AJC Policy: Iran

The Islamic Republic of Iran, the world’s leading state sponsor of terrorism, is an ongoing threat to regional and global peace. It is incumbent on the United States, European and Middle East allies, and the international community to unite in action to decisively halt Iran’s quest for nuclear weapons, curtail its conventional weapons program, and check its regional aggression and internal oppression.

As it pursues negotiations aimed at returning Iran to compliance with the time-limited constraints imposed on its nuclear program in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), while maintaining leverage to lengthen, strengthen, and broaden that agreement, America should coordinate closely with our strategic partners in Europe, the Gulf, and the Levant to prepare the imposition of punishing costs for every one of the regime’s acts of provocation and, in so doing, decisively restore stability and America’s deterrent power in the region. Regional and global security cannot be assured without a truly comprehensive and enforceable agreement, or set of agreements, that will address the full range of the regime’s malign activities, both nuclear and conventional. If diplomacy fails, America and its allies should be prepared for other scenarios and to demonstrate the will and the capacity to act in the event Iran continues its nuclear escalation and aggression in the Arabian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz.

The JCPOA and Iran's Nuclear Ambitions
Since America’s withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018, and re-imposition of sanctions in the ensuing months, Iran’s regional aggression has only intensified, its military provocations have multiplied and threatened the United States and its allies, and its adherence to the 2015 deal’s uranium enrichment limits has ceased. In violation of numerous UN resolutions, the regime continues to demonstrate its nuclear ambitions by advancing both its uranium enrichment and ballistic missile programs.

Rather than permanently impeding Iran’s quest for nuclear weapons, the 2015 nuclear accord merely delayed that process and set Tehran on a dangerous path toward becoming a nuclear threshold state with near-zero breakout time. Any potential new nuclear deal with Iran must therefore include an intrusive and permanent inspections infrastructure, long-term and extendable enrichment prohibitions, and clear and veto-proof penalties for violation.

To prove to the international community its intention to forswear nuclear weapons capability, Iran should cease all uranium enrichment. After all, there is no inherent right for any country to enrich uranium, much less so for Tehran, whose leaders have spent decades concealing its illicit nuclear program. A habitual violator of the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT) prior to signing the JCPOA, the regime has dramatically breached the accord’s enrichment limits, escalating enrichment to 63% purity and, reportedly, beyond – dangerously close to the 90% level needed for a nuclear weapon. What’s more, the International Atomic Energy Agency confirms that Iran has made significant progress toward producing enriched uranium metal, a material used in the core of a nuclear weapon.

In addition, curbing the regime’s tireless and unimpeded work to perfect its means of delivery through ballistic missiles must be an integral part of any future agreement. Today, the regime maintains the region’s most diverse arsenal of ballistic missiles, including missiles with a 2,000 km range capable of hitting targets in Israel and parts of Europe. Unfortunately, UN Security Council resolution 2231, which endorsed the JCPOA, stops short of prohibiting ballistic missile development. With even these lax UN restrictions set to terminate in October 2023, AJC urges the U.S. to rally international
support against Iran's missile proliferation and vigorously oppose missile-sanction relief as an a priori concession to Iran.

Diplomacy remains the most desirable path to rein in Iran – backed by demonstrations of the will and capacity to impose severe consequences for violations of any agreements achieved. Such diplomacy must also include regional partners, chief among them Israel and America’s partners in the Arabian Gulf. Fundamentally, clinching a “longer and stronger” deal will depend on the transatlantic allies in the P5+1 – the U.S., the United Kingdom, France, and Germany – shoring up the political will to put Tehran’s non-nuclear malign activities on the table and keeping essential sanctions in place until the regime changes its behavior.

It is imperative that any comprehensive agreement with Iran take into account the view of the United States Congress. Indeed, a meaningful measure of bipartisan support in Congress is a prerequisite for the accord with Iran to survive and fulfill its purpose in the mid-to long term. In 2015, unfortunately, the congressional discussion of the JCPOA was tinged with partisanship. Not a single Republican in either the Senate or House was persuaded to support the deal, setting the stage for the Trump administration’s withdrawal three years later. More effort needs to be invested in building bipartisan support for any new deal, which means considering, rather than summarily dismissing, concerns voiced by responsible critics. At the same time, responsible criticism of any potential deal must outline achievable alternatives.

Regional Aggression and Support for Global Terror
Since the Islamic Republic’s inception in 1979, the regime has routinely employed terrorism as a tool to advance its nefarious goals. On numerous occasions over the past decades, Tehran has enlisted its diplomats to plot and commit terrorist acts, whether it be assassinations of Iranian dissidents and foreign diplomats or targeting Jewish sites and Western political leaders in Europe and elsewhere.

Among Iran’s most effective tools for destabilization and destruction in the Middle East is its support of terrorist proxies, including Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Houthis, and the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units (PMU). With the help of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its expeditionary Quds Force, the PMUs are responsible for killing hundreds of American forces in Iraq. Iran’s regime and proxies pose an existential threat to America’s key ally, Israel.

Iran's most lethal proxy, Hezbollah, not only sows discord in Lebanon but actively spreads terror throughout the wider Middle East and beyond. Its operatives use hubs around the world to recruit members, raise funds, procure weapons, and, when feasible, instill terror and destruction. The international community must urgently designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization in its entirety. Delegitimizing the group will not only give the people of Lebanon a chance to have a stable government but will also enhance the security of the U.S., Israel, and our allies around the world.

The U.S., Canada, Australia, Germany, the UK, the Netherlands, Australia, the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and others have designated all of Hezbollah as a terror organization. The European Union (EU), however, still falsely distinguishes between a so-called military wing, which could be subject to sanctions, and a political wing, which could operate freely. The very premise that Hezbollah has distinct wings is rejected by Hezbollah’s own leaders. While the 2013 EU designation of the “military wing” was an important first step, Europe – America’s critical partner in negotiations with Iran’s regime –
needs to finish the work, ban Hezbollah in its entirety, and do its part to forge a unified transatlantic position against Iran’s deadly proxy.

**Iran’s Conventional Weapons Program**
On October 18, 2020, the long-standing UN arms embargo against Iran expired as part of the JCPOA, underscoring one of the accord’s most problematic flaws. Tehran hailed the event as “a momentous day.” Today, Iran can both purchase and proliferate new weapons across the region from countries like Russia and China. The U.S. sought to extend the embargo in August 2020 but was defeated at the UN Security Council when Russia and China voted against the move and 11 nations abstained, including the UK, France, and Germany.

In the last several years, Iran has developed missile guidance capabilities for Hezbollah and other forces to more precisely target sites in Israel. The regime is now legally able to transfer a wide range of weapons and military equipment to both state and nonstate actors, including terrorist organizations. **The U.S. and the international community must not give Iran a free pass – but stand together and create new mechanisms to curtail its malign activities.** The danger posed by Iran’s proliferation of advanced conventional weapons was demonstrated in early 2022 in the series of deadly missile and drone attacks by the Houthis and other proxies against the United Arab Emirates.

**Internal Oppression**
America and its allies should be under no illusion about the violent and antisemitic ideology that underpins the Islamic Republic of Iran. At its core, the regime is anathema to the values of democracy and pluralism we hold dear. **Iran’s pervasive human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrests, kidnapping of foreign nationals, torture, unfair trials, executions, and religious persecution must therefore be addressed.**

In addition, the U.S. should work closely with other freedom-loving countries to open channels of communication and engagement with Iran’s younger generation, many of whom reject the regime’s hateful worldview and yearn for freedom, prosperity, and improved relations with the country’s neighbors and the world.