

# A Day 1 Priority: Strategy for the Next Administration to Prevent a Nuclear Iran





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## *In Memoriam*



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# I. Executive Summary

From the day President-elect Trump takes office, he will have almost zero time or margin for error to prevent a nuclear Iran. Even before inauguration, his incoming administration must begin building truly maximum pressure, including credible threats of force, to convince Iran it must remain short of the nuclear weapons threshold. Once in office, he must work with partners to maintain and solidify this pressure, whether or not Washington and Tehran return to the negotiating table. Failing to uphold this enduring national security interest, and letting Iran erase decades of explicit U.S. commitments, would profoundly damage American credibility, encourage even greater Iran-led aggression, and undermine deterrence more globally against China, Russia, and North Korea.

At the very least, President-elect Trump will need to consider Iran's offer of talks seriously, if only to build support for much tougher U.S.-led efforts against the regime's nuclear and other threats. At the same time, however, he should keep top of mind Tehran's ulterior motives. With recent Israeli operations dealing severe and swift damage to many of its best capabilities that were honed meticulously over decades – ballistic missile production facilities, air defenses, and proxy militaries like Hezbollah and the Assad regime – Iran's nuclear program is now far and away its readiest form of leverage and intimidation. By the same token, it also is more vulnerable than ever before. Iran thus has every incentive to reprise its playbook from the Obama and Biden years, exploiting diplomacy as cover to further advance and harden its nuclear infrastructure, delegitimizing military options that would derail negotiations, and ultimately wasting time until the possibility of “snapping back” painful UN Security Council (UNSC) sanctions expires permanently in October 2025.

To seize this unique but fleeting opportunity, President-elect Trump should join Israel in giving Iran an ultimatum at the outset of his presidency: agree fully and immediately to verifiably dismantle its nuclear weapons program, or invite its imminent and utter destruction. Unimaginable just several months ago, the incoming administration's reported discussions of an early strike and Israel's stunning operational successes now lend serious credibility – and urgency – to a military option. For the first time in at least two decades, right now Tehran cannot safely assume it enjoys the upper hand in its nuclear standoff with the outside world. Over time, however, it will try to rectify these weaknesses by advancing further toward the bomb, rebuilding its missile arsenals and proxies, and ensnaring the United States in open-ended diversionary diplomacy.

Given President-elect Trump's strong inclination for dealmaking, understandable reticence to risk new Middle East conflict, and desire to build domestic and international legitimacy for forceful action later, it remains probable his incoming administration will decide instead to first engage Iran in negotiations. If so, he will have to replace his predecessors' patient conciliation with determined coercion. Above all, he must leverage maximum pressure to drive a hard bargain, adhere to a strict timeline to yield results, and be prepared to walk away immediately and work with Israel to neutralize Iran's nuclear infrastructure militarily. Iran has taken a quantum leap toward the bomb since he left office four years ago, while the United States and its allies have precious little time to implement the process of snapping back international sanctions, codified in multiple UNSC resolutions, on Tehran's illegal nuclear activities and weapons proliferation.

The United States and the world have been exceedingly patient with Iran’s nuclear weapons advances. Setting back this program by decades, whether diplomatically or militarily, likely will be Trump’s most critical decision in his second term.

### A. Building Truly Maximum Pressure

Whether or not talks ever develop, from day one the incoming administration must confront Tehran with comprehensive, sustained, and credible U.S. alternatives to diplomacy. Iran reliably reins in its most threatening behaviors when it believes such prohibitive pressure, particularly U.S. or Israeli military action, is truly on the table. But in previous nuclear negotiations in 2012-15 and 2021-22, the United States defeated itself by intentionally divorcing diplomacy from pressure, softening sanctions enforcement, and downplaying military threats—all in the misguided hope of assuaging Iran into an acceptable deal. Notably, the Biden administration treated pressure as a “Plan B” separate from, and subsequent to, the Plan A of negotiations, and then it failed to follow through on its threats to switch to Plan B once Iran rejected U.S. ultimatums and ditched the talks.

#### **Amass Overwhelming U.S. Economic Pressure**

Iran’s economy expanded alongside its nuclear venture over the last four years, as the Biden team sought forlornly to buy Iran’s diplomatic goodwill by grossly underenforcing U.S. sanctions. Since it will take time to reimpose and expand these measures, and for them to take a toll on Tehran, President-elect Trump should signal unambiguously, well before inauguration, his intent to rigorously enforce U.S. sanctions on day one of his administration. Building on this first step, actions to weaken Iran’s economy should include:

- Enforcing the Stop Harboring Iranian Petroleum Act (SHIP Act), signed into law by President Biden, that targets vital regime revenues by sanctioning Iran’s refiners, ports, shippers, insurers, bankers, and their owners and families.
- Implementing sanctions on Chinese banks and other companies conducting energy trade with Iran, and considering targeted tariffs as long as China imports significant amounts of Iranian oil.
- Resuming the Rewards for Justice program that encourages vessels carrying Iranian oil to forfeit the cargo to U.S. authorities, in exchange for cash rewards and resettlement in the United States.
- Restocking the dwindling Strategic Petroleum Reserve, and incentivizing U.S. energy companies to boost domestic production, to reduce the selling price of Iranian oil and insulate America from Iranian threats to disrupt critical global supplies via the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el Mandeb.

#### **Confront Iran with a Unified Front**

When confronted with diplomatic and economic isolation, Iran often counterpunches by trying to split the United States from its allies. American leadership must forge and maintain a wide-ranging coalition of Israeli, Arab, and European partners that will be vital for deterring and denying further Iranian nuclear advances and, if necessary, compelling Tehran to negotiate urgently and earnestly.

Specific steps should include:

- Preparing proactively with “E3” partners Britain, France, and Germany to snap back UNSC sanctions on Iran, well before they expire on October 18, 2025, and making this intent abundantly clear to Iran in advance of any negotiations.
- Driving down Iran’s energy export revenues by encouraging increased production from friendly Arab countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, working with Iraq to end its imports of Iranian natural gas and smuggling of Iranian heavy oil, and ending U.S. sanctions waivers for Iranian electricity exports to Iraq.
- Persuading European partners, and all other friendly nations, to penalize and counter Iran’s aggression in the Middle East and farther afield by designating its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and constituent organizations as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in their respective jurisdictions.

### **Optimize U.S. Military Readiness**

Iran reliably builds up its nuclear program and attacks U.S. interests in the Middle East when it faces strictly economic and diplomatic pressure. Leveraging its appreciable force deployments already in the region, the United States must maximize the credibility of its military options against the gamut of Iran’s malign activities before, or in lieu of, any talks. Specific steps should include:

- Sharpening minds in Tehran by emphasizing explicitly the president’s urgency and rigorous preparations to use military force, if needed, against the Iranian regime’s most valuable assets—not just its nuclear program, but also the IRGC and other forces in Iran and around the region.
  - » The president also should convey that the United States will respond directly against Iran if any proxy attack using Iranian weapons hits U.S. ships or kills American personnel.
- Updating U.S. contingency planning to neutralize Iran’s nuclear facilities and associated military capabilities, and to counter potential Iran-led retaliation against U.S. and partner assets.
- Deploying or relocating strategic bombers and massive ordnance penetrator (MOP) bunker busters to Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, rotating additional carrier strike groups and fast attack submarines through Middle Eastern waters, and ensuring adequate force protection for U.S. strategic assets, vital transit chokepoints, and other likely targets of Iranian retaliation.
- Conducting military exercises under U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) to demonstrate these updated plans and deployments, and to enhance the readiness and ongoing integration of U.S.-led regional and missile defenses against further Iran-led projectile attacks.
- Publicizing these activities and linking them explicitly to U.S. objectives of preventing a nuclear Iran, countering its regional destabilization, and defending U.S. partners and other interests.

### **Support and Coordinate with Israel and Arab Partners**

Tehran’s true nightmare scenario, but one it has never yet faced, is the credible prospect of a combined U.S.-Israeli military threat. Since maximum sanctions and other U.S. preparations will take time to implement, Israel’s proven readiness and capacity to inflict serious damage on Iran—clearly backed by the United States, with no daylight—offers the best option to build leverage and halt Tehran’s nuclear clock. The United States should move swiftly on parallel fronts, maximizing potential Israeli military effectiveness and coordinating objectives and operations, including combined defenses against Iran-led retaliation.



Specific priorities should include:

- Declarations by President-elect Trump that any Israeli military action against Iran's nuclear program is consistent with longstanding U.S. prevention policy and that the United States stands with Israel, fully supports Israel's security and self-defense, and will take whatever steps necessary to deescalate the situation and dissuade Iran from triggering a major regional conflict.
- Ending all U.S. pauses of ongoing transfers of air-to-ground and other vital munitions to Israel.
- Expediting delivery of U.S.-made KC-46A aerial refueling tankers purchased by Israel in 2021, and fast-tracking training for Israeli pilots on these aircraft.
- Ensuring America's prepositioned weapons stockpile in Israel (WRSA-I) is properly updated with precision guided munitions (PGM), including potentially bunker busters and air-to-air missiles, to fulfill the depot's official purpose of supporting Israel in an emergency such as wartime.
- Backstopping Israel's diminished air and defense batteries and interceptor stocks, all of which are co-produced with the United States, by transferring additional systems and interceptors and, as feasible and required, continuing to deploy U.S. air defense systems to Israel.
- Coordinating on objectives and responses in anticipation of any potential Israeli strike, and on options to continue addressing Iran's nuclear and regional military threats after such an attack.
- Conducting combined exercises to demonstrate U.S.-Israeli interoperability and readiness and, as after prior exercises, leaving KC-46A aircraft and/or other key capabilities behind in Israel.
- Signaling the seriousness of preparations for conflict by reducing existing vulnerabilities of U.S. forces currently deployed close to Iran in the Gulf, specifically by working with Israel, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and other partners to identify alternative regional deployments for U.S. military assets.
- Reassuring Arab partners to support tougher measures against Iran, without fear of being left out to dry, by seriously degrading shared threats from the Houthis and other Iranian proxies.

### Exploit the Regime's Illegitimacy

For the first time ever, Iran's glaring domestic political weakness should be seized upon as real U.S. leverage. Given the regime's well-earned illegitimacy among its own people, this offers an acute and growing vulnerability to be exploited by forcing Tehran to spend more time and resources plugging internal security gaps and less on external aggression.

The United States should impose human rights sanctions against regime leaders for their denial of basic freedoms for Iran's populace. Adroit messaging campaigns can also shine light on the regime's rampant corruption while supporting the Iranian people's rights and aspirations for freedom and dignity. There should be a concerted effort to equip Iran's citizens with digital technologies that allow them to securely circumvent regime controls on their ability to access accurate information and communicate with each other and the outside world. The next administration should also exploit the regime's domestic insecurities by considering the implementation of a workers' strike fund to cripple the regime's petrochemical and oil sectors. While the future of Iran must be decided by the Iranian people, U.S. mentorship and assistance to opposition groups could help develop credible and capable regime alternatives, as it did with the Polish Solidarity movement (*Solidarność*) during the Cold War.

## Readying a Redline?

As the Trump administration lays the groundwork to maximize the credibility of these threats, it should begin seriously considering whether and how to clarify America's longstanding policy against Iran possessing a nuclear weapon, even if only for internal planning purposes and potentially private communication to the Iranian regime. Drawing a concrete redline entails complex deliberations and would be most effective only once the new administration has undertaken many of the steps above to rectify America's credibility deficit. As part of these deliberations and the above recommendations, the United States should coordinate with Israel and the E3, with whom it has never confronted Iran with a unified and clear nuclear redline.

### B. Principles and Parameters for Negotiations

Should the new Trump administration ultimately decide on nuclear talks, it should consider several key takeaways and relevant lessons from past diplomacy in which Iran got the better of America:

- 1. *Keep up the pressure:*** Tehran has learned from past talks that it faces less pressure the more it builds its own leverage and escalatory threats. The United States must not flinch from Tehran's retaliatory threats of "maximum resistance," nor try to buy Iran's goodwill through conciliation.
- 2. *Keep an eye on the exit:*** the United States must be ready to shift from talks to less diplomatic options if Iran reverts to its usual foot-dragging and tries to chip away at U.S. demands.
- 3. *Begin with a blank slate:*** Iran frames any talks as a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) revival, since this entails massive and permanent U.S. sanctions relief upfront, minor temporary Iranian concessions, and indirect U.S.-Iran parleys that waste time and attenuate U.S. demands. The Trump administration should give Iran a stark choice: a completely fresh start to talks, or no diplomacy at all.
- 4. *Force Iran to show good faith:*** developing comprehensive pressure offers a last chance to finally compel Tehran to negotiate urgently and in earnest. The administration should demand Iran earn the world's confidence by freezing and shipping out all uranium enrichment and stockpiles above 3.67 percent, the level Iran previously agreed as sufficient for its proclaimed need to fuel nuclear power plants. Iran also must comply immediately with all existing inspection demands by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and halt direct and proxy attacks on U.S. interests and partners throughout the Middle East, including Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping.
- 5. *Set deadlines, with consequences:*** Iran must be painfully aware that its diplomatic option expires before snapback does, which behooves the United States and partners to prepare all possible leverage and penalties for any failure by Tehran to accede to an acceptable agreement in time.

Given Iran's nuclear advances and the JCPOA's proven failures, the Trump administration should lay down clear markers for an acceptable deal by a non-negotiable deadline, namely:

- 1. *Zero enrichment:*** ideally, any deal would prohibit enrichment and related infrastructure, given the proliferation risks of recognizing Tehran's self-proclaimed "right" to enrich. This strict benchmark would align with the "gold standard" that America demands of key partners like the United Arab Emirates in its 123 Agreements for peaceful nuclear cooperation. The United States should aim for

this high bar but, considering the difficulties of attaining it, ensure that Iran is left, at most, with largely symbolic and easily monitored enrichment capabilities.

2. *Full transparency*: no deal can prevent a nuclear Iran without a total accounting of its relevant, often covert, activities. Working with IAEA inspectors, the United States and E3 must demand Iran provide a full declaration of its nuclear program, including all aspects related to weaponization as revealed in Israel's 2018 seizure of Iranian archives, which the IAEA would then verify as a precursor to a deal. Iran also must ratify a monitoring and verification regime commensurate with the IAEA's need to continue certifying the peaceful nature of its nuclear program, including the immediate ratification and implementation of the IAEA Additional Protocol. The benefits to Tehran under any such deal would have to lapse immediately in case of any violations. All open questions about Iran's past activities must be resolved to the IAEA's satisfaction.
3. *No sunsets*: the only acceptable deal should be a permanent one that does not buy mere time until Iran inevitably revives its nuclear weapons infrastructure, and that does not allow international sanctions to expire based on an arbitrarily predetermined deadline suiting the Iranian regime's demands. A permanent deal would be in accordance with decades of U.S. arms control agreements and align properly with longstanding U.S. policy to prevent a nuclear Iran.
4. *Cover all bases*: keeping in mind Iran's penchant to integrate nuclear and regional threats, an agreement must tangibly restrain the regime's programs to develop nuclear delivery vehicles and end its proliferation of weapons to its non-state terrorist proxies. Such parameters would adhere to UNSC embargoes—since lapsed—against Iran's missile and conventional arms trade, and to enduring U.S. policy.
5. *True arms control*: like many of America's most durable arms control agreements, any new deal should be signed and ratified as a formal treaty with a two-thirds majority vote in the U.S. Senate. The Trump administration should make this clear from the start, both to convey its seriousness in securing a much stronger deal than the JCPOA, and to convince the Iranians that the sanctions relief on offer would be more permanent and harder to revoke than with the JCPOA.

## II. A Day One Challenge

### A. Iran at the Nuclear Threshold

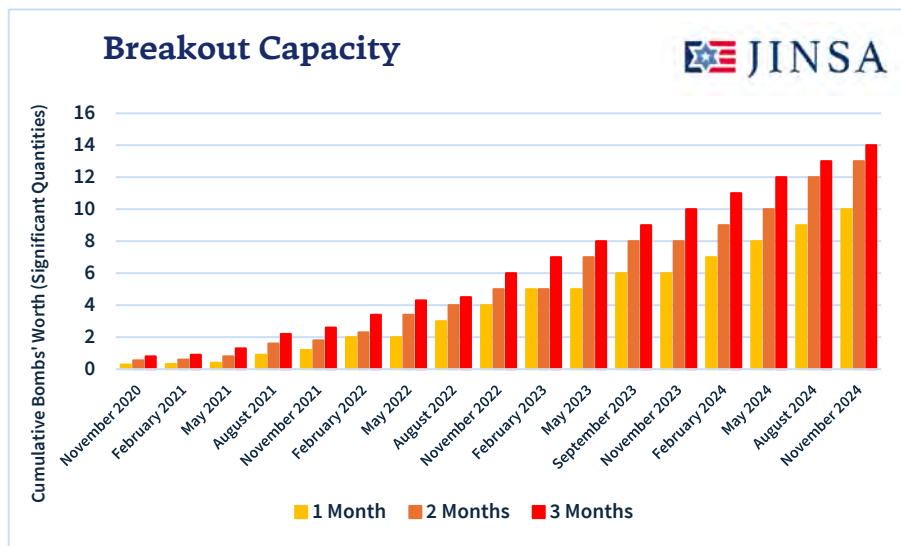
The incoming Trump administration will confront an Iranian nuclear weapons program that is appreciably more advanced, resilient, and opaque than when President Trump left office four years ago. Tehran has advanced its program so aggressively and assiduously that there is now a high risk it could achieve all the necessary elements of a nuclear weapon, with no certainty the outside world could detect such moves quickly and accurately enough to stop them.<sup>1</sup>

#### Expanding Enrichment Program

After advancing its enrichment program steadily for nearly two decades, Iran recently kicked these efforts into overdrive, to the point it can now produce an arsenal's worth of weapons-grade uranium in short order. As Secretary Blinken remarked in July, Iran's breakout time to produce its first bomb's

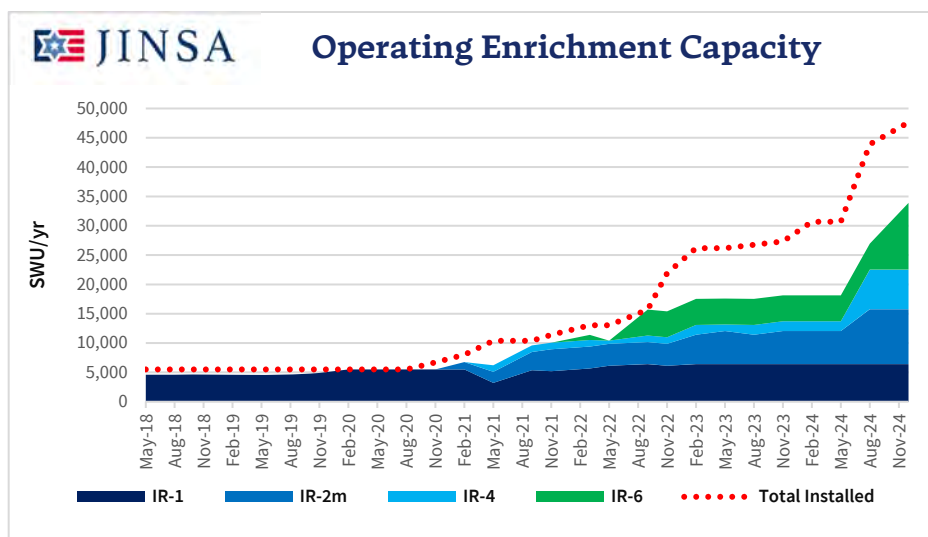
worth (“significant quantity,” or SQ) is “probably one or two weeks,” should it make the final hop to 90 percent enriched uranium, which is widely accepted as the requisite purity for a weapon that can fit inside a missile warhead.<sup>2</sup> Technically speaking, however, Iran would not necessarily need to take this step. The atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima used roughly 80 percent enriched uranium, and even the 60 percent enriched uranium Iran currently produces could be utilized to fashion a cruder, but still usable, nuclear device.<sup>3</sup>

This tight breakout window of 1-2 weeks is troubling enough, but Iran’s larger breakout capacity to enrich multiple SQs month after month is at least as worrisome. When President Trump left office in January 2021, Tehran needed roughly 3-4 months to produce its first SQ, plus another 2-3 months for a second SQ. By his inauguration, Iran will be able to crank out fissile material at a rate more than 20 times



greater, accumulating at least 10 bombs’ worth in just one month, and an additional three the following month.<sup>4</sup>

Iran has shrunk its breakout time and grown its breakout capacity by fast-tracking each element of its enrichment program in recent years. It has been producing 20 percent uranium since November 2020, and 60 percent uranium since April 2021, which represent 90 and 95 percent of the work, respectively, to achieve weapons-grade uranium. And it has more than quadrupled its enrichment capacity—and by extension, its rate of production—by operating ever more advanced centrifuges. Thanks to their higher efficiency, these new machines also enabled Iran



to shift the center of its enrichment gravity from Natanz to the smaller, more deeply buried and protected Fordo.<sup>5</sup> In December, Iran announced it would further expand its production of 60 percent uranium at Fordo by activating significant additional numbers of advanced centrifuges.<sup>6</sup>

## Finishing Touches on a Bomb?


Just as Iran’s ability to make fissile material, and lots of it, has raced ahead in recent years, there are growing indications it could be closing in on another final element of the bomb: a workable nuclear explosive device. Tehran has strenuously sought to shroud these activities from the outside world for decades, but Israel’s 2018 covert seizure of Iranian archives showed this weaponization program to be much more advanced than previously thought, with only a handful of uncompleted tasks separating the regime from a workable device. In 2021, it converted some of its new 20 percent enriched uranium to metal form, effectively demonstrating an ability to produce the 90 percent uranium metal needed for a missile warhead.<sup>7</sup>



This summer, American and Israeli intelligence revealed Iran is undertaking key remaining steps like computer modeling, metallurgical research, and simulations of nuclear detonations.<sup>8</sup> The following month, a report from the Director of National Intelligence omitted State Department reporting language that routinely appeared in past assessments affirming that Iran was not undertaking key activities to develop a nuclear weapon. Instead, the report concluded Iran has “undertaken activities that better position it to produce a nuclear device, if it chooses to do so.”<sup>9</sup> Israel’s October airstrikes on Iran underscored this point by destroying an active, but covert, nuclear weapons research facility at Parchin. Furthermore, the U.S. intelligence community recently assessed that Iran’s efforts to improve the accuracy, lethality, and reliability of its nuclear-capable missiles is continuing apace.<sup>10</sup> In parallel, Iranian officials increasingly affirm their country’s ability and, if provoked, intent to weaponize after years of insisting its nuclear program was purely peaceful and civilian in nature.

## Going Dark

The more Iran has advanced its nuclear weapons program, the more it has obscured that progress by violating with impunity the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards for monitoring its nuclear activities and verifying their peaceful nature. Combined, these factors leave little room to detect remaining weaponization, and even enrichment, steps to cross the nuclear threshold.<sup>19</sup>

Growing Threats by Iran’s Regime to Build a Bomb 		
Date	Official	Statement
November 28, 2024	Seyed Abbas Araghchi, Foreign Minister	“There is this debate in Iran, and mostly among the elites – even among the ordinary people – whether we should change our nuclear doctrine, as some say, or not, because it has proved insufficient in practice.” <sup>11</sup>
November 1, 2024	Kamal Kharrazi, Senior Advisor to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei	“If an existential threat arises, Iran will modify its nuclear doctrine. We have the capability to build weapons and have no issue in this regard.” <sup>12</sup>
October 9, 2024	39 members of Majlis (Iranian parliament)	Letter to Supreme National Security Council calling to reconsider the “defensive doctrine of the Islamic Republic.” <sup>13</sup>
May 12, 2024	Kamal Kharrazi, Senior Advisor to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei	Iran “does not possess nuclear weapons, and there is a fatwa from the leader regarding this matter. But what should you do if the enemy threatens you? You will inevitably have to make changes to your doctrine.” <sup>14</sup>
April 22, 2024	Javad Karimi Ghadossi, Majlis National Security Council member	“If approval is given [by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei], it will be a week until the first [nuclear] test.” <sup>15</sup>
April 18, 2024	Brigadier General Ahmad Haq Talab, head of security of Iran’s nuclear facilities	“If the counterfeit Zionist regime wants to use the threat of attacking our country’s nuclear sites as a tool to put Iran under pressure, revision of the Islamic Republic’s nuclear doctrine and policies as well as a departure from the previously announced reservations is conceivable and probable.” <sup>16</sup>
February 12, 2024	Ali Akbar Salehi, former head of Iran’s Atomic Energy Organization	“We possess all the nuclear science components and technology. We’ve crossed all the lines, overcome all obstacles. It’s like having all the parts to build a car: we have the chassis, the engine, the transmission, everything. Each component serves its purpose, and everything is in our hands.” <sup>17</sup>
January 13, 2024	Mohammad Eslami, head of Iran’s Atomic Energy Organization	“This is not about not having the capability. Rather, it is about us not wanting to do this. In terms of our national security, we do not want to do it. It is not about the lack of capability. This is a very important point. Our national security in this field requires us to continue to seek our objectives and to gain influence.” <sup>18</sup>

With Tehran aggressively rolling back inspectors’ access to key enrichment sites after President Trump left office in 2021, IAEA Director Rafael Grossi has sounded continual alarms about his inability to track the full extent of Iran’s expanding activities, including at undeclared weaponization sites and potential clandestine facilities.<sup>20</sup> There are also rising concerns Iran could use its tightening strategic ties with

Russia, China, and North Korea to surreptitiously attain vital technology or know-how to cross the nuclear threshold. This June, Grossi warned publicly that Iranian suggestions of its ability to weaponize were amplifying his own concerns about its clandestine activities.<sup>21</sup>

By November 2024, these rising concerns finally prompted the United States and its “E3” European partners (Britain, France, and Germany) to request a comprehensive report from Director Grossi which, if it determines Tehran has failed to comply with IAEA safeguards, could end up referring the matter to the UN Security Council (UNSC) and “snapping back” stringent but lapsed international sanctions on Iran’s illegal nuclear activities.<sup>22</sup>

The United States and its allies also lack clear insight into Tehran’s final decision-making to finish the components of a bomb, assemble them, and possibly test a device. Historically, these choices involve political, not just technical, considerations that may not proceed predictably or generate clear intelligence signals. Notably, recent U.S. intelligence assessments of ongoing weaponization experiments call into question prior U.S. and Israeli assumptions that Iran would move sequentially to complete the components of a bomb only after enriching 90 percent uranium, not simultaneously. Washington was caught off-guard by the first Soviet, Chinese, and French nuclear tests, and by the timing and number of Indian and Pakistani tests in 1998. The considerable nuclear advances made by Iraq, Libya, South Africa, and Syria, before those programs were halted one way or another, also surprised U.S. intelligence agencies.<sup>23</sup>

## B. The Urgency of Now

President Trump will have at most a few months, and almost no margin for error, to implement a concerted prevention strategy—especially as he must deal with the demanding processes of staffing a new administration, getting it up to speed, and addressing other policy priorities.

The accelerating technical progress and increasing opacity of Iran’s nuclear venture leaves the president-elect with a much more urgent and complex challenge on this issue than any other incoming administration, including his own in 2017. Moreover, the Bush 43, Obama, Trump 45, and Biden administrations faced fewer, and less thorny, competing demands from other crises. Even with relatively abundant time and leeway, presidents Obama and Biden developed and applied insufficient leverage to convince Tehran to engage in good faith—with demonstrably disastrous results.

Iran has even greater incentive now to drag its feet, play for time, and amass more counterpressure by advancing its nuclear program and making it more robust and opaque, even as its ostensibly “moderate” president offers an equally ostensible olive branch of reengaging on nuclear talks.<sup>24</sup> The sheer scale of its nuclear progress inherently provides more leverage than in past negotiations in 2012-15 and 2021-22, and it will continue doing so with the projected completion next year of an unprecedentedly deep and hardened Natanz Tunnel Facility for enrichment and/or centrifuge production.<sup>25</sup> Most recently, the value of its nuclear program has been thrown in further relief after severe losses to the regime’s ballistic missile production sites and regional proxies, foremost Hezbollah. And while Iran seeks upfront U.S. sanctions relief, it also wants to run out the clock on the months-long process, starting well before the October 2025 expiration date, for the United States and E3 to snap back stringent UNSC sanctions that would legally prohibit its core nuclear activities and international arms trade.<sup>26</sup>

### III. Prevention Is Paramount

Including President-elect Trump, no fewer than four commanders-in-chief, over seven consecutive administrations across both parties, have declared it official U.S. policy to keep Iran from a nuclear weapon.<sup>27</sup> Yet the Iranian regime has adeptly exploited nuclear diplomacy to erase American negotiating redlines, work toward a bomb, and undercut sanctions and military threats. This compounds the challenges of U.S.-led prevention and constrains President-elect Trump's freedom of maneuver and time horizon for preventing a nuclear Iran, diplomatically or otherwise. Yet these costs, risks, and constraints pale in comparison with those of a nuclear Iran. American credibility, the coin of the realm in geopolitics and the U.S.-led global order, would be severely weakened, as would U.S. deterrence against Iran and its corresponding commitments to Middle East stability and partners.

The United States has irreversibly staked itself to preventing a nuclear Iran, with Republican and Democratic presidents alike spending two decades consistently vowing to use all elements of national power, and risking major conflict, to avert exactly this outcome. Indeed, there are few parallels in post-Cold War U.S. strategy where American leaders have so reliably pledged to do whatever it takes to defend such a crucial commitment. The challenges of upholding this pledge are compressing into a tightening timeframe and crowded by competing priorities, yet the alternative will prove far costlier for years to come, including by jeopardizing other vital U.S. interests.

#### A. Middle East Commitments Undone

Because Iran could achieve a nuclear umbrella only by invalidating such a well-established U.S. promise, it would gain the capability and a green light to violate other U.S. strictures as well. Indeed, so much of America's reputation is wrapped up in preventing a nuclear Iran that this promise is innately intertwined with every other U.S. commitment to regional stability. This domino effect of collapsing credibility was captured by Cold War strategist Thomas Schelling's observation that "there is no way to let California go to the Soviets and make them believe nevertheless that Oregon and Washington, Florida and Maine, and eventually Chevy Chase and Cambridge cannot be had under the same principle."<sup>28</sup> Seeing profound U.S. reticence to impose promised punishments for Syria's chemical weapons use in 2013, Iran moved quickly to rescue Assad's beleaguered regime and entrench its own formidable military position in that country. And after successfully pushing the United States to walk back all its JCPOA negotiating redlines in 2013-15, Iran immediately started overstepping the new deal's bans on nuclear-capable missile tests and weapons proliferation, while also threatening core U.S. interests in regional freedom of navigation.<sup>29</sup>

Going nuclear thus would represent an amazing turn of fortune for Iran, with grave knock-on effects for American assurances of regional defense. Despite stunning Israeli military action gutting Iran's main deterrent in Hezbollah and clearing the path for major strikes on its own core assets, crossing the ultimate redline to gain the ultimate weapon would enable and embolden Tehran to restore these capabilities and threaten even more powerful versions of October 7, its own massive missile and drone strikes, and other proxy attacks on U.S. and partner targets. The regime would have good reason to believe these threats could compel the United States to abandon its avowedly "ironclad" support for Israel, and with it the larger vision of a new Middle East architecture built on U.S. leadership, Israel-



Saudi normalization, and regional defense and economic integration. This in turn could be the entering wedge for realizing Iran’s ultimate aim to dominate the region by evicting the United States, jeopardizing Israel’s existence, and cowing Arab countries into submission.

With its deterrent credibility so diminished, possibly fatally, U.S.-led attempts to contain a nuclear Iran are no safe fallback option for failed prevention.<sup>30</sup> Reflecting these concerns about American guarantees, Saudi Arabia and other regional actors have signaled clear intent to develop their own nuclear deterrents, should Iran do so. Rather than congealing into mutually-assured destruction with survivable second-strike capabilities all around, this proliferation cascade would generate an unprecedentedly and inherently unstable, multipolar nuclear standoff among Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia and potentially others—replete with brinkmanship and sharp first-strike incentives, but without any of the hotlines or other tools adopted by Washington and Moscow to defuse crises.<sup>31</sup>

## B. Wider World of Troubles

As a presumably inviolable redline, the continued prevention of a nuclear Iran is also bound tightly with America’s overlapping and globe-spanning network of security guarantees. This is especially true as China, Russia, and North Korea cooperate increasingly closely with Iran and each other in Europe, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific. Were Iran to go nuclear, these other adversaries would then see little risk in testing U.S. redlines and commitments to partners elsewhere, dangerously stretching American resources and credibility toward a breaking point. As analogized by strategist John Lewis Gaddis, “banks routinely lend beyond the value of their deposits . . . and great powers operate similarly: if called upon to honor all commitments extended, or to employ all deterrents deployed, their strategies, like overstretched banks, would quickly crash.”<sup>32</sup>

This tendency was evident in the wider fallout from the failed Syria redline. The vacuum of U.S. credibility fed Russia’s willingness to intervene alongside Iran in Syria and expand its military footprint at America’s expense. Moscow also felt inspired to test other U.S. guarantees, like the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, by annexing Crimea and invading Donbas in 2014. Around the same time, Beijing blew past repeated U.S. warnings, and blatantly broke its promises to President Obama, by escalating construction and militarization of seven artificial islands in the disputed South China Sea.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, America’s precipitous abandonment of its Afghan partners in 2021 helped inform Vladimir Putin’s decision to threaten the very existence of Ukraine, another embattled U.S. partner, less than six months later with a full-scale campaign of conquest. It also encouraged Iran to perceive U.S. decline and weakness in the Middle East. Supreme Leader Khamenei crowed about how the “U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan proved that this country is no longer the superpower of the world and cannot impose its will on nations,” and Iran’s Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) commander declared “what we see is no longer a dangerous America, but a defeated, fleeing, and depressed America.”<sup>34</sup>

The United States faces an even more sweeping run on its credibility bank if it fails to honor an Iran nuclear redline that has been laid down far more consistently and explicitly than the Syria redline or promises to Afghan partners. Iran and its great power cohort would boost strategic and technical ties to weaken American leadership and partners writ large, likely on a much wider scale and with much more risk-taking than their existing support for Russia’s assault on Ukraine. China could accelerate its plans for invading Taiwan in the wake of an equally critical U.S. redline being erased in the Middle East,

and any or all these adversaries could more directly threaten America's ironclad guarantees to formal treaty allies in NATO, South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines, among others. Driven by such dire circumstances, U.S. allies worldwide could move to develop their own nuclear deterrents and thus create additional, equally untenable proliferation cascades, most probably in Northeast Asia's traditional cockpit of conflict. In this sense, a nuclear Iran would be the first loose thread unraveling the global Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), perhaps the most successful arms control agreement in modern history and, as scholar Frank Gavin has explained, a cornerstone of America's extraordinary efforts over decades to inhibit and mitigate the consequences of the spread of nuclear weapons.<sup>35</sup>

## IV. Recommendations: A New Strategy

Whether parallel or as an alternative to negotiations, the incoming Trump administration must hit the ground running, in advance of inauguration, with a concerted strategy to prevent Iran's final progress to the bomb. In the few instances in its history where it genuinely feared prohibitively costly U.S.-led pressure, the Iranian regime has reliably been deterrable or compelled to change even its most entrenched malign behaviors, though that challenge is now more monumental than ever before in light of Tehran's nuclear advances.<sup>36</sup> Notably, the regime has never faced believable, consistent, all-encompassing threats in its nuclear talks with the United States, and thus it steadily attempted to erode U.S. ultimatums, drag out talks, and build counterpressure with nuclear buildups and attacks on U.S. interests in the Middle East—all while vowing to walk away.

Internalizing the failures from past talks and keeping in mind the urgency to resolve the Iran nuclear crisis one way or another, the United States must work with its partners to prepare maximum economic, diplomatic, and military pressure first, and only then consider coming to the table.

### A. What Not to Do: Lessons in Weak Diplomacy

Reflecting on his life, former Secretary of State George Shultz observed how, “if you say that something is unacceptable but you are unwilling to impose consequences when it happens, your words lose their meaning and you will lose credibility.”<sup>37</sup> Sadly, this is an apt characterization of U.S. nuclear diplomacy to date with Tehran. The Iranian regime has exploited the prospect and process of talks to steadily erode U.S. credibility, expand its nuclear program, and secure major U.S. concessions that legitimize and smooth its approach to the nuclear threshold—all while delegitimizing threats of force to prevent it ultimately crossing this threshold.

In both major instances of U.S.-Iran nuclear diplomacy—in 2012-15 to produce the JCPOA, and in 2021-22 attempting to revive that deal—Tehran successfully compelled Washington to soften its own ostensibly nonnegotiable redlines as it played for time, aggressively expanded its nuclear program, conducted proxy attacks, and called American negotiators' bluffs to walk away. This generated a doom loop where increasingly hollow U.S. threats encouraged Iran to continue dragging out diplomacy, extracting further concessions, building out its nuclear weapons program, and ramping up its destabilizing attacks around the Middle East.<sup>38</sup>

Most starkly, the Obama administration's 2013-14 demands for a nuclear deal, while strong on paper, were eviscerated as its negotiators walked back their positions and failed to leverage Israel's military preparations and very clear 2012 redline—one SQ of 20 percent uranium—to achieve their diplomatic goals.<sup>39</sup> The JCPOA's final parameters reflected this one-sided dynamic as they blessed Tehran's self-proclaimed “right” to enrich, permitted work on its advanced centrifuges, retained its deeply-buried Fordo enrichment site and heavy water reactor at Arak, left its ballistic missile program untouched, forbade “anytime, anywhere” inspections, peremptorily closed the file on its past weaponization work, and agreed to terminate robust UNSC sanctions.<sup>40</sup> Iran also leveraged America's transparent hope for successful talks to delegitimize less diplomatic means of addressing its nuclear progress. This included pausing further sanctions pressure while talks were ongoing, securing sanctions relief in a 2013 interim deal, encouraging the White House to forestall Israeli military action, and prodding the Obama administration to sell the final deal as the only alternative to yet another Middle East war.<sup>41</sup>

While Iran ironically saved the Biden administration from itself by refusing to rejoin the JCPOA in 2022, a similar process unfolded over the preceding 16 months as it pocketed U.S. sanctions relief and other conciliatory gestures, ratcheted up regional aggression against U.S. targets, and assiduously grew its enrichment capacity by an order of magnitude—all while essentially daring American envoys to fulfill their evermore empty threats to walk away and implement comprehensive pressure.<sup>42</sup>

By forsaking its own ultimatums, granting unilateral concessions, letting talks drag out indefinitely, distancing itself from its Israeli partner, and mortgaging regional stability in search of Iranian amity, the United States came out of nuclear talks with its prevention policy—and the credibility underpinning it—much worse off than before it first outstretched its hand to Tehran.<sup>43</sup> With Iran's nuclear program and regional aggression so far advanced at this point, and the margins for error and time vanishingly thin, U.S. deterrence cannot remotely afford anything like another round of such counterproductive diplomacy.

## B. Momentum Toward Talks

A return to nuclear talks appears ever more likely. Following his election this summer pledging sanctions relief to stabilize the country, Iran's new president appointed former nuclear negotiators to his foreign ministry and, in September, declared a readiness to revive the JCPOA as the basis for new talks.<sup>44</sup> Simultaneously, then-candidate Trump said “sure, I would do that. We have to make a deal.”<sup>45</sup> In the background, startlingly effective Israeli operations dealt major damage to key Iranian assets meant to deter and deny attacks on its nuclear weapons program, chiefly its best air defenses, ballistic missile infrastructure, and Hezbollah's second-strike capability in Lebanon.<sup>46</sup> In this context, Tehran's supposed olive branch, proffered by a supposedly moderate president, could encumber the United States in open-ended talks, delegitimize Israeli or American military pressure on its nuclear facilities and other strategic assets, secure U.S. sanctions relief, and forestall UNSC snapback.

Despite Tehran's patently ulterior motives and long history of bad-faith negotiation, the incoming Trump administration will need to approach the prospect of talks seriously, if only to build domestic and international support for much greater U.S.-led efforts to counter the regime's panoply of threats. Indeed, diplomatic outreach and maximum pressure intertwine in support of U.S.-led efforts to drive a hard bargaining line. Having become steadily more fed up with Iran's obstructionism, and reading

President-elect Trump's tea leaves, America's E3 partners are increasingly inclined to help pressure Iran into talks before the looming snapback deadline, as evident in their joint censure resolution against Iran at the IAEA's November 2024 board meeting.<sup>47</sup>

### C. Prepare Pressure First

At the outset of his second term, President-elect Trump should seize the current window of Iranian vulnerability by issuing a joint U.S.-Israeli ultimatum to Tehran: agree fully and immediately to verifiably dismantle its nuclear weapons program, or invite its imminent and utter destruction. Unimaginable mere months ago, the incoming administration's reported discussions of an early strike and Israel's stunning operational successes now lend credibility – and urgency – to a military option.

Indeed, whether or not talks ever develop, from day one the incoming administration must confront Tehran with something it has yet to face: comprehensive, sustained, and credible U.S. alternatives to diplomacy. Here Iran's regime must unlearn its lessons from the Obama and Biden teams, which undermined U.S. chances of success by failing to support their diplomats with serious economic and military pressure. In both cases, the United States intentionally divorced negotiations from pressure, softening sanctions enforcement and downplaying military threats in the misguided hope of assuaging Iran into a deal. The Biden administration double-faulted, first by viewing pressure as a "Plan B" separate from and subsequent to the Plan A of negotiations, and then by failing to follow through on its threats to implement Plan B once Iran ditched negotiations by late summer 2022.

Free from fear of punishment, Tehran came out much better both times by steadily increasing enrichment, strengthening regional proxies, advancing its ballistic missile program, deepening cooperation with other U.S. adversaries, and taking dual-nationals hostage.<sup>48</sup> Both times, this leverage forced the United States to weaken its demands and, in 2015, ultimately secured a lopsided agreement giving Iran massive sanctions relief without reliably constraining its nuclear or conventional power.<sup>49</sup> Iran faced no cost for finally ditching the most recent talks in 2022, and in fact walked away with a much more robust nuclear program, greatly enhanced energy revenues, and a sharpened sense of U.S. weakness.<sup>50</sup>

With Iran's nuclear program measurably more advanced than ever before, the new Trump team must focus foremost on maximizing these alternatives to diplomacy, before making or accepting any entreaties to talk. Especially by this late stage in the game, talks on Iran's terms are far worse than anything on U.S. terms. American and allied officials must ignore, for the first time ever, Tehran's by-now standard protocol, basically gaslighting, where it tries to condition talks on unilateral U.S. giveaways to show goodwill, while warning that "maximum pressure will be met with maximum resistance."<sup>51</sup> Concomitantly, this means ignoring the regime's extortionist good cop, bad cop routine—played so well in JCPOA talks under President Rouhani—that frames U.S. concessions as helping empower "moderate" Iranian diplomats fending off regime hardliners that want to finish and test a bomb, leave the NPT, and ramp up attacks on U.S. interests across the Middle East.<sup>52</sup>

### Enact and Enforce Maximum Economic Pressure

The incoming Trump team already has made clear its intent to "bankrupt" Iran's funding capacity for nuclear and regional aggression, including through strict enforcement of sanctions on the regime's oil

exports and other vital revenue streams. Despite additional sanctions being passed by Congress since Trump left office in 2021, Iran's crude oil exports more than tripled in the past four years, with almost all of the increase going to China.<sup>53</sup>

Such financial pressure should start now, before inauguration, as one of the strongest levers is simply an unambiguous message from the incoming president conveying his intent to rigorously enforce sanctions on Day One of his administration. This will signal to any market participants currently aiding Iran's economy to shutter their business or face consequences.

Building from this first step, existing U.S. sanctions must be enforced aggressively, in stark contrast to the Biden administration's laxity, and these measures must be broadened to target the Iranian regime's remaining economic lifelines. Directly enforcing the SHIP Act, signed into law by President Biden in April 2024, can reduce the volume of Iranian oil exports by imposing sanctions against all of Iran's refiners, ports, shippers, insurers, bankers, and their owners and family members.<sup>54</sup> The president also should implement sanctions on Chinese banks and other companies conducting energy trade with Iran, and consider imposing targeted tariffs against China as long as the latter continues importing significant amounts of Iranian oil. Finally, the United States should resume its Rewards for Justice program, incentivizing any vessel carrying Iranian oil to forfeit the cargo to U.S. authorities in exchange for cash rewards and resettlement in the United States. To this end, the new administration should fully fund the Department of Homeland Security's bureau of Homeland Security Investigations, which provides critical legal and logistical support for such operations.

In tandem, the new administration can reduce the selling price of Iran's oil, and strengthen U.S. resilience against Tehran's threats to crucial energy chokepoints at the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el Mandeb, by encouraging U.S. oil companies to increase production via reduced regulations and increased permitting and leases. The United States also should insulate itself from Iranian pressure by refilling the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, which has been drawn down by fully 40 percent in the last four years—its lowest point in almost exactly 30 years, and down by almost half from its all-time high in 2010.<sup>55</sup> These and other U.S. economic actions will take real time to reach full steam in a new administration, as senior policy leaders likely will require Senate confirmation, and will need to build new teams and re-recruit civil servants to execute this extensive, and intensive, campaign.

### **Confront Iran with a Unified Front**

When facing such pressure, the Iranian regime adroitly tries to isolate the United States and avoid its own diplomatic and economic isolation, by offering carrots and sticks to hive off America's European, Israeli, Arab, and other partners. With Russia and China now actively backing Tehran, compared to their relatively neutral roles in JCPOA talks, Iran likely will try to intimidate the E3 and Arab countries onto the sidelines of its confrontation with the United States. American leadership will be vital to hold together this wide-ranging coalition before, during, or in lieu of nuclear talks, especially since Iran is likely to increase its own counterpressure on these countries.

To help drive down the selling price of Iranian oil, the State Department should seek the cooperation of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other friendly major oil producers to increase production. This also would advance parallel U.S. interests in depriving Putin's war machine of similar

funding. Additionally, the administration should work with Iraq to end its imports of Iranian natural gas and smuggling of Iranian heavy oil, and end sanctions waivers for Iran's electricity exports to Iraq.

At the same time, United States should persuade its European allies, and all other friendly nations, to designate the IRGC and its constituent organizations as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in their respective jurisdictions. The European Union (EU) requires the consensus of all 27 member states to take this action as a bloc, but the United States should encourage individual designations in the interim while it helps build this difficult consensus. And though the E3 and EU have imposed penalties on Iran's growing military support to Russia, including banning Iranian state airlines from European airspace, significant additional European pressure can only come via UNSC snapback.<sup>56</sup>

Therefore, U.S.-European diplomatic coordination should focus proactively on preparing for snapback before it expires in perpetuity on October 18, 2025, and should make this intent abundantly clear to Iran in advance of any negotiations. The E3's call for a comprehensive IAEA report on Iran's safeguards violations, due by March 2025, offers useful momentum by signaling a new readiness to move toward restoring stringent UNSC sanctions on Iran's nuclear program.<sup>57</sup> Though the United States self-declared its ability to exercise snapback in the first Trump administration, as a JCPOA participant, a united U.S.-E3 front would maximize the intended effect of such a move. While the process itself takes a minimum of around 30 days, further bureaucratic action to restore sanctions will take several or dozens more days—action that requires friendly and constructive leadership at the Security Council. However, Algeria will chair the UNSC in January 2025, China will succeed it for the February chair, Pakistan will chair in July, and Russia will serve as chair in the final month of October 2025. Each of these leaders could derail the snapback process and deliver Iran significant legal victories, while other non-aligned countries are simply too risky to rely upon. Accordingly, to ensure an optimal outcome, the snapback process should begin in March 2025, the point at which the IAEA report is due and Denmark takes the chair, and conclude before the end of April 2025, when France departs as chair.

### Maximum Military Pressure

From the U.S. perspective, Iran has responded positively the few times it faced believable military threats from the United States or Israel. But its true nightmare scenario, which it has yet to confront, is the prospect of a combined U.S.-Israeli military threat, let alone one joined with truly maximum economic pressure. Given Iran's proximity to the bomb, the sheer scale of its nuclear infrastructure, and its well-honed negotiating instinct to play for time, anything less at this point could very well be insufficient to deter, and if need be deny, the regime's final few steps over the nuclear threshold.

This imperative for tough and unified U.S.-Israeli military pressure becomes even more urgent considering the time needed to implement and enforce maximum sanctions pressure, which will accumulate more steadily over months, and the need to initiate the snapback process in early 2025—well before the October 18 expiration date. Moreover, when facing strictly economic threats, Iran regularly escalates by attacking U.S. bases, partners, and other interests across the Middle East.<sup>58</sup> Fortunately, the United States already has significant deterrent forces deployed in-theater, many with high readiness, and it has gained invaluable experience planning and coordinating operations with Israel and certain Arab countries since October 7, 2023.<sup>59</sup>

In close cooperation with its Israeli, European, and Arab partners, the United States should take the following steps to develop an integrated and coordinated maximum pressure campaign as precursory support for any talks, not subsequent to them, and which works to address Iran's nuclear aggression in close conjunction with the rest of its malign activities.

i. Send Unmistakable Signals of Strength

Even before taking office, President-elect Trump must reinforce America's pledge to use all elements of national power, including its close partnership with Israel, to prevent a nuclear Iran. Unlike past statements referring rather vaguely to "all options" being on the table and only implicitly threatening military force, the incoming president should emphasize explicitly his sense of urgency and rigorous preparations to use military force, if needed, against the Iranian regime's most valuable assets—including, but certainly not limited to, its nuclear program. In the same breath, he should make clear he views any Israeli military action against Iran's nuclear program as consistent with longstanding U.S. prevention policy and that, consequently, the United States stands with Israel, fully supports Israel's security and self-defense needs, and will take whatever steps necessary to deescalate the situation and dissuade Iran from triggering a major regional conflict.

At the same time, the incoming president must make plain that the United States is ready, with its partners, to apply equal pressure and force directly against conventional aggression by Iran—not just its proxies—around the Middle East. As with prior talks, Tehran will ratchet up its regional destabilization for diplomatic leverage, and it will employ or threaten such attacks to try to deter military action against its nuclear program. With or without new negotiations, President-elect Trump must not repeat his predecessors' unforced errors of trying to entice good Iranian behavior by sacrificing America's leadership and position on the ground in the Middle East. In the Cold War, the United States pushed hard against the Soviet bloc globally at the same time it conducted arms control talks with Moscow. Doing likewise against Tehran could help create conditions for success at the nuclear negotiating table, especially by building on the recent momentum from Israel's successful rollback of Iranian, Hezbollah, and Hamas military capabilities. Accordingly, the president also should convey to Tehran that the United States will respond directly against Iran if any proxy attack using Iranian weapons hits U.S. ships or kills American personnel. Failing to seize this opportunity would send a dangerous message, to Iran and rogue regimes everywhere, that nuclear aggression offers unique insurance for other malign activities.

ii. Bolster and Convey U.S. Military Readiness

Tangible and visible actions will be crucial for conveying the seriousness of these strong statements and altering Iran's malign behaviors on the ground and at the negotiating table, after it spent years learning to doubt America's pledges of all options being on the table. Priorities for the incoming administration should include:

- Updating contingency planning for U.S. operations to neutralize Iran's nuclear facilities and associated military capabilities, and to counter potential Iran-led retaliation against U.S. and partner assets.
- Building on U.S. regional force posture enhancements since October 7, 2023, by deploying or relocating strategic bombers and massive ordnance penetrator (MOP) bunker busters to Diego

Garcia in the Indian Ocean; rotating additional carrier strike groups and fast attack submarines through the Gulf of Oman and Arabian Sea; and ensuring adequate force protection for U.S. strategic assets, vital waterways, and other likely targets of Iranian retaliation in the Gulf.

- Working with Israel, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and others to identify alternative deployments of U.S. military assets in the Middle East, to signal the seriousness of preparations for possible conflict by reducing existing vulnerabilities of U.S. forces currently deployed closer to Iran in the Gulf.<sup>60</sup>
- Joint and combined military exercises under U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) demonstrating these updated plans and deployments, and enhancing the readiness and ongoing integration of U.S.-led regional and missile defenses against further Iran-led projectile attacks.
- Strategic communications publicizing these activities and connecting them explicitly to the U.S. objective of preventing a nuclear Iran and regional aggression.

In light of Iran’s tendency to test American resolve and dial up regional aggression in the backdrop of diplomacy, plus its ongoing support for attacks on U.S. forces and interests across the region, the United States also must take active operational leadership in rolling back, not merely trying to contain, these key nodes of Tehran’s “axis of resistance.” The United States must work with its Arab partners, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to seriously degrade the Houthis’ unbroken, year-long threat to Middle East freedom of navigation and meaningfully interdict Iranian arms shipments destined for Yemen. In addition to sending overdue signals to Tehran and reducing America’s risk exposure in the region, these steps can also cut into Iranian leverage from threatening further energy supply risks. Furthermore, they can reassure Arab partners to support tougher economic and diplomatic measures to isolate Iran, without fear of being left out to dry.

### iii. Support and Coordinate with Israel

Israel offers the most ready-made military threat to prevent a nuclear Iran after months of highly effective operations against Iran proper, its second-strike capability in Hezbollah, and the appreciable air defenses of its erstwhile Syrian ally—and after years of waning U.S. credibility to uphold its own redlines. Simply put, Israel’s proven will and capacity to deal significant damage to Iran’s nuclear infrastructure over the past four years is the readiest and sharpest tool available right now.

The United States should move swiftly on parallel fronts to maximize the effectiveness of potential Israeli military action and to coordinate objectives and operations, including combined defenses against Iran-led retaliation. This will confront Tehran with an unprecedentedly daunting threat of military action, and thus also provides the most potent forms of deterrence and negotiating leverage. Specific priorities to enhance Israel’s freedom of action and preparedness include:

- Ending all U.S. pauses of ongoing transfers of air-to-ground and other vital munitions to Israel.
- Expediting delivery of U.S.-made KC-46A aerial refueling tankers purchased by Israel in 2021 and fast-tracking training for Israeli pilots.
- Ensuring America’s prepositioned weapons stockpile in Israel (WRSA-I) is properly updated with precision guided munitions (PGM), including potentially bunker busters and air-to-air missiles, to fulfill the depot’s official purpose of supporting Israel in an emergency such as wartime.



- Following significant attrition of Israeli air defenses since last October 7, backstopping Israel's air and defense batteries and interceptor stocks, all of which are co-produced with the United States, by transferring additional systems and munitions and, as feasible, continuing to deploy U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) and/or other air defense systems to Israel.

In tandem, Washington and Jerusalem should actively confer in advance of any potential strike, and work to coordinate objectives and responses in anticipation of such an eventuality. The two also should ensure they are on the same page on strategic questions that a strike will raise, including how best to ensure Iran's nuclear program remains shut down and how to deal with continuing military threats from its conventional forces and those of its proxies.

In addition to private discussions, these preparations should be conveyed openly through exercises demonstrating these capabilities and coordination to neutralize Iran's nuclear program and other core regime assets, similar to previous Juniper Oak exercises for improving U.S.-Israeli military interoperability. As it did in the past with an advanced air defense radar, the United States should leave behind in Israel certain systems utilized in such exercises, most logically KC-46A aerial refueling tankers already purchased by Israel.<sup>61</sup>

### Exploit Iran's Internal Illegitimacy

For the first time ever, the United States also must lead in applying pressure against the regime internally, inside Iran. This is important in its own right, especially in the wake of increasingly strident and broad-based domestic opposition to the regime's brutality, corruption, wastefulness, foreign interventionism, and illegitimacy generally.<sup>62</sup> But the regime's growing sense of vulnerability at home also offers crucial leverage to compel changes in its malign behaviors more broadly. The more time, effort, and resources the regime devotes to getting its own house in order and plugging security gaps both real and imagined, the less it can spend on nuclear weapons and destabilization abroad. Yet, as with Iran's regional aggression, in past rounds of diplomacy the United States willfully and needlessly took this piece off the board without demanding anything of Tehran in turn.

The United States should take every opportunity to support and demonstrate solidarity with the Iranian people through human rights sanctions against the regime's leaders, provision of internet and anti-censorship technology, exposure of the regime's corruption, and robust messaging in support of the Iranian people's rights and aspirations for freedom and dignity.

The next administration should also exploit the regime's domestic insecurities by considering the implementation of a workers' strike fund to cripple the regime's petrochemical and oil sectors. While the future of Iran must be decided by the Iranian people, U.S. leadership can be leveraged in the mentorship and development of opposition groups that could possibly cohere sufficiently to present credible and capable alternatives to the status quo, as it did with the Polish Solidarity movement (*Solidarność*) during the Cold War. As regime stability diminishes, more attention should be paid to planning and analysis to ensure that any successor to the Islamic Republic is not worse than the current regime.

## Prepare a Redline?

As the Trump administration lays the groundwork to maximize the credibility of this threat, it should devote concentrated attention to what Iranian actions would trigger U.S. use of force, and it should convey this privately but clearly to leadership in Tehran.<sup>63</sup> If it is to be effective, drawing and communicating such a redline should occur only once the new administration has undertaken many of the steps above to systematically rectify America's tenuous credibility and deterrence deficit in Tehran's eyes. As part of these deliberations and this task force's recommendations, the United States should coordinate with Israel and the E3, with whom it has never confronted Iran with a unified and clear nuclear redline. In recent years, Israel and the E3 each have suggested a redline of any Iranian enrichment above the current 60 percent level—but without any coordination with one another or with the Biden administration, which blurred America's own stance around the same time by declaring, without further clarification, that it would not permit Iran a "fielded" nuclear weapon.<sup>64</sup>

As it starts thinking through this course of action, the Trump administration must keep in mind the need to clearly proscribe certain actions to Tehran—for instance, achieving every element of a weapon or assembling them—without being so narrow or descriptive as to tacitly permit any and all activity up to, or around, that point. A redline also would need to be based solidly on knowledge and reliably early warning about Iran's nuclear status, including through more robust IAEA monitoring and verification, to avoid drawing a line Iran already has passed or one which it likely could do so without timely detection. Defining redlines also has become much more complicated in tandem with Iran's technical advances and the vanishing margins of error and time to detect and stop any final progress. Moreover, at this late stage, redlines could be seen at least implicitly as condoning Iran's prior nuclear expansions, encouraging it to continue escalating horizontally right under these lines, and exacerbating near-term U.S. challenges in the Middle East.

### D. How to Conduct Talks, If It Comes to That

Any diplomatic engagement on Iran's nuclear program must avoid the shortcomings of past outreach in 2012-15 and 2021-22 that directly undermined U.S. leverage and deterrence and actively worsened Tehran's nuclear threat.

#### Negotiating Principles

##### i. Keep Up the Pressure

Though it should build genuinely maximum pressure on the regime from the start, regardless of whether talks ever occur, the Trump administration must maintain this comprehensive leverage in concert with its partners throughout any negotiations. Iran has never negotiated in good faith with the United States, precisely because it faced less U.S. pressure the more it built up its own leverage. Both the Obama and Biden administrations intended to buy goodwill upfront by granting unforced unilateral concessions and highlighting their aversion to non-diplomatic options, which created a vicious cycle by encouraging Tehran to drag its feet and build counterpressure on the nuclear and regional fronts. Based on recent trends, the Trump administration must be ready for, and immune to,

Iranian threats to attack U.S. interests, finish a nuclear weapon, leave the NPT, or conduct other brinkmanship designed to coerce U.S. concessions.

ii. Keep an Eye on the Exit

In past rounds, America came out worse for wear in every respect as Iran steadily tested, and successfully erased, supposed U.S. redlines on the regime's nuclear program and its continual foot-dragging at the negotiating table. Every time, Iran either got its way and forced American diplomats to cave, or it simply abandoned the talks scot-free and continued accelerating its nuclear efforts. Should it engage in talks, the Trump administration must be fully and clearly prepared to walk away from the table, and prevent a nuclear Iran by other means, if Tehran's envoys revert to their usual stonewalling tactics, predictable ploys to chip away at U.S. demands, or horizontal escalation through proxy attacks and other non-nuclear forms of aggression.

iii. Begin with a Blank Slate

The Trump administration must steadfastly stand up to Tehran's obvious efforts to dictate terms and portray talks through the lens of reviving the JCPOA. President Masoud Pezeshkian already demands the United States first return to compliance with the 2015 deal and demonstrate goodwill before the regime will deign to discuss follow-on matters.<sup>65</sup> This condition transparently tilts the negotiating table toward Iran by requiring U.S. sanctions relief in advance, and permanently, only after which the regime would (supposedly) roll back its nuclear advances—and then only temporarily, until key JCPOA sunsets start kicking in by October 2025. Notably, IAEA Director Grossi has warned for years that, because Iran's nuclear program is so advanced, trying to put it “back into the JCPOA box wouldn't work ... it should be a JCPOA 2.0 or something, because you have to adapt.”<sup>66</sup>

Equally importantly, Iran's precondition treats the United States as a supplicant that must earn Tehran's trust and raises the prospect that it will again refuse to sit down at the same table, literally, as its American interlocutors. By agreeing to this ultimatum in 2021-22, the Biden administration effectively conceded Iran's warped framing of the talks and its placement of the burden of proof squarely on the United States. By forcing the E3 to traipse back and forth between the American and Iranian teams, this setup further favored Iran by dragging out every procedure and putting the Europeans in the awkward position of having to act as *de facto* intermediaries between their U.S. partners and the Iranians. The Trump administration should make clear, well in advance, that Iran faces a stark choice: a totally fresh diplomatic start, or other paths that are much less diplomatic.

iv. Force Iran to Show Good Faith

By confronting Iran with an unprecedented atmosphere of U.S. leverage, the Trump administration can flip the script from past talks and compel Tehran to prove its own good intentions. To pursue real relief from sanctions and other pressures, the regime should first have to freeze its most obvious forms of counterpressure that it otherwise will build up assiduously during talks. It must freeze and ship out all enrichment and stockpiles above 3.67 percent, the level it previously agreed as sufficient for its proclaimed need to fuel nuclear power plants, and it must earn the outside world's confidence in these and other matters by complying immediately with its IAEA safeguards obligations. It must also commit to halting direct and proxy attacks on U.S. bases, partners, and other interests.

#### v. Clear Deadlines and Consequences

Tehran must understand with crystal clarity that its diplomatic option expires before snapback does. This behooves the United States and the E3 to start following through on their November 2024 IAEA censure resolution and convince Iran it cannot drag out talks yet again, well in advance of the actual October 2025 expiration date for referring the matter to the UNSC. In tandem, the United States must prepare all the comprehensive pressures detailed above, both as diplomatic leverage and as readily-implementable penalties for any failure by Tehran to negotiate in earnest and secure an acceptable agreement before this deadline.

#### Parameters for a New Nuclear Deal

Given the dangerously advanced state of Iran's nuclear program and its demonstrable tendencies to attenuate U.S. demands, the Trump administration would have to lay down clear markers for an acceptable deal by a non-negotiable deadline, short of which the United States would walk away and implement much less diplomatic options.

##### i. Zero Enrichment

Ideally, any new agreement would prohibit Iranian enrichment and the development of associated infrastructure, given the patently obvious proliferation risks that have played out in Iran—and that could play out more globally—ever since the JCPOA flouted the NPT and past U.S. policy by effectively recognizing the regime's self-proclaimed "right" to enrich. This strict benchmark also would align with the "gold standard" that America demands of key partners like the United Arab Emirates in its 123 Agreements for peaceful nuclear cooperation. The United States can and should aim for this high bar but, considering the difficulties of attaining it, ensure that Iran is left, at most, with largely symbolic and easily monitored enrichment capabilities.

##### ii. Full Transparency

No matter how strong its other parameters are on paper, no deal can verifiably stop a nuclear Iran without a total accounting of the regime's nuclear-related activities, most of which have been conducted covertly and in violation of its safeguards agreements. The IAEA Director's forthcoming report on this (non-)compliance should pave the way for demanding Iran provide a full declaration of its nuclear program, which it conspicuously failed to do in implementing the JCPOA. The IAEA then would have to verify the completeness and correctness of this declaration as a precondition for an acceptable agreement. Under a new deal, Tehran also would have to ratify a monitoring and verification regime commensurate with the IAEA's needs to continue certifying the peaceful nature of its nuclear program, and the benefits to Iran under any such deal would have to lapse immediately in case of any violations. All open questions about Iran's past activities must be resolved to the IAEA's satisfaction.

##### iii. The Sun Never Sets

One of the JCPOA's fatal flaws was its glide path for legitimizing an industrial-scale Iranian enrichment program, while also delegitimizing any future UNSC and unilateral sanctions for its illegal nuclear weapons activities. The only acceptable deal should be a permanent one that does not buy mere time until Iran inevitably revives its nuclear weapons infrastructure, and that does not allow international sanctions to expire based on an arbitrary deadline suiting the regime's demands. A permanent deal would be in accordance with decades of U.S. arms control agreements. It would also align with

longstanding U.S. policy to prevent a nuclear Iran, including the Obama administration's explicit condition for a deal and the Biden administration's pursuit of a longer and stronger JCPOA successor.<sup>67</sup>

#### iv. Cover All Bases

Despite its name, the JCPOA also failed to address Iran's threats comprehensively. Even more so today than a decade ago, the regime adroitly integrates its nuclear and regional aggressions, viewing escalation and deterrence in one domain as complementary or supplementary to the other. With Iran's regional destabilization following the JCPOA in back of mind, and its multifront war since October 7 in front, the Trump administration must pursue an agreement that tangibly restrains the regime's programs to develop nuclear delivery vehicles and to proliferate weapons to its proxies. Such parameters would adhere to UNSC embargoes—since lapsed—against Iran's missile and conventional arms trades that have flourished with Russia, China, North Korea, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and others. This demand also would be in keeping with the Obama administration's explicit condition for a deal and the Biden administration's pursuit of a longer and stronger JCPOA successor.<sup>68</sup>

#### v. A True Arms Control Agreement

As with many of America's most durable arms control agreements, any new deal should be signed and ratified as a formal treaty with a two-thirds majority vote in the U.S. Senate. The Trump administration should make this clear from the start, both to convey its seriousness in securing a much stronger deal than the JCPOA, and to convince the Iranians that the sanctions relief on offer would be more permanent and harder to revoke than under the JCPOA, whose weak parameters prevented anything resembling a majority of either house of Congress from approving it.<sup>69</sup>

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