

# Americans Support a US Return to Iran Deal

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Negotiations between Iran and the United States to return to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement—in which Iran agreed to significant restrictions on its nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief—have continued in fits and starts for 17 months. While hurdles in the process still remain, Iran recently dropped two nonstarters for the United States from their original position, potentially paving the way toward a new agreement. Despite their decreased sense of concern about Iran’s nuclear program, the American public is still willing to take significant steps to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, though a majority reject using military options.

## Key Findings

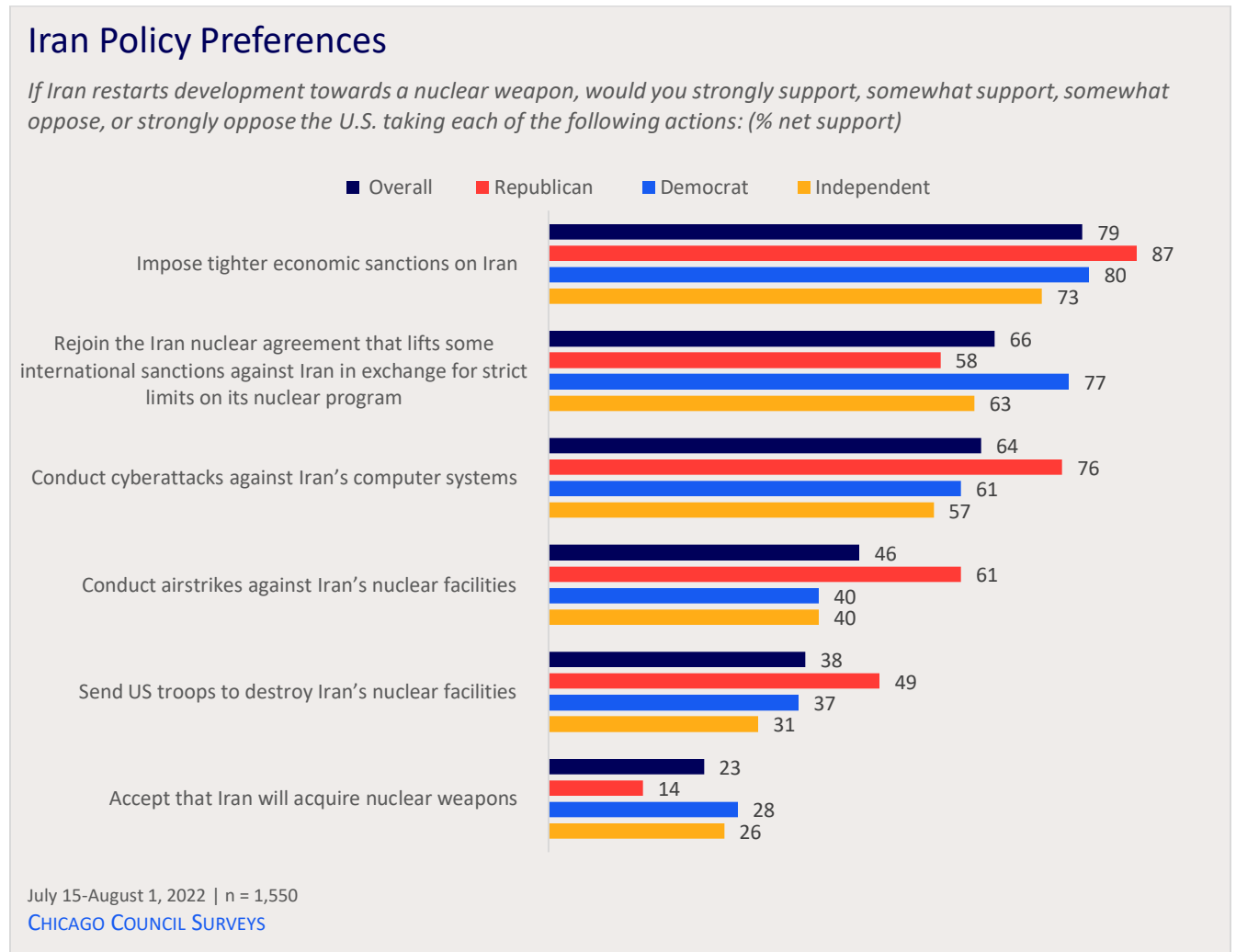
- If Tehran restarts development of a nuclear weapon, majorities of Americans would support tightening US economic and diplomatic sanctions (79%) and conducting cyberattacks (64%).
- A majority reject using force to stop Iran’s nuclear development, although the percentages saying they would support air strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities (46%) and the use of US troops (38%) are significant.
- Six in 10 (59%)—including 73 percent of Democrats, 61 percent of Independents and 41 percent of Republicans—would support returning to the deal rather than staying out and risking Iran developing a nuclear weapon.
- Just over half of Americans consider Iran’s nuclear program a critical threat to the United States (53%).

## Accepting A Nuclear Iran is the American Public’s Least-Favored Policy

In July, in a [joint statement](#) with Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid, President Biden said that the United States “is prepared to use all elements of its national power to ensure” that Iran never acquires a nuclear weapon. This generally aligns with the views of the American public. If Iran restarts development towards a nuclear weapon, 74 percent of Americans say they would

oppose accepting a nuclear Iran. Only about one-quarter think the US should accept that Iran will acquire nuclear weapons (23%).

Instead, majorities support sanctions (79%) and cyberattacks (64%) among the range of options presented. While Americans tend to oppose the use of force, significant minorities support air strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities (46%) and the use of US troops to destroy Iran’s nuclear facilities (38%).



Republicans are about 15 to 20 percentage points more likely than Democrats or Independents to support the US government launching cyberattacks or airstrikes against Iran. GOP supporters are also significantly more likely than either group to support sending troops to destroy the country’s nuclear facilities (+12 percentage points compared to Democrats, +18 percentage points to Independents). Republicans’ greater willingness to support military options could be partially due to a higher threat perception, with more Republicans viewing Iran’s nuclear program as a threat (65%) than Democrats (52%) or Independents (47%). In fact, nuclear nonproliferation is the only issue in the 2022 Chicago Council Survey on which Republicans

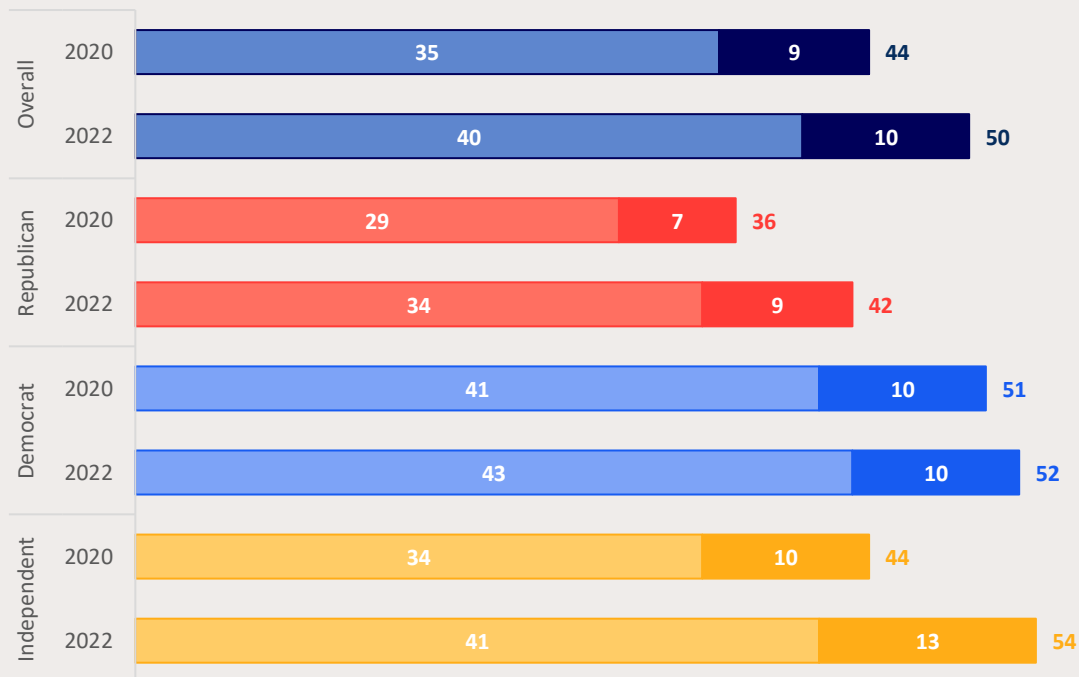
believe the United States should lead international efforts (59% Republican, 61% Democrats, 50% Independents).

Despite promising developments in recent weeks, a return to the deal is not yet a forgone conclusion. The negotiations have made headlines multiple times in recent months due to the supposed imminence of an agreement, but each time the agreement has fallen through. A July 2022 [Iranpoll survey](#) found that a majority of Iranians (65%) are skeptical that even if a new agreement is achieved, the United States will ultimately fulfill its obligations as specified in the restart.

For their part, the American public is divided on whether the United States will be able to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons forever. Half of Americans either strongly (10%) or somewhat (40%) agree that “we have to learn to live with countries like North Korea and Iran possessing nuclear weapons, just as we do with China and Russia,” up from 44 percent in 2020. The other half disagrees (49%, down from 55% in 2020).

## Willingness to Accept a Nuclear Iran

For each of these statements about international affairs and US foreign policy, tell me whether you tend to agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly: **We have to learn to live with countries like North Korea and Iran possessing nuclear weapons, just as we do with China and Russia** (% net agree: somewhat in lighter shade + strongly in darker shade)



July 15 - August 1, 2022 | n = 3,106

CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

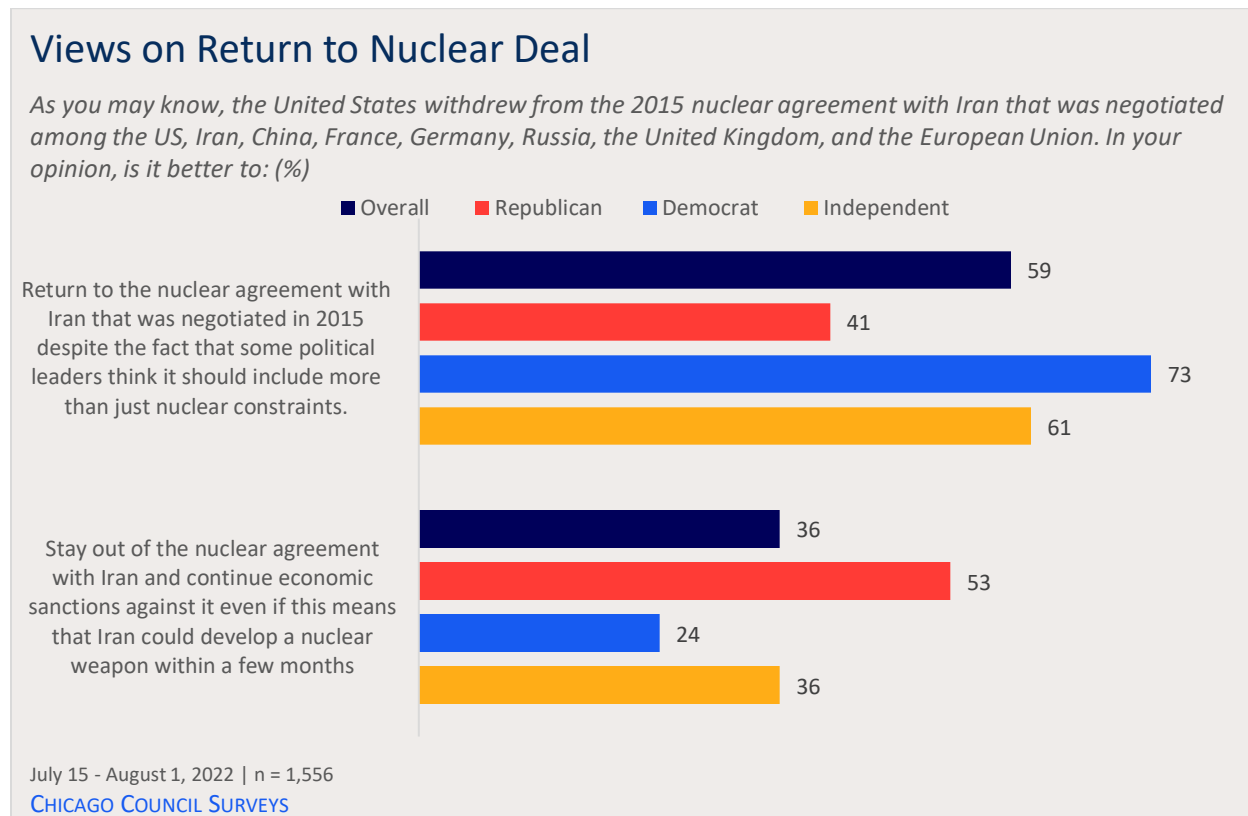
\*Response options may not add up to equal subtotals due to rounding

## Is the Iran Deal Worth It?

A majority of the American public supports rejoining the 2015 agreement (59%). However, there are stark partisan differences that align with the positions of political leaders on each side of the aisle.

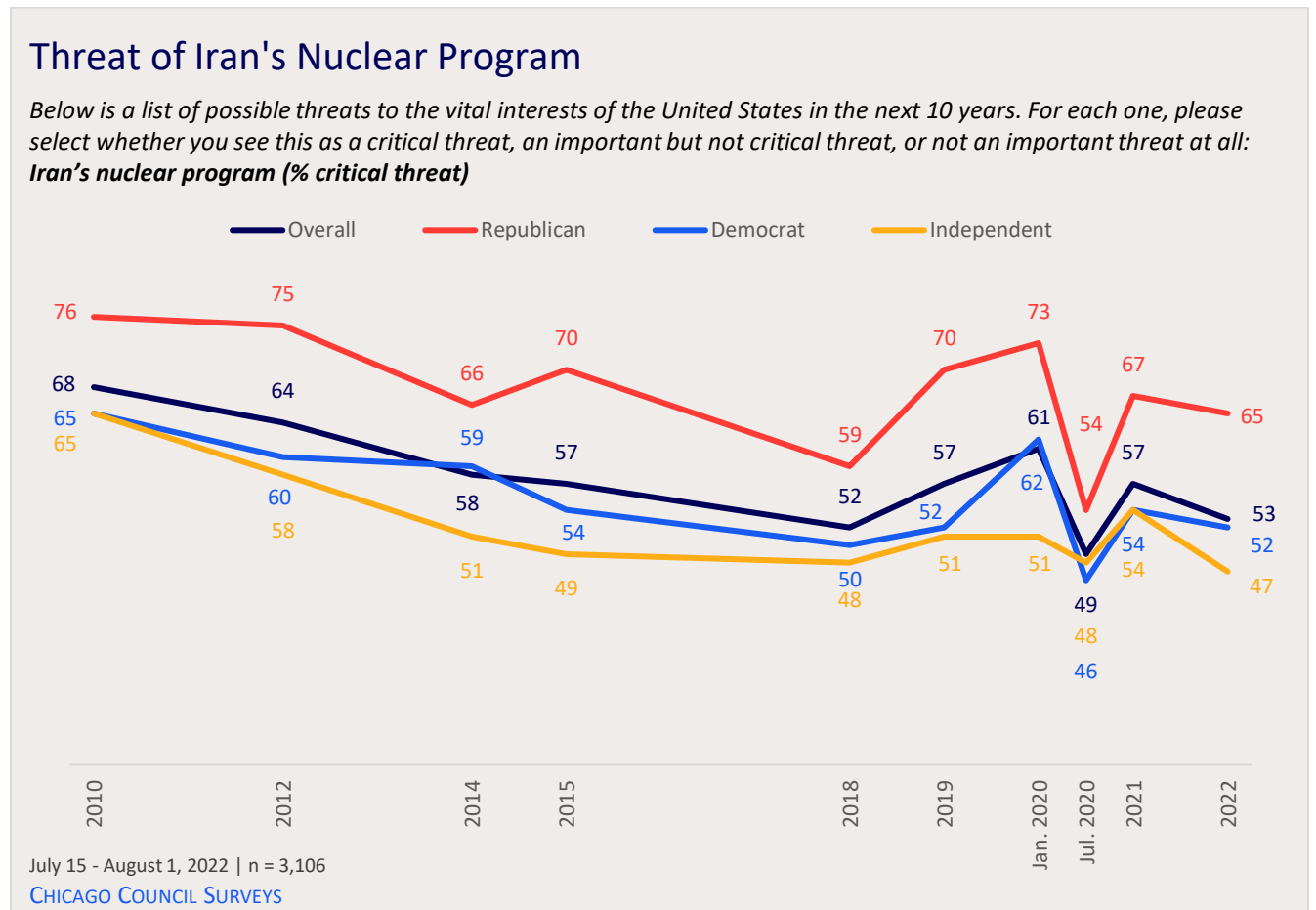
[Democratic political leaders](#) have encouraged President Biden to enter into direct talks with Tehran to revive the JCPOA, believing that even if the agreement is imperfect, it is the best option on the table for containing Iran’s nuclear program. While some Democrats on Capitol Hill have opposed the agreement at various points, due either to its [limited scope](#) or its [implications for Israel](#), the majority of the party leadership has thrown its support behind President Biden’s efforts to revive the deal. At the public level, nearly three-quarters of Democrats (73%) and six in 10 Independents (61%) support reviving the agreement.

On the other hand, Republican politicians have more uniformly criticized the original deal for being too limited in scope and would prefer to continue former President Trump’s [“maximum pressure”](#) sanctions approach. Among the public, a majority of Republicans think the United States should stay out of a deal with Iran, instead continuing sanctions against the country, even if this means Iran could have a nuclear weapon within the next few months (53%).



## Fewer Now than Previously Consider Iran’s Nuclear Program a Critical Threat

Although Iran is far closer to creating a nuclear weapon than ever before, the American public's concern about the country's nuclear program has declined slightly since the Council last asked this question in March 2021. Just over half of the American public classifies Iran's nuclear program as a critical threat to the United States (53%). Iran's nuclear program was considered a top threat compared to others included on Chicago Council Surveys in 2012 and early 2020, when the levels of threat perception were in the high 70s. Consistent with patterns in the past, more Republicans are concerned (65%) than Democrats (52%) or Independents (47%).



Today more Americans are concerned about other international issues such as a disruption in energy supply (62%) and [Russia's territorial ambitions](#) (60%). While the perceived threat posed by Iran has declined from 61 percent in 2020, overall American opinion of the country has remained steady, albeit low, since about 2008 (see Appendix). When asked to rate Iran on a 0 to 100 thermometer scale of feelings toward a country, where 0 is the coldest and 100 is the warmest, Americans give the country a mean score of 25. Only Russia (22) and North Korea (20) are viewed less favorably.

### Conclusion

Iran appears to be on the precipice of developing a nuclear weapon, and even with a return to the 2015 JCPOA deal, the knowledge and technological expertise that Tehran has gained since the US withdrawal from the JCPOA cannot be undone. Even if both countries return to the deal, it is not designed to last forever and can be broken by future leadership on either side. Nevertheless, while some Americans seem braced for this prospect, most are willing to support efforts to fend off a nuclear Iran, including rejoining the nuclear deal. Using military options to stop Iran are, however, not supported by majorities overall at this point, showing the limits of American support for countering the Iran nuclear threat at any cost. In the end, Americans are divided on whether the United States can stave off a nuclear Iran forever.

## Methodology

This analysis is based on data from the 2022 Chicago Council Survey of the American public on foreign policy, a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy. The 2022 Chicago Council Survey was conducted July 15–August 1, 2022, by Ipsos using its large-scale, nationwide online research panel, KnowledgePanel, in both English and Spanish among a weighted national sample of 3,106 adults 18 or older living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is +/- 1.8 percentage points. The margin of error is higher for partisan subgroups or for partial-sample items.

Partisan identification is based on how respondents answered a standard partisan self-identification question: “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?”

## Acknowledgments

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