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Iran nuclear talks produce historic breakthrough

Barbara Slavin
4/2/2014

A much-tweeted photo of Secretary of State John Kerry earlier this week showed him looking pensively out the window of his five-star hotel room in Lausanne, Switzerland.

“John, don’t jump,” wrote one Twitter humorist, reflecting concerns that Kerry might be despondent after days of hard bargaining with Iran and the other members of the so-called P5+1— the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Russia, and China.

But on Thursday evening, after a negotiating session that literally went all night, Iranian and U.S. officials announced a historic framework for a long-term comprehensive nuclear agreement severely restricting Iran’s ability to make nuclear weapons for more than a decade.

After the gloom and doom of previous days, in which negotiators blew through a March 31 deadline for a political framework imposed by the Obama administration, Thursday’s breakthrough seemed all the more sweet.

Negotiators must still finalize the provisions of the deal by June 30, when an interim accord that has been twice extended expires. But there was much more detail released by Iranian and U.S. officials than had been anticipated, given Iran’s reluctance to announce concessions in advance of completing an accord.

The United States, not surprisingly, emphasized the restrictions on the Iranian program while Iran stressed relief of sanctions that have crippled the Iranian economy and soured the mood of the long-suffering Iranian people.

According to a fact sheet released by the White House, Iran has agreed to cut its installed centrifuges — the machines that spin and enrich uranium — by two-thirds from about 19,000 to about 6,000, of which only 5,060 will be allowed to operate for the next 10 years. Iran also agreed not to use more advanced centrifuge models for a decade. For 15 years, it will not enrich uranium beyond a low level and will restrict its stockpile of low-enriched uranium to 300 kilograms — not enough for a single weapon.

The fact sheet did not say how Iran would do this — whether by sending its stockpile to another country or blending it into a less risky form.

Iran also agreed not to enrich uranium at its facility at Fordow for 15 years, although the underground plant can be used for peaceful purposes such as making medical isotopes.

The Iranians, according to the fact sheet, will shut off another potential pathway to a bomb by ripping out the core of a heavy water reactor under construction at Arak and replacing it with technology that yields a smaller amount of plutonium. Iran has promised to send out spent fuel from Arak and not to build a plant to reprocess it, effectively preventing Tehran from using the method to build weapons that North Korea employed when it quit the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003.

The Iranians have also agreed to intrusive inspections including access to uranium mines and mills for 25 years, and to centrifuge production sites for 20 years. It accepted the Additional Protocol of the NPT — which allows for short-notice inspections — in perpetuity. These measures should make it difficult for Iran to sneak out and build a nuclear weapon covertly.

It was left to Iran's U.S.-educated foreign minister, Javad Zarif, to lay out what Iran gets in return.

Switching effortlessly from Farsi to English, Zarif told a horde of exhausted journalists in Switzerland that all previous United Nations Security Council resolutions condemning the Iranian program and imposing sanctions on Tehran would be lifted, along with European Union sanctions and U.S. so-called secondary sanctions that inhibit other countries from normal trade with Iran.

The U.S. fact sheet said a new U.N. resolution would be passed that maintains restrictions on conventional arms transfers to Iran, including sanctions related to ballistic missiles.

U.S. officials said sanctions relief would be phased in as Iran implements its part of the deal. Among the issues not discussed in detail on Thursday was how Iran would satisfy the international community's concerns about possible past military-related dimensions of its program, and how that might be tied to full sanctions relief.

Zarif called the framework a win-win deal that had “stopped a cycle that was not in the interest of anyone.”

President Barack Obama, speaking from the White House Rose Garden on a lovely spring afternoon, pronounced the framework “a good deal” that would make the world — including nervous U.S. allies in the Middle East — safer.

Now both sides will have to convince critics inside and outside their countries that they are right. That will not be an easy task.

Obama began the selling job with Saudi King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz, whom Obama called before speaking to the press — and, tellingly, before calling Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu or the Republican leaders of the U.S. Congress. Obama said he would invite all the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council to Camp David this spring to discuss how he can shore up their security.

Administration officials said the U.S. would also reach out to Israel to address its concerns about Iran's destabilizing activities in the region.

Netanyahu has infuriated Obama by campaigning relentlessly against what the Israeli leader has called a bad deal that threatens Israel's security.

As for Congress, it is on a Passover-Easter break, giving the administration time to make its case to individual members before April 14, when the Senate Foreign Relations Committee is scheduled to vote on legislation that would give the House of Representatives and Senate the ability to block an Iran agreement. Obama promised on Thursday to brief Congress thoroughly on the details of the framework, but initial reaction from Republicans was skeptical.

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker said in a statement that the Obama administration should not “bypass Congress and head straight to the U.N. Security Council,” but should give Congress a chance to “weigh in” on a deal. “It is important that we wait to see the specific details of today's announcement, and as the P5-plus-one works toward any final deal, we must remain clear-eyed regarding Iran's continued resistance to concessions, long history of covert nuclear weapons-related activities, support of terrorism, and its current role in destabilizing the region,” Corker said.

Nuclear experts who have been skeptical of the negotiations sounded more positive on Thursday. Gary Samore, an expert at Harvard University's Belfer Center, told Al Jazeera that the framework was “better than expected but still many important details [need] to be resolved, especially on the inspection and monitoring mechanisms.”

Samore said the framework achieves the administration's goal of preventing Iran from amassing enough fuel for a weapon for a year “as long as the surplus low enriched uranium” remains at 300 kilograms or below. He also noted that “the disposition of the surplus LEU (low-enriched uranium) is not specified in the framework,” and said that would be “an important detail for the final agreement.”

Perhaps the most enthusiastic response came from ordinary Iranians who listened to Obama's comments broadcast live on local television: a first in a country that has been estranged from the U.S. since the 1979 Islamic revolution.

Tehranis, who were celebrating the last day of their two-week New Year holiday, honked horns and sent each other congratulatory text messages including this one: “The winter is over.”