

TEHRAN IMPROVES ITS POSITION VIS-À-VIS TALKS WITH WASHINGTON

Middle Eastern Game of Thrones

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Summary

The internal debate between Iranian conservatives and moderates over the nuclear deal may appear to be sharp and divisive. However, these disagreements are likely staged theatrics performed for the sake of the international community. Iran is bogged down under the yoke of sanctions. Despite this, Tehran is keeping up the facade and violating the nuclear deal, first and foremost in order to conduct negotiations with the US from a position of power. Recent developments in the country's nuclear project have no other explanation except its designation for military use.

The Biden administration's re-examination of the terrorist designation for Yemen's Houthis has upset the regional balance of power. This move is a blow primarily to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. This is a warning sign for Israel, as news of the American decision was revealed at the same time of Iran's deployment of UAVs in Yemen with a range capable of reaching Eilat.

An analysis of Iran's stance on resuming negotiations with the US means a complete rejection of all the conditions imposed on Tehran by the Biden administration, particularly Washington's new demands to expand the nuclear agreement to include provisions related to Iran's regional policy and missile program.



The Iranian internal struggle over the nuclear deal is merely well-staged theatrics.

Iran continues to prepare for clarifications of the Biden administration's ultimate position towards Tehran. However, this preparation is also aimed at the presidential elections in Iran, scheduled for June 18, 2021. This has some impact on the behavior of the political actors in Iran's internal politics.

There seems to be a sharp disagreement between Iranian conservatives and moderates over the nuclear deal. Conservatives are attacking President Rouhani's camp, including Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, over the unsuccessful nuclear deal, which failed to benefit Iran in any way.

The impression outside Iran is that this dispute is fueled by political rivalry. Yet, the debate between conservatives and moderates is not really a purely ideological confrontation, but, above all, a political game. Thus, for example, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif intends to present his candidacy for the presidency. Further success in the upcoming round of talks with Washington would constitute another advantage in this political struggle. Although there are real political struggles on select issues and within certain limits, these debates do not

really have an impact on Iran's strategic direction, which is determined by its supreme leader.

However, it is possible that domestic Iranian political struggles for and against the agreement are nothing more than well-staged theatrics in the spirit of "[good cop, bad cop](#)". In other words, there is a deliberate intention to portray a real, ongoing, and vibrant struggle in Iran between moderates led by President Rouhani (who are seeking negotiations with the US), and extremists led by the militant conservatives in the Iranian parliament and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (who are seeking to thwart the nuclear deal and rule out the possibility of any negotiations with the US). Supreme leader Ali Khamenei spoke out in December in favor of efforts to lift US sanctions, and his statement sparked a war in the press and social media between the "moderates" and "extremists" over the interpretation of the Grand Ayatollah's true intentions. As usual, the extremists [accused](#) the moderates of [distorting](#) the Supreme Leader's remarks, while the moderates made every effort to interpret Khamenei's words as supporting their position. Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei always formulates his words in a way that allows for different interpretations. The Supreme Leader

never commands. Rather, he “recommends” and “advises” so as not to bear direct responsibility for the results of one decision or another.

From Tehran’s point of view, the overarching objective is the removal of the sanctions, not a return to the nuclear deal Tehran is determined to return to the negotiating table. Nevertheless, the goal is not a return to the nuclear deal per se, but the removal of sanctions, especially the freezing of the snapback mechanism.¹

Recent developments in the country’s nuclear project have no other explanation except its designation for military use. Iran has announced the start of uranium enrichment to 20% and is also [on the verge](#) of producing uranium metal. According to reports from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Iran intends to commence production of this substance, which is deemed essential for the assembly of nuclear weapons. The percentage of uranium enrichment required to produce atomic weapons is 90%; Iran is only declaring a 20% enrichment. The 2015 nuclear deal limits Iran to a 3.67% enrichment.

¹ This is a special mechanism for enforcing sanctions that is included in several sections of the 2015 nuclear agreement. Its purpose is that if Iran is found to be in breach of the agreement, one of the signatory countries (out of the 5+1) may file a complaint and demand the automatic imposition of sanctions, i.e. without further discussions at the UN, and in such a way that none of the permanent members of the UN Security Council may impose a

Nevertheless, a 20% enrichment percentage is a qualitative leap from which the path to 90% is much shorter than the path from 3.67% to 20%. Iran’s progress in producing uranium metal, coupled with its 20% enrichment, would be a blatant breach of the agreement and would jeopardize the chances of reconstructing the accord and resuming the negotiations. **However, above all, these two steps ultimately overrule Tehran’s claims that its nuclear program has no military ambitions.**

This is why the European nations that signed the agreement with Iran, i.e. France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, [condemned](#) Iran’s [efforts](#).

Nevertheless, it seems that Iran is no rush to secretly produce nuclear weapons. Otherwise, Tehran would not have informed IAEA representatives of its intentions. **Rather, Iran seeks to commence negotiations with the upper-hand, i.e. not to diminish Iranian capabilities, but to preserve the existing status quo.**

The forgiving American attitude toward the Houthis is undermining

veto. In such a case, Tehran can ensure that it neutralizes any possibility of punishment for possible future violations, if and when it returns to the agreement following the removal of the existing sanctions.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-12/iran-calls-for-future-nuclear-talks-to-drop-sanctions-snapback>

the regional balance of power to the detriment of Israel.

At the same time, Iran is signaling that it has no intention of relinquishing its missile capabilities and regional involvement. In this context, the Revolutionary Guard [demonstrated](#) a purposeful display of power by launching several short- and long-range missiles.

In particular, Iran appears to be making efforts to tighten its grip on [Yemen](#) by supporting its Houthi allies. Iranian support for the Houthis is expressed in its supply of precision-guided missiles and “[suicide](#)” long range UAVs equipped with guidance and precision systems. Iranian missiles and UAVs have hit targets in [Saudi Arabia and Yemen](#). They also pose a danger to Israeli territory, and especially to Israeli ships in the Red Sea.

However, it is highly doubtful that Tehran will take escalatory steps from Yemen towards Israel before the start of talks with the US. The Supreme Leader is navigating between the ideological needs of “resistance” to the US, the West, and Israel as an expression of a constant revolution, and a pragmatic understanding of the

limitations of power and the need to avoid an uncontrolled escalation.

The [Biden administration's decision to lift](#) some sanctions against the Houthis and to [re-examine](#) their designation as a terrorist organization is a strategic turning point, which could upset the regional balance of power. First and foremost, this move is a blow to Saudi Arabia, the traditional ally of the US, and to some extent to the UAE.

It is likely that the American position towards the Houthis without expecting anything in return from Tehran will be perceived by Iran as a sign of American weakness, or even as a tacit American consent to Iran's subversive activities in the region. Washington took the measures despite the Houthi missile attacks on Saudi Arabia's city centers and oil fields, and the fact that the slogan of the Houthi movement states “Death to America and Death to Israel”. This is a warning sign for Israel, as the Houthis do not bother to conceal their solidarity with Iran,² threatening to attack Israel and recently even positioning UAVs that could reach the city of Eilat. The Saudis, in all likelihood, interpret this as American acquiescence to the Houthis' offensive activities.

² They also [marked](#) the anniversary of the death of Qassem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Quds Force.

Analysis of Iran's stance on the nuclear deal

In practice, contact between the Biden administration and Iran has already taken place. According to various indirectly confirmed reports, unofficial talks already commenced between the Biden team and the Iranian representative at the UN, Majid Takht Ravanchi, even before Biden officially took office. According to the Kuwaiti newspaper [Al-Jarida](#), Ravanchi arrived in New York with a list of seven conditions for the talks. **The implication of the seven conditions, detailed below, is that Iran expressly and explicitly rejects all of the Biden administration's negotiating terms.**

These are Iran's terms (Direct translation. Al-Jarida's written commentary is italicized):

1. Iran defines the nuclear deal as a whole that cannot be amended. If the Biden administration wishes to return to the agreement, it must fulfil all its obligations, including the complete removal of sanctions. Only then will Iran return to its obligations under the agreement, which it renounced.
2. Any dispute regarding any matter related to the nuclear agreement must be discussed solely within the framework of the previously established committees and at any

level as necessary. Tehran also has issues regarding the following matter: it wants guarantees against the recurrence of the situation in which one party leaves the agreement as Washington did. Iran is also demanding compensation for damages inflicted upon the country as a result of US withdrawal from the agreement. *This means that Tehran is vehemently rejecting the ideas put forward by Anthony Blinken a few days ago regarding the partial removal of sanctions in exchange for Iran's complete return to the agreement, while a total removal of sanctions would occur within the framework of the agreement.*

3. The nuclear deal, as its name suggests, is linked to the nuclear program and Iran rejects the creation of any affiliation to other issues, such as its missile program or regional activities. *In other words, Iran opposes the participation of the Gulf states or Israel in negotiations, which is contrary to Blinken's proposal.*
4. The addition of new participants to the negotiating team with Iran within the 5+1 framework may entail a re-shuffling of the deck, especially since the previous agreement was not effective for Tehran. Iran is perplexed regarding the need to involve new participants, especially from

countries that have tried to disrupt the course of negotiations. *In practice, this means that Iran opposes the participation of the Gulf states and Israel in the negotiations, in accordance with Tony Blinken's demand. In this context, [Iran has officially rejected](#) the demand made by French President Emmanuel Macron, who stated that negotiations with Iran should also include Saudi Arabia.*

5. Disputes between Iran and its regional neighbors are unique to those countries and must be discussed separately in bilateral or group talks between the region's nations in order to find a framework for mutual understanding and limit intervention. In any case, this matter should not be included in the nuclear framework.
6. The Iranian missile program is a red line. However, Tehran is willing to discuss the issue as part of an agreement to increase armaments in the region, with such an agreement including all regional nations, and especially Israel, under UN supervision. Tehran will cooperate under any general agreement which would include the departure of all foreign forces from the Middle East and the Gulf. Iran is wary of its neighbors' missile programs, especially Israel, in light of the fact

that the latter possesses nuclear weapons.

7. Iran's position on the Palestinian issue has long been stated by its Supreme Leader. This position is based on a UN referendum on Palestine and Israel in which Palestinians residing in Palestine and abroad, and Jewish Israelis will participate. Any result obtained will be acceptable to Iran. *Iran rejects the two-state solution – an explicit demand raised by the Biden team in the preliminary talks. It is not clear why the Americans raised this demand. Yet, it is clear that the Iranian regime's ideology will prevent it from being flexible on this point. Furthermore, the mere raising of the issue also reflects the attitude towards Iran as a regional power and a legitimate player in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.*