Prospects for Iran-US Nuclear Deal Negotiations

Joe Biden's administration says it is ready to join talks with Iran and world powers to discuss a return to the 2015 nuclear deal. This allegedly sharply rejects former President Donald Trump's "maximum pressure campaign," which sought to completely isolate the Islamic Republic.

However, the United States is divided over who should take the first step toward reviving the 2015 agreement. Iran insists that the US must first lift former President Trump's sanctions, while Washington says it is Tehran that must first return to compliance with the agreement. All these actions of the US president were immediately criticized by Iranian hawks and have already caused concern in Israel and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

At the same time, the administration took two steps towards the UN to restore the old policy before Trump pulled out of the deal in 2018. In addition to signaling a willingness to negotiate, Washington also reversed Trump's decision that all UN sanctions against Iran had been reinstated. In addition, strict restrictions on the internal travel of Iranian diplomats who are UN staff have been eased. The State Department announced these steps after talks between Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his British, French and German counterparts, and as Joe Biden prepares to take part, albeit virtually, in his first major international events with world leaders.

In a statement, State Department spokesman Ned Price said the US would accept the European Union's invitation to
attend a meeting of the participants — the five permanent UN Security Council members and Germany, as well as Iran — in its original form on the nuclear agreement. The US has not participated in a meeting of these participants since Trump pulled out of the deal and began steadily increasing sanctions on Iran. Such an invitation has not yet been received, but it is expected in the near future, following talks between Blinken and the foreign ministers of Britain, France and Germany. Such an invitation has not yet been received, but is expected in the near future, following talks between Blinken and the foreign ministers of Britain, France and Germany. They warned that Iran’s actions could jeopardize “sensitive efforts” to return the U.S. to the 2015 deal and end sanctions that are significantly damaging to the Iranian economy.

In Iran, President Hassan Rouhani expressed hope that the Biden administration would join the agreement and lift the US sanctions that Washington re-imposed under Trump. Tehran is using its violations of the nuclear deal to put pressure on the other signatories — France, Germany, Britain, Russia, and China — to give itself more incentives to offset the crippling sanctions. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the President of the European Council held telephone talks with Hassan Rouhani to try to end the diplomatic standoff. The IAEA head planned to visit Iran to find a solution that would allow the agency to continue its inspections and produce an accurate picture of the status of scientific nuclear developments. Finally, on February 20, IAEA Director General Raphael Grossi arrived in Tehran, where he was immediately received by Behrouz Kamalvandi, deputy head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran.

Iran firmly believes, and without reason, that US sanctions will soon be lifted, despite the ongoing “diplomatic wrangling” over the renewal of the nuclear deal, signaling Tehran’s desire to break the impasse, but without offering a new position. Iran and the United States remain sharply divided over who should take the first step toward reviving the 2015 agreement. Iran insists that it is the United States that must first lift former President Trump’s sanctions, while Washington says Tehran must first return to compliance with the agreement. The White House said on the matter that the US plans to take no further action in response to Iranian pressure before potential talks with Tehran and other powers to return to the deal begin.

Nevertheless, Iranian government spokesman Ali Rabiei was quoted by the official IRNA news agency: "We predict with confidence that diplomatic initiatives will lead to a favorable outcome, despite diplomatic bickering, which is a natural prelude to the parties returning to their commitments, including the lifting of all sanctions in the near future." As part of the agreement with the European powers, Iran agreed to limit its nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of international sanctions. In addition to the pressure to break the deadlock, a law passed by the hard-line parliament commits Tehran on Feb. 23 to limit the broad access granted to UN inspectors as part of the deal. Ali Rabiei stated that the law is not inconsistent with our obligations under the agreement and is not an obstacle to our proper response to US actions.

Iran is now studying a proposal by the European Union for an informal meeting between the current parties to the nuclear deal and the United States, but has not yet responded. The Iranian position is that, according to senior Iranian officials, Tehran sees no need to meet to bring the US back to the nuclear agreement, and that to do so would be enough to lift the harsh sanctions illegally imposed by Washington. Trita Parsi, vice president of Washington’s Quincy Institute for Responsible Government, an expert on Iran who regularly gives policy advice to Western governments, said Iran is likely to continue escalating until the Joe Biden administration fully subscribes to the deal. The reality is that Iran is staying under the deal, although it has reduced some of its commitments, while the US president is still out of the deal, having been president for almost a month. The Iranians seem to be nervous about Joe Biden’s intentions, but overreaction could also ruin the possibility of reviving the JCPOA.

We should also point out the position of the Europeans, on whom much depends in the new negotiations with Tehran. They believe that the consequences of the Iranian approach to the nuclear crisis are unacceptable. Britain, Germany, and France, three powerful states that have played key roles in nuclear diplomacy over the past six years, have warned Iran against “undermining” the possibility of renewed diplomacy to fully realize the goals of the JCPOA. In a joint statement issued after the IAEA accused Iran of uranium production, European countries said Iran has no credible civilian justification for this activity, which is a key step in developing nuclear weapons. CBS Evening News, which interviewed Joe Biden, said he "nodded affirmatively" when the interviewer asked him if Iran should first stop enriching uranium before US sanctions are lifted. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken also emphasized this exact same political orientation in several appearances in various media outlets.

But despite all the steps that are being taken to start negotiations on the JCPOA, Tehran persists in its insistence that the other side must take its interests into account. In this regard, it is worth highlighting the statement of Rafael Grossi, head of the IAEA, that his inspectors confirmed that Iran had begun production of uranium metal, and a small amount of 3.6 grams had been produced at the Iranian plant in Esfahan. Metallic uranium, notoriously, can be used...
to make a nuclear bomb, and research into its production is specifically prohibited under the nuclear deal.

But Iran had previously announced the move, saying its plans to conduct research and development on uranium metal production were part of its "stated goal to develop an improved type of fuel," according to the IAEA. When Iran announced its plans to produce uranium metal in January, the foreign ministries of Germany, France and Britain issued a joint statement in which they were "deeply concerned". Officials from those countries said Iran has no reliable civilian use of uranium metal, urging them to cease operations. According to them, the production of uranium metal could have serious military consequences. Although metallic uranium could theoretically be used to produce electricity, experiments with metal alloys are prohibited under the nuclear deal because metallic uranium is a key material in the creation of nuclear weapons. This process involves converting gaseous highly enriched uranium into metal that provides the cladding or outer coating for the fuel rods that power the nuclear reaction.

It is quite obvious that the future of the JCPOA negotiations will depend primarily on Joe Biden personally. It is unlikely that the Iranians, who made the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and have been in a bitter confrontation with the United States ever since, will be satisfied with any half measures. Now Tehran, deeming the moment favorable, hopes for the best of all possible prospects: the removal of all anti-Iranian sanctions, a free exit — political, economic, military — to the world stage, new negotiations on compensation from the US and Europe. But, as events have shown, this is unlikely to work out for the Iranian ayatollahs, since the West itself is in deep crisis on all fronts, and it is only natural that it would want privileges for itself at Iran's expense.

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