

Donald Trump should pursue bigger, better Iran deal: Obama diplomat

Trump is onto something. We shouldn't walk away from the nuclear agreement but we should get more for American companies and regional security.

It was my job in the Obama administration to work with Iran and our allies on implementing the nuclear agreement. Based on everything I saw, President Trump is right that now is the time to be seeking new concessions.

That's why it's confounding that Trump decided to decertify the 2015 nuclear agreement absent any evidence of Iranian violations, instead of building on a deal that's working and going back to the negotiating table for a broader follow-up agreement. It's especially perplexing because Trump — perhaps unintentionally — has in past remarks and tweets suggested the outlines of a bigger and better deal: Allow U.S. companies to re-enter the Iranian market in exchange for Tehran curtailing its ballistic missile program.

The Obama administration argues that it got the best deal on offer — one limited to Iran's nuclear program. As a diplomat charged with working with our allies to implement the agreement, I saw firsthand why we couldn't secure agreement around Iran's ballistic missile program, regional provocations or human rights abuses. America had global support for pressing Iran on its nuclear capability, but not for anything else. Iran was close to getting a nuclear weapon, so time was of the essence. And while the Iranians had no interest in broad negotiations, their nuclear-related concessions were so comprehensive that the international community rightly decided it was a deal worth making, even if it didn't solve every problem with Iran.

But that was then and this is now. A lot has changed in the two years since the negotiation of the nuclear agreement. There is another deal, broader in scope, to be had.

Trump has long attacked the deal for disadvantaging American companies. During the campaign he complained, "Everybody's involved now with Iran selling

them stuff. We're probably going to be the only ones that won't be selling them anything."

He's right. The nuclear agreement allows foreign companies to do business in Iran, while American companies are still restricted by remaining U.S. sanctions.

Trump's not alone in his frustration. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei agrees with him and has called for access to the U.S. financial system. So has Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, who campaigned successfully for re-election on a second "Barjam," the Iranian name for the nuclear deal, to promote economic prosperity.

This overlap creates the possibility of a deal.

Our remaining sanctions give Washington leverage to seek new concessions. The Iranians agreed to dismantle their nuclear program because their economy was crumbling, and sanctions relief offered a lifeline. But Rouhani oversold the economic benefits domestically. Many foreign banks and companies are still reluctant to do business with Iran because of lingering legal and political concerns. As a result, the economic impact has been modest, and Iranians are disappointed. Notwithstanding the positive trajectory on macroeconomic measures such as gross domestic product growth and foreign direct investment, the economy is still struggling to create well-paying jobs, especially for Iran's young, educated population.

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In the early days of implementation of the nuclear agreement, it was my job to travel around the world explaining to international banks and companies that they could now invest in Iran, even encouraging them to do so. This was a surprising mission, but the Obama administration was concerned that the Iranians would withdraw from the agreement unless they saw real economic benefits from sanctions relief.

It turns out we didn't have to worry. The Iranians were so desperate for an economic boost, they'd take whatever they could get — and still would.

Lifting the remaining U.S. sanctions would benefit American companies and workers. It would also give us room to get concessions from Iran we couldn't get

the first time, such as a broader agreement around ballistic missiles.

Trump put it well during the campaign when he said: “At the very least, we must hold Iran accountable by restructuring the terms of the previous deal. Iran has already — since the deal is in place — test-fired ballistic missiles three times. Those ballistic missiles, with a range of 1,250 miles, were designed to intimidate not only Israel, which is only 600 miles away, but also intended to frighten Europe and, someday, the United States.”

Trump is onto something. We shouldn’t walk away from the nuclear agreement, but we should get more for U.S. companies and regional security. Now is the time to go back to the negotiating table to get more for more.

YJ Fischer served as the assistant coordinator for Iran nuclear implementation at the State Department during the Obama administration. Before that, she served as chief of staff to Ambassador Tom Shannon. She co-wrote the Democratic Party platform and served on the Clinton-Kaine Transition Team.

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