

Mideast Freedom Forum Berlin
Policy Paper

**Activate Iran Sanctions with the Snapback Mechanism:
Germany Must Act Now to Prevent Iran from Acquiring
Nuclear Weapons**

The snap-back clause in the nuclear deal (JCPOA), which would reinstate all UN sanctions against Iran's nuclear program, will expire on 18 October 2025. German politicians must therefore act quickly. Each party to the JCPOA - including Germany - can trigger the snapback on its own. This option to restore the full pressure of sanctions only exists until October 2025, after which a new sanction via the UN Security Council would be virtually impossible due to the expected vetoes by Russia and China. In order to activate the snapback mechanism, this option must be activated as soon as possible by mid-July 2025 at the latest due to the lead time of at least 65 days required by the process.

Executive Summary

The Islamic Republic of Iran has continued to destabilize the Middle East with years of arming its terrorist proxies. With the resulting attack by Hamas on Israel on October 7, 2023, Iran bears the main responsibility for the warlike escalation in the region. Iran also actively participated in the war against Israel and bombed it twice from its own territory. The destruction of Israel is the official state doctrine of the Islamic Republic and a key objective of the regime's anti-Semitic ideology. Now the Iranian regime is even on the verge of developing nuclear weapons.

According to the UN nuclear agency IAEA, Iran has enriched questionable quantities of uranium to 60%. This level cannot be justified by any civilian use. Iran only needs a few days to produce weapons-grade uranium. The final step towards nuclear armament is only a political decision by Iran's supreme spiritual leader, Ali Khamenei. The regime also has ballistic missiles that are potentially capable of carrying nuclear weapons and can also reach European targets. If the regime were to acquire nuclear bombs, this would trigger a nuclear arms race in the Middle East and thus a global crisis.

Against the backdrop of the volatile political situation in the Middle East and the ongoing aggression of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the issue of Iran's nuclear program is of utmost urgency. The current course of the regime in Tehran and Iran's ongoing violations of the provisions of the JCPOA require a decisive and coordinated response from the international community. Germany faces the strategic decision to activate the snapback mechanism under UN Resolution 2231, which would reinstate all lifted UN sanctions against Iran.

In view of the ongoing nuclear escalation, the new German government must act decisively to protect its security policy interests and maximize diplomatic pressure on Tehran. The previous strategy of using diplomacy to bring about Iran's return to compliance with the JCPOA has not achieved any substantial success. **Activating the snapback is the last non-military option to prevent an Iranian nuclear weapons program.**

Background

The JCPOA was concluded in 2015 between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the P5+1 states (USA, Russia, China, France, Great Britain and Germany). The aim was to prevent Tehran from developing nuclear weapons by offering the Iranian leadership economic incentives in the form of sanctions relief. In return, the regime committed itself to restrictions on its nuclear program and strict monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

The most stringent means of sanctioning violations of the agreement by the Islamic Republic of Iran is the so-called snapback mechanism. The snapback is a central component of UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which enshrined the agreement in international law. If a JCPOA signatory state determines that the Islamic Republic is in breach of its obligations, it can trigger the mechanism. This then automatically reinstates all UN sanctions lifted by the JCPOA, without other Security Council members being able to prevent this through a veto.

So far, despite a debate about this, the snapback mechanism has not been activated and softer solutions have been used instead. The European strategy was based on the belief that continued economic cooperation with Tehran would persuade the Islamic Republic to honor its commitments. However, this assumption has not materialized.

The Current Status of the Iranian Nuclear Program

Since the US unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018, the Islamic Republic of Iran has systematically expanded its violations of the agreement. This primarily concerns uranium enrichment and the storage of enriched material. The JCPOA had limited the enrichment level to 3.67% and the permitted quantity to less than 300 kilograms of low-enriched uranium. These agreed limits are being ignored by the regime. Accordingly, the latest IAEA reports from 19 November 2024 and 26 February 2025 paint an extremely worrying picture of the current status of the nuclear program. The enrichment of uranium in particular has accelerated dramatically. Since May 8, 2019, the Islamic Republic has gradually reduced its commitments under the JCPOA until it finally refused to cooperate fully with the IAEA under the agreement on February 23, 2021.

Since then, the IAEA no longer has full access to the country's nuclear facilities, which makes seamless monitoring impossible. The continued enrichment of uranium to up to 60% U-235 is particularly critical. In its report from November 2024, the IAEA estimated that Iran's total enriched uranium stockpile now stands at 6,604.4 kilograms, including 182.3 kilograms in the 60% category.¹ In February 2025, the organization stated that this amount had increased significantly to 274.8 kilograms. The stockpile of low-enriched uranium now stands at 7,464 kilograms.² No state without a nuclear weapons program produces and accumulates highly enriched uranium on this scale. IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi warned of this "dramatic" acceleration in uranium enrichment back in December 2024. Tehran is in the process of increasing its capacities more than eightfold. The focus is particularly on the Fordow and Natanz production sites.³ According to Grossi, small quantities of uranium with an enrichment level of 83.7 percent had already been detected in past IAEA investigations in 2023.⁴

The technical step to further enrich the existing material to weapons grade is alarmingly short due to the technical know-how acquired in recent years, the advanced centrifuges available and the stock of enriched uranium. **It must therefore be assumed that Tehran is currently in a position to produce enough weapons-grade uranium within a week to be able to manufacture nuclear weapons.**⁵ This means that Iran is on the brink of a nuclear breakout. The missing step to becoming a nuclear power is a purely political one. The necessary technical foundations are all in place.

Table 1: The development of Iran's nuclear program from 2020 to early 2025.⁶

	November 2020	February 2025
Time window until the nuclear breakout	3-4 months	< 1 week
Produceable quantity of nuclear weapons based on the production capacity for weapons-grade uranium (90%) within six months	2	16+
Stock of low-enriched uranium	2,442.9 kg	3,655.4 kg
Highest level of enrichment to date	20 %	84 %
Stock of 20% enriched uranium	0 kg	606.8 kg
Stock of 60% enriched uranium	0 kg	274.8 kg
Active advanced centrifuges	512	11.731

Iran's Ballistic Missile Program

¹ IAEA (November 19, 2024) Verification and monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in light of United Nations Security Council resolution 2231 (2015). GOV/2024/60/Rev.1. <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/24/11/gov2024-61.pdf>

² IAEA (February 26, 2025) Verification and monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in light of United Nations Security Council resolution 2231 (2015). <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/25/03/gov2025-8.pdf>

³ Cornwell, A. Murphy, F. Irish, J. (December 06, 2024) Exclusive: Iran dramatically accelerating uranium enrichment to near bomb grade, IAEA says. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-dramatically-increasing-enrichment-near-bomb-grade-iaea-chief-2024-12-06/>

⁴ Tagesschau, 1.3.2025: Discovery of almost weapons-grade uranium confirmed. <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/asien/uran-iran-partikel-fund-101.html>

⁵ Albright, D. Burkhard, S. Spencer, F. (November 21, 2024) Analysis of IAEA Iran Verification and Monitoring Report - November 2024. <https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/analysis-of-iaea-iran-verification-and-monitoring-report-november-2024/8>

⁶ Source: Singh, M. (2025) Policy Steps to Prevent a Nuclear Iran. Washington Institute. p.5, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/policy-steps-prevent-nuclear-iran>; updated on the basis of IAEA (February 26, 2025) Verification and monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in light of United Nations Security Council resolution 2231 (2015): <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/25/03/gov2025-8.pdf>

The ballistic missile program must be considered a second pillar on the path to nuclear armament. For this reason, according to the JCPOA, the Islamic Republic should not build or test any nuclear-tipped missiles until October 2023. Unfortunately, the JCPOA did not completely prohibit Iran from researching and testing ballistic missiles. In March 2016, a missile test by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) violated the JCPOA in the opinion of the USA, the UK, France and Germany.⁷

Since then, a large part of the developments and tests within the ballistic missile program have been in a grey area without any significant political consequences. For several of the missiles in the Islamic Republic's current arsenal, it is unclear to what extent they are capable of carrying nuclear weapons. For example, the Khorramshahr medium-range missile cannot officially be equipped with a nuclear explosive, but the North Korean BM-25 Musudan base can. The North Korean original would be able to reach nuclear Europe from Iran.⁸ The Sejil missile model, which was developed before the JCPOA and retested in 2021, is considered to be more clearly capable of delivering nuclear weapons. Like the Khorramshahr, it can reach Greece from Iranian soil.⁹

The missile attacks on Israel in April and October 2024 also used types of missiles considered to be capable of carrying nuclear weapons.¹⁰ The arsenal of actual and suspected nuclear-capable ballistic missiles is therefore considerable and militarily proven. As with nuclear technology, it is clear that the Islamic Republic of Iran is only separated from becoming a nuclear power by the corresponding political decision. The consequences of such a step for the regional and global security situation would be fatal.

Rocket type	Nuclear weapons capable	Reach	Threat to the EU
Ghadr-1	Yes	Up to 1,600 km	Southeast Europe
Emad	Yes	Up to 1,700 km	Southeast Europe
Sejil	Yes	Up to 2,000 km	Southeast Europe
Khorramshahr	Presumed	Up to 2,000 km (official) 3,000 - 4,000 km (estimates)	Core Europe

Table 2: Selection of Iranian medium-range ballistic missiles with nuclear weapons capability.¹¹

⁷ DW (30.03.2016) US, European allies accuse Iran of defying UN resolution. <https://www.dw.com/en/iran-missile-tests-defied-un-resolution-say-us-and-european-allies/a-19149402?maca=en-rss-en-all-1573-rdf>
⁸ Missile Threat CSIS (September 29, 2017; April 23, 2024) Khorramshahr. <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/khorramshahr/>; Missile Threat CSIS (August 08, 2016; April 23, 2024) BM-25 Musudan (Hwasong-10). <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/musudan/>
⁹ Missile Threat CSIS (August 09, 2016; April 23, 2024) Sejil. <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/sejil/>
¹⁰ Army Recognition (April 15, 2024) Analysis of Missiles and Drones Used by Iran in Recent Strike on Israel. <https://www.armyrecognition.com/focus-analysis-conflicts/army/analysis-defense-and-security-industry/analysis-of-missiles-and-drones-used-by-iran-in-recent-strike-on-israel>. Army Recognition (October 30, 2024) Iranian Ballistic Missiles a Growing Threat to Israel and Middle East. <https://www.armyrecognition.com/focus-analysis-conflicts/army/analysis-defense-and-security-industry/iranian-ballistic-missiles-a-growing-threat-to-israel-and-middle-east>
¹¹ Data source: Missile Threat CSIS (June 14, 2018; August 10, 2021) Missiles of Iran. <https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/iran/>

The Necessity to Activate the Snapback

Despite these clear and dramatic steps towards nuclear armament and the resulting direct threat to regional and international security, there is currently still the possibility of containing the situation through a policy of tough and effective sanctions. The regime in Tehran is under pressure to act due to the loss of its strategic partner Bashar al-Assad, the heavy losses suffered by Hezbollah, the painful military strikes by the Israeli army, the continuing opposition from the Iranian population and, last but not least, the worst economic crisis since 1979.¹² Determined action on the part of the German government can permanently restrict the scope of action of the leadership in Tehran by activating the snapback. Other measures, such as a ban on the IRGC, are also part of an effective and sustainable containment of Iran's policy of aggression.¹³ In addition, serious support for the Iranian opposition is essential. Only a fundamental system change in Iran can solve many of the region's problems in the long term.¹⁴

However, in order to achieve a sufficiently strong position vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic to obtain the necessary concessions in the area of the nuclear and missile programs, a maximum of international sanctions must be activated. Due to the current global political frontline and the likely vetoes of China and Russia, this can no longer be achieved by imposing new sanctions via the UN Security Council. Triggering the snapback, on the other hand, is excluded from this veto option and enables a return to the sanctions pressure that motivated Tehran to negotiate the original JCPOA. The time factor is crucial here: in October 2025, the path to increasing diplomatic pressure on the Islamic Republic to the level that made the conclusion of the first agreement possible in the first place will finally be blocked. Only by acting quickly and decisively can Germany safeguard its security policy interests and contribute to the stability of the international order.

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Michael Spaney
Executive Director

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Mideast Freedom Forum Berlin e.V.
P.O. Box 2 77 48
10130 Berlin
Phone: +49 (0)30 - 209 958 52
info@mideastfreedomforum.org
www.mideastfreedomforum.org/

¹² Serjoe, K. A. (December 16, 2024) Humiliated Abroad, Iran Is Also Enfeebled at Home. <https://time.com/7202352/iran-islamic-revolution-regime-weakening-inside-syria/>

¹³ In addition to efforts to list the IRGC as a terrorist organization in the EU, consideration must also be given to national prohibition solutions. Cf. on this: Rauffer, Jan (2024) Die Islamischen Revolutionsgarden (IRGC) - Eine Gefahr für die innere Sicherheit in Deutschland und Europa. https://www.mideastfreedomforum.org/fileadmin/editors_de/Artikel/Policy_Paper/IRGC_final.pdf

¹⁴ https://www.mideastfreedomforum.org/fileadmin/editors_de/Artikel/Policy_Paper/Forderungen_fuer_eine_neue_Iran-Politik_2022-10-13.pdf