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Making the Joint Plan of Action Work

With talks now resumed in Geneva, Shashank Joshi asks whether the P5+1 Joint Plan of Action (JPA) with Iran will bear fruit or not. He believes that curtailing Tehran's nuclear program is possible, but only if negotiators resolve six open questions about its future direction.

By Shashank Joshi for ISN

Iran and the world powers – grouped into a bloc known as the E3+3 – have finally ironed out the details of the interim nuclear deal that they agreed upon in Geneva, November 2013. That deal, known as the 'Joint Plan of Action' (JPA), took effect on 20 January and will run for a renewable six months.

US President Barack Obama has [publicly stated](#) that the odds of converting this limited, short-term agreement into a longer-term deal are no more than 50/50. Remaining disagreements over the eventual size and scope of Iran's nuclear program, political hostility towards diplomacy in both Tehran and Washington, and continued tension over issues like the Syrian civil war are all sound enough reasons for his caution. Indeed, the history of diplomacy is littered with agreements that lose momentum and remain stuck at the interim stage, the Israel-Palestine peace process being a prime example. Complicating matters further, sceptics contend that Iran's ultimate aim is to force world powers into accepting the status quo. So, with Iran and the E3+3 now reconvening to discuss the parameters of this final status, what is the likely way forward?

Six Key Issues

The JPA - with its acknowledgement that Iran is to be permitted a [mutually defined enrichment program](#) - has changed the terms of the debate. As President Obama [noted](#) in December 2013, 'we can envision an end state that gives us an assurance that even if they [Iran] have some modest enrichment capability, it is so constrained and the inspections are so intrusive that they, as a practical matter, do not have [breakout](#) capacity'. Accordingly, the debate is no longer about whether Iran will be permitted to enrich uranium, but how much uranium it will be allowed to enrich. Under a final accord, Iran is to be permitted a 'mutually defined enrichment program'. This amounts to a conditional recognition of Iran's long-claimed right to enrich, albeit on more rigid terms than Tehran would have wanted.

Consequently, there are now six key issues confronting negotiators: 1) how many centrifuges should Iran be allowed?; 2) should Iran be permitted to use or conduct research and development with more sophisticated centrifuges (it presently uses only inefficient, first-generation technology)?; 3) how much enriched uranium will Iran be allowed to accumulate, and in what form?; 4) at which locations

will Iran be permitted to enrich uranium, and will this include the deeply-buried facility at Fordow near Qom?; 5) how will Iran's under-construction heavy-water reactor at Arak - capable of producing plutonium if a reprocessing plant is added - be treated?; 6) and perhaps hardest of all, how should the IAEA-supported allegations of Iran's past nuclear weapons research be addressed?

If Iran and its interlocutors can agree on answers to these six questions, the nuclear dispute would be largely resolved. However, they remain far apart at present. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has [insisted](#) that he will not "dismantle" any centrifuges, while other Iranian officials have said that they will not shut down Fordow or Arak. In addition, every Iranian leader from the Supreme Leader downwards continues to assert that Iran has never sought nuclear weapons. However, these contentious issues may not be as intractable as they seem when we boil each side's position down.

Core Red Lines

Iran's core red line is simply that it must maintain some enrichment as part of a final deal. In return, the West must be satisfied that Iran has no ongoing weapons-related activity, and that it cannot quickly produce fissile material. There will be intense debates within the Western camp over what "quickly" means and how much verification is enough. These will be matched by equally intense debates in Tehran over how much enrichment is enough. But the degree of potential overlap is greater than observers often imagine.

For example, Iran could make a large number of centrifuges inoperable by [removing key parts](#) and storing the disabled machines under tight international safeguards. Tehran could thereby claim that it had not, technically, "dismantled" these, but the West would be satisfied that the equivalent outcome had been achieved. Iran could reduce its number of remaining centrifuges to between 2,000 and 4,000 and agree that its total stockpile of enriched uranium would never rise above 800kg. Tehran could claim that this would be all it needed as an insurance policy against disruptions to foreign fuel supplies, and the West could be [confident](#) that this would leave Iran a [year away](#) from producing a bomb's worth of fissile material if it chose to do so. Iran could agree to convert Arak into a more proliferation-resistant light water reactor (LWR), allowing it to produce energy - always its stated rationale for a nuclear program - while easing Western concerns that plutonium might be extracted. Indeed, the head of the Atomic Energy Agency of Iran, former foreign minister Ali Akbar Salehi, [said](#) this month [February 2014] that Iran would be open to modifying Arak to produce less plutonium in order to "allay the worries".

This still leaves a number of key questions that will inevitably need answering. For instance, how long should any restrictions on Iran's nuclear program last? Any comprehensive agreement will tie Tehran's hands for a certain period, but the JPA implies that Iran will be treated as any other state when this time lapses. Iran will want this period measured in months, and the US in [decades](#). Moreover, how can Iran's desire to continue research and development be squared with the West's desire to lock it into using only its current crop of slow, first-generation centrifuges? However, there's also room for compromise here: Western powers might agree to transfer other civil nuclear technologies to Iran in exchange for Iranian restraint.

Stuck on No. 6?

The hardest issue of all may well be answering the sixth question: how to deal with allegations of past Iranian nuclear weapons research. For one thing, this overlaps with the IAEA's own [engagement](#) with Iran. The JPA established a Joint Commission comprised of experts from Iran and the E3+3, and part of its remit may be to work with the IAEA in resolving these concerns. But for Iran to admit to nuclear weapons research would be entirely contradictory to the insistence of President Rouhani and other Iranian leaders that Tehran has never sought nuclear weapons. An artful compromise may be

necessary: one where the E3+3 - and particularly the United States - agrees not to impose any further sanctions in response to complete Iranian revelations of any illicit activity they conducted in the past, as long as all details are revealed.

A longer-lasting deal - one that would end a crisis that has dragged on for longer than a decade - is, therefore, far from impossible. Both sides have compelling reasons for compromise. Iran wants to ease the burden of crushing sanctions, whereas the West wants to forestall the collapse of diplomacy, the renewed growth of Iran's nuclear program, and the prospect of war.

But the more difficult issues are more political than technical. Although the US Congress' push for new sanctions has [slowed](#), hardliners in both Washington and [Tehran](#) remain committed to maximalist positions, and will seek to portray compromise as acts of surrender. The challenge for negotiators is to work fast and achieve the outlines of a final deal within the six month lifetime of this JPA, because buying more time may prove politically impossible.

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[Sunset on the 'High Noon' of US-Iranian Confrontation?](#)

[Light at the End of the Tunnel?](#)

[Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Thinking and the Pakistani Connection](#)

[Iranian Foreign Policy after a Nuclear Agreement](#)

[Tehran Calling: Understanding a New Iranian Leadership](#)

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