

The Stalling of Vienna Talks on Iran Nuclear Deal

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The Stalling of the Negotiations

In April 2022 the negotiations in Vienna to revive the Iran nuclear deal seem to have reached a standstill. There was an optimistic attitude just two months ago: the deal seemed imminent, and the parties were very close to an agreement. Indeed, according to experts, a draft deal had been agreed upon; it would have been very similar to the 2015 original agreement, the so-called JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), limiting the enrichment of uranium by Iran in exchange for the US lifting of the sanctions.

Instead, today there is a stalemate. The problem is the disagreement between US and Iran on some crucial issues. Indeed, few but susceptible topics remain to be faced and solved, and they are blocking deal's conclusion. The most important is the delisting of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) from the US list of "Foreign Terrorist Organisation" (Mehdi, 2022). The IRGC is a powerful branch of the Iranian Armed Forces that exercise influence inside and outside Iran, in the Middle East. The Trump Administration in 2019 had designated this body as a foreign terrorist organisation in a move labelled as very symbolic (Guyer, 2022). Today, Iran blames the U.S. for halting the talks and asks to finalize the nuclear deal, to remove the IRGC from the terrorist list. Many senior Iranian diplomats that consider this point very important have made a request in this sense (Mehdi, 2022). Indeed, the IRGC is an organ of the Iranian State, and its inclusion in a terrorist list, intended for non-state actors, is an affront (Guyer, 2022).

The answer of the US so far had been negative: the American position is that this issue is beyond the negotiations of the nuclear deal, and it would be faced, in case, in another agreement in the future. Moreover, President Biden is under pressure from the Congress not to give in on this issue, from both Republican and Democrat senators; for example, Senator Joe Manchin underlined that IRGC is and remains a terrorist organisation (Liechtenstein, Toosi, 2022). For these reasons, in exchange for the delisting, the US asks Iran for further commitments, such as guaranteeing that it will not target Americans in the Middle East region. However, Iran refused to take this commitment. As said, the issue seems essentially political and symbolical. Indeed, even if the delisting would happen, few would change for the IRGC. There are currently many other US sanctions against the Iranian group that will remain heavily sanctioned (Motamedi, 2022). A suggested potential way to solve this issue would be an agreement to face the problem in follow-up negotiations after the conclusion of the nuclear accord.

Therefore, the two main sides of the negotiations currently blame each other for the standstill. In the middle between the two countries, there is the European Union. The EU has the role of the main mediator between the two sides. Indeed, US and Iran delegations are conducting indirect negotiations in Vienna through the other participants (Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China). Enrique Mora, the EU coordinator for nuclear talks also recently travelled to Teheran and Washington to transmit the proposals of the two countries and achieve an agreement between them. Moreover, at the beginning of May, Mora affirmed to be ready to go back to Iran, to try to break the stalemate in the negotiations; so far, Iran has not answered with an invitation (Norman, 2022).

Therefore, now, the feeling is that a good draft deal is a hostage to bilateral and mostly symbolic issues (Liechtenstein, Toosi 2022).

A Troubled Year

This is not the first issue encountered during this year of negotiations. Indeed, talks to restore the JCPOA started approximately one year ago, in April 2021, and they experienced different problems and breaks.

First, negotiations did not start immediately after the assignment of the Biden administration in January 2021. To revive the nuclear deal with Iran was on the political agenda of new US President Biden. However, he likely feared that risky foreign policy moves could undermine its domestic agenda (Guyer, 2022). In addition, the Biden Administration was criticised for not doing much to reverse Trump's "maximum pressure" strategy and to facilitate and boost the negotiations. US limits itself in appointing Robert Malley, the lead negotiator of the previous agreement, as US special envoy to Iran. Instead, it did not lift any of the sanctions on Iran enabled by the Trump Administration. These factors probably contributed to the radicalisation of both Iran's internal debate and negotiating positions (Rad, 2021).

This can be also seen in the second issue encountered, namely the Iranian elections. They took place in June 2021 and were won by the conservative Ebrahim Raisi, leading to the formation of a hard-line Iranian government. Moreover, after the election, Iran waited for five months before coming back to the negotiating table, probably to strengthen its negotiating position (Guyer, 2022). Another pause occurred also in March. The cause was the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Russia demanded and wanted to assure that Western sanctions would not involve future Russian dealings and trade with Iran. For this reason, Borrell, the EU foreign affairs chief, announced at the beginning of March an indefinite pause in the talks, citing "external factors" (Gambrell, 2022). Luckily, the issue was solved after some days because Moscow received enough guarantees regarding this issue. Then, as it was said, a deal seemed imminent and very close.

What for the Future?

A solution has to be found hopefully in the short term. Otherwise, the risk is that negotiations lose momentum and will be subject to further external political issues.

Still, some scholars are quietly optimistic that the talks could be successful; indeed, both US and Iran had heavily invested, in political terms, in the future agreement, and a derailment would be detrimental to both sides (Motamedi, 2022). Indeed, an agreement seems today the only feasible and immediate option to avoid the development of a nuclear bomb by Iran in the short term. Such achievement would be essential also to prevent a war or a nuclear arms race in the Middle East region (Guyer, 2022). Indeed, it is highly unlikely that other countries in the area, like Israel, would peacefully accept an Iran armed with a nuclear weapon. Moreover, the deal and the consequent lifting of the sanctions could reduce the radicalisation of Iranian public opinion and leaders. Iran needs the deal for economic reasons; the delay of its conclusion has an economic burden in terms of opportunities lost for its economy (Geranmayeh, 2022).

In conclusion, the most significant issues to overcome seem to be the political fears and the lack of trust between the two parties; indeed, both sides would undoubtedly benefit from an agreement. It is in the interest of the European Union to mediate between the parties, to find a reasonable compromise and finalise the deal.

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