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# Iran's Majlis Unlikely to Settle Internal Dispute on the Nuclear Deal

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Brief Analysis

**The release of a special-committee report to the Majlis will be seized on by hardliners, who will continue to voice their opposition even in the probable event implementation goes forward.**

On October 4, the Iranian Majlis will release a report with recommendations regarding approval of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the nuclear deal with the P5+1 is known. The implementation of the deal is very likely to happen, but the means of getting there are unclear, and domestic critics will seek to maintain room for maneuver.

Whatever the predicted outcome, hardliners have advocated the Majlis's right to either approve or reject the deal. However, only Ayatollah Ali Khamenei or the Guardian Council -- which has the exclusive right of interpreting the constitution -- can determine which institution, the Majlis (parliament) or the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), should ultimately endorse the JCPOA. Both Khamenei and the Guardian Council have called on parliament to review the JCPOA but have not specified or recommended that the Majlis vote on the deal before it is referred to the SNSC. President Hassan Rouhani prefers that the SNSC approve the deal without a Majlis vote.

Even members of parliament have been mum on whether their discussion of the JCPOA report, drafted by a special committee, will be followed by a vote or whether the legislators' comments will be sent along to the SNSC for final approval. Also uncertain is a deadline for conclusion of the parliamentary debate and possible vote, although some legislators have said the discussion should be concluded as soon as possible.

## Hardliner Objections

Recent events have fueled hardliners' antigovernment rhetoric. Causes have included the handshake between Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, a key deal negotiator, and U.S. president Barack Obama at the recent UN General Assembly meeting and what they perceive as an inadequately forceful anti-Saudi response by the Rouhani government to the Hajj tragedy.

In his September 30 *Kayhan* newspaper editorial, Hossein Shariatmadari, a close Khamenei confidant, criticized Rouhani's UN General Assembly speech for, among other failings, discussing the JCPOA as if Iran had already approved it. "If this document is not approved by the Majlis, it would be illegal to implement it," he wrote. He also reiterated what he saw as the "disastrous" effect of implementing some JCPOA articles.

As for the Zarif-Obama handshake, the Iranian judiciary's first deputy and spokesman, Qolam-Hossein Mohseni-Ejei, likened it to "espionage": "The spy is not only the one who is on the enemy's payroll, [he is] also the one who paves the way for the enemy to come to [the country]." This said, he portrays his animosity as being diminished and suggests that "America is not an enemy anymore."

Regarding other appeals against the JCPOA, on Wednesday hardline legislator Hamid Rasaei showed a short video clip of a Khamenei public meeting in which a war veteran who lost his vision opined on the dangers of the JCPOA, which he claimed would open the door to endless negotiations with the United States and facilitate further American influence in the country. He argued that "the Majlis should pay attention to this and reject the agreement." After listening to him carefully, Khamenei asked that he share such concerns directly with legislators, a gesture interpreted by hardliners as reflecting the Supreme Leader's tacit disapproval of the agreement and guidance toward a "no" vote. On October 1, in addressing army commanders, Khamenei reiterated that "the enemy is, after making us surrender and concede before him, not eliminating its animosity." Some weeks earlier, he defined the "enemy," calling America the "enemy par excellence."

In such an environment, SNSC head Ali Shamkhani recently told reporters that the Parchin military/nuclear complex, near Tehran, had not been inspected during the late September visit by International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) head Yukiya Amano. "There will never be any inspection at any level in Parchin," he asserted, claiming Amano's visit was merely ceremonial.

Setting aside the heated rhetoric, hardliners have two major criticisms of the JCPOA: (1) that some of its details could expose Iran's security and military data to the West or significantly cripple the nuclear program without proportional sanctions relief -- allowing the Supreme Leader's redlines to be crossed; (2) that the deal, whatever its details, is designed to open the country's door to Western economic and cultural influence and gradually drain the Islamic Republic of its ideological content, transforming it into a Westernized government. This second point has been a particular focus of Khamenei's post-deal speeches.

## Possible Scenarios

Given the upcoming report to the Majlis, three scenarios can be imagined for legalizing the document. Implicit in these alternatives is that outright rejection of the deal by either the Majlis or SNSC is unlikely. More probable is that the deal will be approved -- but with caveats that allow the Iranians to keep their options open in light of next year's U.S. presidential election and other developments. With this background in mind, here are the scenarios:

1. The Majlis ultimately approves the JCPOA, but with heavily detailed criticisms of its content, and passes legislation requiring the government to implement the deal in certain circumscribed ways. Majlis legislation, in this case, could tie the government's hands in some areas of implementation but will not block it.
2. The Majlis sends a heavily critical review (or possibly two reviews) of the deal to the SNSC, but leaves the council with

the responsibility of approving it. In this way, the Majlis could show that the deal was approved only reluctantly and backed by very weak political will. Khamenei would here be legally expected to sign the SNSC decision, but he could still opt to avoid leaving his personal mark.

3. The Majlis rejects the deal. The mostly unlikely scenario -- and, indeed, a highly improbable one -- this would entail the resumption of negotiations, during which Majlis concerns and criticisms would presumably be considered, postponing the final agreement indefinitely.

Even in the probable scenario in which the JCPOA is ultimately approved and legalized, Iranian hardliners are sure to campaign against it with ever-greater force, up through the parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections of 2016 and presidential election of 2017. Objections will be justified, and critics emboldened, by roiling Middle East violence and particularly the intensifying rivalry with Saudi Arabia. Calls to interrupt implementation could well occur in coming years. But in the meantime, once implementation begins, Rouhani will struggle against hardliners to gain public credit for his accomplishment, and doubts could grow among citizens about the tangible, daily economic benefits of the deal.

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