

Finessing the Iran-Sanction Issue

Despite discouraging headlines about last-minute troubles facing the nuclear deal with Iran, negotiators have devised a clever way of sidestepping the touchy issue of when Iran would get sanctions relief – by delaying the actual signing until initial steps have been taken, reports Trita Parsi.

By Trita Parsi

Contrary to public posturing on the timing and pace of sanctions relief, a framework for handling this critical matter of the nuclear deal has been resolved, according to Iranian sources.

Iranian officials have on numerous occasions insisted that sanctions relief must come immediately upon the signing of an agreement. This has been at direct odds with the position of the U.S. government and its allies, who insist that relief only can come after Iran has taken numerous steps limiting its nuclear activities.

As oftentimes is the case in diplomacy, the solution was found in a combination of a play with words and practical measures. This is exactly what the diplomats did to reconcile the Iranian insistence on front-loaded sanctions relief and the Western position of relief being provided only after the International Atomic Energy Agency has verified Iranian steps to curtail its nuclear program.

According to Iranian sources, the agreement is divided into three phases. The initial phase called “adoption of agreement” takes place as the two sides agree on a final deal. This phase will kick in over the next few days if a deal is reached.

The next phase the operationalization of the agreement will begin once the domestic political processes of various parties have conclusively approved the agreement. This phase has been added primarily as a result of the U.S. Congress passing the Corker bill, in which the American legislature gave itself the right to review and vote on the nuclear deal.

The timing of the second phase is directly related to the duration of the Congressional review process. If the two sides come to an agreement prior to July 10, the review process is set at 30 calendar days, in addition to 22 calendar days for Congress to pass a resolution to accept or reject the deal and for the President to use his veto, if need be. If the two sides fail to reach a deal by July 10, the Congressional review process increases to 60 calendar days.

While other states in the negotiations may also initiate some form of internal

review and approval process, none of them are expected to take as long as the Congressional review. As such, the U.S. Congress has significantly delayed the implementation of a presumptive deal.

Once the deal has survived the Congressional review whether through a resolution of affirmation or the failure to pass a resolution of rejection the Iranians will begin implementing the first steps of their commitments. This is phase III.

The initiation of the implementation of their end of the deal must then be verified by the IAEA, after which the U.S. and its allies will begin relieving sanctions. It is at this point that the deal will be “signed,” enabling the Iranian demand for sanctions relief to occur upon signing of the deal to be upheld.

The exact timing of this schedule depends on the date the deal is adopted, the duration of the Congressional review and the time it takes for Iran to implement the first steps of the agreement. But at best it will begin a few months after the adoption of the deal. This is reflected by President Hassan Rouhani’s statement earlier in June that he expected relief from sanctions within a “couple of months” after an agreement is reached.

While agreement on these principles of the process is a very important step forward, some question marks remain. What kind of a binding commitment will the U.S. and its allies make to reciprocate Iranian implementation of the deal, as the first steps taken will be Iranian? At what point will the UN Security Council adopt a resolution that affirms the deal?

While these are important details that must be settled, it is more important that the framework for the process has been agreed upon.

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