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Biden's JCPOA Revival, Iran's Elections and Some Concerning Variables

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The Biden Administration recently signalled its willingness to provide sanction relief “against critical elements of Iran’s economy, including oil and finance.”¹. The lifting of sanctions aims to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

This development has taken place in the backdrop of recently opened talks by the Joint Commission of the JCPOA in Vienna, where representatives from Iran, the UK, France, Germany, and Russia concluded their fourth round of discussions towards two main possibilities - one, that of the US re-joining the JCPOA; and two, that of overall effective implementation of the nuclear deal. However, despite this recent optimism, concerns can be observed that might dominate the revival of JCPOA in the immediate future.

It appears that the final resolution would likely be a lengthy process; thus, in the extended period of negotiations, the likelihood of several variables posing challenges to the US-Iran dynamics remains.

To start with, the upcoming Presidential elections in Iran this June is undoubtedly going to introduce a new actor in the negotiation dynamics, as the current Iranian Presidents’ term is coming to an end. While the final list of the Presidential candidates will be announced on 27th May, some names that have emerged so far include Mohsen Rezaei- currently the Secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council and former Commander in Chief of the IRGC; Hossein Dehghan - a former Minister of Defence and former commander of the IRGC and Rostam Ghasemi- a former Brigadier General from the IRGC Minister of Petroleum. Other conservatives running for the Presidential race include the current head of Iranian Judiciary Ebrahim Raisi, and former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

While a change in the executive leadership of Iran might not directly affect the strategic rationale governing Iran’s JCPOA commitments, the negotiations on JCPOA compliance in itself would most likely change due to the recent Iranian domestic law that directs the Iranian Atomic Energy Agency to continue enrichment beyond JCPOA’s permissible limit along with other activities. This would imply tricky navigation of Iran’s domestic commitments vis-à-vis its international non-proliferation commitments.

A lot would also depend on how the new leadership’s aims and objectives with regard to reviving JCPOA are perceived by the US and vice-a-versa. The new leadership’s outlook towards the US, too, would come into play. It is also crucial for the US that the new leadership shares the same view and spirit of negotiations as the previous one. In the case of a hardliner at the helm of nuclear

negotiations, these perceptions matter as they would directly influence the quid-pro-quo regarding sanction relief and JCPOA compliance.

Currently, the Iranian aim with regard to the JCPOA remains to “rapidly finalise sanction-lifting and nuclear measures for choreographed removal of all sanctions, followed by Iran ceasing remedial measures”, according to the Iranian Foreign Minister’s tweet on 02 April 2021². In addition to this, the Supreme Leader has repeatedly stated that “Iran will not return to compliance or cease its deliberate efforts to move far beyond the enrichment limits set by the JCPOA” unless the United States removes all nuclear-related sanctions.³

To complicate things further, Iran seeks to pursue the verification of sanctions relief, which would likely take at least a few months. In this case, the chances of any other unexpected externality interrupting the progress cannot be ruled out, such as the possibility of Iran’s disruption of IAEA’s inspector visits, a missile test, or another round of sabotaging attempt at the Iranian nuclear facility. It is important to recognise here that “the deadline for IAEA inspectors’ access to the Iranian sites would expire on 21 May.”⁴. Furthermore, it is essential to note that the current US-Iran dynamics is not straightforward; it is overshadowed by recent geopolitical-bilateral tensions, historical experiences and somewhat dominated by expectations from American allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. Both can be expected to attempt to influence the negotiations. Already, Saudi Arabia has insisted on linking the negotiations to address Iran’s ballistic missile programme that directly affects regional stability.

The JCPOA revival talks are at a crucial juncture. The parties have made an impressive start by ironing out the difference on significant issues, yet it is far from getting concluded. The Biden Administration extracted a promise from Rouhani’s team in less than 100 days. Would it be possible to continue the same path? Would it be possible for President Rouhani to exert any influence or offer his expertise in the nuclear negotiations from the outside after his Presidential tenure comes to an end? As it was during his era that US-Iran achieved a diplomatic breakthrough. Maybe his wisdom can come in handy in ironing out differences between the two distant actors? Answers to these questions remain unclear and would only unfold later.

However, for now, it is essential to recognise that the indication of the easing of sanction relief from the US side is a significant step as it conveys a genuine intent and also creates space for further engagement. This has also brought much-needed face-saving for Iran.

Post the American withdrawal from the JCPOA, the unilateral snapback of the sanctions had remained the bone of contention between the US and Iran, which further played out in the form of the breach of the JCPOA commitments by Iran as well as in the proxy clashes between the two. Thus, the

undoing of 1600 sanctions on Iran that President Trump re-imposed is a crucial development initiated by the Biden Administration, especially in the setting of recent sabotaging attempts at the Iranian nuclear facility at Natanz, including the 'alleged' assassination of the nuclear scientist. It was expected that the sabotaging attempts would likely to de-rail any possibility of the US- Iran negotiations. While the jury is still out on the final fate of the JCPOA revival, one may hope that the two significant parties- the US and new leadership in Iran would continue to take note of what is achieved so far in order to deliver a non-proliferation gain.

Notes

¹ Ian Talley, Benoit Faulcon and Laurence Norman, "Iran Nuclear Deal Talks Advance as US Offers Sanctions Relief", *Wall Street Journal*, 21 April 2021, Available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-nuclear-deal-talks-advance-as-u-s-offers-sanctions-relief-11619024783>

² Available at <https://twitter.com/JZarif/status/1377950244508475392>

³ Daniel Brumberg, "Hard-liners Fight for Iran's Presidency and Foreign Policy", 17 March 2021, Available at http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analyses/hard-liners-fight-for-irans-presidency-and-foreign-policy/, Accessed on 28 April 2021

⁴"France Warns Over May 21 Deadline on UN Access To Iran Nuclear Sites", *Iran International*, 11 May 2021, Available at <https://iranintl.com/en/world/france-warns-over-may-21-deadline-un-access-iran-nuclear-sites>, Accessed on 16 May 2021.