

Biden buys calm from Iran until 2025

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 14.08.2023

This past May, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant revealed that Iran had accumulated enough uranium enriched to 60% and 20% purity for five nuclear bombs. He further said that “the Iranian nuclear program has reached its most advanced stage ever.” When policymakers speak about the emerging understandings between Iran and the US, they have to take into account those two facts above everything else. These include Israeli officials as well as the members of the Biden administration, congress members and senators, and US public opinion influencers.

According to various media reports, US and Iranian officials have recently struck an unofficial deal that has three components: First, a mutual release of prisoners; the second, unfreezing Iranian funds at a sum of some \$6 billion from South Korean and Iraqi banks (Iran’s access to those accounts had been blocked due to the US sanctions, but now Iran would be able to use the money for humanitarian purposes); and third, Iran halting its enrichment progress: It has apparently committed not to go beyond 60% purity and not to accumulate more uranium of that grade.

By having these steps framed as “unofficial understandings,” the administration can theoretically avoid having to get congressional approval, which would have been far from certain under the current circumstances. Submitting a deal for approval might have made Iran front and center in the public discourse, so this path allows the White House to kick the Iranian can down the road to 2025 and buy some calm until his reelection campaign is over.

As far as Iran is concerned, it won’t have to take any drastic measure as part of this deal, especially compared to what it would have had to do if it were to return to the original deal from 2015. Although it might not get all of what it could have gotten under that framework, nevertheless the new arrangement marks the first time it gets a de facto permission to reach 60% purity grade. Moreover, true to its conduct in the past, it would be able to renege on its pledge not to accumulate more such material and not to exceed this level.

The new understandings could cement Iran's stature as a nuclear threshold state with an American stamp of approval. Iran will maintain a breakout capacity that would allow it to easily shift gears to a military nuclear program. This reinforces the fear that the president – despite vowing to stick to a strategy of pre-emption – is actually now pursuing a policy of containment.

Even as Israel continues to bolster its operational capabilities, it should maintain its steadfast rejection of the concessions made to Iran as part of the unofficial deal. It should also insist that the US take concrete steps against Iran. Having Israel be a tacit participant in this effort to buy time on behalf of the Biden administration. Israel must formulate its position on this matter based on the outcome of the discreet talks with the White House.

Published in Israel Hayom, August 14, 2023.