



Bringing Gulf Arab countries and Israel into JCPOA talks is unrealistic

By Dr. Kristian Alexander and Giorgio Cafiero

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Many commentators predict that Joe Biden's term in office will be in essence a continuation of Barack Obama's presidency. But Biden may approach the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula in ways that would set him apart from his old boss. Although it is still too early to discern how Biden's administration will direct US foreign policy in the Middle East, the region has changed vastly since his time as Vice President. The policy landscape has shifted with various Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members moving closer to Israel, for example. As Iran's actions keep on worrying some of Washington's regional partners, Biden's administration might take steps to deal with certain Gulf Arab states and Israel's worries about the expected easing of "maximum pressure".

BIDEN, THE GULF AND THE JCPOA

Ultimately, Biden believes it serves US interests to avoid upsetting some of Washington's closest partners when it comes to the Iranian nuclear file. The new US president does not want to approach the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in ways that leave the Gulf Arabs and Israelis feeling abandoned by the US, which was largely the case during Obama's presidency.

In his second term, Obama attempted to somewhat assuage GCC states' concerns about the JCPOA by [supporting the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen](#). Yet Biden is cutting off US support to offensive Saudi military actions in Yemen while some are pushing him to bring the Kingdom, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and/or Israel into future nuclear [negotiations with Tehran](#). In fact, at a recent Atlantic Council event, French President Emmanuel Macron advocated that the Saudis and Israelis have a seat at [future nuclear talks with Iran](#).

It is safe to assume that Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel will demand that Biden's team bring them into the negotiation process. Officialdom in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Tel Aviv do not want the Biden administration to treat them as bystanders or spectators, especially when the outcome will directly impact their countries' security considerations.



www.cespi.it
cespi@cespi.it

Piazza Venezia 11
00187 Roma



One can argue that bringing these GCC states and Israel into negotiations with Iran over the JCPOA would give these countries less reason to worry about the Biden administration's approach to Tehran. But the new US leadership should not even try because the idea is too unrealistic. Although US officials will likely consult Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Tel Aviv and provide these three capitals with some reassurances while keeping them in the loop on ongoing developments, their formal participation at the negotiation table is unfeasible.

A NONSTARTER FOR TEHRAN

Iran would never agree to mediate the JCPOA's revival after the negotiating table enlarges to include Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and/or Israel. If western powers require this enlargement, Shireen Hunter, an Iran expert and Research Professor at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, believes that Tehran could end cooperation with the [International Atomic Energy Agency](#).

"Adding new parties to the JCPOA is a nonstarter," explained Negar Mortazavi, a Washington-based Iranian-American journalist and political commentator¹. "It is a done deal that was negotiated for years and signed and implemented. Arab states can be included in follow-on talks about regional issues. But on JCPOA, there is only one path and that is for the US to return to the deal and for Iran to return to full compliance. Anything beyond that has to happen in new negotiations."

Iran knows that the Saudis and Emiratis, if able to veto agreements reached by the P5+1, would make non-nuclear issues (Iran's sponsorship of powerful Arab militias, the country's ballistic missile program, the Emirati-Iranian islands dispute, etc.) part of a new and 'better' Iranian nuclear deal. Calls for widening the JCPOA's scope to include non-nuclear issues will meet a [strong rejection from Tehran](#). Also, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi would likely demand that Iran agree to not enriching any uranium, which was Washington's position until the Obama administration shifted the US's red line from "no enrichment of uranium" to "[no nuclear bomb](#)". Just as the 2005 talks failed because the West refused to accept Iran's legitimate right to enrich, Tehran would still never sign an accord that committed Iran to zero enrichment for reasons that largely pertain to [national pride](#). Frankly, any Iranian leader agreeing to this restriction would be committing political suicide at home.

Tehran's view is that its nuclear program and regional conduct are "two completely separate files, each of which involves a separate set of actors", explained Hamidreza Azizi from the German Institute for International and

Security Affairs in Berlin ⁱⁱ. “The nuclear issue is seen as a factor in Iran’s relations with the West, especially the United States. That’s why, since the very beginning, Iran decided to engage with Western countries to solve the crisis, and this approach actually succeeded in terms of reaching a multilateral deal. In this sense and given the experience of an actual deal already being there, Iran sees regional actors totally irrelevant in any talks for the deal’s revival. On the other hand, Iran’s established position is that problems with its neighbors could be only solved by direct dialogue between regional states, without any foreign presence or pressure. As such, the West is believed [by Tehran] to be an irrelevant actor here.”

Ali Ahmadi, a Tehran-based geopolitical analyst, believes that the push for inclusion of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi is coming from hawks in Washington and the French president, who may have ulterior motives such as a weapons sale to Riyadh. “The French did a lot of similarly irrational things during the negotiation of the JCPOA and there has always been a lot of speculation about their intentions in Iran.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Two other P5+1 members—China and Russia—would oppose any western effort to add Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and/or Israel into the Iranian nuclear talks. This is mainly because Beijing and Moscow realize that Tehran would never agree to this. Officially, China and Russia’s positions are that the Iranian nuclear accord’s problems lie not with the deal itself but rather the US’s decision to trash it in May 2018. This means that Beijing and Moscow view Washington’s return to the accord, as opposed to the enlargement of the negotiating table, as the first necessary step to take in order to peacefully resolve the standoff over Iran’s nuclear program.

REBUILDING TRUST

A diplomatic opening between the US and Iran could see the start of step-by-step negotiations that move away from the policy of “maximum pressure” while (re)building some degree of trust. The new leadership in Washington views the most anti-Iranian GCC states with some skepticism and has fears that these close partners of the US could act as spoilers, rather than constructive partners, while the Biden administration seeks to deal with Tehran through diplomacy. Throughout this delicate process of engaging the Islamic Republic, possibly via Qatar and/or Oman, Biden’s administration will be concerned about foreign interference aimed at sabotaging efforts to salvage the JCPOA.

Dr. Kristian Alexander is a Researcher at TRENDS Research & Advisory, a UAE-based think tank, and an adviser at Gulf State Analytics, a Washington-based geopolitical risk consultancy. He has worked as an Assistant Professor at the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi.



Giorgio Cafiero is CEO of Gulf State Analytics. Follow him on Twitter: @GiorgioCafiero.

ⁱ Negar Mortazavi, Interview with Authors, February 7, 2021.

ⁱⁱ Hamidreza Azizi, Interview with Authors, February 8, 2021.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ali Ahmadi, Interview with Authors, February 8, 2021.