



2020 presidential race: Top Democrats support Iran's hopes instead of promising sanctions

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Quite suddenly, Iran is emerging as a 2020 election issue. In an already-crowded field of contenders for the Democratic nomination for president, the question of Iran — and specifically, how best to address the country's persistent nuclear ambitions — is steadily rising in prominence.

With more and more candidates dipping their toes into the Democratic presidential race, advocacy groups supportive of President Obama's 2015 nuclear deal with Iran — and hostile to the Trump administration's decision to reimpose economic sanctions on the Islamic Republic — are ramping up their lobbying efforts. Middle East news website Al-Monitor reports that one in particular, National Security Action, has circulated a draft memo to all declared Democratic candidates urging them to publicly commit to bringing the United States back into the nuclear deal should they win office.

The appeal seems to be working. No fewer than five of the current Democratic contenders — among them Senators Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren and Kamala Harris — have already promised to revive and preserve the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the agreement is formally known, if they are elected. Other Democratic political hopefuls, eager to keep pace with their colleagues and distinguish their own foreign policies from that of President Trump, can be expected to follow suit.

That makes the question of America's approach to the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism an unexpected top-tier political issue at home — and a wedge issue abroad.

Ten months ago, President Trump formally withdrew the United States from the JCPOA over concerns that the agreement was weak, ineffective and in fact empowered malign Iranian behavior throughout the Middle East. Ever since, his administration has been working to reestablish multilateral economic pressure on the Iranian regime as a way of curbing its destabilizing international activities.

Sanctions are holding Iran in place

So far, Iran hasn't done much in response. Despite official bluster to the contrary, Iranian leaders have opted to keep their country within the confines of the nuclear framework they hammered out with the Obama administration, and for good reason.

Economically, reinvigorated U.S. sanctions are already having a clear — and detrimental — effect on Iran's rickety economy. But the situation would become much, much worse if America's international partners joined in. So far, they have not. In fact, European leaders have been actively working to dilute the potency of U.S. pressure on Iran in hopes of eventually capitalizing on normalized trade with the Islamic Republic.

An Iranian abandonment of the JCPOA, however, would alter this dynamic, and nudge nations in Europe and Asia toward supporting the Trump administration's sanctions policy. That's something that Tehran, eager to prevent its own economic isolation, doesn't want to see happen.

Democrats threaten to give Iran relief

Politically, meanwhile, Iranian leaders are clearly banking on a policy of what some have described as "strategic patience." Their hope is that, despite the mounting economic pressure from Washington, they will be able to wait out the Trump team until a more accommodating administration comes to power in Washington and dials down the pressure.

The new Democratic push to rehabilitate the JCPOA plays directly into this logic. In the process, it also reduces the likelihood that Iran's radical regime might be compelled to make a meaningful change of policy course in the near future. Simply put, Iran's leaders are now more convinced than ever that relief from the Trump administration's policies could be right around the corner.

That, in turn, promises to make America's Iran policy a top topic of contention in the Democratic primaries — and a major dividing line between President Trump and whoever ends up becoming his liberal challenger in November of 2020.

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