

**“WHAT NEXT FOR THE JOINT COMPREHENSIVE PLAN OF ACTION?”  
SUMMARY OF A WEBINAR HELD BY  
THE ATLANTIC COUNCIL**



**15 SEPTEMBER 2022**



**OVERVIEW**

After a summer of ups and downs in the nuclear negotiations, the fate of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) continues to remain uncertain. Strenuous efforts by the European Union and Iran’s Arab neighbours to bridge gaps between the United States and Iran have failed to clinch a revival of the agreement and Iran allegedly continues to raise demands that go beyond the parameters of the JCPOA.

In preparation for the Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi ‘first trip to the United Nations General Assembly in New York, the Atlantic Council held a panel discussion moderated by Barbara Slavin (Director of the ‘Future of Iran Initiative’) on the prospects for the nuclear agreement and the strategies of Iran and other key players as the stalemate continues. The panel included the following experts:

**KELSEY DAVENPORT** (*Director for Non-Proliferation Policy, Arms Control Association*)

**NASSER HADIAN** (*Professor of Political Science, University of Tehran*)

**AZADEH ZAMIRIRAD** (*Iran Researcher and Deputy Head of the Africa and Middle East Division, German Institute for International and Security Affairs*)

**SUMMARY OF COMMENTS MADE BY NASSER HADIAN<sup>1</sup>**

- Main stumbling points for the reaching an agreement has to do with the recent concerns expressed by the IAEA as well the guarantees sought by Iran.
- Hadian expressed a sense of personal optimism that something positive may happen in the course of the next few weeks.
- Any alternative to reaching an agreement would mean the continuation of the current status quo which can take shape in 2 ways:
  - 1. Continue with a ‘Freeze for Freeze’ modum which means that no one does anything to escalate matters.
  - 2. Possibly arrive at a temporary agreement which has a more formal structure (though this option seemed less likely in his view).

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<sup>1</sup> Focus is made on the comments of Nasser Hadian because of his access to key centres of power in Iran. Points made by others have been covered in other reports.

- On the other hand, any escalation could be disastrous. In any event, even if the IAEA complaints were to reach the UN Security Council, any punitive resolution against Iran would be vetoed by both Russia and China.
- In such an event, the US and the Europeans may opt for the 'Snap back' option for the reimposition of sanctions that is veto-proof, in which case Iran would then simply withdraw from the NPT.
- Iran's departure from the NPT would then lead to a situation that is dubbed as 'Strategic Ambiguity'. Any escalation thereafter could potentially ignite not just Iran but the entire region.
- Hence, there is no better option for all parties than a return to the JCPOA (something that could be achieved with help of regional parities like Qatar and Oman).
- Existing problems in Iran have to do with the extent of the mistrust of the Biden Administration that is felt by many 'influential quarters' – something that will become much more exacerbated in the event of a Republican president replacing Joe Biden in 2024.
- The debate within the 'Principalist Constituency'<sup>2</sup> hangs around the point of convincing their constituents that what they will be delivering is better and stronger than what Zarif delivered before.
- However, both President Raisi and Ali Shamkhani are anxious to finalize an agreement if they can. The same also applies to Iran Atomic Energy organization.
- Hadian pointed to another important matter regarding the fact that even within the reformist camp, there are elements that are critical of the ongoing negotiations, though they are more hopeful that something could be worked out.
- While the 'Quds Force' is generally supportive of the JCPOA, some key IRGC elements are not in favour of the agreement because of their high level of mistrust for the Americans.
- As a result, what they seek is a new situation in which there can be no further misrepresentations of any kind in the future.
- These elements are not particularly concerned about the issues raised by the IAEA and they are willing to provide legitimate help in dealing with the existing concerns so long as the matter is ended after one or two sessions – i.e., they do not want some kind of an open-ended discussion over these issues.
- Finally, what Iran wants are the required guarantees, they want to be sure that they would get all the benefits they would be entitled to without "the US playing any new tricks" – e.g., not to use the terrorism excuse to reimpose the same sanctions they would be removing following the consummation of a

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<sup>2</sup> Although Hadian does not use the term, this is in fact a clear reference to the 'Deep State'.

new deal as well as keeping the promises they failed to keep in the 2015 agreement.

- Hadian felt that Joe Biden and Rob Malley, a deal could be achieved.

