

REPORT

# The Nuclear File: The Repercussions of Transferring the Vienna Negotiations to the Raisi Government

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Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs submitted its periodic report regarding the ongoing nuclear negotiations to the Iranian Parliament on July 12, 2021. It expressed hope that the negotiations to revive the nuclear [agreement would be completed](#) after Raisi's government is inaugurated. Undoubtedly, the negotiations transferring to Raisi will cast a shadow over the negotiations, particularly given his "hardline" orientations, loyalty to the supreme leader and position in the system. After the negotiators have made significant strides and settled many sensitive issues, Raisi will take charge of the negotiations. Other outstanding sensitive issues will still require political will and difficult decisions to be taken, and Raisi's government will have to shoulder responsibility for these decisions. This article will shed light on the features of the nuclear agreement, the current dispute between Iran and the United States following six rounds of the Vienna talks, the opportunities available to Raisi after the negotiation file is transferred to him, the future of the Vienna talks under his government, and how his government will deal with the core outstanding issues.

## First: The Vienna Talks, the Limits of the Agreement, and the Current Dispute Between Iran and the US

[Six rounds of negotiations were held in Vienna, starting in April 2021](#). They witnessed consensus on several basic issues and provided an indication that there is a great opportunity to revive the nuclear agreement. Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif stated that the negotiations had brought the two sides closer to a ["possible framework agreement to lift sanctions,"](#) and that it was agreed to remove "more than a thousand legal and real personalities, and institutions under the supervision of the Supreme Leader's Office, from the US sanctions list, as well as lift an important part of the oil and banking sanctions, in addition to delisting IRGC." In exchange, Iran will comply with its nuclear obligations, return to the maximum limit of 3.67 percent uranium enrichment, and it will be allowed to "use 6,104 IR1 centrifuges," while advanced centrifuges must be returned to storage.

However, a final nuclear agreement has not been reached because [there are still unresolved sensitive political issues](#). These issues highlight the current differences between Iran and the United States. The latter wants to remove all sanctions first before compliance with its obligations. However, the United States is not prepared to grant Iran this privilege, and has insisted on lifting the sanctions step by step, and is concerned with lifting the nuclear sanctions only.

Iran also wants a guarantee that the current US administration or any future administration will not withdraw from the nuclear agreement. However, the United States has stated that the agreement's internal rules and protocols do not allow any guarantee to be offered in this regard. In addition, international laws do not guarantee that the United States will stick to the agreement in the future.

In fact, the United States did not take part in the [Vienna negotiations in order to revive the nuclear agreement only](#), but it also, during the fifth and sixth rounds of negotiations, expressed its desire to include Iran's ballistic missile program and its regional behavior in subsequent talks. It also proposed to set a framework to control Iran's advanced centrifuges and its stockpiles of enriched uranium at 20 percent and 60 percent, while Iran wants to keep the technical developments regarding these advanced centrifuges, and opposes any additional items to be added to the nuclear agreement.

Raisi's team has formed a committee to study the negotiations and the prog-

ress made. It concluded that [Iran's negotiating team led by Abbas Araghchi in Vienna was weak](#). Therefore, as the negotiations were suspended, the ball is now in Iran's court, and it must deal positively with US demands and concerns or insist on its position unlike the Rouhani government which was flexible on some issues. However, the negotiations will be an important test for Raisi's government once the file is transferred to it.

## **Second: The Reasons for the Negotiation File Being Transferred to Raisi's Government**

The Vienna talks cannot be separated from the internal conflicts and rivalries between Iran's various political factions. This was evident in the politicized language of the message sent by Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the country's Parliament concerning the 22<sup>nd</sup> report on the nuclear negotiations that was leaked to press, including a recommendation to transfer the negotiation file to Raisi's government. This recommendation was confirmed by [the request of the former deputy in Parliament](#) Ali Motaheri to Rouhani and Zarif to leave the signing of the Vienna agreement to Raisi's government so it can benefit from any advantages or distance itself from any disadvantages stemming from the agreement.

Basically, [controversy](#) erupted after Raisi was elected. Some estimates indicated that if the Vienna talks were concluded under Rouhani's government, Raisi would not have to bear the burden of reaching a new agreement and would have more room for maneuver. However, if a new agreement is reached amid Raisi's government taking over the presidency, it will have to take full responsibility and deal with any advantages and disadvantages which stem from the agreement.

In the end, the controversy was resolved. The government and the supreme leader want to provide Raisi with the opportunity to sign any new agreement and benefit from its gains. As a result, Rouhani's government was sent a message that its role in the negotiations was over. Rouhani mentioned that he received the message in March 2021.

As the negotiation file has been transferred to Raisi's government, there is an opportunity to swiftly lift the sanctions. Six rounds of negotiations and consensus on a final framework provides Raisi with an opportunity to reach a deal quickly, and fulfill his first campaign promise that the negotiations [would not become a debilitating process](#).

Raisi will not have to face internal challenges about returning to the nuclear agreement, especially as there is an internal consensus regarding the importance of reviving the agreement. This may help him in taking highly sensitive political decisions, since they will be quickly approved by the “hardliners” in the government.

The nuclear agreement’s revival also provides Raisi with an opportunity to lift the sanctions, rehabilitate the country’s faltering economy and address the deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, as well as appease the growing popular anger, grant militias abroad popular legitimacy, overhaul his personal image after doubts regarding the legitimacy of the presidential elections and strike additional blows to his opponents. Internal stability and the easing of tensions with the outside world sets the stage for a smooth political transition if Khamenei was to pass away.

However, Raisi will not enter the negotiations without having pressure cards to reduce the cost of returning to the nuclear agreement. This has been noted in Iran’s positions concerning the nuclear file and limiting its cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency since Raisi was elected. These Iranian moves are understood to be negotiation tactics and an attempt to strengthen pressure cards before returning to Vienna. In addition, Iran will use other pressure cards at the regional level, such as the Yemeni file and Iraq/Syria files.

### **Third: The Future of the Vienna Talks Under Raisi’s Government**

Despite the atmosphere of mistrust and although Raisi represents the Iranian “hardliners,” and was specifically assigned to the presidency to rehabilitate the political system, uphold its ideology and hostile foreign policy orientations towards the West and the United States in particular, he is not in a position to bring about a fundamental shift in Washington’s position regarding the talks, and surely he and the “hardliners” will be the ones who suffer the most if the negotiations collapse.

Despite [the policy of nuclear blackmail](#), the United States believes it can be easily reversed. Raisi is fully aware that there are international red lines regarding Iran possessing nuclear weapons. Thus, Iran’s acceleration of pressure and maneuvers to return to the nuclear agreement without making any concessions may pose a significant danger to the Iranian system itself as

any failure in the negotiation process may result in harsher behavior from the Biden administration compared to the Trump administration. Raisi realizes that regional powers may individually face the challenges that Iran poses. These powers are mainly working to disrupt the negotiations and ensure that Iran has no alternative except to face isolation and sanctions. The Raisi government must make important concessions if it wants to revive the nuclear agreement and remove US sanctions. Iran will continue to face difficulties at the political and economic levels if it does not return to the nuclear agreement, although any return would be in accordance with Washington's prospective vision and it would determine the privileges that Iran would receive.

During the sixth round of the Vienna negotiations, the United States requested a side document to be added containing restrictions on the development of Iranian missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads. [Rouhani agreed to discuss this issue. However, Raisi has rejected this request completely](#), because the issue of missiles is seen by the government as a non-negotiable issue, and an issue over which Iran is not willing to make any concessions. In addition, it is not willing to [hold talks on its behavior in the region as demanded by the Europeans and the United States](#). If Iran wanted to comply with such requests, it would have complied during Trump's era.

The US intent to return to the 2015 nuclear agreement in light of the Raisi government's strong desire to control Iran's nuclear program means the agreement will not be a great success, especially if Raisi believes he can pursue the same Iranian policies as adopted in the past. After the nuclear agreement was signed in 2015, the United States did not give up on the policy of sanctions, with the Obama administration itself adding some sanctions. Iran's non-compliance with the spirit of the agreement was the cause of its complete collapse in 2018, which is a repeatable scenario.

In connection with the previous US position, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [stated](#) in Congress that the Biden administration will keep enough sanctions to ensure the economic pressure tool on Iran remains in place. Basically, the sanctions formulated under the Trump administration were done in such a way to ensure that they cannot be lifted simply by reviving the nuclear agreement. However, the JCPOA structure has been badly undermined and there can be neither a full return to it nor can it be isolated from the rest of the other Iranian outstanding issues.

If the concerned parties do not agree to include a settlement mechanism

to address Iran's destabilizing regional activities and missile threats, the agreement will be devoid of critical details once again, may prompt some regional powers to [take unilateral action](#) which may harm the position of the United States itself and threaten its interests, drain Iran's capabilities and keep it in a state of permanent confrontation, something Tehran cannot afford in the long run, even if some of the sanctions are lifted.

In addition, the United States has an opportunity to corner Iran's "hardline" current, especially as they now dominate the corridors of power since Raisi won the presidential election. There is an opportunity for the United States to get the "hardliners" to sign a new agreement, which is not subject to internal criticism. If not, there is another opportunity by continuing with a policy of maximum pressure to agitate public opinion against the "hardliners" and the supreme leader. Perhaps, this could lead to deep changes in Iran against the backdrop of the government's declining popularity, as evident by [the lowest popular participation](#) in the recent presidential election since the revolution, [and in light of widespread protests](#) across Iranian cities and the worsening water and electricity crises. The predicament the government find itself in is similar to the Shah's predicament prior to the 1979 revolution.

## Summary

To conclude, it can be said that the success of the Vienna negotiations will depend on the degree of flexibility shown by the Iranian side. It seems that Rouhani's JCPOA formula, with the participation of the Parliament and the National Security Council, and supervised by the supreme leader and the security and military institutions in Iran, especially the IRGC, is the only available option for Raisi. It appears that sensitive decisions regarding Iran's hostile activities are political considerations, and Tehran showing aggression is intended to reduce US demands such as returning to the agreement without major concessions. Furthermore, by escalating, Iran wants to reflect internal public opinion and its strong hold over society. Raisi's government needs the agreement more than the Rouhani government. It is more likely that there will be a definite return to the nuclear agreement, according to new conditions that will be accepted by Raisi's government. Otherwise, it will have to face intense internal and external pressure.



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