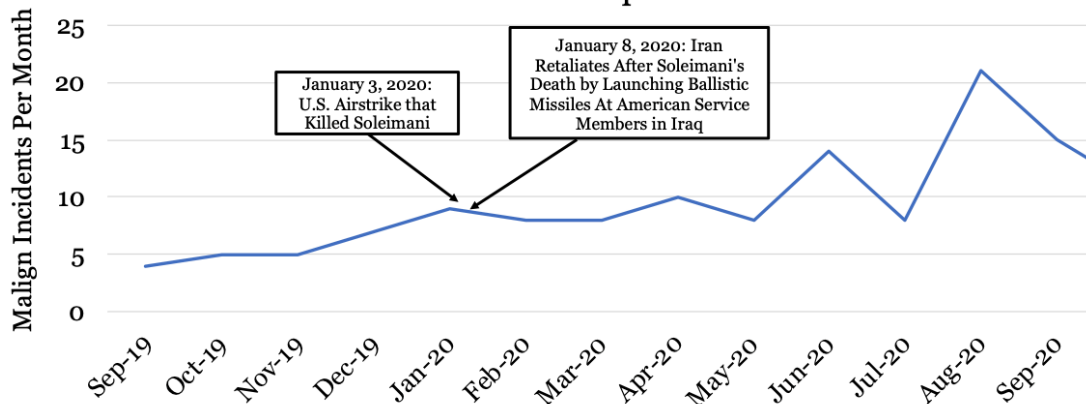


- In 2015, prior to JCPOA adoption in October, there were 24 known malign activities, roughly **8 incidents per 100 days**.
- After the JCPOA was adopted, there were nearly 300 malign Iranian incidents over the almost 3.5 years the deal was in effect, about **28 incidents per 100 days**.

- » Compared to the pre-JCPOA era, there was a **223% increase** in the frequency of incidents for the remainder of Obama’s presidency.
- » There was a further **8% increase** between the time Trump took office and withdrew from the agreement.
- Since the United States left the agreement in May 2018, there have been over 550 incidents, **nearly 40 incidents per 100 days**, with a substantial increase beginning once Biden took office with the intention of re-entering the JCPOA.
 - » For the remainder of Trump’s presidency after he left the agreement, there were 243 major incidents of malign activity, a frequency of 39 incidents per 100 days. This is a **36% increase** over the period of Trump’s presidency during which the JCPOA was still in effect, a smaller increase than those that occurred following JCPOA adoption or during ongoing negotiations to revive the deal.
 - » Since Biden took office, there have been over 300 incidents of malign activity, roughly 77 incidents per 100 days, a **98% increase** compared to the post-JCPOA period during the Trump administration.
- Despite the U.S. airstrike that killed Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani on January 3, 2020, often being credited with [detering Iranian aggression](#), JINSA data indicates any such reduction in malign activity was short-lived.
 - » Five days after Soleimani’s death, Iran retaliated by firing at least 12 ballistic missiles at American service members in Iraq, [injuring about one hundred](#). Then, Iran **decreased its activity by 56%** for 2.5 months, until March 2020, from 40 to **18 incidents per 100 days**, presumably waiting to see if the United States would take further action.
 - » Once Tehran became convinced the Soleimani strike was a unique occurrence rather than the beginning of a new, aggressive U.S. policy, it increased its attacks to a rate of roughly **50 incidents per 100 days** until October 2020.



Iran Briefly Paused Then Continued Escalation After Realizing Soleimani Strike Was Unique Occurance



- If President Biden agrees to reenter the JCPOA, the United States and its partners should expect that Iran will test the United States to see how the deal might affect his administration's tolerance for Iranian aggression and willingness to engage in the Middle East.
- This analysis is based on open-source reporting gathered by JINSA on projectile strikes primarily by Iranian-backed militias that target U.S. service members, partners, and interests in Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates; Iranian maritime vessels harassing Western naval and commercial vessels through dangerous maneuvers; known cyber hacks and intrusions; kidnapping and wrongful detention of Western individuals; and Iranian weapons tests and public announcements about the advancement of its weapons programs, notably its ballistic missiles.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- Regardless of any deal that the Biden administration strikes with Iran, the United States should publicly declare that it will not tolerate Iranian malign activity and visibly prepare a range of credible military options to deter and punish Iranian aggression.
 - » The Biden administration should support Israel's freedom of action and build deterrence against a nuclear weapon breakout by expediting the delivery of capabilities that would better enable a strike on Iran's nuclear program, such as [KC-46A aircraft refueling tankers](#).
 - » The U.S. Fifth Fleet should preempt Iranian naval harassment through joint training with regional partners and freedom of navigation operations in the Arabian Gulf.
 - » U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) should coordinate with regional partners for joint operations to preemptively target and retaliate against projectile storage and launch sites.
- Congress should hold open hearings with senior administration officials asking how the United States plans to monitor, deter, and respond to Iran's malign activity.
- The Pentagon should preempt Iran's projectile attacks by deploying additional air defense assets to the Middle East, particularly those capable of intercepting the drones that Iranian partner militias are increasing launching.
- To reinforce America's commitment to Middle Eastern partners who must live with a potentially dangerous Iran nuclear agreement, the Biden administration should leverage the Abraham Accords normalization agreement between Israel and Arab states to develop a regional integrated air defense system.