

The Backstory: A Deal With Iran?

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The Backstory

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Welcome to *The Backstory*. Every Sunday, we'll guide you through the debates driving U.S. foreign policy and international affairs using pieces from the *Foreign Affairs* archives—some recent, some decades old.

Only days into his term, President Joe Biden has made good on some of his foreign policy promises, taking steps to both reenter the Paris climate accord and reengage with the World Health Organization. Rejoining the Iran nuclear deal, however, will be a more difficult pledge to keep. A swift agreement with Tehran is unlikely, Elisa Catalano Ewers, Ilan Goldenberg, and Kaleigh Thomas [wrote in October](#). "But to fail to cement any progress would be to lose a possible opportunity."

The 2015 agreement was among President Barack Obama's signature foreign policy achievements. "The Iran deal was not perfect," [wrote Wendy Sherman](#), the lead U.S. negotiator and now Biden's nominee for deputy secretary of state. Still, it provided "the best possible assurance that Iran would never obtain a nuclear weapon."



How We Got the Iran Deal

And Why We'll Miss It

Wendy Sherman

President Donald Trump had [expressed his displeasure](#) with the agreement since his campaign, and in May 2018 he announced that the United States would withdraw from the deal and reinstate sanctions on Iran, pivoting to a policy of "[maximum pressure](#)." As [Kian Tajbakhsh explained](#), the Trump administration had "abandoned normalization and made countering Iran's regional advances an overriding priority."



Getting Real About Iran

It's Not an Existential Threat or an Ally in the Offing

Kian Tajbakhsh

"The inevitable escalation cycle seems well under way," [Philip Gordon wrote](#) a year after the withdrawal. The United States tightened sanctions and deployed military craft to the region; Iran threatened to suspend its compliance with the deal and likely orchestrated attacks on Saudi oil facilities. In January 2020, the Trump administration took a "[highly escalatory step](#)" by killing the Iranian

military commander Qasem Soleimani. The incident affirmed Washington's lack of strategic vision, [Brett McGurk argued](#). Relentless tit-for-tat exchanges were "evidence of a policy not working as intended."



The Cost of an Incoherent Foreign Policy

Trump's Iran Imbroglio Undermines U.S. Priorities Everywhere Else
Brett McGurk

Can a new U.S. administration bring more stability to U.S.-Iranian relations? [Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar argues](#) that Iran is now in a stronger negotiating position—that it "will expect and offer less." Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif laid out Tehran's terms on Friday in *Foreign Affairs*. "Biden can choose a better path by ending Trump's failed policy of 'maximum pressure' and returning to the deal his predecessor abandoned," [Zarif writes](#). "The initiative squarely rests with Washington."



Iran Wants the Nuclear Deal It Made

Don't Ask Tehran to Meet New Demands
Mohammad Javad Zarif

There is more at stake than the nuclear deal. After decades of hostility, the United States "has a compelling interest in finding a modus vivendi with Iran," [Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon write](#). Trita Parsi argues that the Biden administration [should think big](#). The question now is not only how to revive the 2015 agreement but "what kind of relationship the United States would like to have with Iran in this century."



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