

Setting a Deadline for U.S.-Iran Nuclear Talks

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As the United States and Iran resume nuclear negotiations in Vienna, the Biden administration finds itself at even greater disadvantages than when previous talks broke off in June, given growing Iranian nuclear leverage, a new hardline president in Tehran and eroding U.S. credibility. With time currently on Iran's side, the White House should issue a year-end deadline for Iran to rejoin the JCPOA, as well as commit to submitting any agreement to Congress for approval. Regardless of the outcome of talks, the United States urgently must build credible military alternatives to open-ended diplomacy, including by supporting Israel's freedom of action.

What Happened?

- The United States and Iran [are returning](#) for a seventh round of talks, starting today in Vienna, to discuss rejoining the JCPOA nuclear deal.
 - » This would be the first such talks in more than five months, after negotiations from April-June ended inconclusively, and the first since the inauguration of hardline Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi in August.
- Iran's nuclear program has progressed to unprecedented levels in the meantime, including now being able to produce one nuclear weapon's worth of fissile material in [under a month](#).
 - » Tehran also agreed to [renewed](#) IAEA visits after stringing inspectors along for months, though it has yet to actually resume compliance with its transparency obligations.

Why Does It Matter?

- At this point, there are two likely outcomes for these talks: either the United States caves and accepts a deal even weaker than the JCPOA, or Iran drags out negotiations.
 - » Since the last round of talks in June, U.S. credibility has declined precipitously, erasing what limited leverage it had to convince Tehran to return to the deal.

- » Meanwhile, Iran’s nuclear program has advanced significantly, giving it both greater leverage to demand U.S. concessions and greater incentive to buy time as it approaches nuclear weapons capability.
 - As a senior [Iranian official](#) said last month, “Iran will eventually return to the talks in Vienna. But we are in no rush to do so because time is on our side. Our nuclear advances further every day.”
- As JINSA [spelled out](#) earlier this year, there are several major factors that make a JCPOA return increasingly uncertain, and perhaps outright impossible:
 - » Iran’s irreversible nuclear advances that are not covered by the original nuclear deal, including know-how from operating newer centrifuges, as well as its continued obstruction of IAEA verification and monitoring.
 - » The new Iranian negotiating team under President Raisi, which is [outspokenly critical](#) of the deal negotiated by its predecessors.
 - Former FM Javad Zarif, the regime’s chief advocate for talks with the United States, has been [replaced](#) by Hossein [Amir-Abdollahian](#), an outspoken hardliner who sees no contradiction between the “battleground” and diplomacy.”
 - › Moreover, new chief negotiator Ali Bagheri Kani has long [opposed](#) the JCPOA.
 - Believing Iran already has weathered the worst of America’s “maximum pressure” campaign, this new team de-emphasizes [sanctions relief](#) and instead aims to [build](#) an autarkic “resistance economy” and closer ties with China.
 - The new team also claims Washington [never did](#), and cannot ever be [trusted](#) to, ensure Iran realizes the economic benefits of sanctions relief – even though doing so was never required of the United States under the nuclear deal.
 - » Increasingly unrealistic Iranian conditions for returning to the JCPOA, including stipulations that go well beyond anything in the actual deal:
 - Claiming the United States owes Iran [\\$10 billion](#) to compensate for leaving the deal;
 - Demanding far more [extensive](#) sanctions relief than the JCPOA requires, and demanding that the United States first lift all sanctions – and that Iran then [verify](#) this lifting – before Tehran begins rolling back any of its nuclear advances.
 - Requiring the United States and Europe to [guarantee](#) foreign investment in Iran.
 - Insisting on [assurances](#) Washington won’t leave the deal again or impose new sanctions, even if such sanctions don’t contradict the JCPOA.
 - » The decision by Iran’s Supreme National Security Council to declare [invalid](#) the draft roadmap for a mutual JCPOA return, agreed with the United States in June; this suggests Raisi’s team may try to use its growing leverage to renegotiate the entire deal.

- » Since the previous round of talks adjourned in June, U.S. leverage and credibility have been damaged significantly by:
 - The precipitous nature of the Afghanistan withdrawal which, as Supreme Leader Khamenei [pro-claimed](#) about the United States at the time, “proves that this country is no longer the superpower of the world and cannot impose its will on nations.”
 - White House attempts to conciliate Tehran and entice it back to the table by under-enforcing key sanctions on Iranian oil exports to China.
 - The United States avoiding [retaliation](#) for a drone attack by Iranian proxies on American troops in Syria last month.
 - The administration’s persistent eagerness to reach an agreement – even a lopsided [interim deal](#) – despite warning for months that its [patience](#) is running out.
- » The lack of direct U.S.-Iran talks in Vienna, which only prolongs the negotiating process.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- Rather than continue open-ended talks, which only enable Iran to build more leverage, the Biden administration should tell Tehran it will walk away from the table for good by year’s end if Iran does not commit to reenter the existing JCPOA by then.
 - » If there is no JCPOA return by that point, the White House should make clear it will [reimpose](#) UN “snap-back” sanctions, significantly ramp up U.S. sanctions and work with allies to [censure](#) Iran at the UN Security Council for its ongoing obstruction of inspections.
- At the same time it issues this ultimatum, and regardless whether the JCPOA ultimately is revived or talks collapse, the administration should [prepare](#) credible military options against Iran’s nuclear program and bolster Israel’s freedom of action.
- The White House should also publicly commit to submitting any deal for congressional [approval](#) under the terms of the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act (INARA) of 2015. This would provide American negotiators additional leverage by claiming, truthfully, that in order to receive lasting sanctions relief Iran will have to agree to a deal that meets with bipartisan approval in Congress.