

Biden and the JCPOA: Lessons from Arab and Iranian Public Opinion

By [James J. Zogby](#)

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With Joe Biden as President-elect and Donald Trump soon leaving the White House, analysts are engaging in endless speculation about what this change in administrations will mean for the future of the JCPOA, the “nuclear deal” negotiated between the P5+1 and Iran.

I’m well aware of the difficulties involved in attempting a simple US return to the agreement and of additional complications because of actions taken by Trump and the Israeli government that served to strengthen Iranian hardliners. My intention, therefore, is not to add to the already excessive speculation/commentary on “What Joe Biden should do?” Instead, I thought it might be useful to insert into the discussion of the past and possible future of the JCPOA, the views of both Iranian and Arab public opinions compiled from our extensive polling across the Middle East.

I want to begin by confessing, with apologies to former Secretary of State John Kerry, that I was against the deal before I was for it. Just looking back at our pre-JCPOA polling data, I noted that although Arabs believed that Iran was pursuing its nuclear programme with the goal of developing a nuclear warhead, they were more concerned with the Islamic Republic’s meddlesome interventions across the region. In fact, it was Iran’s involvement first in Lebanon, then in Iraq, and finally in Syria that caused the deepest concern in Arab public opinion. I found that Iran’s favourable ratings among Arabs in most countries plummeted from the 80 per cent range in 2006 to less than 30 per cent in 2012 and then to less than 20 per cent in our most recent polls. I noted, at the time, that it was Iran’s role in Syria that acted as “the nail in the coffin of Iran’s standing in Arab opinion”.

With these numbers in mind, I remember asking members of the Obama Administration’s National Security staff, “Why are you expending so much of our political capital and whatever leverage we might have gained from sanctions on trying to stop a bomb that Iran does not have, and even if they did, they could not use it anyway, when we ought to be focusing on the very real and immediate danger posed by Iran’s direct engagements in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen?”

After the deal was announced, I supported it, for three reasons. In the first place, a negotiated solution to any problem reached through multilateral diplomacy is always preferable to conflict. And then there was the hope, as expressed by British Foreign Secretary Catherine Ashton, that the framework created by the P5+1 could be extended in due course to negotiations dealing with Iran’s ballistic missile programme and its involvement in regional conflicts.

My third reason for supporting the JCPOA came after I reviewed our polling results from Iran

and Arab countries in the years after the “deal” was in place and then after President Trump unilaterally pulled the US out of the agreement and instituted new sanctions on Iran.

When the framework for the nuclear deal was announced in 2015, majorities in most Arab countries were opposed to it. But in the intervening years, support for the P5+1 agreement grew with increasing confidence that it would serve to limit Iran’s capacity to develop a nuclear bomb. By 2018, majorities in these same countries supported the deal. But, because there was growing concern with Iran’s regional behavior, in that same year, strong majorities in every Arab country, including Iraq and Lebanon, supported the Trump Administration’s decision to scuttle the deal, expressing the hope that it would be replaced by a new arrangement that would address Iran’s “role in the region’s conflicts.”

Equally telling were the results of our Iran polling, where we saw dramatic shifts in public opinion between 2014 and 2015, after the announcement of the framework agreement with the P5+1, and finally in 2018, following the Trump Administration’s decision to pull out of the agreement. These shifts occurred in three areas.

In 2014, almost one-half of Iranians felt their country “should have the right to a nuclear weapon because it is a major nation.” After the framework agreement was announced in 2015 support for that proposition dropped to 20 per cent. Following Trump’s decision to withdraw from the deal, the percentage of Iranians who felt they had a right to a nuclear weapon because they are a major nation rose again to 40 per cent.

In 2015, 80 per cent of Iranians supported the P5+1 agreement and expressed the view that their country’s interests had been well served by the deal. After the US pullout positive responses to both questions, dropped to 60.

Also in 2014, substantial majorities of Iranians (between 90 per cent and 60 per cent) expressed support for their government’s involvement in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. In 2015, after the framework agreement was announced, that percentage began to drop and by 2016 support for these foreign entanglements had plummeted to below 50 per cent in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, and just 20 per cent in Yemen. By 2017, after the US pullout and the introduction of new sanctions on Iran, the Iranian public’s support for these foreign involvements had risen to over 60 per cent.

And finally, when we asked Iranians their attitudes towards their government’s performance and policy priorities, we found a significant shift from 2014 to 2015 and 2018. After the P5+1 framework was announced, Iranians turned inward, not only did they express significantly less support for a nuclear weapons programme and for involvement in foreign conflicts, they also said they wanted their government to focus more resources on job creation and give more emphasis to protecting personal rights. Once again, after the US pullout and the imposition of new sanctions, Iranian opinion shifted to support for their government and its policies. It appears that when their government is threatened, Iranians turn to it and not against it.

Given this survey of both Arab and Iranian opinion, it seems that the incoming Biden Administration may be on the right track. They seek engagement with Iran and not conflict. And they plan to reenter the nuclear agreement, but with the added component of firmly addressing Iran’s involvement in regional conflicts. Such an approach may be difficult to achieve for several reasons.

Iranian opinion has hardened. The new sanctions imposed by the Trump Administration have taken a toll and with elections in Iran coming in June 2021, the country's hardliners are on the ascent. Attitudes towards Iran have also hardened here in the US, especially among Republicans, where any move to ease sanctions or reenter the JCPOA may be met with strong opposition in Congress. Opinion towards Iran among Arabs has also hardened in light of Iran's continuing aggressive role in the region.

Nevertheless, despite these very real difficulties, engagement remains the better course. Efforts to negotiate a reentry in the JCPOA, while at the same time addressing Iran's regional involvement, may provide a key to shifting public opinion in Iran and the Arab World, both of which need to be considered. It won't be an easy lift. But anything is better than the current path which leads to the dead end of continued or, God forbid, an expanded conflict that no one can win.

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