

Has Biden Botched Diplomacy with Iran?

Keeping all of the Trump-era “maximum pressure” sanctions in place has been the major error that may very well end up dooming that effort.

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The Biden administration’s effort to reenter the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is [languishing](#), and there is an increasing likelihood that the nuclear deal won’t be salvaged:

Hopes for a quick re-entry to the accord that Donald Trump abandoned have dimmed after six rounds of negotiations in Vienna, with little sign of when a seventh might start.

If that happens, it will not only be a major, avoidable foreign policy failure for Biden, but it will also reward Iran hawks for their years of sabotage. A collapse of the JCPOA would be a significant setback for the cause of nonproliferation, and it would send a message that the U.S. is incapable of making and honoring agreements even when they are extremely favorable to our side. It hasn’t happened yet, and administration officials may manage to stave off a complete collapse before the end of the summer, but it is worth considering how things reached this sorry state. It is not entirely the Biden administration’s fault, but they do bear a large part of the blame for letting things get to this point.

The administration’s main mistakes have been wasting too much time up front, refusing to offer any sanctions relief, and publicly entertaining the so-called “longer and stronger” follow-on agreement that no one truly thinks is possible. The Israeli government threw a wrench in the works with its campaign of assassination and sabotage, which then prompted the Iranian reaction that opponents of the deal have sought to use to discredit the agreement. Iran’s move to end implementation of the Additional Protocol clearly hasn’t helped matters, and that is a consequence of the Israeli attacks. Iranian demands for a [“guarantee”](#) that the U.S. won’t betray them again are impossible to meet (any such guarantee would be meaningless and non-binding in any case), since we all know that the next administration could easily throw the agreement in the trash again.

All of these things have contributed to the current problem, but it is the administration’s unwillingness to provide any sanctions relief and to take the most basic step of formally rejoining the agreement that have made it much more difficult to save the agreement. That unwillingness is driven at least in part by fear of being attacked by domestic hawkish critics

and regional clients. No doubt Biden would have been attacked for taking the initiative in rejoining the agreement and lifting sanctions, but he did not spare himself from these attacks by dragging his feet and now he risks botching things. It is unclear to what extent Biden administration officials genuinely support the absurd “longer and stronger” agreement idea, but it hasn’t gained them anything with their domestic critics and it has helped to undermine the effort to rejoin the agreement.

Keeping all of the Trump-era “maximum pressure” sanctions in place has been the major error that may very well end up dooming that effort. For all intents and purposes, Biden has been continuing Trump’s Iran policy, and it has had the same predictable results. Had Biden begun by making significant changes to that policy by winding down the economic war that the U.S. has waged on the Iranian people, the nuclear deal’s chances of survival would be much better. As things stand now, the administration now has to salvage their salvage operation before time runs out later this year.

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