

Opinion – The Viability of Iran Nuclear Talks Without the Gulf Cooperation Council

Written by Poornima B

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The Joint Commission meeting of the members of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in Vienna has been reported to be progressing well. Despite the US and Iran not engaging in direct talks yet, the other parties to the negotiation have given positive feedback about the way the talks have been unfolding. Iran had also expressed its complete cooperation for this multilateral endeavour. Diplomatic efforts towards reviving the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) that was withdrawn by President Donald Trump, comes at the right time. Only in December 2020, Iran's Supreme Council passed a nuclear law that directs the state to bolster its Uranium enrichment levels up to 20%. Despite President Hassan Rouhani's warning against the consequences of such legislation, the Supreme Council passed it. As of February 2021, Iran had produced 17kg of weapons-grade Uranium. Unlike the previous administration in the US, President Joe Biden has been determined to work with Iran to reignite the nuclear deal.

However, the negotiation process does not look rosy. Disagreement between the US and Iran over what sanctions to remove is a potential hurdle for the negotiations. While Tehran's representatives demand all sanctions imposed after January 2016 be lifted, the delegation from Washington D.C is of the stand that sanctions that are "inconsistent with the accord" will only be removed. Further, for the Iranian government, the negotiations have to fructify before the Presidential elections in June. If a hard-liner replaces Hassan Rouhani, Iran could revisit its decisions pertaining to the negotiations. The deal must see the light for the moderates to retain their face amid widespread calls for a hard-liner Presidential candidate in Iran. Such political change could delay the outcomes of the talks, as opposed to what the other parties aim to achieve.

Even if the JCPOA overcomes these impediments to arrive at a nuclear deal, the sustainability of such a deal will be laid on shaky grounds. Much of the reason why this could be the case is that the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have been kept out of the negotiations. Saudi Arabia and UAE have been vocal critics of Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs and have constantly demanded to be included in the negotiations. Riyadh, apart from Tel Aviv, pressured President Trump to pull out of the Accord. This group of Arab states play a vital role in maintaining peace and stability in the region and their cooperation is indirectly crucial for the Iran nuclear deal to be enduring. Currently, the GCC places no trust in Iran and has been concerned about the Persian state developing a nuclear weapon that could invariably set in motion the Middle East nuclear arms race.

The GCC has concerns beyond just the JCPOA. Iran's missile program has been a worrying aspect for the Gulf Arab states. The missile threat is amplified especially as frequent missile and drone attacks have been launched by the Houthis in Yemen towards the Saudi Arabian territory. Much of the weapons used by the Houthis are of Iranian origin and the Arab states seek to put an end to it. Iran has also been equipping its proxies with these weapons elsewhere in the Middle Eastern region. Being once again excluded from the negotiation process, the GCC's assistant secretary-general for political affairs and negotiation, Dr Abdel Aziz Aluwaisheg has stressed the need to involve the regional states and address issues that could have repercussions for the region like Iran's ballistic missile program and risks related to Iran's nuclear program, apart from the JCPOA. He has put forth a demand for a 'Nuclear Plus agreement'.

Not including the regional states in the talks could also be counter-productive in the sense that these states cannot be deterred when they make attempts to sabotage Iran's nuclear program within their individual capacity. The recent

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cyber-attack on the Natanz enrichment facility in Iran raises the alarm. While Iran blames Israel, it has simultaneously increased the Uranium enrichment level to 60%, disturbing the course of the ongoing nuclear talks. Attacks of such kind are not new for Iran which saw one of its top-most nuclear scientists, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, being assassinated not long ago. Having said that, instigating offensive attacks on nuclear establishments is also not new for Israel that is known for the 1981, 2007 and 2010 attacks on Iraqi, Syrian and Iranian nuclear plants respectively.

The Middle East does not host the traditional patterns of enmity anymore. The Arab states have been embracing closer ties with Israel, a shift more obviously witnessed after the Abraham Accords were signed during the second half of 2020. Israel as well as the Gulf Arab states find themselves on the same page concerning Iran and that has been a major driver for their rapprochement. If the current nuclear talks do not consider the GCC's viewpoints, the future of a renewed JCPOA could be endangered. Another cyber-attack on Iran's critical infrastructure could give way to a string of reactions that might not bode well for the region which is already in a state of turmoil.

At various junctures, the EU members, particularly France, had emphasised the need for broadening the scope of the nuclear talks and to make it a multilateral engagement involving major players in the Middle East like Saudi Arabia or the GCC as a whole. The positions of China and Russia are still unclear, however, as states aspiring to establish healthy ties with the Gulf states, they might not object to involve the GCC in the Iran nuclear talks. Although Iran has demurred, the GCC's participation is crucial if the tensions regarding Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs in the Middle East have to be resisted.

After recent media reports, Iran has accepted its willingness to conduct talks with Saudi Arabia. Nonetheless, the Arab states show distrust towards the Shia state and vice-versa. Needless to say, the first step towards any such bilateral talks is the establishment of a confidence-building mechanism that can provide a platform for future comprehensive talks between the regional rivals. The world powers in Vienna who are currently negotiating with Iran need to explore the prospects of drawing in the GCC if they are looking for a resolution that is not just limited to the JCPOA.

About the author:

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