

To: President Elect Biden and the Biden administration

As experts on Iran, international relations and nonproliferation, we write to fully support the incoming Biden administration in its commitment to make a clean break from the Trump Administration's failed Iran policy and maximum pressure campaign and return the U.S. to the diplomatic path and full compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), or Iran nuclear deal.

In 2017, President Trump inherited an enviable position on Iran. Iran's nuclear program was no longer a source of major security concern, while there was a prospect to broaden diplomatic negotiations to address pressing security concerns in Syria and Yemen. Instead, Trump unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA over the objections of close allies while Iran was still compliant with the accord. This self-inflicted wound set the U.S. on a destructive path with no easy offramp. The U.S. and Iran moved to the precipice of war twice, Iran expanded its nuclear leverage to counter America's sanctions and the Iranian people were crushed between U.S. sanctions and their own government's repression.

In short, Trump's approach has failed, and you will be left with the unenviable task of reversing his damaging policies as you simultaneously contend with domestic rancor and a deadly pandemic. Nevertheless, it is clear to us that the most straightforward path is to move quickly to return the U.S. and Iran to compliance with the JCPOA.

Some may argue in good faith that a Biden administration should delay its return to the negotiating table with Iran, whether out of perception that Trump's sanctions have provided additional U.S. leverage rather than undermined our position, or a desire to avoid a political battle. However, delay will only risk codifying Trump's action not as an outlier but as carrying the imprimatur of a new administration, and cause the U.S. to lose a last opportunity to definitively break with Trump's policy and risk allowing the window to negotiate with Iran to close entirely. It may also encourage Iran to advance its nuclear program further in a bid to enhance its own leverage, injecting crisis at the early stages of a new administration. Iran has many nuclear cards it can still play, including enriching at higher levels, limiting inspector access and withdrawing from the JCPOA and the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Moreover, if a hardline administration succeeds Hassan Rouhani as President, the task of once again diplomatically removing the threat of a nuclear-armed Iran - let alone addressing non-nuclear concerns - is likely to grow immeasurably more difficult.

Rather than see your negotiating position further erode, you should take immediate action to revive diplomatic channels. On Day 1 of your administration, we encourage you to revoke President Trump's order (National Security Policy Memorandum 11) withdrawing the U.S. from the JCPOA and request a meeting of the Joint Commission to resolve questions of noncompliance with the accord. Simultaneously, the U.S. should ease sanctions that have hobbled Iran's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and were designed to limit a Biden administration's options to negotiate with Iran.

Undoubtedly, reviving diplomacy will be difficult, but there is likely to be a time-bound window to save the JCPOA. Acting quickly will both serve national interests and lessen the challenges facing your administration over the long term.

Jamal Abdi, President, National Iranian American Council

Arshin Adib-Moghadam, Professor in Global Thought and Comparative Philosophies, SOAS University of London

Andrew Bacevich, President, Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft

Narges Bajoghli, Assistant Professor of Middle East Studies, School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), Johns Hopkins University

Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj, Founder and CEO, Bourse & Bazaar Foundation

Peter Beinart, City University of New York

Jeremy Ben-Ami, President, J Street

Salih Booker, President & CEO, Center for International Policy

Joseph Cirincione, Distinguished Fellow, Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft

Juan Cole, Collegiate Professor of History, University of Michigan

James Dobbins, former Assistant Secretary of State and Ambassador

Dina Esfandiary, Fellow, The Century Foundation

John Esposito, Professor of Religion and International Affairs, Georgetown University

Farideh Farhi, Affiliate Graduate Faculty, University of Hawaii at Manoa

Mark Fitzpatrick, Associate Fellow, International Institute for Strategic Studies and former deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Non-Proliferation (Acting)

Lara Friedman, President, Foundation for Middle East Peace

Nancy Gallagher, Research Professor and Director of the Center for International and Security Studies, University of Maryland

Mark Gasiorowski, Emeritus Professor of Political Science, Tulane University

Ellie Geranmayeh, Deputy Director Middle East & North Africa Programme,
European Council on Foreign Relations

Behrooz Ghamari Tabrizi, Professor of Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University

John Ghazvinian, Executive Director, Middle East Center, University of
Pennsylvania; Author of *America and Iran: A History, 1720 to the Present*

Robert J. Goldston, Professor, Princeton University.

Kevan Harris, Assistant Professor, UCLA

Nader Hashemi, Associate Professor and Director of the Center for Middle Eastern
Studies, University of Denver

Matthew Hoh, Senior Fellow, Center for International Policy

Robert Hunter, former US Ambassador to NATO

Rula Jebreal, Visiting Professor, University of Miami

Peter Jenkins, former British Ambassador to the IAEA

Robert Jervis, Adlai E. Stevenson Professor and Professor of International and
Public Affairs, Columbia University

Derek Johnson, Chief Executive Officer, Global Zero

Bijan Khajepour, Managing Partner, Eurasian Nexus Partners

Lawrence Korb, Senior Fellow, Center for American Progress and former Assistant
Secretary of Defense

Joshua Landis, Sandra Mackey Chair in Middle East Studies and Professor,
University of Oklahoma

Daniel Larison, Senior Editor, The American Conservative

John Limbert, retired Foreign Service Officer, former deputy assistant secretary of
state for Iranian affairs

John Mearsheimer, R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of
Political Science, University of Chicago

Stephen Miles, Executive Director, Win Without War

Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, MBE, Founder/CEO, International Civil Society Action Network & Director, LSE Centre for Women, Peace, Security

Rouzbeh Parsi, Senior Lecturer, Lund University

Trita Parsi, Executive Vice President, Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft

Thomas Pickering, former Under Secretary of State and Ambassador

Paul Pillar, Non-resident Senior Fellow at the Center for Security Studies of Georgetown University

Assal Rad, Senior Research Fellow, National Iranian American Council

Djavad Salehi Isfahani, Professor of Economics, Virginia Tech

Azadeh Shahshahani, Legal & Advocacy Director, Project South; past president, National Lawyers Guild

Gary Sick, Senior Research Scholar, Columbia University and former NSC Staff member for Iran

Barbara Slavin, Director of the Future of Iran Initiative at the Atlantic Council

Yasmine Taeb, Senior Fellow, Center for International Policy

John Tierney, Executive Director, Center for Arms Control & Nonproliferation

John Tirman, Executive Director and Principal Research Scientist, MIT Center for International Studies

Frank von Hippel, Senior Research Physicist and Professor emeritus, Princeton University

Jim Walsh, Senior Research Associate, MIT

Stephen Walt, Robert and Renee Belfer Professor of International Affairs, Harvard University

Stephen Wertheim, Deputy Director of Research and Policy, Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft

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