

How the Framework Is Playing Inside Iran

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Iran needs a nuclear deal to provide daylight for its stricken economy, but if the supreme leader senses that the impending agreement falls short of that, he may impose new redlines that effectively close down the discussions.

Few watchers of Iran's domestic scene expected a nuclear framework deal to be met with easygoing acceptance. But a good many were surprised by the speed and fury with which the spinning began.

At the center of early debate was the fact sheet released by the State Department following last Thursday's conclusion of the Lausanne agreement. Iran's hard-liners, for their part, immediately attacked President Hassan Rouhani and his team for accepting what they characterized as draconian terms.

Going on offense -- or defense, depending on how you look at it -- Iran's foreign minister, fellow negotiator Javad Zarif, has since spoken on state TV and held two off-the-record sessions with parliament during which he has both defended the deal and denied some of the terms claimed by the P5+1, as the five permanent UN Security Council members and Germany are known.

Zarif and Ali Akbar Salehi, who heads the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, have promised members of parliament that the Foreign Ministry will soon release its own fact sheet to clarify details of the agreement.

A key point of dispute involves the timing of sanctions relief. According to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, sanctions relief should be a part of the deal, not its result, implying that sanctions should be lifted on the day a comprehensive deal is signed, presumably in July.

Rouhani effectively seconded Khamenei's view Monday, calling for all U.S. sanctions resolutions to be abolished. He elaborated, "In the course of the negotiations, our position was always the abolition of the economic, financial and banking sanctions. We have never negotiated about suspension (of sanctions). If there was such a discussion, we would not have reached a mutual understanding."

Such rhetoric is at odds with language from U.S. officials, who have asserted that sanctions will be lifted gradually, based on Iran's faithful implementation of the deal's terms. As President Obama explained to NPR in an interview published Monday, "They're not going to be able to suddenly access all the funding that has been frozen all these years."

These differing interpretations are rooted in decades of mutual mistrust between Iran and the United States. Iranian frustration was expressed most powerfully in the 1979 seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and the subsequent 444-day hostage crisis. As for the supreme leader, who will make the final decision on any nuclear deal, he has likened the U.S.-Iran relationship to that between a wolf and a lamb, a dynamic in which friendship simply cannot happen.

Obama effectively acknowledged this imbalance in his NPR interview when he said, "If suddenly Iran transformed itself into Germany or Sweden or France, there would be a different set of conversations about their nuclear infrastructure." Khamenei has historically exploited exactly this type of messaging to justify his anti-U.S. "resistance" policy, in which surrender is not an option.

If the first few post-framework days are any indication, Iran will put up stiff resistance to Western aims over the next few months. Not only hard-liners but Rouhani's own team has accused U.S. negotiators of duplicity.

Hard-liners will now continue to emphasize the deceptive nature of the American negotiators, while Rouhani and his team will claim the deal is far from over -- that any comprehensive agreement will have terms favorable to Tehran. Moreover, contradictory accounts by Western and Iranian negotiators will deepen the suspicions of hard-liners in Iran. Exhausting public debate may also take a toll.

But the bottom line is this: Iran needs this deal to provide daylight for its stricken economy. If the supreme leader senses the impending comprehensive agreement may provide something short of this daylight, he may impose new red lines that effectively close down the discussions.

He might also lay down fresh restrictions if he senses the U.S. objective is not only to constrain Iran's nuclear capabilities but more generally to maintain permanent economic and political pressure on Tehran. The diminishing likelihood of a U.S. or Israeli military strike could free him to take such a step.

For all these reasons, a sustainable deal will likely be harder to achieve than many might hope. To begin with, we can keep an eye out for that Iranian fact sheet.

Mehdi Khalaji is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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