

Back to the future

## **Joe Biden wants to re-enter the nuclear deal with Iran**

Sounds simple, but he faces some big obstacles

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#### BEIRUT AND JERUSALEM

THE ASSASSIN was not a human. Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, erstwhile maestro of Iran's nuclear-weapons programme, was gunned down on November 27th by a remote-controlled machinegun mounted on an exploding pickup truck—if Fars, an Iranian news agency, is to be believed. “No one was present at the scene,” said Ali Shamkhani, the head of Iran’s national security council. Other accounts suggest that gummen—human ones—were on the ground, and escaped. The bullets were certainly real.

Mr Fakhrizadeh, notionally a physics professor, was the brains behind Project Amad, Iran’s clandestine pursuit of nuclear weapons from the 1980s to 2003. After Iran’s leaders halted the formal programme, Mr Fakhrizadeh continued to dabble in dual-use research, presumably to keep alive the possibility of a bomb. Documents stolen by the Mossad, Israel’s intelligence agency, suggest that 70% of Mr Fakhrizadeh’s staff under Project Amad stayed with him in a new organisation.

That made him a marked man. Several of his underlings were killed in suspected Israeli hits from 2007 to 2012. When Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel’s prime minister, presented the stolen files in 2018, he singled out Mr Fakhrizadeh by name. Israel’s motive for killing him might have been to set back Iran’s nuclear programme by eliminating its most experienced manager. But the likelier aim was to hobble the efforts of Joe Biden, America’s president-elect, to resuscitate the nuclear deal signed between Iran and six world powers in 2015.

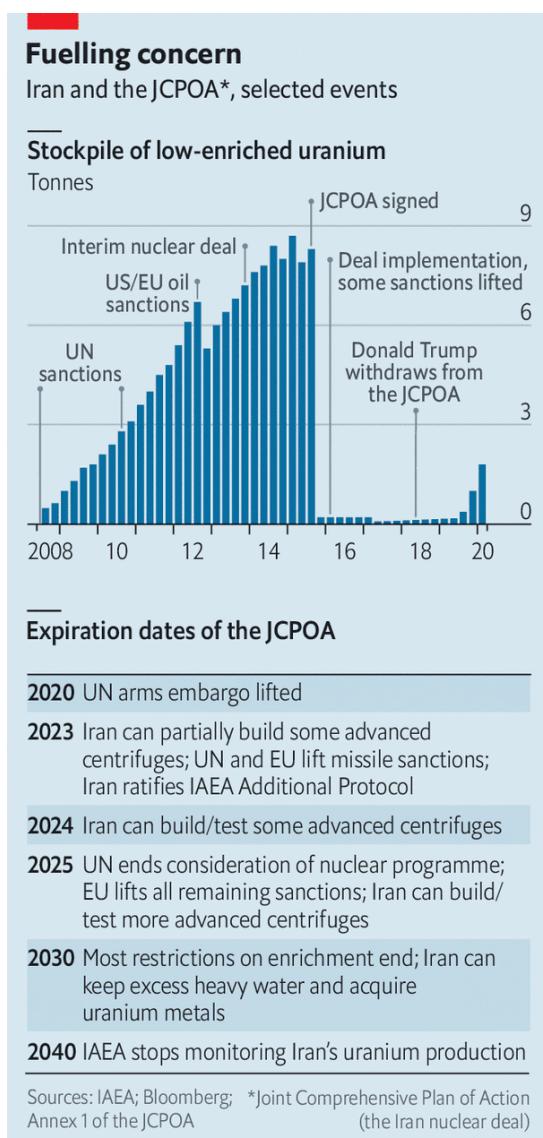
Under the deal, called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Iran agreed to curb its nuclear programme and open itself up to rigorous inspections in return for the lifting of international sanctions. President Donald Trump called it the “worst deal ever”, pulled America out of it in 2018 and has lashed Iran with sanction upon sanction. Iran responded in 2019 by attacking international shipping and striking Saudi Arabia with drones and missiles. It has also gradually violated the deal’s provisions. Iran has now accumulated 12 times more enriched uranium than permitted—enough for a pair of bombs, if enriched further. It has also enriched some of that to higher levels of purity than allowed, conducted research on advanced centrifuges and moved some of them to an underground facility. But Iran has not substantially interfered with inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN’s nuclear watchdog.

In theory, turning the clock back should be simple. Mr Biden says he will rejoin the JCPOA if Iran returns to compliance. Javad Zarif, Iran’s foreign minister, has said that if Mr Biden lifts sanctions “we too can immediately return to our full commitments in the accord.” There will be a narrow window between Mr Biden taking office on January 20th and Iran’s own presidential election on June 18th, notes Ilan Goldenberg of the Centre for a New American

Security, a think-tank in Washington. “The cleanest, easiest and simplest option is a mutual return to the JCPOA,” he says. In practice, things could prove more complicated.

Start with Iran, whose leaders were initially delighted by Mr Biden’s victory and the prospect of rejuvenated oil sales and trade. In meetings Mr Zarif excitedly repeated the name of John Kerry, Mr Biden’s chosen climate envoy and Mr Zarif’s opposite number during the negotiation of the JCPOA. Yet Mr Zarif is a member of Iran’s pragmatist camp, which has been undermined by the failure of the JCPOA to deliver economic benefits.

Hardliners won a thumping victory in parliamentary elections in February (after many more moderate candidates were banned). They fear that a restoration of the nuclear deal would revive the fortunes of the pragmatists. Some want reparations for American sanctions. Mr Fakhrizadeh’s assassination—met with lukewarm condemnation from Europe—has handed them more ammunition. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Iran’s principal military force, quickly rallied its proxies in parliament. On December 1st lawmakers passed a bill calling on the government to enrich uranium to near weapons-grade and, if certain American sanctions are not lifted soon, kick out the IAEA’s inspectors. Iran’s defence minister said that the budget of Mr Fakhrizadeh’s old organisation would double.



The JCPOA is viewed sceptically in America, Israel and the Gulf states, too. Critics point to three issues. One is its timeline (see chart). An arms embargo on Iran expired in October. Restrictions on advanced centrifuges and missile imports and exports will end, or “sunset”, in three years. Most other restrictions will do so in a decade (though heightened IAEA scrutiny will last for ever). A second grievance is Iran’s burgeoning missile programme, the sophistication of which was displayed in January, when Iran retaliated for America’s assassination of Qassem Suleimani, head of the IRGC, with precise strikes on American troops in Iraq. A third is Iran’s behaviour in the region, in particular its sponsorship of armed groups like Hezbollah, a Lebanese militia-cum-political party.

America’s Israeli and Arab allies, along with many hawks in Washington, would like Mr Biden to wring concessions from Iran on these issues before rejoining the JCPOA. “I think the balance of power has moved to the Americans,” says Amos Yadlin, a former head of Israeli military intelligence, who points to unrelenting American sanctions and the killing of Suleimani, among other factors. Recent Israeli intelligence assessments concur that economic pressure has put Iran’s regime in a position of “unprecedented precariousness”.

Iran’s economy is “anaemic” and inflation “persistent”, says Esfandyar Batmanghelidj of Bourse & Bazaar, a website that analyses Iran’s economy. GDP shrank by 5.4% in 2018 and 6.5% in 2019, and will contract again this year (thanks in part to covid-19). That has led to protests. But it has not caused regime change, as some in the Trump administration hoped. “We are far from the collapse scenario often discussed,” says Mr Batmanghelidj. Firms that track tankers even claim that Iranian oil exports rose sharply in September in defiance of American sanctions. The state’s ruthless security forces keep a lid on discontent. A year ago they killed hundreds of protesters in two days. “I don’t see any danger to internal stability,” says an Iranian academic.

Mr Biden anyway rejects the idea of putting preconditions on a return to the JCPOA. “Look, there’s a lot of talk about precision missiles and all range of other things that are destabilising the region,” he told Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*. But “the best way to achieve getting some stability in the region” is to deal “with the nuclear programme.” Jake Sullivan, who will be Mr Biden’s national security adviser, says other issues will be dealt with in later negotiations. The content and timing of such talks are up in the air, though they will probably involve fresh concessions on both sides—what diplomats call a “more-for-more” deal. Iran would probably seek access to dollars, an easing of energy and manufacturing sanctions and a legally binding agreement that could not be overturned as easily as Mr Trump sundered the JCPOA, says Ellie Geranmayeh of the European Council on Foreign Relations, a think-tank.

America’s priority should be to extend the sunset clauses on Iran’s enrichment activity, suggests Gary Samore of Brandeis University, who served as Mr Obama’s arms-control tsar from 2009 to 2013. Mr Yadlin says the sunsets should be extended to 30 years rather than 15, that IAEA inspections should be “everywhere” with “no limits” and that Iran should be forced to divulge full details of its weapons-related work. “If you collect these three, I will sleep better at night,” he says. Mr Goldenberg suggests that because the sunsets are a decade away, America would be better off “building out a regional dialogue” between Iran and its rivals, using innocuous issues, such as co-operation against covid-19, as stepping stones to more contentious ones.

If Mr Biden simply returns to an unreconstructed JCPOA, or if subsequent talks go nowhere, he can expect stiff opposition from America’s regional allies. “If they bring to us an additional agreement that’s the same quality as the JCPOA, we will do our best to change it,” says an Israeli official. “At the end of the day we will not rest until we have a better solution.” A confrontation between Mr Netanyahu and Mr Biden is “inevitable”, says **Raz Zimmt** of the **Institute for National Security Studies** in Tel Aviv, a veteran Iran-watcher in Israeli

intelligence. “It’s in Netanyahu’s political interests to continue taking as hard a line as possible and no one in government or the security establishment can currently contradict him publicly.”

Mr Netanyahu has ample means of influencing the American and Iranian calculus. During the Obama administration the perennial threat of Israeli air strikes on Iran’s nuclear programme was a major impetus for both sanctions and diplomacy. It led America to collaborate with Israel on a landmark cyber-attack, known as Stuxnet, on Iranian centrifuges. Along with the assassination of Mr Fakhrizadeh, Israel is thought to be responsible for a string of explosions at nuclear facilities over the summer. And it is putting pressure on Iran beyond its borders, too. “Things are happening in Syria that did not happen in the past,” says the Israeli official, coyly. “Iranian equipment worth billions of dollars has been burned.” The latest suspected Israeli air strike in Syria was on November 29th, killing an Iranian commander on the border with Iraq.

Iran’s Arab rivals are similarly worried, though less capable and more cautious. They have watched as Iran’s regional influence has grown in Syria, Iraq and Yemen in the years since the JCPOA was signed. Their doubts about America deepened last year after Mr Trump’s feeble response to an Iranian drone-and-missile attack on important Saudi oil facilities. These concerns have gradually driven into the open an Arab-Israeli axis. In August the United Arab Emirates (UAE) established diplomatic ties with Israel. Bahrain followed a month later. Prince Muhammad bin Salman, Saudi Arabia’s de facto ruler, is thought to have met Mr Netanyahu in November.

Arab states have little to offer Israel by way of muscle. They could allow Israeli warplanes to fly over their territory en route to Iran, and might share whatever intelligence the Mossad has not already gathered. More effective would be joint lobbying in Washington against the JCPOA. That would make it trickier for Mr Biden to fortify it, or any follow-on deal, with a legislative stamp of approval. Over time, though, Arab and Israeli interests may diverge. Israel’s biggest concern is quelling Iran’s nuclear activity. The Gulf states are most worried about Iran’s regional influence.

They are also more vulnerable to escalation, should fresh sanctions or Israeli sabotage prompt Iran to lash out again. The UAE may have the Arab world’s best army, but an economy that relies on travel and trade—and imports almost all its necessities—can be easily disrupted. “We’re the first country across the water from Iran,” says an Emirati diplomat. “We always need to exercise de-escalation.” The UAE was notably quick to deplore Mr Fakhrizadeh’s assassination and urge “maximum restraint”.

In the short term Iran’s leaders must decide whether and how to avenge Mr Fakhrizadeh’s killing. Their response to Suleimani’s death was theatrical but did not hurt America much. They know that striking Israel directly would risk incurring a severe response—perhaps even from Mr Trump, who could leave the fallout to his successor. An attack on one of Israel’s new friends in the Gulf might send a message without provoking a war.

Yet some Iranian officials still counsel restraint in the hope of smoothing the path back to the JCPOA. After 30 years as supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is fading. The transition preoccupies his court. “For continuity when the supreme leader dies, they need to get the oil revenues flowing again, and for that they need some kind of accommodation with the US,” says the Iranian academic. Iran would not be averse to doubling the duration of the sunset clauses as part of a broader set of compromises, says Vali Nasr, a former State Department official. It may even agree to pull back from some regional conflicts, particularly Yemen. But it would probably want to see matching gestures from its Arab rivals. That would entail a level of trust that may be hard to reach. ■

<https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/12/05/joe-biden-wants-to-re-enter-the-nuclear-deal-with-iran>