Iran-US and the Future of the Vienna Talks

In recent days, conflicting reports have regularly emerged about the outcome of the ongoing Vienna talks to revive the 2015 nuclear deal, leading to the question of the extent to which the United States will lift the Trump-era sanctions imposed on Tehran. Many experts believe that the reports coming from Iran reflect some leaks that the Islamic regime is already declaring victory at the negotiating table with the Joe Biden administration, pegging the lifting of the sanctions that the Iranians sought at a 90-95 percent chance.

Richard Goldberg, a senior advisor at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and an expert on Iranian negotiations and sanctions, believes that the Washington administration appears to have proposed lifting a wide range of sanctions imposed on Iran by the Trump administration, including due to its "sponsorship of terrorism and ballistic missile program ". Reports stated that the sanctions that US negotiators may agree to lift could include sanctions imposed on the Central Bank of Iran, the National Iranian Oil Company, the National Iranian Tanker Company, and its National Petrochemical Company in exchange for Tehran re-entering the nuclear deal.

In an attempt to seize the initiative, Washington administration officials spoke out against reports in Iranian state-run media outlets that America and Iran had allegedly reached an agreement to lift the sanctions against the Islamic
Republic as part of behind-the-scenes talks between the two countries to re-establish the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, who appeared on ABC News This Week with George Stephanopoulos, denied reports from Tehran that the negotiations had ended in an agreement. "There is still quite a distance to go to close the remaining gaps," he stated, adding that work will continue in the near future. In addition, the US also rejected claims put forth by Iran that it had reached an agreement on exchanging prisoners.

Israeli politicians, who are following the Vienna talks very closely, believe the United States may be giving more than it would get in an attempt to return to the initial deal. The Iranians are agreeing to come to an agreement that is already terminating in their favor, writes The Jewish Week, with some conditions involving a decline that already began last year, when the international arms embargo was lifted. That really does not make any sense from the point of view of the US negotiating stance. It is necessary to reject, the newspaper continues, existing historical leverage in exchange for adhering to a deal that is already flawed deal whose validity period is already expiring. Easing sanctions, the Israelis stated, would also run counter to the policies introduced during the Obama administration, which allowed the United States to impose economic sanctions on Iran for activities not related to its pursuit of nuclear weapons, such as “supporting terrorism” and developing and distributing conventional long-range missiles. Evidently, in the opinion of many Israelis who think too highly of themselves, Iran should only have small arms left over from WWI in service.

Throughout all the current negotiations, Iran has clearly and directly stated that it will not join the JCPOA unless the sanctions that were introduced during the Trump administration, and were not part of the original nuclear deal, are also repealed. This issue, according to Tehran, is one that is perfectly clear - and not subject to any debate. The Joe Biden administration agrees with this, and now claims the sanctions are illegal under the nuclear deal, something which even US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken agreed with during his Senate confirmation hearing. This means that the real question is if the Joe Biden administration is going to rescind the “terrorist and missile sanctions” imposed on Iran, and not require that Iranians declare all their undisclosed activities in the nuclear power industry, then would that somehow be in the interests of US national security interests, The Washington Post asked. On top of all this, today we see a Middle East that has fundamentally changed from what it was in 2015, thanks to the Abraham Accords and the prospect of relations between the Arabs and Israelis continuing to normalize, the newspaper continued.

At the same time, US President Joe Biden told Mossad Director Yossi Cohen that negotiations still have a long way to go to reach an agreement. Senior Israeli officials have been to Washington to voice their concerns about a possible return to the 2015 nuclear deal. Barbara Slavin, the director of the Future of Iran Initiative at the Atlantic Council, told JNS that she remains “cautiously optimistic” that the Vienna talks will lead to a reciprocal renewal of JCPOA compliance on the part of Iran and the US. The Biden administration has pledged to lift all sanctions “incompatible” with the deal, and I interpret this as sanctions imposed on the Central Bank of Iran, the National Iranian Oil Company, and its shipping industry, as well as other important economic actors like Iran's auto industry, the expert said.

Many politicians and experts legitimately believe that while the deal remains controversial, both Washington and Tehran want to revive it. Tehran could raise the stakes - for example, by demanding that more sanctions that fall within the purview of the nuclear deal be lifted, such as the previous administration’s sanctions on Iran's metallurgical industry, construction industry, and the financial holdings of its leaders that are still in force. Iran will also try to have the US exclude the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps from the list of foreign terrorist organizations; in 2019, the organization was added.

Even if an agreement is reached to bring Iran back to the nuclear deal, experts are wondering whether Iran will actually honor the deal. The International Atomic Energy Agency is investigating Iran for concealing undisclosed nuclear activities and materials, which violates not only the JCPOA, but also the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. While there little constitutional support exists for the Iranian deal, the Joe Biden administration can simply remove the Iranian threat from the table, and focus on other parts of its international agenda.

For its part, Tehran has demonstrated its willingness in good faith to revive the deal with the International Atomic Energy Agency, which will expire in a few weeks, stating that prolonging the temporary deal will depend on whether the Vienna talks go in the right direction. Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said that as Tehran sees it extending the cooperation agreement with the IAEA is one of the options for how the situation could develop. He made that announcement the day after Iranian leader Ayatollah Khamenei announced his readiness to renew the agreement. He was referring to the February deal between Iran and the IAEA, which allowed the latter to continue its surveillance activities in the run-up to the passing of a parliamentary nuclear law that obliges the
Iranian government to severely restrict cooperation with the IAEA if the West does not repeal sanctions. This agreement was reached during a two-day visit by IAEA Director Rafael Mariano Grossi to Iran, during which he met and held productive talks with the director of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, Ali Akbar Salehi, and the Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif.

Along with that, Iranian leadership has resorted to the policy of the stick over the carrot, pushing the United States to take what is, in the Iranians' opinion, the right decision, meaning a swift return to JCPOA. On April 13, Iran announced that it had informed the IAEA of its plan to begin 60 percent enrichment, which would entail installing 1,000 cutting-edge centrifuges at the Natanz nuclear facility. The decision follows an alleged Israeli act of sabotage at a facility that is one of the facilities under UN jurisdiction under the 2015 nuclear deal.

It is quite apparent that the ongoing negotiations in Vienna are very difficult, with each side is trying to vie for advantage. However, taking into account that Iran has been under a sanctions regime since the beginning of the Islamic revolution in 1979, then at this stage the Iranians will not take any risks, and can afford to wait another 2, 3, or 5 years. Joe Biden's administration cannot look that far ahead, and it is not clear what will happen in the next presidential election in 4 years. In addition, Washington is under tremendous pressure from Israel and the Jewish lobby in the United States itself, adding on top of that a negative reaction to the Vienna talks from the Arab states in the Persian Gulf region, which Donald Trump contemptuously called "cash cows". All of these difficult constituent aspects should predetermine the future results of the Vienna talks.

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