

“IRAN’S NUCLEAR TALKS AT A TURNING POINT”



KEY POINTS FROM A WEBINAR HELD BY THE INSTITUTE FOR PEACE AND DEMOCRACY



4 FEBRUARY 2022

OVERVIEW

In recent weeks, all parties involved in the Iran nuclear negotiations have acknowledged that there has been some progress made in the Vienna talks. Yet, the United States has repeatedly stated that the time is running out with only a few weeks left to revive the nuclear deal.

Meanwhile, Russia, in coordination with the US, has proposed an interim agreement with Iran that would involve limited sanctions relief in return for reimposing some restrictions on Tehran’s nuclear program. In response, Iran has consistently ruled out any deadlines for the nuclear talks while still insisting on a permanent solution, backed by guarantees and verifications, to restore the JCPOA. Despite Iran’s refusal to engage in direct negotiations with the US, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian has said that Tehran is now willing to negotiate directly with Washington if nuclear talks reaches an advanced state that requires such dialogue between the two countries. As Iran and the US move closer to reviving the nuclear deal, the opposition voices have also ramped up their pressure on the Biden administration to undermine any potential deal with Iran. More than 100 Republicans in the US House of Representatives called on Biden to “immediately withdraw” from the Vienna talks and “strongly reinforce” existing sanctions. In the same vein, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennet has made it clear that Israel will not be bound to any agreements with Iran, suggesting that it would maintain its freedom of action regardless of the outcomes of the negotiation with Iran.

A webinar, moderated by Bijan Ahmadi: (Executive Director, Institute for Peace & Diplomacy) that was composed of a number of ‘Iran friendly analysts’ discussed the current state of the talks and underlined some of the remaining obstacles that need to be overcome if a deal is finally arrived at.

KEY POINTS MADE BY THE SPEAKERS

1. **BARBARA SLAVIN** [*Director, Future of Iran Initiative, Atlantic Council*]
 - Given the current dire economic circumstances confronting Iran that has been exacerbated by other issues such as Covid and rampant corruption, Iran is fully aware that its 25-year agreement with China

can not yield any benefits unless it can once again have access to the international financial systems – i.e., through consummating an agreement in Vienna with the various negotiating parties.

- It was also a fact that the current government of Mr. Raisi that was elected with the lowest turn out in any election since the advent of the Islamic Revolution, has raised expectations in such a way that leads many pundits to believe that they are aiming for some kind of an agreement that will be announced before the start of the upcoming Nowrooz or the Iranian new year.
- Success is also dependent in many ways in Iran slowing down its enrichment activities, although moving its ‘centrifuge building plant’ from Karaj to Isfahan will not be a serious impediment.
- Also, the Houthi attack on Abu Dhabi – a setback in Iran-UAE ties - has probably resulted in Raisi’s proposed state visit to UAE being called off for the time being.
- There are no firm guarantees that the US could remain a party to any agreement if power was to change hand in 2024, however, any agreement at this time will help reduce tension in the region for the interim period not forgetting the fact that Iran will also gain by having access to some \$100 billion of its money which is currently blocked.

2. **ADNAN TABATABAI** [*CEO, Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient*]

- It was critical to note that any agreement to revive the JCPOA in 2022 will not be as important as the agreement previously reached in 2015.
- It is also important to note that Iran’s ‘gained knowledge’ in the nuclear field as well as its lost income as a result of America’s withdrawal from the deal in 2018, are not reversible.
- The fact that there has been no public denunciation of Iran by the UAE and Saudi Arabia in the aftermath of the Houthi attack on Abu Dhabi may possibly indicate that bilateral talks between them may be in an advanced stage – i.e., thereby not affected by such incidents (*NOTE: Contrary to this comment, it was announced on 8 February that Saudi Arabia has apparently called a halt to its talks with Iran in Baghdad*).
- On the position of the position of the Israelis, while Prime Minister Naftali Bennet for reasons of expediency criticizes the talks, other key players in the government – e.g., Mossad and the military think that the JCPOA is good and places a constraint on Iran’s nuclear program.

3. **TRITA PARSİ** [*Executive Vice-President, Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft*]

- While there might be room for some optimism, it is a fact that little progress has so far been reached on 'assurances' (sought by Iran) despite the fact that some progress has been achieved in other areas.
- However, there are ground for some pessimism with regards to the survivability of the JCPOA (given that many of the original content will become obsolete in no time).
- The Biden administration, contrary to the period under Obama, has not usefully used the time it has had for some kind of a diplomatic breakthrough. Rob Malley's Tweet regarding the denial of visa to the Iranian football team is not seen as a good sign for the promotion of better diplomacy.
- Also, the rising state of US competition with China, has resulted in the US trying to boost its allies in the Gulf region (i.e., against Iran). America's "shameful reversal on Yemen" is an example at point.
- Talk of any 'Plan B' is nothing but fantasy because what more can the US do to inflict more pain on Iran, especially as 'Maximum Pressure' has so far continued to remain in force.
- In such a situation, the next step would be to the unlikely step of trying to get Europe to also jump on the 'Maximum Pressure' bandwagon.
- Acknowledging his own much 'hyped and publicized' previous rancour in suggesting that the Biden administration was not willing to guarantee the sustainability of any agreement even during the US President's current term, it was now a fact that the Biden will honour any agreement up to January 2025 or beyond (if he is re-elected).
- Nonetheless, there are unprecedented issues that are still plaguing the talks such as 'Snap back' which was especially designed to keep pressures on Iran in the event that it cheated (without creating any similar mechanism favouring Iran if the opposite happened) without requiring a separate UN Security Council vote - something new and totally without precedence.
- At the end of the day, any deal reached has a maximum life span of 2-2½ years given that in 2023 one of the sunset clauses will require a Congressional vote if it is to be extended - something that is not likely to get anywhere.
- In such circumstances, contributions by country's like Qatar are minimal. Before, the Swiss and the Omanis had also tried to assist in promoting such a process.
- Perhaps, the greatest contribution Qatar (or others) can make at this time is to try and liberate the US citizens held in prison in Iran.
- On the subject of lead time for Iran to go beyond certain acceptable parameters, there is no question that anything around 6 months or less will leave the US only with the military option.

4. **LUCIANO ZACCARA** [*Advisor, Institute for Peace & Diplomacy; Assistant Professor, Qatar University*]
- The picture had been more optimistic before with the expectation that the JCPOA would be revived before Rouhani had left office.
 - Now, things will take longer given that going back to JCPOA is most difficult, although the party that needs this deal the most is still Iran.
 - While the benefits from the JCPOA from 2015-2018 had not been along the lines that Iran had hoped for, were Trump to be re-elected in 2 years, other Western parties are likely to also suffer and become adversely affected in the event of another American withdrawal.
 - Hence, the cause for some pessimism is strong because matters will require another round of talks (*NOTE: 9th round that started on 8/2/22*) in conjunction with the various mediation efforts that have been going on by the likes of Qatar.
 - Also, Importance needed to be given to a statement once made by Elliot Abrams who said that in the case of Iran, European governments did matter but that European companies did. The importance of this comment was borne out by the fact that while European governments did not go along with Trump in leaving the JCPOA, European companies followed suit and quickly disassociated themselves from further activities with Iran.
 - From a regional perspective, it is important to note that there has been no common GCC policy on Iran.
 - Indeed, on the subject of the JCPOA, some countries are actively pursuing the deal (e.g., Qatar), while others are not. It is also important remembering that in 2015, most GCC states saw the deal as something would help enhance Iran's regional policy, much to their detriment.

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