

The Iran nuclear deal: driven by international factors for the US, and domestic ones for Iran.

In July, Iran and the P5+1 reached an historic deal over Iran's nuclear program. [Steven Hurst](#) takes a close look at the factors which explain why Iran and the other key negotiator – the US – were able to come to a deal. He writes that sanctions alone do not explain Iran's change in policy, and that the US compromise was driven by President Obama's acceptance of the limits of US foreign policy.



In July 2015 Iran and the international community reached a resolution (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or [JCPOA](#)) to their dispute over the former's nuclear programme. After years of disagreement and failed negotiations, what were the key factors that led the two key actors in the negotiations, Iran and the United States, to agree to this historic compromise?

The Deal

As part of the deal, Iran agrees to cut its operating centrifuges to 5000; limit uranium enrichment to 3.7 percent; cap its stockpile of low-enriched uranium at 300 kilograms; redesign its Arak reactor so it can't produce weapons grade plutonium and submit to an extensive inspection regime.

For their part, the international community acknowledges Iran's right to continue enriching uranium and agrees to the lifting of sanctions.

Explaining the Deal

To an extent, the willingness of each side to accept the deal reflects concessions made by the other which acknowledge their most fundamental concerns. Iran can continue enriching and the international community has assurances that Iran will not be able to develop nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, that alone does not explain why each side felt compelled to make significant concessions or why both saw this compromise as preferable to the alternatives. To do that we have to look at other factors:

Iran

1. Sanctions: Much discussion has emphasized the significance of sanctions for Iran. The coincidence of the [demonstrable impact](#) of sanctions on the Iranian economy and Iran's concessions in the JCPOA is taken as evidence of cause and effect. However, while the economic impact of sanctions on the Iranian economy was clear they had little impact on the Iranian nuclear programme. Nor was there much evidence that they threatened the Iranian regime. Polls indicated that Iranians did not see the effects of sanctions as disastrous and that they blamed the USA, rather than their own government, for their imposition. Finally, if sanctions were so effective, why did the USA and its partners feel compelled to accept Iran's right to enrich? Sanctions alone do not explain the change in Iranian policy.
2. Rouhani: The change in Iranian policy nuclear followed the election of President Hassan Rouhani in 2013. This development marked the end of Iranian hard liners' complete control of all of the key institutions of state and signalled a shift in the factional balance of power in Iran in favour of more moderate elements. That shift, the scale of Rouhani's victory and the splintering of Iranian conservatives into several warring camps post-2009 all facilitated a change in the Iranian negotiating position.

3. Ayatollah Khamenei: Having long opposed any concessions in the nuclear negotiations, in 2015 the Iranian Supreme Leader decided to support JCPOA, largely for domestic political reasons. The Iranian regime's legitimacy had been eroding since 2005 and was dramatically undermined by the fraudulent 2009 presidential election. Khamenei's recognition of the danger to the regime was indicated by his decision to accept Rouhani's victory in 2013. Unlike in 2009, he chose not to allow the election to be rigged because to do so would have struck another major blow to the remnants of the regime's [popular legitimacy](#). Having accepted Rouhani's victory Khamenei's decision to support him over the JCPOA was a logical continuation. Supporting a popular president and a deal favoured by most Iranians helped reinforce regime stability. Rejecting the deal would have undermined Khamenei's efforts to restore regime legitimacy in a single action.



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The USA

1. Policy failure: Despite much discussion in the USA about the success of sanctions, it was the probability of their failure that was a key factor in Obama's decision-making. As he noted in his [speech](#) at American University in August 2015, sanctions had failed to halt the Iranian nuclear programme. If no agreement was signed, that programme would continue and if evidence of a weapons programme emerged, the only option left would be military action, with all the dangers inherent in such a course. Obama compromised in large part because he feared that the alternative was another disastrous war in the Middle East, whether started by his successor or potentially by Israel.
2. Policy dependence: For a long time the USA pursued a unilateral policy toward Iran with little support from other international actors. Since the second George W. Bush administration, however, America's Iran policy has increasingly been coordinated with that of other states, primarily through the P5 + 1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany). The effect of this shift has been to increase the dependence of US policy on that of the other members of the P5 + 1. By pursuing a multilateral approach to the Iranian nuclear question, the Obama administration constrained effective US policy choices to the range of outcomes acceptable to its international partners. The fact that the rest of the P5 + 1 indicated they would implement the JCPOA even if the USA did not, and that this would render futile unilateral US efforts to force Iran to abandon enrichment, was a key factor deterring Congress from rejecting the JCPOA.

3. Obama's pragmatism. For a policy to change it is not enough that there is evidence that it is likely to fail or that a state cannot achieve its goals without the cooperation of partners. It also requires that leaders are sufficiently open to information to recognize those realities. The literature on leader types tends to divide them into two broad categories. While 'crusaders' are insensitive to political constraints and ignore or reject information that challenges the vision they seek to impose, 'pragmatists' are responsive to contextual information and political constraints and work within such parameters. Obama falls clearly into the second category. His whole approach to foreign policy demonstrates sensitivity to context in the form the relative decline of American power and the need to fashion a foreign policy that accommodates that reality. His acceptance of the compromise embodied in the JCPOA demonstrated a similar awareness of the limits of his ability to compel Iran to comply with American demands.

While this is hardly an exhaustive analysis of the agreement reached in July 2015, it does outline some of the key factors in Iranian and American policy and suggests that each was driven by rather different imperatives. Iranian policy was strongly shaped by domestic political factors while US policy, despite all the domestic controversy that accompanied the agreement, was largely driven by 'international' considerations.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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