Have We Just Witnessed the America-Israel Endspiel in the Nuclear Talks with Iran?

Following the opening, on February 8, of the eighth round of talks on restarting the Iran nuclear deal (formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA), and with a 20-page draft document on the revival of the “deal of the century” now on the table, there are grounds for hoping that the negotiations are drawing to an end. But some recent moves by the Biden administration suggest that it is still too early to celebrate.

The participants in the Vienna talks are certainly trying to demonstrate that they share a common goal, and are working together to achieve success. And, despite the barrage of propaganda from opponents of the nuclear deal, and the protests being aired in the media, progress is clearly being made.

The goal of the talks in Vienna is to revive the JCPOA on the terms and in the form agreed in 2015, not to agree on a “Plan B” which would come into effect should the efforts to revive the deal be unsuccessful. “Globally, the general consensus is that there is no reasonable alternative to the JCPOA, and that the last US administration’s serious mistakes and violations of UNSC Resolution No. 2231 need to be put right. This will allow Iran to continue complying with its voluntary commitments under the deal - a process which was put on hold in response to Washington’s withdrawal from the deal,” said Vladimir Yermakov, Director of the Non-Proliferation and Arms Control Department at the Russian Foreign Ministry.

However, as previous experience in these negotiations has proved, it is still too early to speculate on the results of the talks or make any predictions about deadlines.

Currently, the assumption is that the JCPOA will be revived in its entirety, with nothing added, and nothing taken away. Since the situation has changed considerably over the last four years, it is possible that some new issues may arise, but these should be discussed separately at the end of the process. A great deal has already been achieved. A draft of the final document has been drawn up. It does contain a number of points requiring further elaboration, and a considerable number of questions, some of which are fairly fundamental, still need to be resolved. The document deals with the lifting of the US sanctions, Iran’s future actions in relation to its nuclear program, and, finally, a road map for implementing the measures agreed on. Once a final agreement has been reached, the preparations for its implementation will begin. This may take one or two months. And then, we may see the long-awaited JCPOA coming into effect, more or less in the form that was agreed back in 2015.

During the Vienna talks, the international community - which reflects all views, not only those of Washington and Tel Aviv - has shown itself sympathetic to Iran’s wishes. After all, in this case Iran is the injured party - it was the USA, not Tehran, that withdrew from the JCPOA in breach of international rules and accepted negotiating practice. And it was not Iran’s idea to renege on its obligations, the decision was forced on it by the US’s “maximum pressure” campaign.

As readers will remember, Iran signed the JCPOA with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany, in July 2015. But in 2018 the USA unilaterally withdrew from the agreement and imposed sanctions on Iran, and the following year Iran, in response, began its staged withdrawal from its obligations under the JCPOA. But following the inauguration of Joe Biden as US President Washington decided to renew the dialog with Iran, and considerable progress was made in six rounds of indirect talks, held in Vienna. But last June’s presidential elections in Iran brought a new team to power in Tehran, and the talks were paused until November, and when they were renewed, at the end of the year, they ran into difficulties.
And in recent months Israel has also been raising objections to the revival of the JCPOA. Thus on November 28 Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett stated that Tel Aviv was becoming increasingly concerned about the leading world powers’ willingness to lift the sanctions in exchange for “insufficient” restrictions on Iran’s nuclear program. Bennett had earlier declared that his government would not comply with the terms of the nuclear deal, even if it was revived with the support of Washington, as Israel was not a party to it. The possibility of the renewal of the nuclear deal concluded between the USA and Iran clearly frightens Israel - and not just because it would help to boost Iran’s status within the international community. Israel is also concerned that the JCPOA may deal a lethal blow to the anti-Iranian coalition between the US, Israel and the Persian Gulf nations, that came into being with the signing of the Abraham Accords.

On February 6 Naftali Benet had the latest in a series of telephone conversations with Joe Biden to discuss the “growing Iranian aggression, and the steps to block the Iranian nuclear program”. Moreover, the news site Axios, citing an unnamed Israeli civil servant, reports that Naftali Bennet had urged the US not to revive the Iran nuclear deal. According to the site’s source, during the telephone conversation the Israeli premier assured his US counterpart that “nothing will happen if you don’t sign it”.

The White House, apparently prompted by Tel Aviv, then found a highly original way to retreat from its position without losing face. The Biden administration appointed Sam Brinton to a high-ranking post in the Department of Energy’s Office of Nuclear Energy, a position that involves liaising with counterparts in China, Russia and Iran on nuclear-related issues including the JCPOA.

In certain respects the appointment appears entirely reasonable: Sam Brinton has a dual Master’s degree in engineering systems and nuclear sciences from the globally renowned Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Brinton has extensive professional experience and is no stranger to the workings of government, having advised the Obama administration and worked with the US Congress on its nuclear policy.

However, Brinton’s public image is strikingly different from what would be expected of a senior functionary in most countries, especially in Asia - and particularly in Iran. Sam Brinton is a LGBTQ activist whose highly individual appearance and openly queer lifestyle have provoked a storm of comment on social media. Brinton is an out-an-proud drag queen and “pup handler” - a gay sub-culture in which men dressed in fetish gear “train” other men, who play the role of dogs, as a prelude to sexual activity. Sam Brinton has also given talks on the kink lifestyle in many university campuses and is the author, apparently, of Instagram posts containing graphic “live demonstrations” of various sexual perversions.

As for Iran, a fundamentalist Muslim country with nuclear ambitions, the involvement of an openly queer drag queen in the negotiations will certainly put a strain on the relations between the two countries, and Brinton’s sexual orientation may even put the newly appointed expert at risk of prosecution in the Islamic Republic. That is a very real risk - as number of media outlets have reported, the latest in a series of executions of gay men took place in Tehran on January 30. And in June last year two other men were executed for the same offense, according to Human Rights Activists.

The Biden administration’s decision to appoint Sam Brinton is an symbolizes the US’s social decadence and, better than anything else, illustrates the mentality of the country’s current government. As reported by the Daily Mail, recently more than thirty Republican delegates, headed by former Presidential Doctor Ronny Jackson, called for Joe Biden to undergo a cognitive skills test to prove that he is still fit for office. In their letter they refer to a number of recent gaffes made by the President and cite the precedent of Donald Trump, who took such a test in 2018. Maybe the lawmakers are onto something, and there really are grounds for concern.

Vladimir Danilov, political observer, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.