

# **The Nuclear Deal and its Ramifications for Turkey-US Relations - Zelal Özdemir**



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The nuclear agreement between the United States and Iran on July 14, 2015, also formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), has been heralded as a diplomatic triumph. The agreement was reached after years of intense negotiations between the two countries, and it represented a major breakthrough in their relations. The JCPOA is designed to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, and it includes strict limits on Iran's nuclear activities with increased international monitoring of Iran's nuclear program. In exchange for these limits, the international community has agreed to provide Iran with relief from

crippling economic sanctions.

Although the nuclear deal was a major accomplishment of the Obama Administration, and being praised as a major diplomatic victory, the deal was always controversial in the U.S., and has been met with criticism particularly from Republicans in Congress. The deal would allow for UN inspectors to have access to Iranian nuclear sites, in return for the lifting of sanctions. Critics argue that the deal will not prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, while supporters argue that it is the best option available to prevent such a weapon from being acquired.

On Tuesday, May 8th, 2018, President Trump announced that the United States will withdraw from the nuclear deal with Iran. This move has been widely anticipated and has drawn criticism from both Republican and Democratic lawmakers alike. The president has characterized the agreement as “the worst deal ever”[\[1\]](#) and said that he will work to reinstate sanctions on Iran. The Trump Administration then imposed new sanctions on Iran, and tensions between the two countries increased. With a “maximum pressure”[\[2\]](#) policy, the idea was lowering Iran’s resources through economic sanctions that would reduce its disruptive operations overseas: In the words of then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, “either fight to keep its economy off life support at home or keep squandering precious wealth on fights abroad. It won’t have the resources to do both.”[\[3\]](#) The Trump administration’s decision to withdraw from the nuclear deal with Iran generated a great deal of controversy and raised many questions.

President Biden, in October 2021, announced that his first foreign policy move as president would be to turn back to the table to reinstate the deal.[\[4\]](#) The decision of policy makers in the Biden administration to return to the Iran nuclear deal has been met with mixed reactions. Some argue that the move is a necessary step in order to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, while others contend that it simply diplomatizes a regime that cannot be trusted.

However, there is no denying that the deal represents a change in policy from the Trump administration, which withdrew from the agreement in 2018. Under the terms of the deal, Iran agreed to limit its nuclear program in exchange for lifted economic sanctions. The return to the deal is seen as a sign that the Biden administration is willing to engage in diplomacy with Iran, rather than resorting to military action or economic pressure.

While it remains to be seen whether the deal will ultimately be signed, it is clear that this agreement represents a significant shift in U.S. foreign policy towards Iran, a daunting task faced by the Biden Administration. In this new round, the circumstances have changed for both the U.S. and Iran. Iran is now a much stronger regional power than it was in 2015. While the U.S. has lost credibility as a negotiating partner, the “maximum pressure” campaign of the Trump Administration was responded with a “maximum resistance” campaign that was framed by the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei as “the resistance economy”[\[5\]](#). Against the expectations of the Trump Administration, the sanctions have failed to bring Iran to its knees rather the outcome brought Iran closer to obtain a nuclear weapon.

Therefore, the change in policy of the Biden Administration, which has been foretold during Biden’s 2020 election campaign as “smarter way to be tough on Iran”, is welcomed by many policy makers, who believe that it is the only way to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons as well as that continuing hostility and conflict with Iran is a far worse alternative[\[6\]](#).

After 16 months of indirect talks between the two countries with the mediation of the EU, the final text has been prepared on August 8th 2022, exchanged and waiting for the final decision to be made. The final document was written on August 8th, 2022, after 16 months of indirect negotiations between the two countries, mediated by the EU. While the deal

signed by the Obama Administration was limited to the nuclear problem, the scope of the latest negotiations is broader. Considering Trump's withdrawal from the 2015 deal, Iran demanded verification of the removal of Western sanctions and guarantees that the United States would not withdraw from the accord in the future. Most importantly, Iran and the United States were unable to reconcile their differences over the US designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a foreign terrorist organization. Moreover, the main regional allies of the U.S., especially Israel has been in the forefront of efforts to uncover and prevent a potential Iranian nuclear weapon for more than a decade. It was one of the most vociferous opponents of the nuclear negotiations with Iran that culminated in July 2015 in a final agreement. In this new round, Israel has kept its oppositional stance.

Despite all these tensions, the final text of the nuclear deal has been exchanged, and the final decision is still pending. This paper attempts to elucidates the possible implications of this final decision, either positive or negative, on the relations between Turkey and the U.S., as well as on the Middle East.

## **Turkey and the US of the Nuclear Deal**

Preventing Iran from getting nuclear weapons and aggravating instability in the Middle East have been decades-long U.S. priorities. The normative interest is to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons, which would increase the number of states with the capability to threaten the United States and its allies. The security interest is to protect against an Iranian nuclear weapon, which could be used directly against the United States or its allies, or could fall into the hands of terrorists. The strategic interest is to prevent Iran from becoming a regional hegemon, which would give it dominance over the oil-rich Persian Gulf and allow it to project its power and influence throughout the Middle East.

The U.S. has pursued all three of these

interests in its diplomacy with Iran. The normative interest has been pursued through international organizations like the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which is responsible for preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The security interest has been pursued through bilateral negotiations and, more recently, through sanctions. The strategic interest has been pursued through diplomacy with Iran's neighbors, particularly Saudi Arabia.

The different approaches to these three interests have led to controversial outcomes. The normative interest has been largely successful during the Obama Administration as the IAEA has been able to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. The security interest has been less successful, as Iran has accelerated its nuclear program despite international pressure under the Trump Administration. The strategic interest has also been less successful, as Iran has increasingly asserted its influence in the region despite American efforts to contain it.

Turkey's position on the nuclear issue, on the other hand, is shaped at the intersection of its own interests and its relationships with the United States and Iran. Turkey is a close ally of the United States and a member of NATO, and albeit the tensions it also maintains working relations with Iran. While Turkey agrees with the United States that Iran should not obtain nuclear weapons, it urged Washington to exempt it from certain sanctions, notably those related to oil purchases.

Turkey's interests include preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons, protecting against an Iranian nuclear weapon, and ensuring regional stability. Turkey has consistently advocated for a world free of nuclear weapons and has signed and ratified all major international treaties related to nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. In addition, Turkey is a party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. So, the normative interest of Turkey is to support the international nuclear non-proliferation regime and to contribute to global efforts for disarmament. For Turkey, a world free of nuclear weapons would make it easier to address other security challenges and reduce the risks of nuclear proliferation. The security interest

of Turkey, is to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons to its immediate neighborhood. This is directly related to Turkey's membership in NATO, as any proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East would increase the security risks to Turkey. The strategic interest of Turkey is to maintain good relations with both the United States and Iran. This is important for Turkey because it wants to be seen as a regional power and a key player in the Middle East. Turkey has tried to pursue all of these interests at the same time, but this has not always been easy. For example, Turkey was one of the few countries that voted against sanctions against Iran at the United Nations Security Council in 2006. This was because Turkey saw the sanctions as counterproductive and believed that they would only make it harder to find a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear issue.

The relationship between the two nations is complicated and marked by both times of friction and collaboration. Maintaining a "tight line" between fierce opposition and friendly ties has defined Turkey and Iran's diplomatic culture.<sup>[7]</sup> Both nations have a vested interest in developments in neighboring states, particularly Iraq and Syria. Thus, it is not surprising that they often attempt to expand commerce, address security concerns, and strike a balance between their respective objectives yet, both nations are often rivals in Central Asia and the Middle East, and they regard each other's efforts and engagement with intense distrust.

The proximity of the two countries heightens the stakes of a potential battle between the two countries. A comparable instability in Iran to that which Turkey has seen in Iraq and Syria would undoubtedly lead to an increase in migration, the threat of terrorism, and many security and economic worries for Turkey. Therefore, for Turkey, stability in Iran is of significance importance rather than impending collapse. Thus, Turkey has always opposed military intervention in Iran over the nuclear issue.

A nuclear-armed Iran not only offers

strategic problems to Turkey in terms of the power balance between the two nations in the Middle East, but also places Turkey in a precarious position if Iran's nuclear aspirations precipitate a war between Iran and other major countries. Such a conflict on Turkey's borders would have significant repercussions, ranging from the Kurdish issue, refugee influxes to nuclear catastrophes.

Iran would develop the nuclear arms it would lead the arm race in the region, it is highly likely that other countries in the region would seek to develop their own nuclear weapons capability in order to maintain a balance of power. This would lead to an increase in regional tensions and could potentially trigger a new arms race. If the deal fails to be signed, it would further isolate Iran from the international community and could lead to increased internal instability within Iran. This would have a knock-on effect on stability in Turkey and the region as a whole. Turkey stands to lose from the imposition of more sanctions on Iran and stands to gain from their withdrawal. Turkey has little option but to participate in trade with Iran; it shares a border with the country, purchases natural gas from it, and has its sights set on a big market with so many potentials to exploit, should the conditions allow. Furthermore, rising isolation of Iran paved the way for a more aggressive Iranian foreign policy which would leave Turkey and Iran at further divergence as regards their approach to the Middle East.

The Iranian issue will keep the Turkish foreign policy from striking a good balance between domestic and international concerns. Turkey and Iran have coexisted in the region despite the cohabitation of cooperation and competition between the two countries. Turkey has strengthened its ties with Iran for energy and security reasons, and it has stood by Iran despite harsh international condemnation, especially with its stance on Iran's nuclear program. If the nuclear deal with Iran is not signed and the U.S. adopts a tougher policy against Iran, this will leave Turkey in a difficult situation for converging its policies toward Iran with the U.S.

However, the successful conclusion of the deal is not risk free for the U.S.-Turkey relations. This risk resembles the concerns that other allies of the US in the Middle East have. As Mark Lynch points out, the risk of realignment of American foreign policy in favor of Iran in the region is particularly concerning for Israel and the Saudi Arabia.<sup>[8]</sup> The U.S.

has made significant efforts to “reassure” these countries on issues ranging from the war in Yemen to arms sales in order to keep them on board for the higher priority Iran deal.

As a matter of fact, the visit of Biden to the to Israel, the West Bank, and Saudi Arabia in the mid- July 2022 can be read as an act of re-assurance on the part of the US.<sup>[9]</sup> With this tour, the Biden Administration intended to reassure its traditional friends that the United States is committed to regional challenges, particularly the nuclear issue. The Jerusalem Declaration of July 2022, signed by President Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid, states that the United States will deploy “all instruments of national strength” to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

This worry also applies to Turkey. Given the fact that, Turkey’s relations with the U.S. under the Biden Administration are far from what Turkey hoped for, a revival of strategic relations of Iran with the West, may left Turkey in a disadvantageous position in three regards: First of all, Iran could be a constructive force for regional stability. Europe might expand its collaboration with Iran on the anti-ISIS effort in Iraq and get more involved in the resolution of the Syrian war.

Iran’s influence may be used to reduce the war in Yemen. Secondly, Iran has a strategic location at the intersection of many pipeline lines leading from Afghanistan and the southern Caucasus to Turkey, as well as various sea routes leading north (Caspian Sea) and south (Persian Gulf). Therefore, Iran can eventually help Europe diversify its energy supply. Finally, Iran, one of the remaining large untapped rising markets in the world, has an enormous consumer base of 80 million people.



Added to this

is the political and security ties between Greece and Cyprus, and the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia that have advanced significantly in the last year. There are signs of a new regional alignment taking shape, including political conferences, security pacts, and joint military drills. The reproachment between these countries is pointed out by the Cypriot foreign minister

as, “The evolving web of regional cooperation is creating a new narrative.”[\[10\]](#)

According to Guzansky and Lindenstrauss[\[11\]](#), with this move, UAE and Saudi Arabia seek to build deeper connections with Brussels and strengthened relations with the European Union in order to offset Turkey’s rising assertiveness. Even if the alliance is ephemeral, it has significant political importance as it enhances Ankara’s isolation and compels it to reevaluate its regional strategy. Turkey and the U.S. should carefully navigate this “new narrative” in order to preserve a long history of alliance, partnership and cooperation between the two countries. Turkey may become more closer to Russia, China block and can be drifted away from the Western bloc.

In addition to

being highly significant for Turkey, the US, the region and the web of relations, an agreement is also very important at the normative level. The JCPOA will be a major victory for international law. The agreement establishes a clear legal framework for resolving disputes, and it sets a strong precedent for future negotiations. It will also be a major achievement for multilateralism. The agreement was reached through negotiations between Iran and the US with the mediation of the EU, it represents a victory for diplomatic engagement. The deal is a positive development for the Biden Administration as well as its foreign policy and it represents a significant accomplishment for US diplomacy. The agreement will help to restore America’s credibility in the world, and it will increase President Biden’s leverage in dealing with other global challenges. Turkey, on the other hand, is interested in how the agreement may affect Iran’s regional policy.

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