UN Secretary-General António Guterres called on the United States and Iran to work together to break the current impasse over the international nuclear agreement, but said he did not expect a quick result. President Joe Biden’s administration has said it is ready to bring the US back into the agreement after predecessor Donald Trump pulled out of the agreement in 2018. However, Washington and Tehran expect each other to be the first to make a move. There is a lot of work to be done, and one should not expect an immediate solution, Guterres said during a press conference on the Middle East.

It is only natural that the two countries have directly opposing views on the solution to the so-called Iranian crisis and the Iranian nuclear program. The US itself believes that the first priority of the Joe Biden administration is to break the nuclear stalemate with Iran, as Tehran is steadily moving closer to having enough fissile material for nuclear weapons.

Many experts agree that if President Joe Biden is serious about joining the JCPOA, he needs to lift the sanctions imposed on Iran as a confidence-building measure. After the unexpected ups and downs that led to the defeat of the Trump administration, the current president is expected to work to improve the country’s credibility and build relationships with allies. Washington could renew the nuclear deal signed by Tehran and world powers in 2015 by lifting anti-Iranian sanctions, an action that would benefit the parties to the JCPOA, European countries and Iran’s
In this difficult environment, the choice of Joe Biden as special envoy on Iran fell on experienced diplomat Robert Malley, which sparked a fierce debate between hawks and his supporters, who launched a furious media campaign defending or opposing his choice. The opposition to the appointment of Robert Malley, former chief Middle East adviser for President Barack Obama’s second term and current president of the International Crisis Group, stems from his past positions on engagement with Iran, although he will almost certainly act differently as a government official. In fact, being a government official is not the same thing as running a nongovernmental think tank, something the opponents of the new special envoy could not understand.

On the other hand, progressives have joined forces to defend Malley’s appointment, as if he has the magic charm to put an end to the malicious behavior of the US toward Iran. They believe that those who accuse Malley of sympathizing with the Islamic Republic do not understand — or are not interested in — true diplomacy, which requires a balanced understanding of the other side’s motives and knowledge that can only be acquired through dialogue. The new special envoy, in their view, is someone who will revive diplomacy with the Iranian adversary and identify possible areas of agreement and resolution, leading to a reduction in tensions between Tehran and Washington.

Iran, it should be stressed, has repeatedly stated that it does not intend to build nuclear weapons. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the leader of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, issued a fatwa (religious ruling) declaring the production, accumulation and use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), including nuclear weapons, to be religiously forbidden. In May 2019, exactly one year after D. Trump officially withdrew the US from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and imposed the harshest sanctions against Iran under his “maximum pressure” campaign, the Islamic Republic announced that its “strategic patience” was over and began gradually lifting restrictions on its nuclear activities every two months. At a time when Iran announced that if the parties to the JCPOA fulfill their obligations, Tehran would immediately reverse its decision. Under the JCPOA, Iran is instructed to limit its nuclear program in exchange for an end to economic and financial sanctions.

Seeing no action from the JCPOA after five years, in December the Iranian parliament passed a law formally titled “Strategic Action to Remove Sanctions and Protect the Rights of the Nation,” which requires the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) to accelerate nuclear activities if US sanctions are not lifted within two months. The nuclear law stipulates that the Iranian government must take certain nuclear measures, such as increasing uranium enrichment to 20 percent and suspending voluntary implementation of the Additional Protocol to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) after several months if Western parties fail to fulfill their obligations. In accordance with parliamentary approval, the Iranians began increasing uranium enrichment to 20 percent at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant on January 4, and 17 kilograms of 20 percent uranium were produced this January.

In a January 27 New York Times article, Majid Takht Ravanchi, Iran’s ambassador to the United Nations, expressing the views of his leadership, said quite openly, “The window is closing. If the new administration does not fulfill its obligations and drop the sanctions as soon as possible, it will destroy the possibility of participation in the nuclear agreement.” According to the Iranian leadership, the full and fair lifting of sanctions would create a new atmosphere that would help reduce tensions in the region and beyond. However, the Iranian Foreign Ministry rejected any new talks or changes in the composition of Tehran’s nuclear deal with world powers after French President Emmanuel Macron said that any new talks should include Saudi Arabia. The nuclear agreement is a multilateral international agreement ratified by UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which is not subject to discussion, with the parties being clear and unchanged, state media quoted Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh as saying.

It should be stressed that Saudi Arabia and its ally, the United Arab Emirates, have said that this time the Arab Gulf states should be involved in any negotiations, which they say should also be about Iran’s ballistic missile program and Iran’s support of its proxies in the Middle East. The intellectual elites of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE fear that the geographical proximity to Iran and the existence of a number of military and political problems will negatively affect the security of the Middle Eastern monarchies. The anxiety in Saudi Arabia and the GCC countries is caused primarily by the fact that the US, in their opinion, can establish relations with Tehran at the expense of the interests of the conservative monarchies of Arabia.

The US may have accepted the fact that Iran cannot give up its nuclear program, just as it has accepted the fact that Iran is not an aggressor, but a country living in such a hostile environment (created, incidentally, with the active participation of the United States itself) that only a threat as powerful as nuclear weapons can deter the onslaught of its neighbors and Western opponents. But when Iran and the United States began to thunderously articulate their
preconditions for the 2015 Iran nuclear deal’s resumption, Russia, to push both sides toward a positive outcome, asked Tehran and Washington to address the “problem” of reviving the multilateral nuclear agreement. During his meeting with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov directly addressed the issue of preserving the JCPOA in his opening remarks, although the main topic of the Iranian minister’s visit to Moscow was to discuss the situation in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh.

According to a statement from the Russian Foreign Ministry, during the meeting Lavrov and Zarif discussed at length the latest developments related to the Iran nuclear deal and stated that the positions of their two countries are identical and that they are interested in its full preservation. Lavrov voiced a hope that “ongoing efforts will yield results and lead to the preservation of the JCPOA, and that the US will resume full implementation of the resolution. He even said that Russia believes that all signatories of the JCPOA will resume their obligations under the 2015 nuclear deal.

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