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Iran's nuclear deal: miracle or just a time break?

Evanthia Balla

FOR YEARS there have been multiple rounds of negotiations over Iran's nuclear programme between Iran and the so-called P5+1 – the UN Security Council permanent members, the US, UK, France, China, Russia and Germany; yet, the two sides always failed to reach a deal. Surprisingly though, on January 12th, 2014, less than two months after the election of Hassan Rouhani as President of Iran, the six world powers reached an interim agreement with Iran on the framework for a long-lasting solution over Iran's nuclear programme.

However, whilst the deal has been welcomed by many as an important step towards the normalization of Iran's relations with the West, it has been sharply criticised by others as a disastrous error of diplomacy. In particular, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani and the American President Barack Obama welcomed the deal as a success. Yet, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called it a "historical mistake" that makes the world a much more dangerous place to live in.

For Israel, the deal is a historical mistake because it may mark the end of American involvement in the region. Such a development can shift the balance of power in the region to Israel's loss, reducing Israel's manoeuvrability and the usefulness of its own protection by the West.

The real deal

The implementation of the Joint Plan of Action set out by Iran and P5+1 entered into force on the 20th of January and is currently monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The IAEA is responsible to verify, through daily inspections, that Iran is not enriching uranium in roughly half of its installed centrifuges at Natanz and three-quarters of installed centrifuges at Fordo (see map). The agreement establishes that uranium enriched beyond 5% shall either be diluted or converted to uranium oxide, that no new uranium at the 3,5% enrichment level is been added to Iran's current stock, and no new centrifuges are being installed or prepared for installation. Furthermore, Iran agreed to halt all additional testing of fuel for the Arak reactor. In return, Iran obtained the release of exiting sanctions worth about \$7 billion and is spared of the imposition of new sanctions.

After decades of nuclear standoff with Iran, and a 35-year-long diplomatic freeze between Iran and the United States, this deal comes as a relief and as a promise over a new and constructive *rapprochement* between both parties. In this regard, Iran's agreement to allow IAEA inspections of facilities involved in the production, assembly, and storage of centrifuges can be considered as an

important victory for the West. On the other side, the economic sanctions relief promise to revive Iran's economy in a significant way.

Nevertheless, the situation still remains unclear over Iran's intentions and right to develop nuclear weapons. President Rouhani claims that Iran's right to enrichment has been recognised while President Obama states that the deal cuts off Iran's most likely path to build a nuclear bomb. In reality, neither side has given away any of its big bargaining cards. Indeed, most decisions and actions taken can, in fact, be reversed.

First of all, the deal provides for infrastructures' restrictions, not technical knowledge eradication. Iran accepted limitations that delay, but not exclude, the possibility to develop a nuclear weapon; for developing nuclear weapons the importance rests basically on technical know-how and Iran owns crucial technical information. Iran stated that none of its existing nuclear facilities will be destroyed and that the country has the right to undertake "industrial-scale" uranium enrichment, which could mean at least 50.000 centrifuges. But, above all, for Iran the enrichment program is a symbol of the country's regional supremacy and ability to stand up to the West. Let's not forget that Iran is the world's fourth-largest oil producer, holding 12,7% of OPEC reserves and the second-largest holder of natural gas reserves. This reality cannot easily be modified during a six-months interim deal.

The P5+1 and European Union committed to suspend sanctions on Iran's petrochemical exports,

imports of goods and services for its automotive manufacturing sector, and its import and export of gold and other precious metals. But most of the sanctions, including measures targeting Iran's key oil, banking, and financial sectors, remain intact. In fact, West's short-term goal, at least until July, is to ensure that when the deal expires, Iran will be far from acquiring a nuclear weapon capability and that a deeper knowledge of Iran's nuclear activities will have been acquired.

After the six-month period, the West shall insist that Iran reduces its centrifuges from its current 19.000 to fewer than 5.000; closes the underground enrichment facility at Fordow; dismantles the heavy-water nuclear reactor at Arak; and accepts an even more rigorous inspection regime.

It shall also seek to broaden the scope of negotiations to include Iran's sponsorship of terrorism and its human rights violations. Iran cannot emerge from this six-months deal with its nuclear ambitions intact, its people basic rights denied, and its terrorist activities undiminished.

The success of a long-term nuclear deal will certainly be very difficult to achieve, but hopefully, not impossible.

Causes and consequences of the deal

The sanctions imposed on Iran have had significant negative effects on the country's economy, including an escalation in inflation, an increase in the rate of unemployment and a shortage of necessary items, including medicine. As a result, social unrest and distrust among the people of

JOINT PLAN OF ACTION – PREAMBLE

The goal for these negotiations is to reach a mutually-agreed long-term comprehensive solution that would ensure Iran's nuclear program will be exclusively peaceful. Iran reaffirms that under no circumstances will Iran ever seek or develop any nuclear weapons. This comprehensive solution would build on these initial measures and result in a final step for a period to be agreed upon and the resolution of concerns. This comprehensive solution would enable Iran to fully enjoy its right to nuclear energy for peaceful purposes under the relevant articles of the Non-Proliferation Treaty in conformity with its obligations therein. This comprehensive solution would involve a mutually defined enrichment program with practical limits and transparency measures to ensure the peaceful nature of the program. This comprehensive solution would constitute an integrated whole where nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. This comprehensive solution would involve a reciprocal, step-by-step process, and would produce the comprehensive lifting of all UN Security Council sanctions, as well as multilateral and national sanctions related to Iran's nuclear program.

There would be additional steps in between the initial measures and the final step, including, among other things, addressing the UN Security Council resolutions, with a view toward bringing to a satisfactory conclusion the UN Security Council's consideration of this matter. The E3+3¹ and Iran will be responsible for conclusion and implementation of mutual near-term measures and the comprehensive solution in good faith. A Joint Commission of E3/EU+3 and Iran will be established to monitor the implementation of the near-term measures and address issues that may arise, with the IAEA responsible for verification of nuclear-related measures. The Joint Commission will work with the IAEA to facilitate resolution of past and present issues of concern.

Source: CNN online, 24.11.2014. Available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/11/24/world/meast/iran-deal-text/> [last access: 28.02.2013].

¹ E3+3 refers to the same members of PS+1 (expression used by the USA and Russia) but emphasises the three European countries.



Iran's nuclear main facilities. Font: BBC official site, "Iran's key nuclear sites", 15.10.2013. Available online: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11927720> [last access: 28.02.2014].

Iran was raised. Under this prism, Iran's bourgeois regime revealed more open to reform during the last year's run up election period. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a divisive leader who has pushed the country into isolation over its nuclear ambitions and to near economic ruin, was replaced. Hassan Rouhani won the elections promising first and foremost an improved economy. Hence, the fastest way to deliver on this promise and protect Iran's theocratic regime was by achieving relief from the sanctions, repair Iran's frayed relations with the world and find real solutions to the nuclear quarrel that enables the country to revive oil exports and resume international trade relations.

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However, sanctions are not solely responsible for Iran's change in attitude. In reality, just as important has been the increasing anger of the Iranian people at the deteriorating economic situation and the anti-liberal policies of its government. Today, Iranians' first priority is fixing the economy and the second one is reversing isolationist anti-liberal policies.

Revolts in the Arab world also posed additional pressure on Iran's strategic arrangements. Arab Spring shed light not only on Iran's nuclear programme but also on the country's severe human rights violations.

First of all, the revolts have been upsetting a regime that has repressed its own people for decades. In the 2009 elections, when the Green Movement launched an open challenge to the political *status quo*, the Revolutionary Guard of Iran crashed it decisively. The Iranian regime got rid of the threat pretty easily. However, the people of Iran cannot but loathe the reality of a regime that restricts civil liberties, tortures and executes. A new more popular and legitimate government not necessary means the end of Iran's nuclear plans, but it displays a different dynamic in the country's foreign affairs strategy. Last year's elections proved just that.

On this basis, a more successful long-term Western approach to Iran's case must be geared towards building a more democratic Iran. The West should continue placing a greater emphasis on human rights abuses, a shift that can also contribute to build trust with Iranian public opinion and change the overall perceptions over Western policies. As an underwriter of numerous international conventions, Iran has a legal obligation to uphold its people's human rights. When it fails to do so, the international community has a responsibility to react. The United States has supported the establishment of a special United Nations human rights monitor for Iran and has also imposed financial and travel sanctions on high-ranking Iranian security officials for their involvement in human

rights abuses. The EU has also adopted autonomous restrictive measures (an asset freeze and visa ban) on 32 individuals deemed responsible for serious human rights violations in Iran. Additionally, the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) finances special projects with the aim to promote freedom and equality worldwide.

Sanctions cannot continue as a trustworthy strategy to suspend Iran's long-term nuclear ambitions. Indeed, decades of UN resolutions and sanctions against Iran did not prevent it from building approximately 8.000 more centrifuges and increase the degree of enrichment by twenty per cent.

Any long-term understanding with Iran will rest with the country's own people. Before trusting Iran's political regime, West must keep faith in the people of Iran by continuing to speak out in favour of their rights.

In addition, as Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister, Abbas Araghchi, has stressed a nuclear deal in no way means a normalization of ties with the United States.

“We have problems with the USA over dozens of issues, such as the Palestinian issue, issues related to the Middle East, the Syrian issue, human rights, seeking hegemony, global hegemony, and issues related to excessive demands and bullying. All these are still there. Nothing has changed. The USA is still the Great Satan in our view.”²

Is true that there are huge difficulties to be overcome before a long-lasting solution is reached over Iran's nuclear programme. Nonetheless, both sides have finally taken that single first step towards peace and reconciliation, and we should not ignore its importance after so many false starts. However, the journey is still in its very beginning. ■

Notes

¹ Full text of the nuclear deal between Iran and six world powers: Joint Plan of Action – Preamble

² As quoted in *The New York Times* article “Iran Agrees to Provide Data on Its Detonators”.

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