

The Renewal of the Talks on Returning to the Nuclear Deal – Slim Chances of Success

Eldad Shavit and Sima Shine | No. 1537 | November 24, 2021

The talks on the possibility of returning to the nuclear deal (JCPOA) are supposed to be renewed on November 29. In the background of the publication of the reports of the International Atomic Energy Agency detailing violations by Iran – both of the nuclear deal and of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. At this stage, it is impossible to assess whether the Iranians have decided to return to the talks with the intent of reaching an agreement, or alternatively of proving that Washington is responsible for failing to achieve one. Consequently, the most likely scenario for the coming months is not having a decision while maintaining the diplomatic framework of the talks. The chances of the talks failing are greater than of reaching an understanding, and the administration and elsewhere are already being flooded with alternative ideas, whose feasibility is doubtful. Washington has examined, including vis-à-vis Israel, the idea of an interim agreement – “less for less.” By avoiding public disagreements with Washington, Israel has been able to conduct a strategic discourse with Washington and to attentively listen to its arguments. That being said, Israel’s adherence to ruling out diplomatic solutions while brandishing the military option undermines its relevance to the international processes, in particular given the widespread understanding that the military option is not feasible in the current circumstances – certainly when it lacks American backing.

The talks on the possibility of returning to the nuclear deal (JCPOA) are supposed to be renewed on November 29, after a five-month break and four months after Ebrahim Raisi became president of Iran. European sources have emphasized that even after a round of meetings with the new head of Iran's negotiation team, Ali Bagheri, the position of Iran's new leadership is still not clear, both regarding the conduct of the talks – will they continue from the point they left off, or will Iran seek to reopen issues that had already been discussed and agreed upon – and regarding Iran’s desire to return to the agreement. Although the Iranians have declared their interest in returning to the agreement, media leaks indicate that Iran plans to focus the upcoming round on the full removal of the sanctions – including those imposed in the past by the administrations of Presidents Obama and Trump, and which are not directly connected to the nuclear

issue – without relating to the issues of the nuclear program. Furthermore, the Iranian media also presented demands that would ensure that the sanctions are removed before Iran is required to take steps that would turn back the clock on its nuclear progress, as well as a commitment from the American administration that the US will never withdraw from the agreement.

Meanwhile, on the eve of the talks and in the lead-up to the meeting of its board of governors (November 24–26), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has published two reports. One, the [periodic report](#) describes at length Iranian violations of the nuclear agreement, emphasizing Iran's continued accumulation of material enriched to high levels and its refusal to permit supervision and to allow the monitoring of images that are collected from the nuclear sites. The other [report](#) details issues that are considered to violate the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), such as Iran's not providing explanations for materials and activities revealed at four sites that were not declared to the IAEA. In addition, the [Wall Street Journal](#) published that Iran has resumed its production of advanced centrifuges at the Karaj facility, which the Iranians claim had been damaged in an Israeli sabotage operation and which the IAEA is not permitted to enter.

Against this backdrop, IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi was invited to talks with the Iranian leadership to try to reach an agreement again on the cooperation that was largely suspended last February. So far, most of the agreements that Grossi has reached with the Iranians have not been implemented; but still, time after time these agreements have helped to delay the decision of the IAEA board of governors to issue a condemnation, which would serve as a basis for transferring the issue to the Security Council and torpedoing the possibility of renewing the talks.

The American administration has engaged in intensive diplomatic activity in the lead-up to renewing the talks, in an attempt to demonstrate as much consensus as possible between it and its negotiating partners, as well as with countries in the Middle East. In this context, last October, on the

sidelines of the G20 summit, President Biden held a special [meeting](#) with the leaders of France, Germany, and the UK that was dedicated to discussing only the issue of Iran. The Iranian issue also came up in a conversation between President Biden and President Xi of China and in talks between the American lead negotiator, Rob Malley, and Russian officials. This extensive diplomatic activity compelled Washington's partners in the nuclear deal, including Russia, to call on Iran to return to the agreement and even prompted Germany's foreign minister, Heiko Maas, to ask that Iran continue the talks from the point where they had stopped. France's foreign minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, warned Iran not to come to the talks with "[embarrassing positions.](#)" Meanwhile, Malley visited Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. In Saudi Arabia, an extraordinary [meeting](#) took place on November 18 in which representatives of the US, France, the UK, and Germany met with representatives of the Gulf States, Egypt, and Jordan. It should be noted that the American administration is acting cautiously with respect to Iran; in the middle of October, the US even refrained from taking any military response to an Iranian attack against an American base in the area of al-Tanf in Syria.

Iran is also engaging in diplomatic efforts on the eve of the talks: Iran's foreign minister and the head of its delegation to the talks in Vienna held a round of discussions in European countries. Iran is particularly seeking to ensure that Russia and China will support its positions; in this context, Iran's president held talks with his counterparts in Moscow and Beijing. Iran and the Gulf States have also been engaged in dialogue for several months now, with the UAE's national security advisor, who is also the brother of the Emirati crown prince, planning the first-of-its-kind visit to Tehran in the coming days.

Achieving a diplomatic solution that will curb Iran's progress on its nuclear program continues to be the Americans' interest. Iran's measures in the field of enriching uranium to high levels considerably shortened the time frame that guided the nuclear deal, keeping Iran a year away from a decision to produce enough material for a nuclear facility. Of all the

positions voiced by the Iranians, it is impossible to assess if the regime has decided to return to the talks in Vienna with a real intent of negotiating so that it can ultimately achieve an agreement that will restore the previous situation according to the conditions of the 2015 nuclear deal. Alternatively, Tehran may have already decided not to return to the original agreement and its presence at the talks in Vienna could be in response to the pressures exerted on it, with its aim being to prove at the end of the talks that Washington should be blamed for their failure (which is thereby anticipated). In any case, Iran is coming to the talks clearly with the sense that it has succeeded in creating leverage so that time is on its side. Unlike in the past, the American administration will be coming to the talks after having succeeded at convincing the international arena and the Gulf States that returning to the nuclear deal is the preferred solution. Nonetheless, the US has been conveying a sense of impatience, and it is clear that it is eager to remove the issue from its agenda so that it can deal with what it sees as more burning issues.

Under these circumstances, the most likely scenario in the coming months is a lack of decision all while maintaining the diplomatic framework of the Vienna talks. After the upcoming round of talks, when the Iranian delegation presents its maximalist positions and undermines parts of the agreements reached in the previous rounds of talks, the sides will return to their countries for consultations, with the talks then continuing in 2022. It will take an estimated six months before it will be possible to determine whether there is any point to continuing the talks.

It is understood that the chances of the talks failing are greater than reaching an understanding of fully returning to the nuclear deal. The US administration and its partners in dialogue with Iran are already being flooded with other ideas, whose feasibility is doubtful, in order to avoid adopting steps that could cause an escalation, which likely would be ineffective. Reportedly, Washington has examined, including vis-à-vis Israel, the idea of an interim agreement – “less for less” – in which Iran would suspend all of the exceptions to the agreement that it has implemented (the enrichment of uranium to a high level, the use of metallic uranium,

enrichment using advance centrifuges). In return, the US would allow the export of Iranian oil and would release some of the frozen Iranian funds kept outside of Iran. At this stage, Iran is publicly opposed to the idea.

When formulating its policy on the renewal of the nuclear talks, Israel must take into account both the American interest in reaching an agreement and the fact that the Gulf States are conforming to Washington's position, while they themselves are pursuing dialogue with Iran. Israel's adherence to a position that rules out diplomatic solutions stands to undermine its relevance to the international processes and will make it more difficult for Israel to prevent the adoption of measures contrary to its interests. By avoiding public disagreements with the US administration, Israel is able to conduct a strategic discourse, of laying out its arguments and trying to influence the American policy. At the same time, however, Israel's brandishing of the military option in the current circumstances emphasizes how marginal Israel is to the central process – the renewal of the Vienna talks – while it also undermines the relevance and effectiveness of a military option, given the widespread understanding that this option is likely impractical in the current circumstances and certainly when it does not have American backing.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen