

The Nuclear Talks in Vienna: Iran's Procrastination

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Iran is not in a hurry to return to the nuclear talks with the United States and will not return to negotiations before President-elect Ebrahim Raisi takes office. In the meantime, Tehran is accumulating important knowledge and experience for a decision to progress toward nuclear weapons, and in the international arena there is increasing doubt regarding the chance of renewing the nuclear deal. Under the auspices of the dialogue underway in Vienna, Iran is progressing on uranium enrichment to high levels, uranium metal production, and the operation of advanced centrifuges. The United States and Israel must prepare an alternative to the diplomatic path, which could come to an end. It is important to strengthen American deterrence vis-à-vis Iran, in part in order to strengthen those in Tehran who support returning to the deal.

Iran made clear to the European representatives mediating the nuclear talks with the United States in Vienna that it does not intend to return to the seventh round in the near future, and it appears that the talks will be renewed after the establishment of the new government, headed by President-elect Ebrahim Raisi. Leaks from Iran have suggested a return to the talks in the second half of August, while other reports push it back until September or October. Thus, Tehran has put an end to speculation regarding the chance of returning to the original nuclear deal from 2015 during the final days of the government of President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif. Meanwhile, it has emerged that a joint committee of the outgoing and the incoming governments has been established in Iran, to examine what has been achieved so far in Vienna. Members of this committee include the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani; the head of the Atomic Energy Organization, Ali Akbar Salehi; the director of the talks in Vienna, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Abbas Araghchi; three members of parliament from the foreign affairs and defense committee; and two representatives of Raisi. One is Ali Bagheri Kani, who was involved in the nuclear talks from 2008 to 2013 and is

currently responsible for Raisi's transition team in the Foreign Ministry, and there is speculation that he will be the next Foreign Minister. The second is Ali Hossein Tash, who is serving as a deputy of Shamkhani and another participant, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's representative to the Revolutionary Guards. Hence, the committee has a clear conservative majority, and there appears to be an assessment among its ranks that the negotiations conducted by the new President's team will have a greater chance of achieving American concessions.

For his part President Rouhani made clear in a recent government meeting that "it is Iran that should decide if it wants to conclude the Vienna agreement, and that a decision can already be made in the coming days and the sanctions can be removed, or they can continue for months." Rouhani also accused unelected entities (perhaps the Supreme Leader's associates or the Revolutionary Guards) of intervening in the negotiations and thus preventing the removal of the sanctions. Foreign Minister Zarif, in the final report that he submitted to the Iranian parliament, also expressed hope that what had been achieved to date in the talks would be completed early in the tenure of the new government. Zarif thus implicitly questioned the completion of the negotiations, whether out of an assessment that Iran's demands will be rejected by the US administration, or because of his assessment that the new Iranian government, which reflects Khamenei's position, is not at all interested in returning to the agreement.

Meanwhile Iran is advancing the nuclear program in troubling areas. Especially concerning is the decision to produce uranium metal enriched to 20 percent, which can be used to accumulate knowledge and experience if it decides on a nuclear weapons breakout. The production of uranium metal will be another stage in the program that the original nuclear deal tried to prevent, or at least delay. The accumulation of uranium enriched to 60 percent or more is also just a step from enrichment to 90 percent and more, which is necessary for nuclear weapons. These steps by Iran led the foreign ministers of the three European powers that are signatories to the agreement – France, Germany, and the UK – to issue a joint declaration expressing increasing concern and calling on Iran to stop actions that violate the agreement. Russia's ambassador to the IAEA declared that "now there is room for concern, as Iran is progressing too fast." The US State Department spokesperson also declared that a point in time could arrive in which Washington assesses that Iran's benefits from the nuclear program outweigh those that the international community would receive from returning to the nuclear deal; as such, the time for returning to the agreement is not unlimited, and is of the essence.

Against this backdrop, there is increasing concern in the international community regarding the very ability to revive the nuclear deal, especially due to the assessment that in effect it is not currently possible to return to its central parameter, whereby the Iranian program must be a year away from nuclear breakout capability. The focus is on Iranian progress in producing and operating advanced centrifuges that are capable of producing 3-4 times more enriched uranium than what is produced using the old model of centrifuges, which was the basis of the original agreement. And indeed, from leaks from the Vienna talks it appears that most of the time and inability to come to agreement has focused on this issue, with Iran placing a red line on any demand to destroy advanced centrifuges (a position that was apparently accepted), and being willing, under certain conditions, to discuss the manner and timing of their removal and storage. This issue and others that have not been resolved will be at the center of the discussions when they are renewed, and it is highly questionable whether it will be possible to agree on relevant compromises.

Doubts regarding the ability to return to the nuclear deal, which hovered over the Vienna talks as long as little progress was evident, have intensified since Raisi's election and given some of the officials designated for senior positions in his government who are not enthusiastic supporters of returning to the agreement. The various figures involved in the issue are divided. Some believe that Iran is still interested in removing the sanctions in order to improve the country's economic situation, and that ultimately, after difficult negotiations in which it will try to achieve maximum American concessions, will agree to return to the agreement. Others, meanwhile, believe that in the debate underway in Iran on this issue, those opposing a return to the agreement are prevailing, and their influence on Khamenei has so far prevented the negotiating team from progressing to an agreement. As time passes, there is increased risk that Iran will indeed place demands and difficulties that prevent reaching understandings, while trying to place the blame on Washington. In other words, the question remains whether the current difficulties are tactical and ultimately agreement will be reached and the sides will return to the nuclear deal, or whether Tehran has already made a strategic decision not to return to the agreement.

The US administration continues to strive to renew the agreement, but it too understands that the situation is growing increasingly complicated. The impression received by participants in a closed Congress briefing by Secretary of State Antony Blinken was very pessimistic. The main problem facing the administration is that its strategy relies entirely on returning to the agreement,

having assumed that this would be relatively simple, and it does not have an alternative plan.

Consequently, all of the sides involved, including Israel, must prepare a viable alternative to the current diplomatic path, which could come to an end within a few weeks. First and foremost, Washington must reach understandings with its European partners both regarding the final date of Iranian delays as well as the steps to be taken against Iran when this date arrives. The toolbox is not especially big, but it includes possible additional sanctions by the Europeans as well, diplomatic pressure, and a possible resolution at the IAEA that accuses Iran of non-cooperation and failure to answer open questions that the agency presented to it, and therefore a decision to transfer the file to the Security Council (which is of limited potential utility due to the Chinese and Russian positions).

Above all, Washington needs to strengthen the deterrence toward Iran, given the recurring attacks on bases in Iraq where American forces are stationed, and above all, vis-à-vis progress on the nuclear program. Iran is currently at an ideal point in time from its perspective, as it is making great progress in its nuclear program without real supervision, while enjoying the "umbrella" of diplomatic dialogue in Vienna. In Tehran the assessment is that the United States is not interested in taking military steps, and that it might even curb any Israeli intentions to take military steps. It is important to undercut this assessment in order to strengthen those in Iran who still support returning to the agreement.

The regime in Iran is experiencing a period of significant changes that include strengthening the standing of conservative forces led by Supreme Leader Khamenei, especially in advance of his possible departure from the political stage. The regime's willingness to take action to ensure the election of Raisi, without concern for public reaction, is a strong message to the public itself regarding the forceful hand that the regime intends to use against criticism and protest. These join the assertive positions on the nuclear issue, including by Rouhani himself, who stated that Iran can enrich to 90 percent if need be. It appears that the Iranian regime is trying to demonstrate determination and endurance in the face of pressure, as its preferred strategy for advancing its goals.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz and Eldad Shavit