

Biden Admin's Coercive Iran Policy Threatens Serious New Regional Crisis

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Global Research, January 28, 2021

[The Grayzone](#) 25 January 2021

Region: [Middle East & North Africa, USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

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Team Biden is planning to hold on to what it apparently sees as its "Trump card"— the Trump administration's sanctions against Iran oil exports that have gutted the Iranian economy.

A close analysis of recent statements by members of President Joseph Biden's foreign policy team indicates his administration has already signaled its intention to treat negotiations with Iran as an exercise in diplomatic coercion aimed at forcing major new concessions extending well beyond the 2015 nuclear agreement. The policy could trigger a renewed US-Iran crisis as serious as any provocation engineered by the Trump administration.

Although the Biden team is claiming that it is ready to bring the United States back into the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) if Iran comes into full compliance first, it is actually planning to demand that Iran give up its main source of political leverage. Thus, it will require Iran to cease its uranium enrichment to 20 percent and give up its accumulated stockpile of uranium already enriched to that level before the United States has withdrawn the economic sanctions that are now illegal under the JCPOA deal.

Meanwhile, the Biden team is planning to hold on to what it apparently sees as its "Trump card"— the Trump administration's sanctions against Iran oil exports that have gutted the Iranian economy.

But the Biden strategy faces a serious problem: Iran has already demanded all sanctions imposed after the JCPOA took effect must be ended before Iran would return to compliance. Iran expects the United States, as the party which initially broke the agreement, to come into compliance first.

The new Biden coercive strategy

The Biden administration is banking on a scenario in which Iran agrees to cease its enrichment to 20% and reverse other major concessions Iran made as part of the 2015 agreement.

The Biden team then states it would start a new set of negotiations with Iran, in which the

United States would use its leverage to pressure Iran into extending the timeline of its major commitments under the deal. Further, Tehran will be required to accept a modification in its missile program, as European allies have urged.

The Biden team's Iran strategy was not hastily cobbled together just before inauguration. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan outlined it in an [interview last June](#) with Jon Alterman, the Middle East program direct at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "You can get some early wins on the nuclear program but tie long-term sanctions relief to progress on both [nuclear and other issues] files," Sullivan explained.

Sullivan made it clear the primary goal of his proposed strategy was to constrain Iran by imposing extended restraints on its nuclear program. The idea, he explained, was "to see, is it possible to get a short term win on the nuclear file to basically get Iran back into compliance with the JCPOA and to then put the longer term disposition of Iran's nuclear program on a negotiating track."

Biden's future NSC director implied that US sanctions would be exploited to draw Iran into talks with Israel and Saudi Arabia on missiles and other issues, but not at the expense of U.S. aims on the nuclear issue. The assumption that the US would maintain its coercive leverage on Iran is at the center of the policy. As Sullivan said, summarizing an article he co-authored for Foreign Affairs, "the U.S. should say, 'We are going to be here applying various forms of leverage, including economic leverage as well as military dimensions, apart from whether we have 20,000 more troops or 10,000 less troops there.'"

At the heart of Biden's strategy is the demand for Iran to return immediately to full compliance with the nuclear agreement. Before Iran rejoins the pact, the new administration expects it to reverse the moves it made to increase the level and the speed of enrichment in response to Trump's withdrawal.

The Biden administration's demand ignores the fact Iran scrupulously observed all of the JCPOA's provisions for two years after the Trump administration had withdrawn from the agreement. It was only after the Trump administration reintroduced old sanctions outlawed by the agreement and introduced crushing new sanctions aimed at preventing Iran from exporting oil that Iran began enriching uranium at higher levels.

By piling up onerous demands while offering few concessions of its own, the new administration conveys the clear message that it is in no hurry to return to the JCPOA. Secretary of State of Tony Blinken stated in his confirmation testimony that the Biden administration was "a long way" from returning to the deal and said nothing about reversing any of the sanctions that were introduced or reintroduced by the Trump administration after it quit the agreement.

Robert J. Einhorn, a key Obama policymaker on the Iran nuclear issue as State Department Special Adviser on Arms Control and Proliferation who has maintained contacts with Biden insiders, has [provided an explanation](#) for that ambiguous message. He suggested that the Biden administration aims to press Iran for a deal falling well short of full restoration of the JCPOA — an "interim agreement" involving "rollback" of part of Iran's current enrichment activities and going beyond the JCPOA in return for "partial sanctions relief."

That relief would include "some" of the revenues from oil sales that have been blocked in

foreign bank accounts. Einhorn appeared to confirm that the new Biden strategy would be based in holding on to the leverage conferred by Trump sanctions against Iran's oil and banking sectors, which have crippled the country/s economy.

Learning the wrong lesson from Obama's coercive diplomacy

Biden's foreign policy team is comprised largely of Obama administration officials who either initiated nuclear deal talks in 2012-2013 or who were involved in the later stages of the negotiations. NSC Director Sullivan and CIA Director William Burns were key figures in the early talks with Iran; Blinken oversaw the later phase of the negotiations as Deputy Secretary of State, and Undersecretary of State Wendy Sherman was in charge of day-to-day negotiations with Iran on the JCPOA until the final round in Vienna in 2015.

So it should be no surprise that the Biden team is pursuing an Iran strategy similar to the one that the Obama administration followed in its negotiations with Iran on the JCPOA itself. The Obama administration proudly claimed success in increasing Iran's "breakout time" for obtaining enough enriched uranium for a single bomb from two or three months to a year through the pressure of heavy sanctions. It believed it had secured a winning diplomatic hand in 2012 when it got European allies to buy into its coercive strategy of oil and banking sanctions that would cut deeply into Iran's foreign currency earnings.

But Iran's enrichment efforts before negotiations on the nuclear deal began in 2012 tell a very different story. As the [IAEA reported](#) at the time, between late 2011 and February 2013, Iran enriched 280 kg of uranium to 20 percent, which would have placed it well over the level regarded as sufficient for "breakout" to a bomb. Meanwhile, Iran roughly doubled the number of centrifuges capable of 20 percent enrichment at its Fordow enrichment facility.

Instead of storing the total amount of uranium enriched to 20 percent for a possible bomb, however, Iran did exactly the opposite: it immediately converted 40 percent of its total capacity of enriched uranium to power Iran's reactor. What's more, it did not take steps to make the new centrifuges at Fordow capable of enrichment.

Iran was clearly amassing its stockpile and enrichment capability as bargaining chips for future negotiations. During a September 2012 [meeting with EU officials](#) in Istanbul, Iran confirmed the strategy by offering to suspend its 20 percent enrichment in return for significant easing of Western sanctions.

The Obama administration believed its sanctions weapon would prevail over Iran's diplomatic chips. But Iran persisted in asserting its right to more than a token enrichment program. In the very last days of the negotiations in 2015, Secretary of State John Kerry sought to retain language that would allow the United States to reimpose sanctions deep into the implementation of the agreement, as [an Iranian official told this writer](#) in Vienna. But Iran held fast, and Obama needed to get an agreement. Kerry ultimately gave up his demand.

Blinken, Sullivan and the other Biden administration officials who worked on Iran during the Obama administration seem to have forgotten how Iran used 20 percent enrichment to get the United States to drop its sanctions. In any case, they are so enamored with the Trump sanctions and their role in stifling Iranian oil sales that they believe they will have the upper hand this time around.

In its bid to coerce a state that is fighting for its most basic national rights into submission, the Biden administration has exhibited a stubborn refusal to acknowledge the limits of U.S. power. The Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” campaign has already prompted Iran to establish military capabilities that it previously lacked.

If the Biden administration refuses to relent on its coercive diplomacy and provokes a crisis, Iran can now inflict serious costs on the United States and its allies in the region. Yet Biden’s foreign policy team appears so far to be oblivious to the serious risks inherent in its current path.

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Year: 2015

Pages: 240 Pages

List Price: \$22.95

Special Price: \$15.00

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