

US, Iran Exchanging Glances

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While on a ‘farewell’ visit to Israel, outgoing German Chancellor Angela Merkel said on Sunday in Jerusalem at a joint press conference alongside Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett that negotiations in Vienna over the return to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal have entered “very decisive weeks.” She noted, “I never considered the JCPOA to be ideal, but it’s better than having no agreement.”

When it came to Bennett’s turn to speak, to be sure, he didn’t fail to highlight the danger that Iran’s nuclear program poses to the world, and pledge that Israel would do what it takes to stop Tehran from reaching nuclear weapons capability.

But there was no Netanyahu-style sabre rattling. Instead, Bennett concluded, “This is a critical point, and Germany’s position is especially important.” Israel’s resignation that the Biden Administration shall not be deflected from the path of negotiations to revive the JCPOA is self-evident.

The Biden Administration is preparing a soft landing for the lifting of US sanctions against Iran with the Secretary of State Antony Blinken scheduling meetings with Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid and the UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan on October 13 in Washington in separate bilateral meetings and then in a trilateral setting.

Meanwhile, last Thursday, Iran’s Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian called for “practical actions” to underscore the US’ sincerity of purpose. Earlier, after returning from New York, where he had a crowded schedule on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly session, Amir-Abdollahian had specifically urged Washington to release “some of Iran’s blocked funds.”

On Friday, the Biden administration removed two Iranian firms alleged to have been involved in Iran’s ballistic missile program from the US’s sanctions blacklist. The Trump administration had alleged in August 2020 that these companies “are key producers and suppliers of military-grade, dual-use goods for Iran’s missile program.” The Biden Administration has not cared to explain why the two Iranian firms are now being removed from the US sanctions list. Presumably, there is some messaging here.

After all, it was only the previous day that Amirabdollahian had said,

“It is important that we receive signals from the other side (Western powers), including from the United States, showing that they are intent on returning fully to their commitments. We are assessing the behaviour of the United States. If it reflects a full return to their commitments, we can be optimistic about the Vienna talks.”

Curiously, on Thursday, the US special envoy for Iran Robert Malley spoke with South Korea’s First Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-Kun to discuss the nuclear negotiations! Now, two South Korean banks hold \$7 billion of Iran’s funds from the time when Seoul was purchasing oil from Tehran before full US sanctions on Iran’s crude exports were imposed in May 2019.

Tehran has been hinting that Washington should release the frozen Iranian funds before it returns to the talks. According to the South Korean media, Malley asked for Seoul to play a “constructive” role in efforts to resume the negotiations, without specifying what on earth South Korea has got to do with the JCPOA!

The South Korean news agency Yonhap quoted the foreign ministry in Seoul as saying Choi reiterated to Malley South Korea’s willingness to provide support necessary for the resumption of the nuclear talks “in consideration of the importance of Seoul-Tehran relations.” Evidently, the Biden Administration is open to releasing the frozen funds.

These are tell-tale signs. A broader shift is also visible in the US’ Middle East strategy as a whole. Clearly, the Biden Administration takes no interest to impose sanctions under the so-called Caesar Act, which came into force last year with the intent of adding to the pressure on President Bashar al-Assad, although the Arab allies of the US — UAE, Jordan, Egypt — are lately stepping up efforts to bring him in from the cold by reviving economic and diplomatic ties with Damascus.

King Abdullah of Jordan spoke to Assad for the first time in a decade this month and the border between Syria and Jordan was fully reopened for trade last month. Without an explicit US acquiescence, Amman couldn’t have pushed through the recent deal to pipe Egyptian natural gas to Lebanon via Syria.

On the other hand, the Biden Administration seems to be watching impassively the Iran-Saudi talks to normalise relations which are making headway. In a lengthy interview last week with France 24, Saeed Khatibzadeh, Iran’s Foreign Ministry spokesman said,

“We are now in a position with great hope that we can have clear and frank talks with our Saudi friends; I believe that if we see a change in approaches, we will see good results and a good outcome of these talks.”

The bottom line is that the Biden Administration is reviewing its old US approach to Iran. Significantly, a sub-text of the [announcement](#) by the CIA chief William Burns on Thursday regarding the reorganisation of the agency’s work by creating two new mission centres — one focused on China, the other focused on emerging technology, climate change and global health — is that the Biden administration is also undoing what the previous administration did by creating mission centres focused on North Korea and Iran.

Those two mission centres are now being folded back into regional centres focused on the

Middle East and East Asia. The Iran mission centre was a sign of the Trump administration's hard line on Iran and its chief Michael D'Andrea was known to be a passionate advocate of a muscular approach towards Iran. (D'Andrea is now retiring from the CIA.) The winding up of the CIA mission centre implies that the Biden administration is abandoning the regime change agenda on Iran.

However, Iran will not lower its guard, given the vagaries of the US policies and a long history of US interference in Iran's internal affairs. In fact, Iran has reacted warily to the ISIS attack on the Shias in Kunduz last week.

A lengthy [statement](#) by President Ebrahim Raisi said,

"It is no secret that the development of this Takfiri terrorist movement (ISIS) has taken place with the support and plans of the United States, and in recent years, the United States has facilitated the expansion of the activities of ISIS criminals in Afghanistan and prevented their eradication.

"I hereby express my concern over the continuation of terrorist acts and the combination of religious agitation with ethnic agitation, which is part of the new US security project for Afghanistan."

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