

Interviews and Presentations

Assessing Iran-P5+1 Talks as Deadline Nears

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The former chief of staff to Israel's defense minister discusses the pros and cons of the interim nuclear agreement with Iran and the prospects for continued negotiations past the upcoming deadline.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif will meet with EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton and Secretary of State John Kerry in Vienna this week, with the November 24 deadline for a comprehensive agreement on Iran's nuclear programme just weeks away. Brig. Gen. (res.) Michael Herzog -- the senior visiting fellow at BICOM and the Milton Fine International Fellow with The Washington Institute -- spoke with BICOM Director of Research Dr. Toby Greene about the chances for a deal and the Israeli concerns surrounding the talks.

Greene: What is your assessment of how the interim agreement has played out over the last year?

Herzog: The balance of the interim agreement since last November is very mixed. On the one hand, the agreement did bring about the freeze, rollback or capping of some Iranian nuclear activities including rolling back their stockpile of 20 per cent enriched uranium, which was an Israeli red line put forward by Prime Minister Netanyahu in the UN a few years back. There is no doubt that the interim agreement has also enhanced monitoring of the Iranian nuclear programme and that it maintained most of the sanctions in place.

On the other hand, everything that the Iranians gave in the interim deal is reversible. The Iranians were allowed to keep major elements in their programme including research and development, and the construction of the reactor in Arak, short of installing the fuel cycle. While most sanctions are in place there is definitely a notable relaxation in the pressure on Iran due to the easing of some sanctions.

There is then the very important element of possible military dimensions to Iran's nuclear programme, which are not discussed between Iran and P5+1, but between Iran and IAEA. According to IAEA reports Iran has not been cooperative.

There is a deep concern in Israel over the fact that in the interim agreement the Iranians were given two major concessions which ultimately might make it difficult to reach a good permanent deal. The first was that they were allowed to enrich on their own soil and the second was that it stipulated that once the timeframe for the permanent deal is over - whatever timeframe is agreed between the parties - Iran will be treated as any other international actor, without pressure or sanctions.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Zarif will meet with EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton and Secretary of State John Kerry in Vienna this week. There are still reports of considerable gaps between the parties. What is your assessment of the chances of a deal at this point, and what happens if there isn't a deal?

It looks likely that the parties will not reach a comprehensive agreement by the 24 November deadline and they will have to decide how to move on. The two major gaps are the following: First on uranium enrichment, while the P5+1 wants Iran to reduce from some 10,000 operational centrifuges (and a similar number of non-operational ones) to something like 1,500, maybe more (there were reports about willingness to consider 4,500 under certain conditions), the Iranians are not willing to accept that. Moreover, they are demanding that after a few years they will be allowed to expand their arsenal of centrifuges, citing the excuse that their deal with Russia to provide fuel for the Bushehr reactor expires in 2021. Of course this is an excuse because the Russians are more than happy to continue to provide that fuel. Essentially the debate about how many centrifuges, of what type and what amount of low enriched uranium they can keep is a debate about the breakout capacity of Iran; what timeframe will the deal allow them to breakout to a nuclear device, should they decide to do so.

The second major gap has to do with a time frame for the deal. The P5+1 are thinking about a long time frame, up to 20 years, while Iranians are trying to limit the number of years to less than ten. This is very important because, as noted, according to the interim deal, once that timeframe expires, the Iranians will be treated normally as any other international actor, with no sanctions or special restrictions. So, if that timeframe is short, it means that Iran simply has to stick it out, and after a few years they are free of restrictions.

If the parties reach 24 November without a deal there will be a number of options. One option is that they stop

negotiations and undo the interim deal. This is very unlikely, because it sets them on a course of confrontation. The Iranians would be able to continue to expand the nuclear programme, and on the other hand the international community would continue with sanctions, and maybe enhanced sanctions. There is no appetite in the West for confrontation with Iran, even more so whilst there is a view in the West that they need Iranian cooperation against ISIS.

The more likely scenario is that the parties will agree on extending the interim deal. They already talk about it publicly. It could be for two months, taking us up to one year on from the date of implementation of the interim deal (20 January) or they can go beyond that. There are also variations, like a semi-permanent interim reality where they apply certain understandings and agreements and continue to negotiate other elements.

This issue was once again the central theme of Prime Minister Netanyahu's recent trip to the US and his meeting with President Obama in Washington. Given where talks have got to, with the P5+1 prepared to allow Iran to keep some uranium enrichment capacity, what will Netanyahu be hoping to achieve?

The Israeli position has been that no deal is better than a bad deal, citing what some senior American officials were saying. But that leads us to the question of what is a good deal and what is a bad deal. The official Israeli position is that a good deal leaves Iran with no enrichment capacity on its own soil, no centrifuges and no uranium stockpile, and that everything they need they should get from outside as many other countries do. But we all understand this is not going to happen; in the interim agreement Iran was allowed to enrich on its own soil.

So the discussion now centres on the grey area between what is a bad deal – one which leaves a very short breakout time – and a good deal with no centrifuges and no stockpiles on Iranian soil. But I think for Israel the debate goes deeper than just the number of centrifuges or the amount of enriched uranium Iran can stockpile. It is a deep feeling that the P5+1 – the West – is more eager for the deal than Iran is, that there is insufficient resolve to force a reasonable deal on Iran, and that the West may make further concessions that ultimately allow Iran to establish itself as a nuclear threshold state, either through an inadequate deal or a semi-permanent interim reality.

Short of making the case as powerfully as it can, what can Israel and its Prime Minister do to influence the outcome?

Israel conducts an ongoing close discussion with the US and other members of the P5+1, but I think the formal Israeli position of zero enrichment, zero centrifuges, and zero stockpiles makes it harder for Israel to influence the debate. However, one area where Israel is concentrated right is a concern that given the emerging threat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, and because of converging interests between the West and Iran against ISIS, the P5+1 will make more concessions to Iran in order to get its cooperation against ISIS.

The Israelis are saying, and I think rightly, that you do not have to pay the Iranians to cooperate against ISIS; it is in their own interests. But more importantly Israel is saying that the Iranian-led Shiite axis is no less dangerous than the threat of ISIS. It is an Islamist, radical axis led by a regional power, unlike ISIS, with aspirations to become a nuclear power and with some very potent, strong proxies, such as Hezbollah with over 100,000 rockets. At this point this is more of a danger than ISIS, without minimizing the latter's danger or the importance of the coalition against it. Israel is saying: while you build the coalition of regional and international forces to fight ISIS, do not let go of the need to stop Iran from becoming a nuclear capable state, because that will change the whole regional equation, which is not in the interests of the region nor the West.

We saw last week another mysterious explosion at an Iranian military facility, this time in Parchin where the IAEA suspects Iran of testing nuclear weapons triggers. From the reports we have seen, are there any conclusions we can draw about what's going on there?

I think that incident draws attention to the fact that Iran is not cooperating with the IAEA on the possible military dimensions of its nuclear programme. It has been well established for years that the Iranians have been conducting experiments and tests in Parchin, including simulating nuclear explosions, testing nuclear triggers and so on.

The Iranians have denied IAEA inspectors access to that base since 2005. A very important element in the permanent deal between Iran and the West should be closing the files on suspected military dimensions of the programme. This is not a technical issue; this is a very significant matter because if you want to establish a sustainable, effective, permanent deal with Iran that will prevent them from breaking out to a nuclear device, you must resolve the issue of its past military nuclear research so as to establish the baseline for a future deal between the parties.