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Nuclear Deal Takes U.S.-Iran Ties Out of Deep Freeze

By Jasmin Ramsey

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A final deal was reached on Iran's controversial nuclear program in the early morning hours of July 14 in Vienna, over a decade after talks between Iran and world powers began.

"This deal demonstrates that American diplomacy can bring about real and meaningful change — change that makes our country, and the world, safer and more secure," said U.S. President Barack Obama.

"Put simply, no deal means a greater chance of more war in the Middle East," said Obama during remarks made from the East Room of White House.

The "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action" (JCPOA), drafted during 18 consecutive days of intensive negotiations in the Austrian capital by Iran and the P5+1 (US, UK, France, China, Russia and Germany), freezes Iran's nuclear program for the next decade in exchange for gradual sanctions relief.

The agreement "establishes a strong and effective formula for blocking all of the pathways by which Iran could acquire material for nuclear weapons," said Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Washington-based Arms Control Association.

“When implemented, the P5+1 and Iran agreement will establish long-term, verifiable restrictions on Iran’s sensitive nuclear fuel cycle activities – many of these restrictions will last for 10 years, some for 15 years, and some for 25 years,” he added.

New Era of U.S.-Iran Relations

“With courage, political will, mutual respect and leadership, we delivered on what the world was hoping for: a shared commitment to peace and to join hands in order to make our world safer,” Iran’s top negotiator, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, said Tuesday during a joint statement issued in Vienna with EU High Representative Federica Mogherini.

“This is a historic day also because we are creating the conditions for building trust and opening a new chapter in our relationship,” he added.

The deal was made between Iran and the P5+1, but direct U.S.-Iranian engagement – jump-started after a historic phone call between Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and US President Barack Obama in 2013 – has proven to be the key ingredient of success.

This is not the first time Tehran and Washington have cooperated.

Iran’s assistance – led by Zarif when he was ambassador to the U.N. – proved crucial to the US mission to establish a post-Taliban government in Afghanistan.

But it is the first time since the 1979 Iranian revolution that Tehran and Washington have negotiated during an extended period of time, openly, directly and (mostly) respectfully at the highest level to bring about an internationally sanctioned, historic accord.

“That’s what they mean by confidence-building measures,” said Gary Sick, a former national security official and Columbia University scholar who has been studying U.S.-Iran relations for decades.

“This is the beginning of what could be a process of the US and the Iran developing a better and more normal relationship,” he added. “I don’t expect that to be instant...but you have to begin some place, and it’s a good beginning.”

12 Years in the Making

The process that led to the deal has taken more than decade.

The Europeans, known then as the EU-3 (France, Germany, UK), began the negotiations with Iran in 2003 before the US, along with China and Russia, finally joined the talks in 2006 and formed the E3+3 (or P5+1).

It would take five more years of desultory talks, threats of war, “crippling” sanctions, sabotage, assassinations, cyber warfare, and a change of presidents in Tehran and Washington before an interim agreement was finally reached in 2013.

The US and Iran have been enemies since Iranians brought down their U.S.-backed monarch in a widely supported revolution premised on the notion of independence from foreign exploitation.

Throughout the negotiations chants of “Death to America” from Iranian hardliners and its supreme leader’s public disdain for the US have continued.

During the final round of talks in Vienna, while Iran’s foreign minister posed for photographs at one-on-one meetings with the US Secretary of State – their nation’s flags side-by-side behind them – Iranian hardliners burned American flags at the government-sponsored Qod’s Day festivities.

The US government has meanwhile made no secret of its enmity with Iran.

The State Department has officially listed the Islamic Republic as a state sponsor of terrorism every year since the revolution. Both the George W. Bush and Obama administrations have issued threats of war and imposed sanctions that have also severely harmed Iran’s economy.

Although Democratic President Obama adopted a softer stance than his Republican predecessor, some congressional hawks have continued Bush’s aggressive anti-Iranian rhetoric.

Iran is a “pariah nation” determined to acquire nuclear weapons to deploy “against us and our allies,” wrote GOP presidential candidate Lindsay Graham in the Wall Street Journal in May.

“I met a lot of liars, and I know the Iranians are lying,” said the senator a week later.

“[D]eception is part of the DNA,” said Under Secretary for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman, the US’s top negotiator until Kerry stepped in, during testimony aimed at convincing Congress to delay imposing new sanctions on Iran in 2013.

Nothing, however – not Zarif’s public outrage after the US released “fact sheets” following the 2014 accord that he said “underplays concessions” to Iran and “overplays Iranian commitments,” nor vitriolic displays of anti-Americanism in Tehran, or even the Israeli prime minister’s ongoing warnings about Iran’s allegedly evil ambitions – has pushed either side away from the negotiating table.

Road Ahead

Congress has 60 days to review the final deal. Republican lawmakers have already threatened to block it.

“This ‘deal’ will only embolden Iran – the world’s largest sponsor of terror – by helping stabilize and legitimize its regime as it spreads even more violence and instability in the region,” said House Speaker John Boehner in a statement.

“We will fight a bad deal that is wrong for our national security and wrong for our country,” he added.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who called the deal a “historic mistake,” will also lobby Congress, as he did in March, to reject the deal.

President Obama vowed, however, to veto any bill that delays its implementation.

“This is not the time for politics or posturing,” he said Tuesday. “The world would not support an effort to permanently sanction Iran into submission.”

The Iranian parliament, which has expressed consistent criticism of the negotiations, will also review the deal though no timeframe has been set.

Before the final deal was announced, officials on both sides were already suggesting that a successful conclusion to the talks could lay the groundwork for further U.S.-Iran cooperation.

But even though a cartoon of Obama taking a selfie in Tehran has already made its way into an Iranian magazine, experts argue that hopes for a Nixon-to-China historical replay are premature.

“Thirty-five years of mistrust and hostilities cannot be resolved through only the nuclear issue,” Hossein Mousavian, who served as the spokesman for Iran’s nuclear negotiating team when Rouhani was its chief, told IPS.

“A deal is a success and big step toward lessening tension...but the wall of mistrust is so thick that breaking it down would take some years,” he said.