

STOPPING IRAN GOING NUCLEAR: A PIVOTAL YEAR

LFI POLICY BRIEFING

LABOUR FRIENDS OF ISRAEL

WORKING TOWARDS A TWO STATE SOLUTION

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FEBRUARY 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: A PIVOTAL YEAR

2025 is a pivotal year for stopping Iran acquiring nuclear weapons.

- Iran can now build nuclear weapons within a short time of a decision to do so, and there are signs it may be more motivated to do this than ever before.
- The Trump administration is returning to its policy of “maximum pressure”, with increasing calls from Israel for military action.
- October 2025 is the deadline for the UK and other remaining signatories to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to “snapback” key UN sanctions.

Iran has the capabilities to build nuclear weapons after decades of concerted effort.

- In the late 1990s, Iran launched a crash programme to build nuclear warheads.
- When its secret facilities were exposed in 2002, it scaled back the programme but continued its work.
- Under pressure of biting sanctions, Iran signed the JCPOA in 2015, accepting time-limited restrictions on its programme, but it was not forced to come clean on past activities.
- After the Trump administration left the JCPOA in 2018, Iran began abandoning restrictions in the agreement.

Iran could develop a bomb in a short time from a decision to do so.

- Iran now has enough highly enriched uranium for multiple devices and could enrich it to weapons-grade in about a week. It could produce a crude bomb in as little as six months and a warhead for a missile in one-to-two years.
- Russia is sharing nuclear technology with Iran.

Iran’s nuclear programme threatens its neighbours, the UK and the non-proliferation treaty.

- The Islamic Republic is committed to Israel’s destruction, making Iranian nuclear capabilities intolerable for Israelis.
- Iran’s Sunni neighbours are also acutely concerned about Iranian nuclear breakout, which would help Iran to reenforce its position as a mainstay of radicalism.
- Iran getting nuclear weapons would trigger a Middle East nuclear arms race and undermine the global non-proliferation regime.
- It would increase Iranian threats to the UK in the Middle East and in Europe.

The UK has an important role to play in stopping this danger.

- Confronting Iran now, at a moment of relative weakness, will curtail its ability to pose greater threats backed by nuclear weapons in the future.
- By backing US efforts to tighten up sanctions and promoting an international alignment with European, Arab and G7 allies, the UK could help bring significant pressure on the Iranian regime.
- The government can help to isolate Iran and curtail its threat to the UK by fulfilling its commitment to proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.
- Implementing the snapback mechanism is a significant card in the hand of the UK, France and Germany.
- By standing firm with allies against Tehran’s threats, the UK can help strengthen multilateral deterrence.

INTRODUCTION: WHY 2025 IS PIVOTAL FOR THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR PROGRAMME

After years of concerted effort, Iran has reached a position where it can build nuclear weapons within months of a decision to do so. Contrary to its claims and international commitments, Tehran has developed the infrastructure, components and specific technical capabilities to produce a deployable nuclear weapon.

At the same time, Iran now appears more motivated to take this step than ever before, after major setbacks for its “axis of resistance” regionally. These include the destruction of much of Hamas’ capabilities, defeat of Hezbollah, the fall of Assad and the severe damage to Iran’s air defences inflicted by Israel. Iran’s vulnerability is compounded by domestic unrest and a looming succession challenge. The recently elected president, Masoud Pezeshkian, is interested in compromise to ease sanctions, but remains beholden to the supreme leader, Ali Khamanei, and the dominant Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Khamanei himself is ageing and has no clear successor aside from his son, Mojtaba.

The Trump administration is committed to returning to its policy of “maximum pressure”. This will include a renewed focus on restricting Iranian oil sales, which are primarily to China. Benjamin Netanyahu will seek to persuade Donald Trump that there is a unique window to set back Iran’s nuclear programme militarily, though there appear to be a [range of approaches](#) on Iran within the incoming administration. It is noteworthy, for instance, that Elon Musk met with Iran’s ambassador to the UN shortly after last November’s election.

But, even without Trump, October 2025 is the deadline for the UK and other remaining signatories to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to trigger the “snapback” of important sanctions on Iranian activities imposed prior to the 2015 deal by the United Nations security council. In a 6 December 2024 letter to the security council, Britain, Germany and France (the so-called E3) declared their readiness to use the snapback mechanism, demanding: “Iran must deescalate its nuclear program to create the political environment conducive to meaningful progress and a negotiated solution.”

This briefing offers key information about Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons:

- How has Iran come so close to nuclear weapons?
- How quickly can Iran build nuclear weapons?
- What threat does Iran’s nuclear programme pose?
- What are the UK government’s policy options?

HOW HAS IRAN COME SO CLOSE TO NUCLEAR WEAPONS?

THE ORIGINS OF IRAN’S PURSUIT OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

The Iranian regime’s interest in developing nuclear weapons dates back to the 1980s. The supreme leader, Ruhollah Khomeini, is believed to have taken a decision in 1984 to reactivate Iran’s nuclear programme both in the context of the grinding war with Iraq, and more broadly to secure “the Islamic revolution” from the US and Israel.¹

Iran’s nuclear weapons programme accelerated in secret during the 1990s after Khomeini’s death in 1989 and his replacement by Khamenei as supreme leader. Tehran acquired assistance from China, Russia and North Korea, and the Pakistani nuclear scientist AQ Khan’s [smuggling network](#). Iran secretly developed programmes to produce fissile material (both enriched uranium and plutonium) in direct contravention of its commitments as a signatory of the 1968 nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT).

In the late 1990s, Iran launched a crash nuclear weapons programme – “the Amad plan” – to build five nuclear warheads to be carried on missiles and a production line for more, to be completed by March 2003.²

In 2002, Iranian opponents of the regime revealed to western intelligence Tehran's secret uranium enrichment plant at Natanz and heavy water production plant at Arak, capable of producing plutonium. Under intense international scrutiny, and against the backdrop of the toppling of Saddam Hussein, Iran attempted to hide the military dimensions of its nuclear programme. A 2007 US intelligence estimate assessed that the weapons programme had stopped but, in reality, Iran had downsized and restructured it to make it harder to detect.³

In November 2003, Iran agreed with the E3 to pause its uranium enrichment and conversion activities and to sign an additional protocol expanding IAEA supervision in return for recognition of the right to develop peaceful nuclear energy. Negotiations continued on how to address Iran's nuclear capabilities, with Iran seeking recognition of its right to uranium enrichment.

In October 2005, after the election of Mahmoud Ahmedinejad as president, Iran suspended implementation of the additional protocol and began openly enriching uranium. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) formally found Iran to be non-compliant with its safeguards agreement, and referred Tehran to the UN security council. In July 2006, the council passed the first of eight resolutions demanding Iran suspend enrichment and imposing a series of sanctions on nuclear activities, which culminated in the imposition of an arms embargo.

In September 2009, the UK, US and France revealed the discovery of another secret enrichment site, Fordow, built deep under a mountain in Qom. The apparent purpose of this secret and protected facility was to convert low-enriched uranium into weapons-grade uranium.

Between 2010 and 2012 the US and European Union imposed biting new sanctions including on Iran's central bank and its oil and gas sector. The Labour government took a leading role in building support for tough sanctions, with the then prime minister, Gordon Brown, declaring that he "did not rule out anything" in order to confront Iran's nuclear ambitions. During the same period, Iran's nuclear programme was slowed by covert actions, including the assassination (widely attributed to Israel) of nuclear scientists and the Stuxnet virus.

THE JCPOA

In November 2013, under pressure from sanctions and the Israeli military threat, Iran accepted an interim agreement with the P5+1 (US, Russia, China, UK, France and Germany) to freeze parts of its nuclear programme in return for a decrease in sanctions, to allow time for more negotiations.

In July 2015, the P5+1 signed the controversial JCPOA with Iran. It was negotiated primarily by the then US secretary of state, John Kerry, with the active role of the other states and the EU. The agreement rolled back sanctions and closed the IAEA files on suspected Iranian nuclear weapons development in return for substantial but time-limited restrictions on Iran's nuclear programme, and expanded monitoring (although this was not comprehensive). The agreement included: limiting the number, type, and location of centrifuges carrying out enrichment; limiting the level of enrichment (3.67 percent); limiting the stockpile of enriched uranium (300kg); restricting research and development on centrifuges; and changing the use of the Fordow enrichment site and Arak plutonium reactor.

The agreement included "sunset" clauses that allowed most limitations to lift over 10 to 15 years. The Obama administration accepted this partly in the hope that, free of sanctions, Iran would be drawn into the international community and no longer pose a threat. After this point, the deal permitted Iran to enrich uranium on an industrial scale to levels higher than those required for civilian power, using highly sophisticated centrifuges. The deal did not provide comprehensive international monitoring since it did not allow for inspection of sites suspected to be linked to the nuclear programme but unacknowledged by Iran, including military bases. In addition, Iranian missiles capable of carrying nuclear weapons were prohibited by a weak, and time limited, UN security council resolution (UNSCR 2231).

Under the JCPOA, the remaining UN sanctions related to Iran's nuclear and ballistic missiles expired in October 2023. However, the E3 states decided to maintain the sanctions through domestic legislation due to Iranian non-compliance with the JCPOA's provisions. UN restrictions on the transfer of conventional weapons to Iran were lifted in October 2020.

The JCPOA snapback mechanism allows any signatory to the deal to trigger the reimposition of the original UN sanctions up to October 2025 by lodging a formal complaint about Iran's non-compliance. Once triggered, Iran's relief from UN sanctions would automatically expire within 30 days unless the security council passes a resolution to continue that relief. This effectively gives each of the P5 powers the ability to ensure the snapback through its veto. But, as a result of withdrawing from the JCPOA in 2018, the US cannot trigger the snapback.

HOW HAS IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAMME ADVANCED SINCE THE COLLAPSE OF THE JCPOA?

An Iranian secret nuclear archive seized from Tehran by Israeli intelligence in 2018 exposed more undeclared nuclear sites and activities related to the military dimensions of the nuclear programme. This exposed the flaws of the IAEA closing its examination of the military aspects of Iran's nuclear programme under the umbrella of the JCPOA.

In 2018, Trump withdrew the US from the JCPOA and implemented a policy of "maximum pressure" with the goal of forcing Iran to renegotiate. This approach was strongly favoured by Netanyahu, although some Israelis believed it better to stick with the deal once it was signed. The US administration thus lost its ability to use the snapback mechanism and, when it tried to do so in 2020, was blocked by other security council members because it had left the deal. After Trump's departure from the deal, the E3 attempted to sustain the JCPOA and work around US sanctions, but with limited effect.

Beginning in May 2019, Iran stopped implementing its nuclear-related commitments under the JCPOA on a step-by-step basis. In November 2019, in defiance of the nuclear deal, Tehran began enrichment at Fordow. Three years later, in November 2022, it announced it had increased enrichment there to 60 percent, far beyond the 3.67 percent allowed by the JCPOA and technically very close to the weapons-grade level of 90 percent. Other civilian nuclear powers with uranium enrichment capabilities like Japan and the Netherlands only produce low enriched uranium (typically up to 5 percent). Iran also rapidly increased stocks of enriched uranium, installing advanced centrifuges capable of faster enrichment, and began to produce uranium metal of the type that could be used in the core of a nuclear weapon. In January 2023, the E3 referred Iran's non-compliance to the JCPOA's dispute-resolution mechanism. The IAEA and western powers also voiced increasing concern over Iran's failure to explain evidence of past breaches, as well as Tehran's increased curbing of IAEA monitoring and inspection, including revoking permits for the agency's inspectors. A detailed timeline is available [here](#).

In 2019 and 2020, the IAEA [found](#) uranium traces at three undeclared locations exposed by the archive seized by Israel and environmental samples. Iran did not provide the IAEA with credible explanations for the presence of uranium at Taramin, where Iran had a secret pilot uranium enrichment facility, and Turqz Abad, a secret nuclear warehouse. In June 2020 (and later in June 2022) the IAEA board of governors censured Iran and called on it to cooperate. The IAEA is also concerned about missing uranium, upon which Iran has admitted it falsely reported but which is still unaccounted for. The IAEA fears Tehran may have used this missing stash to experiment with weaponisation.

In February 2021, despite Joe Biden entering office on a policy of renewed diplomacy, Iran stopped implementing the additional protocol altogether, further limiting the IAEA's view of its activities. Since then, Iran has not allowed the agency to conduct several verification and monitoring activities. When, in June 2022, the IAEA board of governors censured Iran again, Tehran responded by removing all the agency's JCPOA-related surveillance and monitoring equipment.

Biden offered a return to compliance with the JCPOA and to negotiate a "stronger, longer" agreement but talks, brokered by the EU with the participation of the UK, collapsed in the autumn of 2022. The failure of

the talks stemmed from a toughening of Iranian demands, including Tehran's desire to end IAEA investigations into its suspect activities. In September 2024, the E3 stated: "In 2022, Iran twice refused a negotiated outcome and instead chose to escalate and expand its nuclear programme to alarming levels." The collapse of the talks was followed shortly afterwards by a wave of major anti-regime demonstrations in Iran triggered by the death of Mahsa Amini. The protests, and the regime's brutal crackdown, further diminished prospects for a diplomatic agreement.

Although Iran promised in a March 2023 "joint statement" to cooperate with the IAEA on its investigations and implement the agency's monitoring, it did not deliver. By November, the E3 concluded that "Iran has not approached the Joint Statement in good faith." This came against the backdrop of the war that erupted following the 7 October 2023 Hamas attacks on Israel, and also coincided with the sunset of UN nuclear sanctions.

Throughout 2024, various Iranian regime figures have alluded to producing nuclear weapons, something that was previously taboo. In April 2024, Kamal Kharrazi, a senior advisor to Khamenei and head of Iran's Strategic Council on Foreign Relations, said: "[Iran has] no intention of producing a nuclear bomb, but if [its] existence is threatened, we will be forced to change our nuclear doctrine." In October 2024, 39 Iranian parliamentarians called for the country to develop nuclear weapons.

HOW QUICKLY CAN IRAN BUILD NUCLEAR WEAPONS?

Iran could produce the fissile material for a nuclear bomb in about a week; a crude device in as little as six months; and a warhead in one-to-two years. Iran is well advanced on all three dimensions of nuclear weapons production: fissile material, warhead production and delivery systems.

- Since 2022, Iran has been in a position at any time to produce enough highly enriched uranium for a single nuclear device. It has enough uranium enriched to 60 percent to further enrich to weapons-grade 90 percent with a small number of advanced centrifuges, prompting the Institute for Science and International Security, a leading US research organisation, to declare its breakout time to be zero. Iran could do this in its heavily fortified Fordow facility. As of September 2024, Iran's stockpile of highly enriched uranium was considered enough for four nuclear devices.
- Iran already has missiles that can carry nuclear warheads. These include solid fuel and precision-guided missiles of the type used against Israel in October 2024.
- Iran has the designs for a workable nuclear warhead. Producing a missile-deliverable warhead is widely thought to take another one-to-two years, although some experts believe a crude device could be constructed in six months. The weaponisation process could be conducted in a small and hard-to-detect facility. This remains the main impediment to Iran becoming a fully-fledged nuclear weapons power.

It is of acute concern that Russia is sharing nuclear technology with Iran. This was on the agenda for Keir Starmer's summit with Biden in September 2024. As the former US secretary of state, Antony Blinken, warned at the time: "Russia is sharing technology that Iran seeks ... including on nuclear issues."

WHAT ARE THE KEY IRANIAN NUCLEAR SITES?

Iran's nuclear programme is complex and has taken place across many sites over a long period. Many were secret until exposed, and others may remain secret. Some key sites of relevance are:

- The Isfahan Nuclear Technology Centre, which includes a “uranium conversion facility” to convert uranium for enrichment.
- The Natanz Fuel Enrichment Complex, a large underground facility exposed in 2002.
- Fordow, an underground enrichment facility exposed in 2009, apparently tailored to produce weapons-grade uranium in a place impenetrable to air attack.
- Arak, a heavy water production facility and reactor (known as IR-40), exposed in 2002, capable of producing plutonium for use in nuclear weapons.
- The Parchin Military Complex, where it is believed that Iran conducts nuclear weapons research. Israel bombed buildings at Parchin in October 2024, with Netanyahu acknowledging that sites linked to Iran’s nuclear programme were targeted.
- Taramin, where Iran had a secret pilot uranium enrichment facility, and Turqz Abad, a secret nuclear warehouse exposed by Israel in Iran’s captured nuclear archive, are sites where the IAEA discovered uranium traces which Iran is yet to explain.

WHY DOES IRAN’S NUCLEAR WEAPONS PROGRAMME MATTER?

THE THREAT TO ISRAEL

The Islamic Republic is ideologically committed to Israel’s destruction – a position its leaders have articulated repeatedly for years – making Iranian nuclear capabilities intolerable for Israelis and anyone with a commitment to Israel’s existence. There is an open debate about whether Iran would use nuclear weapons against Israel. Some assume Iran would be deterred by the likelihood of a massive Israeli nuclear response, but others consider the regime’s apocalyptic and messianic fervour make it fundamentally irrational. Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a former president of Iran, infamously [said](#) in a speech in 2001 that if “the world of Islam” came to possess nuclear weapons then one bomb would destroy everything in Israel, whereas it would only damage the world of Islam.

For Israel, any possibility of an Iranian nuclear strike constitutes an unbearable challenge. Given Israel’s small size, and the concentration of its population and economic capacity, even a single nuclear strike represents an existential threat. Perceptions of these threats in Israel is shaped by the deeply rooted principle in Israeli political culture that the Jewish people should never again face a genocidal threat, and that such threats should be pre-empted.

The pattern of conflict since 7 October 2023 shows the high risks of miscalculation and uncertainty in the region. A nuclear-armed Iran would take these risks to a new level. Tehran’s extensive use of proxies and its pattern of advanced-weapons proliferation, including sharing advanced missiles with the Houthis and Hezbollah, raises the further threat that Iran could use a nuclear device in a deniable manner via proxies.

Israeli appetite across the spectrum for military action against Iranian nuclear facilities has risen considerably in recent months. The 7 October attacks and the subsequent conflict has heightened Israeli perceptions of potential strategic threats and reduced its willingness to tolerate them. At the same time, Israel’s military successes against Iran and its axis, especially the damage to Hezbollah and to Iran’s air defences, have greatly reduced Iranian deterrence against Israel.

THE WIDER THREAT TO THE FUTURE OF THE REGION

Iran’s Sunni neighbours are also acutely concerned about Iranian nuclear breakout, which would help Iran to reinforce its position as a mainstay of radicalism in the Middle East.

Although there has been a measure of détente between Saudi Arabia and Iran, they remain divided not only on sectarian and religious lines but over their vision of the region's future. The Saudis, along with the UAE and others, want diversified economies and societies open to the west and to maintain the US security umbrella. To this end, they want to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, normalise relations with Israel and promote more moderate forms of Islam. By contrast, Iran and its allies want to expel western influence, perpetuate the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and to prevent normalisation with, and ultimately destroy, Israel.

Nuclear breakout could enable Iran to restore the prestige and deterrence it has lost due to Israeli military successes against Hamas and Hezbollah and the collapse of the Assad regime. The deterrence provided by a nuclear umbrella would make Iran more likely to escalate its threats and attacks on Israel, moderate Arab regimes and international targets both directly and through proxies. The potential threats would include attacks on western military bases (such as the January 2020 Iranian missile attack against US forces stationed at Ayn al Asad airbase in Iraq); its neighbours' energy facilities (as in the 2019 attack on the Saudi Aramco oil facilities); or disruptions to energy flows through the Gulf. These threats, especially in the absence of a clear US commitment to the defence of regional allies, may lead some regional actors to be more inclined to accommodate or appease Iran, tipping the strategic balance back in its favour. These threats may enhance Iran's ability to undermine any future normalisation process, and its efforts to [support](#) and rearm proxies including Hezbollah, Hamas and the Houthis.

THE THREAT OF A POLYNUCLEAR MIDDLE EAST

The closer Iran gets to nuclear weapons, the greater the incentive of other regional powers to follow suit, triggering a nuclear arms race and undermining the global non-proliferation regime. The Saudi crown prince, Mohammed Bin Salman, has [said](#) repeatedly that if Iran acquired nuclear weapons his country would follow. Riyadh has asked for US civilian nuclear cooperation as part of a possible normalisation deal with Israel, and there has long been [speculation](#) about agreements for Saudi Arabia to acquire nuclear technology from Pakistan. Other regional powers, including Turkey or even Egypt, could also seek to balance Iran's threat with their own nuclear capabilities.

THE THREAT TO THE UK AND ITS INTERESTS

Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons presents significant strategic threats to the UK, with Tehran being an adversary not only in the Middle East but in Europe. To the extent that nuclear arms capability strengthens Iran's strategic position it increases the risk of it taking escalatory action that harms UK interests in both these regions.

The Middle East is of enduring strategic concern to the UK, as a source of energy and economic investment, a market for UK exports, and, at the same time, a driver of instability and radical anti-western ideologies. The significance of the region is reflected by Britain's close military relationship with numerous states in the region and the presence of UK military installations including in Bahrain and Oman. Iran has the capacity to trigger shocks to energy prices; further disruptions to shipping either from the Houthis (which the UK has helped to counter) or Iran directly; or threaten the stability of Arab states that are vitally important for UK trade and investment.

Closer to home, an emboldened Iran may also escalate its direct threats against the UK or its western allies, including its attempts to kill or kidnap British or UK-based individuals recently [highlighted](#) by the director-general of MI5, Ken McCallum. Iran's nuclear-capable ballistic missiles can already reach [deep](#) into Europe and US intelligence recently [confirmed](#) that Tehran's work on space-launch vehicles shortens the time it would need to develop inter-continental ballistic missiles that could [reach](#) Britain. Iran is also a strategic threat to European security through its support for Russia's war in Ukraine, including [supplying](#) missiles and drones.

WHAT ARE THE UK GOVERNMENT'S POLICY OPTIONS?

Confronting Iran now, at its moment of weakness, will curtail its ability to pose greater threats, backed by nuclear weapons, in the future. As the prime minister told the House of Commons in October 2024: "We must ensure that Iran cannot possibly get weapons. The sanctions, and the regime around them, must be geared towards that central issue."

Iran's nuclear advances mean that the JCPOA's terms are no longer an adequate basis to ensure Iran cannot get nuclear weapons. Iran's stockpiles have gone far beyond those envisaged by the JCPOA, and its technological advances are irreversible, making the 2015 deal irrelevant. As David Albright and Sarah Burkhard of the Institute for Science and International Security have warned: "With its multiple violations of the JCPOA, Iran has reached previously uncharted territory, accumulating important new knowledge, experience, and practice, representing a significant block of nuclear capability banned to Iran by this point in time under the JCPOA. These advances not only violate the JCPOA limits, but many are irreversible, threatening to collapse the JCPOA's overall purpose of keeping Iran a certain timeframe away from being able to produce enough weapon grade uranium (WGU) for a nuclear weapon and assemble a nuclear weapon." Any future arrangement would thus have to be far more comprehensive.

The E3 share with the incoming Trump administration a belief in the need to increase pressure on the Iranian regime to compel a change in its behaviour. Over the last two years, Iran has accelerated towards breakout largely unchecked. Western governments have hesitated to escalate sanctions out of concern that this will push Tehran to move even more decisively towards breakout or withdraw entirely from the NPT. Given how close Iran has already come to breakout, any case for such restraint is dissipating.

The Labour government has a pivotal role to play as a leader in the E3, a Transatlantic bridge and an influential player in the Arab world. Since Labour entered government, the UK has issued several statements describing Iran's rapid acceleration of its enrichment activities and its obstruction of IAEA monitoring as "highly concerning". The UK also joined with G7 partners in September 2024 in declaring that "Iran must never develop or acquire a nuclear weapon".

The Iranian regime is at a moment of vulnerability domestically and internationally. The economy is suffering after years of sanctions. Widespread dissatisfaction among the Iranian people with the regime has spread beyond the economy to social and cultural issues, as illustrated by the "Woman, Life Freedom" protest movement. Meanwhile, Iran's regional "axis of resistance" has been badly damaged, and its own offensive and defensive military capacities have been weakened.

The UK can play a significant role in building pressure on the Iranian regime to stop both its advances towards nuclear breakout capability and its attempts to rebuild its regional axis in Lebanon, Syria and the Palestinian territories.

ECONOMIC PRESSURE

By backing US efforts to tighten up sanctions and promote an international alignment with European, Arab and G7 allies, the UK could help bring unbearable pressure on the Iranian regime. The ailing Iranian economy is kept afloat by oil sales to China. Since the end of 2019, Iran's oil exports have more than doubled to around 1.6m barrels a day, earning revenue of around \$53bn in 2023. China buys at a discount and evades sanctions through various mechanisms. Even partially stopping this trade could make Iranian regime finances unsustainable, making it harder to finance its regional activities and increasing domestic dissent. Specific measures would include sanctioning ships and operators linked to Iran's "shadow fleet" and deterring states from registering ships under their flags.

BAN THE IRGC

Under Labour's manifesto, the government is committed to finding the appropriate legal mechanism to proscribe the activities of the IRGC, including making it a criminal offence to join, organise or show support

for the organisation in the UK. The IRGC is a significant player in the Iranian nuclear programme, its regional activities, the Iranian economy, and Iranian global threats and propaganda including in the UK. Banning the IRGC could form part of a wider effort to isolate the regime diplomatically and economically, using every available tool to constrain its activities.

SNAPBACK SANCTIONS

Implementing the snapback mechanism is a significant card in the hand of the UK, France and Germany. The E3 can contribute to pressuring Iran by making clear that it will not allow snapback to expire in October 2025 without a clear and irreversible change in Iranian policy. It is important for the E3 to show they will not be deterred from using the snapback mechanism by Iranian threats of escalation.

DETERRENCE

By standing firm with allies against Tehran's threats, the UK can help strengthen multilateral deterrence against Iranian challenges whether direct or through proxies. The UK could help enhance international deterrence against Iranian threats on the nuclear front (for instance, a decision by the regime to withdraw from the NPT or enrich to weapons-grade 90 percent) by making clear that it would not oppose military action – including that taken by Israel or the US – in response to Iranian aggression or were it justified as a final resort to stop Iran acquiring nuclear weapons. The government could echo Brown's position during his time as prime minister that he “did not rule out anything” in order to confront Iran's nuclear ambitions.

The UK can also enhance deterrence by stepping up its own response with allies to military threats from Iran or its proxies (including the Houthis) to its neighbours, international shipping, or western assets or individuals in the Middle East or in Europe. One way to communicate this readiness would be to enhance intelligence and defence cooperation with Israel, and to promote and participate in enhanced multilateral regional cooperation between Israel and Arab states, as part of a wider normalisation process linked to an end to the war that began on 7 October.

ENDNOTES

[1] David Albright and Sarah Burkhard, *Iran's Perilous Pursuit of Nuclear Weapons*, (Washington: Institute for Science and International Security Press, 2021), p. 26.

[2] *Ibid*, p. 36.

[3] *Ibid*, p. 365. See also [IAEA GOV/2011/63](#), 8 Nov 2011.

IRAN NUCLEAR TIMELINE

Mid 1980s

The Islamic Republic reactivates Iran's nuclear programme first developed by the Shah.

1980s

Late 1990s

Iran launches secret crash "Amad plan" to build nuclear weapons.

1990s

December

Former president implies Israel's nuclear program was developed by a single individual.

2010-2012

US and EU impose biting sanctions including Iran's central bank and energy sector.

November 2013

Under sanctions pressure and Israeli military threat, Iran accepts interim agreement with the P5+1 (US, Russia, China, UK, France and Germany).

July 2015

P5+1 sign Joint Comprehensive Action Plan (JCPOA) with Iran, offering sanctions relief for temporary nuclear restrictions.

September 2009

Iran's secret Fordow uranium enrichment site exposed.

2010

2015

June 2022

Leading Washington thinktank assesses Iran's breakout time to be zero.

October 2023

Under JCPOA, UN nuclear-related and ballistic missile sanctions expire.

2020-2024

International Atomic Energy Agency accuses Iran for nuclear activities and non-cooperation.

2023

2024

er 2001

President Rafsanjani
Israel could be destroyed
nuclear strike.

August 2002

Iran's secret nuclear
facilities at Natanz
and Arak exposed.

November 2003

Iran agrees with E3
to pause uranium
enrichment and
conversion.

2000s

October 2005

Iran begins openly
enriching uranium.

July 2006

UNSC passes first of eight
resolutions demanding Iran
suspend uranium enrichment
and imposes sanctions.

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April 2018

Israel unveils secret nuclear
archive recovered from Tehran,
exposing more undeclared
sites and military nuclear
activities.

May 2019

Iran begins abandoning
JCPOA restrictions.

2020-2022

Biden administration tries
unsuccessfully to restore
JCPOA.

May 2018

President Donald Trump withdraws US
from the JCPOA and implements
"maximum pressure."

2020

condemns
operation.

2024

Iranian regime
figures refer
publicly to option
of producing
nuclear weapons.

January 2025

Trump returns to
office committed
to restoring
"maximum
pressure."

October 2025

Deadline for JCPOA
signatories to
snapback UN
sanctions.

2024

2025

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