



Assassination of Iranian Nuclear Scientist: Complications for Biden Administration's Options on JCPOA

Dr. Hina Pandey
Associate Fellow, CAPS

Keywords: Biden Administration, Iran, JCPOA, Iran Nuclear Deal, Iran Nuclear Programme

On 20th January 2021, President elect, Joe Biden will formally assume the American Presidency. Conversations on what would be the possible direction of the US foreign policy on a host of critical issues in the upcoming Administration had begun even when the vote count was not settled.

Specifically, on Iran, President elect Joe Biden's had expressed his views in an op-ed he penned for the CNN – *"There's a smarter way to be tough on Iran"*, in September 2020. He referred to President's Trumps Iran policy as "dangerous failure" that urgently required changing the course. The most direct way to change the course was to undo the American withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the landmark Iranian nuclear deal. He promised to re-join the nuclear deal on the condition of Iran's compliance to the same, and to initiate further follow up negotiations.

The issue of Iran's compliance is important. It is noteworthy that Iran has reportedly amassed "...more than ten times the amount of enriched uranium permitted under the agreement"¹. Since December 2019, Iran has often conveyed its intention to reverse its commitments under the JCPOA in response to the US abandoning the JCPOA. The upcoming Biden Administration has once again renewed the promise of constructively engaging Iran on the nuclear deal. However, with the recent killing of the Iranian nuclear scientist in an attempt to sabotage the possibility of nuclear negotiations with Iran, has further posed some difficult questions for both Iran and the US. Before delving into these questions, a brief account of what happened is imperative.

On 27 November 2020, an Iranian scientist - Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, who was believed to be one of the key personnel in the Iranian nuclear programme was assassinated in

the city of Absard. The Iranian Foreign Minister- Javad Zarif in his tweet not only stated that "...terrorists murdered an eminent Iranian scientist ..."², but also identified an Israeli hand in the attack. Since this is the second time this year (since January 2020) a significant senior official from Iran has been killed, the pressure on Iran to respond remains high. Furthermore, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh was no ordinary individual. As per the New York Times; he was to Iran's nuclear programme what Robert J. Oppenheimer was to Manhattan Project. He was a physics professor, a brigadier general in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), "most importantly, the chief officer of the agency that spearheaded Tehran's nuclear programme until 2011"³. In Iran, he was treated as a hero, who also contributed to the design of COVID-19 preparatory kit. It is argued that his loss might set Iran's nuclear progress back by many years.

It must be noted that Iran's UN envoy- Majid Takht Ravanchi has already conveyed, the country's intention to avenge the death of a national martyr. In a letter to the UN Secretary, he stated that "the Islamic Republic of Iran reserves its rights to take all necessary measures to defend its people and secure its interests,"⁴ Another senior Iranian official- Hossein Dehghan has further identified this as an act to "intensify pressure on Iran and create a full-blown war"⁵.

Just when the pressure on Iran to take revenge seems high, the pressure on the US to pre-empt the diffusing of building tensions too

remains high. The questions remain to be answered; how will Iran respond? It is possible that Iran may leverage its commitments under the JCPOA to demand compensation from the EU as well as the US. The demands may take the form of freezing the current quantity of enriched uranium. It may take the form of setting new conditions for future negotiation if the US goes ahead with the promise of re-joining the deal.

Iran is most certainly expected to insist the US to provide sanction relief as a precondition to any progress on JCPOA. Since the demand for sanction relief has been overdue for some time, it is likely that, in the light of the recent killing, Iran might find it useful to toughen the future negotiations one notch higher.

However, the real question is how these demands would be taken up by the EU and especially by the US. The upcoming Biden Administration cannot possibly afford to appear soft on the issue. Nevertheless, it cannot possibly afford to not deliver on the campaign promise. It is to be noted that the P4+1 (remaining parties to the deal) too has expectations from the US to do its part. Furthermore, President elect Joe Biden was Vice President when the landmark Iranian nuclear deal was signed. Thus, the pressure on fixing the damage for his Administration too is high. Iran, on the other hand, too is hopeful that the incoming Biden Administration might keep the promise of the US re-joining the JCPOA and provide much needed sanction relief. Thus, the unfolding situation has presented itself with a

complicated set of choices for Iran. It has to raise the cost for the US delicately and maybe indirectly, such that remaining prospects of rapprochement can be salvaged. Indeed, the challenge has come at a wrong time, as the promise of the salvaging of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) seemed high. An optimal compromise will need deft diplomacy and willingness on both parties to contain the issue. In any case, the upcoming meeting of the Joint Commission of the JCPOA on December 16, remains crucial for any future direction, as representatives from E3 + 2 (France, Germany, UK, Russia, China) and Iran would meet to discuss effective implementation of the JCPOA. Any outcome is most likely to set the tone for future discussions on the JCPOA.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹“Iran's enriched uranium stockpile '10 times limit'”, *BBC*, 05 September 2020, Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-54033441>, Accessed on 20 November 2020.

² Foreign Minister Javad Zarif's Tweet, Available at <https://twitter.com/JZarif/status/1332345633425022976>, Accessed on 28 November 2020.

³“Iran Says Its Top Nuclear Scientist Killed in Attack”, *Wall Street Journal*, 28 November 2020, Available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-says-its-top-nuclear-scientist-mohsen-fakhrizadeh-killed-in-attack-11606493367>, Accessed on 29 November 2020.

⁴“Top nuclear scientist 'assassinated,' says state media”, *DW.COM*, 27 November 2020, Available at <https://www.dw.com/en/iran-top-nuclear-scientist->

[assassinated-says-state-media/a-55751883](#), Accessed on 29 November 2020.

⁵ Ciaran Mcgrath “Iran fury: Scientist's assassination could trigger 'full blown war', claims military chief”, *Express UK*, 27 November 2020, Available at <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1365646/iran-news-donald-trump-israel-assassination-ayatollah-khamenei-world-war-3>, Accessed on 29 November 2020.