

Reading Through Iran's Nuclear Demands

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Brief Analysis

Tehran has maintained its stringent line of insisting that Washington lift all sanctions, verify their removal, and provide future guarantees before it will lift a finger on resuming compliance with the JCPOA.

After a months-long pause, the Iran nuclear negotiations will resume on November 29 in an attempt to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). To set the stage for the Vienna meetings, the official newspaper of President Ebrahim Raisi's government [published an editorial \(https://www.irannewspaper.ir/newspaper/page/7772\)](https://www.irannewspaper.ir/newspaper/page/7772) on November 14 titled "Operation Sanctions Defeat." The article emphasized that Iran has been taking a new approach toward the West for some time now—namely, expanding its uranium enrichment and other nuclear activities in order to [put the ball in the international community's court \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/threat-war-only-way-achieve-peace-iran\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/threat-war-only-way-achieve-peace-iran) and force practical responses to the impasse. This strategy aligns with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's rhetoric in recent months indicating his [reluctance to return \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-if-its-not-tactic-khameneis-waning-faith-jcpoa\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-if-its-not-tactic-khameneis-waning-faith-jcpoa) to the JCPOA framework.

So what would Iranian officials see as a good deal? If the government's editorial is any indicator, the terms they present next week could remain maximalist, with substantial repetition of past demands and some new ones that may be even more stringent.

Demand 1: Negotiations must focus solely on sanctions removal. Iran has long been adamant about refusing to discuss its regional activities or missile programs as part of the nuclear negotiations. Yet the editorial went a step further by maintaining that the regime will no longer negotiate its nuclear activities either. Recent Iranian statements have repeatedly framed the Vienna talks as a forum to discuss sanctions removal alone, either minimizing or ignoring the fact that issues such as uranium enrichment must be discussed as well. For example, chief nuclear negotiator Ali Bagheri-Kani told Al Jazeera on November 22 that there is no reason for Iran to cease nuclear activities that violate the JCPOA when "the violating and non-compliant party to the deal does not

demonstrate, in practice, its commitment to the JCPOA,” referring to Washington’s 2018 withdrawal from the deal.

Given Tehran’s significant nuclear advancements over the past year

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/while-washington-argues-iran-makes-nuclear-advances>), a refusal to negotiate such activities until all sanctions are removed would presumably be a nonstarter given the West’s paramount nonproliferation goals. Tehran’s posture may just be a bluff intended to help it minimize the scope of required nuclear reversals or use even the most minor “compromises” as negotiating chips. Yet if Iranian officials truly refuse to budge on this point, it may indicate they are resuming the Vienna process solely to waste (or buy) time, not to reach a new deal.

Demand 2: Washington should compensate Iran for withdrawing from the JCPOA. During his weekly press conference on November 8, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh insisted that the United States acknowledge its responsibility for the current situation. The November 14 editorial went further, arguing that Washington must compensate Iran for its losses in order to build the necessary trust between negotiators. Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian has mentioned this idea several times in recent months, including an October 27 demand that Washington unfreeze \$10 billion of frozen Iranian assets as a goodwill gesture to show that the Biden administration “has a serious desire to lift sanctions.” Some observers might characterize this as the opening salvo in a “less for less” interim agreement to defuse tensions with the United States and limit Iran’s ongoing nuclear advancements ahead of broader talks. Yet Iranian officials have repeatedly rejected incremental proposals over the past year, insisting that the only deal they will make is full sanctions removal followed by a return to compliance with their JCPOA nuclear commitments.

Demand 3: All non-JCPOA sanctions must be lifted. Iran has long emphasized that it expects Washington to remove all sanctions that are “contrary to the nuclear deal,” including 1,500 individual sanctions imposed by the Trump administration after its 2018 withdrawal from the JCPOA, as well as nonnuclear sanctions and other unilateral measures imposed under President Obama. This July, the Supreme Leader’s office published an interview with Iranian envoy Kazem Gharibabadi, who claimed that during the previous rounds of Vienna negotiations, the United States refused to lift Trump-era sanctions from more than 500 individuals or other key restrictions (e.g., various executive orders concerning the arms embargo; the 2017 Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, or CAATSA).

Demand 4: A mechanism must be established to verify that sanctions are actually removed. Khamenei’s March 2021 Nowruz speech (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/khamenei-continues-playing-hardball-nowruz-speech>) accused the Obama administration of lifting sanctions only “on paper” during the JCPOA’s early years, asserting that Washington continued to threaten and deter companies from doing business with Iran. Against this backdrop, the November 14 editorial acknowledged that removing all sanctions will take time; it also noted that Tehran may allow an impartial body to supervise the verification process, and signaled that the country’s ability to buy/sell oil and transfer its foreign currency reserves back home would be good indications that the process is effective. Again, Tehran seemingly expects all of these processes and assurances to be in place before it returns to its nuclear commitments.

In September, the Majlis Research Center detailed what such a verification mechanism should look like. It recommended that sanctions removal be defined in quantitative terms and reassessed on a continuous basis, so that Iran could decide if it wants to remain compliant with the deal or reduce its commitments again. The report then suggested a long list of indicators to determine Washington’s level of compliance, such as a minimum threshold of two million barrels of oil sold per day. An April report by the same center estimated that the initial verification process would last between three and six months.

Demand 5: Washington must provide guarantees that it will comply with the new deal. In July, Khamenei argued

that U.S. authorities had refused to **give guarantees** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-gift-president-biden>) that “they will abide by their commitments in the future,” and Iranian officials have reiterated this theme in recent days. The November 14 editorial firmly emphasized the need for such U.S. commitments. On November 12, Abdollahian explained that recent U.S. designations against Iranian entities made it an “undeniable necessity” for Washington to give objective guarantees. And a day earlier, Bagheri-Kani noted that European governments would be required to guarantee they will trade with Iran no matter what the U.S. position may be, suggesting they could use some kind of blocking statute to nullify the effects of any resultant American sanctions on European firms.

Iranian officials presumably understand that Washington will struggle to meet this demand. Their rationale for emphasizing it likely stems from a desire to raise the cost of any future U.S. withdrawal while lowering the impact on Tehran. For example, Gharibabadi hinted in July that Iran had asked Washington to allow companies “reasonable time” to continue working in the Islamic Republic in case of another sanctions snapback, noting that U.S. officials had rejected the idea. Similarly, the Majlis Research Center suggested that negotiators make Washington take steps to “decrease the risk of trading with Iran.”

Implications

Whether the tough rhetoric in the November 14 editorial is mere posturing or Tehran’s actual position should become clearer once the negotiations start. Khamenei has not remarked on the resumption of talks since July, so his specific thoughts on the current state of play can only be assessed through the lens of the Raisi government’s rhetoric. The approach that Iranian negotiators take and the preconditions they lay out on day one of the Vienna meetings will be a good signal of whether or not the regime is willing to move past the hardball rhetoric behind closed doors and compromise.

In any case, it is discouraging that Tehran has done little if anything to prepare the Iranian public for potentially walking back its oft-ballyhooed nuclear progress. To the contrary, its rhetoric could complicate the already difficult quest for a new accord by implying to domestic audiences that Iran need not lift a finger at the negotiating table to secure sanctions relief.

Omer Carmi is a former visiting fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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