The Iranian Nuclear Program and the Current International Agenda

Iran began enriching 60 percent uranium at its plant in Natanz a few days after the explosion that occurred at the facility - something for which Tehran legitimately laid the blame on Israel. “Our response to the anger of our enemies,” stressed President Hassan Rouhani, “is to replace the damaged centrifuges with more advanced ones, thereby activating 1,000 cutting-edge centrifuges, and there will be an increase in the level of enrichment of up to 60% at the Natanz Nuclear Power Plant”.

The International Atomic Energy Agency stated that it had been informed of the decision by the Iranian authorities. For its part, Washington pedantically called Iran’s statement “provocative”, and said that the US administration was allegedly concerned, adding that this casts doubt on Tehran’s seriousness in its negotiations on the nuclear program.

At the same time, US President Joe Biden has repeatedly stated that he wants to return to the deal, but Iran apparently “must terminate its violations”. This caused the European Union to call for negotiations to hopefully accomplish precisely this. Although the American delegation has a presence in Vienna, it does not meet directly with the Iranian one, but rather with diplomats from other countries that shuttle between them. Entering the negotiations - which have just begun - Iran said that it is ready to return to fully complying with the agreement, but that the United States will first have to repeal all the sanctions that it imposed under Donald Trump. However, this is fairly difficult, since the previous administration added sanctions on Iran that went beyond the boundaries of those related
to its nuclear program, including those imposed due to accusations of terrorism, human rights violations, and the country’s ballistic missile program.

But there still are glimmers of hope. According to Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi, an Iranian scholar at the Britain’s Royal United Services Institute, the negotiations quickly passed by the “Who makes the first move?” debate, and began to address specific issues. “It’s a very good development that these work groups exist that really do talk about and examine the nitty-gritty,” she told the Associated Press. For Iran to return to the deal, among other things it must return to enriching uranium to no more than a 3.67% level of purity, stop using advanced centrifuges, and drastically reduce the quantity of its enriched uranium. Despite the challenges, Tabrizi said that “the challenge ahead is not as difficult as the one the group faced in 2015, since there is already a deal in place”.

Although negotiations have just begun, the question has arisen as to how long they will last. There is no specific time frame. The diplomats involved in the talks say these issues cannot be resolved overnight, but several reasons exist why they hope that they will be resolved in a matter of weeks, not months. The initial deal was agreed upon after Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, widely known as a moderate politician, first took office. Rouhani is unable to run again in the upcoming June elections due to term limit restrictions, and he hopes to be able to step down during a time when Iran can again sell oil abroad and gain access to international financial markets.

Meanwhile, the US could face much more difficult negotiations if it doesn’t strike a deal before Rouhani leaves. Hardliners in Iran reject the nuclear deal, saying it hasn’t brought enough economic assistance, and is a slippery slope leading to increasing pressure on the country. This does not necessarily mean they will stop the negotiations if they are elected, although that will complicate matters, said Sanam Vakil, deputy director of the Chatham House Policy Institute’s Middle East North Africa Program.

There is another reason to take action quickly: In February, Iran began curtailing International Atomic Energy Agency inspections at its nuclear facilities. Instead, it was announced that surveillance footage of the facilities would be retained for three months, and then transferred over to the IAEA if the Iranians gain some relief from the sanctions. Otherwise, Iranian scientists will erase all records and, quite possibly, the IAEA will face new obstacles to visiting Iran and monitoring its nuclear program.

Although it must be acknowledged that there are many other difficulties and obstacles. The Natanz nuclear facility has just been targeted with subversive activity, which the Iranian authorities have called sabotage. Many with good reason suspect that the attack was carried out by Israel, which opposes the nuclear deal, although the Israeli authorities are somehow trying to avoid the question of commenting on that. The lion’s share of Iran’s work at the Natanz plant has gone to waste, with many Israeli media reporting gloatingly. According to their assessments, the Iranian regime is now being dealt one blow after another, which indicates its inability to protect even its important nuclear facilities, but it will definitely seek to exact revenge when it can. Lieutenant Colonel Michael Segall, a strategic affairs expert specializing in Iran, terrorism, and the Middle East who is a senior analyst at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, noted that talks between the United States and Iran on bringing the Islamic Republic back to a nuclear deal “triggered many recent events, and the latest actions taken by Israel”. This is not the first time that the centrifuges in Natanz have suffered some kind of destruction. “I’m not sure how many of the cascades that keep the uranium enrichment centrifuges in place have been destroyed, and it’s unclear what happened, but when a cascade breaks down that spells years of work going down the drain,” Segall said.

Prior to that, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani announced that Iran had begun testing new IR-9 centrifuges, which enrich uranium 50 times faster than first-generation IR-1 centrifuges. That same day, Iran reported that 164 IR-6 centrifuges were started up at Natanz that enrich uranium 10 times faster than the IR-1 centrifuges. Incidentally, the 2015 nuclear deal restricts Iran to using only IR-1 centrifuges. After that, Natanz suffered a mysterious power outage that followed reports of an explosion. The well-informed (from what source?!) The New York Times newspaper immediately reported that the incident would halt production at the plant for at least nine months. The IR-9 centrifuges have really cut down on the time frames needed for enrichment, and this decreases what used to take days down to a few hours. A power outage without backup power could lead to serious damage if the cascades are thrown out of position, said Israeli specialist Segall.

Iran strongly believes that Israel clearly hopes to disrupt negotiations by using sabotage. Rouhani stated he still hopes the talks will work, but the latest attack has made matters more complex. First, Iran responded by announcing that it would increase its uranium enrichment activities to reach a 60% purity level - one much higher than ever before, and install more advanced centrifuges at the Natanz plant. And following how these events unfolded, both sides ratcheted up their rhetoric and propaganda. In particular, the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei,
who has the final say on all state matters in the country, rejected all proposals that have been considered so far in Vienna as “not worthy of attention”. At the same time, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated that Washington has demonstrated its commitment by participating in indirect talks in Vienna, but with Tehran’s recent statements “it remains to be seen whether Iran shares the seriousness of this objective”. The US is very serious about its “provocative” announcement on intending to start enriching uranium up to 60 percent, Blinken said at a press conference held at NATO headquarters in Brussels, referring to Iran. European countries participating in the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal - and unquestioningly fulfilling the will of their overlord - also told Tehran that this step allegedly contradicts their efforts to revive the agreement, one from which, it is worth reiterating, the United States withdrew.

Meanwhile, at the nuclear talks in Vienna, as evidenced by the facts, Washington has so far demonstrated a rather decisive, uncompromising, and crass position. The American delegation was headed by the US Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley - a man, as American media outlets note, who is little inclined toward negotiations or flexibility in his thinking. But Iran, for its part, “very strongly” insists that all sanctions be lifted before it reverses its moves in the nuclear power industry. Incidentally, there is a well-organized division of labor in the Iranian government, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reflecting the firm position taken by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and President Hassan Rouhani sometimes adopting a more optimistic tone about the possible outcome of the negotiations.

It is quite apparent that the Iranians’ idea is that all sanctions should be lifted, even those related to non-nuclear issues like accusations of supporting terrorism. Verification is very important from the Iranian perspective - first of all, Iran wants to make sure that the sanctions are lifted, and only then will it reverse its latest measures, including in installing the advanced IR-9 centrifuges. It should not be forgotten that Iran is supposed to stop sharing video footage of its nuclear facilities with the IAEA in six weeks, a move that followed Tehran terminating its live video feeds as part of its ever-escalating series of moves in the nuclear power industry to exert pressure on the negotiations. But the reality is that everything will basically depend only on the reasonable measures taken by the Joe Biden administration - if any of those will originate from the White House.

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