

# Why Biden's new deal with Iran must rein in Tehran's regional proxies





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**T**here is no doubt that the Obama administration's Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), better known as the Iran nuclear deal, was a great achievement of diplomacy<sup>1</sup>.

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran was as much an uprising against Washington and London as it was against the Shah. Yet 35 years later, the two antagonists managed to come together and agree to an international treaty. Reinstating it would be a major accomplishment; the deal halted the development of nuclear weapons by Iran (though Tehran clearly retains its existing research and theoretical capacity) and reduced the risk of a nuclear confrontation with Israel. In terms of domestic Iranian politics, it also offered support to those factions within the regime looking to normalize the country's relations with the rest of the world.

## CRITICALLY FLAWED DEAL

Nevertheless, the 2015 deal was critically flawed in a way that made it unsustainable from the outset. It successfully contained Iran's nuclear capacity but left Tehran free to attack other US interests and allies in the Middle East<sup>2</sup>.

In the immediate aftermath of the 1979 revolution and the suppression of the secular wing of the revolt against the Shah, the new regime constructed what it called an Islamic Republic. Domestically this retained a veneer of democratic processes over an authoritarian core that reserved key issues to Shiite religious figures and placed significant parts of the state outside of democratic oversight.

Internationally, by 1981 the regime was embroiled in a long war with Iraq. Initial attempts to appeal to Iraq's majority Shiite population as coreligionists failed to have much effect, and while the revolution offered some encouragement to oppressed Shiite communities in regions such as the Gulf Cooperation Council area, it failed in itself to



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Iraqi fighters from the Abbas Brigade, which fights under the umbrella of the Shiite popular mobilisation units. AFP

create a new Shiite polity or even much in the way of shared identification.

Lebanon was a partial exception; Shiite militancy found a space and expression there in opposition to a corrupt government, the overbearing actions of the Palestine Liberation Organization in the south, and frequent Israeli interventions.

In 1984, initially in the form of the Amal movement, Shiite militants carried out attacks on Western peacekeeping forces in Beirut and became the key component of the non-Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation<sup>3</sup>. After some time, the religious leadership of Amal founded Hezbollah and became much more clearly aligned with Iran, both ideologically and militarily. Since then Tehran has added to its extensive network of proxies throughout the Middle East but it took the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 to create the basis for this<sup>4</sup>.

## TARGETING THE WEST

While the Iran-Iraq war consumed most of the Iranian regime's attention during the

1980s, it was clear that it viewed the US and Israel as its main enemies. This conflict started early (indeed, it was a core part of the events in Iran in 1978-79) and prompted direct armed clashes in the 1980s. The situation was not helped by the Iran-Contra affair<sup>5</sup> and Iranian-sponsored terrorist attacks on the wider Jewish community (such as the 1994 suicide-bomb attack on a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, Argentina<sup>6</sup>).

The fallout from the 2003 invasion of Iraq radically changed the scope for Tehran to attack the US and Israel, and to create the basis for a wider Shiite polity under fairly direct Iranian control. Tehran provides funds, supplies weapons and training, and often even directly coordinates strategy and tactics for groups such as: the anti-US, anti-NATO Assad government in Syria; the dominant, anti-Israel, Islamist Hezbollah party in Lebanon; the militant Hamas group in the occupied Palestinian territories; and the Houthis in the civil war in Yemen<sup>7</sup>.

In recent years Iran has even begun helping the Afghan Taliban<sup>8</sup>, to which it was





previously antagonistic, in its efforts to expel the US from Afghanistan. On top of that, Tehran has sustained myriad smaller terrorist groups<sup>9</sup> and cells that for decades have carried out attacks against US diplomatic and military assets.

By early 2020, Iran had developed a network of such groups with a clear control mechanism via the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force. The killing of Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani may

**Pakistani Shiite Muslim protest against the killing of top Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani in Iraq.** AFP

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have temporarily undermined this control but Iran retains a network.

As noted above, Tehran's main early ally was Hezbollah, but others include Palestinian factions such as Islamic Jihad and Hamas (despite the latter being ideologically aligned to the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood). In Iraq, Iran controls all the Shiite militias that have, in effect, replaced the regular Iraqi army<sup>10</sup>.

Less well known is Tehran's funding of Shiite factions in Afghanistan and Central

Asia<sup>11</sup> (where it is assisted by linguistic and ethnic links to the Tajik community), as well as in Pakistan and India<sup>12</sup> (where it was able to use its local proxy to attack an Israeli diplomat in 2012).

To this list should be added proxy groups in North Africa and Nigeria. This network might not rival the global networks of Daesh or Al-Qaeda but it is deadly nonetheless and the Iranian regime has no qualms about using it, whether to impose territorial control or to organize terrorist attacks.

A Democratic-led Washington could opt to confront the disruptive regional activities of these proxies independently of the nuclear deal. But any anti-Iran hawk could later use the actions of those proxies that target American interests in the region as a pretext to sink the JCPOA and set the US on the path of direct military confrontation with Tehran. And Washington certainly has no shortage of anti-Iran hawks who have been keen to do just that<sup>13</sup>.

So we can see it is imperative that Biden resurrects the deal with Iran to ensure Tehran does not acquire nuclear weapons. The only other way potentially to stop the Iranians from pursuing and achieving that goal is out-and-out war which, given the experience in Iraq, obviously should be avoided.

Iran is much bigger and more powerful than Iraq was and it has close economic and strategic ties with Russia and China<sup>14</sup>, both of which would aid Tehran's war effort. And the Iranian people, even those who loathe the Islamist government, would despise Western intervention even more and rally against invading forces. War would be not only morally wrong, it would be ruinous to American interests. Washington might win the war, but would likely lose the peace.

But if war is to be avoided not only during this but also subsequent US administrations, any treaties between Washington and Tehran that would guarantee the peace need to be politically sustainable in the long term.

Future US administrations must not be given such easily accessible pretexts to rescind the agreements and reinitiate hostilities — and primarily this means that Iran must be constrained from continuing its proxy wars against US interests and allies in the region.

Of course, this works both ways. Tehran is also replete with anti-US hawks<sup>15</sup>, and its own



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nationalist conservatives have strong political incentives to undermine any detente with America and instigate direct confrontation.

For this reason, the US must also make concessions. Above all, Washington must publicly acknowledge it was former President Donald Trump who reneged on the JCPOA first and that despite its malign activities in the region, Tehran did in fact comply with the terms of the agreement itself<sup>16</sup> — and, indeed, continued to do so for a while after the US withdrawal — and that the people of Iran perhaps deserve some kind of compensation for the economic hardship that resulted from the reintroduction of sanctions by the Trump administration.

## CHANGING REGIONAL DYNAMICS

A further complication to dealings with Iran is rapidly emerging. For the past 30 years, the dynamics in the Middle East have been driven by the enduring Israeli-Palestinian problem, the emergence of Jihadism in the Sunni community, and the extent to which Iran has used its leadership of the disparate Shiite community to its own benefit. This has led to a distinct set of dynamics, including constant tensions between the Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the unannounced (by either side) but relatively close relationship between the Saudis and Israelis.

The Soviet Union was marginalized in the region even before its collapse, other than the influence it retained over its primary client state, Assad's Syria (and more fractiously over Iraq). Until 2000, Russia was similarly irrelevant in the Middle East as it dealt with its own internal problems and sought a role when it was no longer a superpower.

Since then, Russia has returned to the region with a complex set of alliances. Some are obvious and mutually supportive, such as with Syria and Iran. Moscow may not share Iran's drive for a regional Shiite confederation but it is clearly not worried about it.

While Russia has some grand geostrategic interests, such as its old naval base in northwestern Syria, in the main it plays a spoiling role in the region. In this guise Moscow has picked factions in various conflicts, such as the one in Libya, based on a perception of their local value. This has led to on-off relations with Turkey.

At times Moscow and Ankara have seemed

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to be at risk of open military confrontation, especially in northern Syria<sup>17</sup>. More recently they seem to have come to a mutually acceptable accord about Turkey's ambitions and the clear intent of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to end the long rapprochement between Turkey and the EU<sup>18</sup>. This has the potential to destabilize Russia's relations with Iran and Syria, as it is increasingly clear that Erdogan has a grand conception of Turkey's role in the region.

Ideologically, Erdogan's party has much in common with the Muslim Brotherhood and this has given it common interests with Qatar in places such as Libya, where the Brotherhood is an important faction (and in turn fueled tensions with Egypt, the Saudis and the UAE, who are viscerally opposed to the Brotherhood having any influence in the region<sup>19</sup>).

Equally, Erdogan has been prepared to pursue long-held territorial ambitions by intervening in northern Syria to prevent the Kurds establishing control after the collapse of Daesh<sup>20</sup>. While notionally his target might be the Kurds, this makes the Syrians suspicious because of previous Turkish incursions into the northeast of the country in the early 1950s.

Also, not only did Erdogan recently back the Azeris in the latest round of Azerbaijan's conflict with Armenia, he has indicated that Turkish ambitions encompass the Azeri-ethnic region that lies in Iran<sup>21</sup>. It might be too early to suggest that Erdogan has grand dreams of restoring the Ottoman Empire, or even the pan-Turkism that was a feature of Turkish policies in the early 20th century, but it does suggest a new source of potential problems in the wider region.

Erdogan's actions clash with Russia's historical interests. Moscow is determined to prevent any other power establishing permanent influence within the former Soviet Union (even if Russian President Vladimir Putin cannot recreate it as a geographical entity he is intent on preventing elements establishing permanent

links outside those borders) and has found it easy to balance its alliances with Iran and Syria.

So far Russia has managed to accommodate Turkish actions, perhaps because they help to drive Ankara further from the EU and could, potentially, lead to the fragmentation of NATO. But with both Iran and Turkey emboldened, and on a collision course in terms of geography and ideology, it is important to seek to ease tensions.

## CONCLUSION

Restoring the nuclear deal with Iran is important, therefore. It did succeed in preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons (and despite the actions of the US under the Trump administration, Tehran has still not breached that threshold) and restoring it will help to integrate Iran into a community that includes the US and the EU, as opposed to Russia and China.

But the nuclear agreement cannot be viewed in isolation. Not only is Tehran's proxy network a source of unrest in itself, it undermines any claim that Iran is interested in normal international relations. The added complication of Turkey abandoning traditional constraints points to the potential risks in the region if tensions cannot be better managed.

This makes both a nuclear agreement and a show of good faith from Tehran important because the current situation in the Middle East is almost certain to lead to war. In that war there will be no winners. Washington will lose status, money, power and the lives of American soldiers, the Islamist leadership of Iran will lose their lives — and millions of innocent people caught in the middle will suffer and die needlessly.

Such a war might not begin as a result of tensions between Washington and Tehran, but a combination of Iranian actions and Turkish, Saudi and Israeli responses could create a situation that escalates into open conflict, and that is a scenario no one can afford to allow.

The newly inaugurated fuel manufacturing plant in the central province of Isfahan on April 9, 2009. AFP





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