

# US-Iran Deal Dangling in the Air

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*In an interview on The Daily Wire’s Ben Shapiro Show, the former prime minister of Israel — and the likely next PM — Benjamin Netanyahu claimed on Sunday that he had an ingenious Plan B for forcing regime change in Iran. Netanyahu said, “With low-flying satellites” and other miniature devices, “you might break their (regime’s) hold—their monopoly on information. That begins to challenge them.”*

Netanyahu insisted that “there are devices the size of a matchbook” that could help destabilise the Iranian regime. “There are many other things I could talk about, but I won’t,” he added.

The hawkish politician was speaking at a defining moment when Tehran was expected to give its “final thoughts” to the European Union’s “final text” on behalf of the Americans, at the end of the 16-month long negotiations in Vienna that would enable Washington to return to the 2015 nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA.)

Netanyahu’s thesis was that Israel cannot and will not put all its eggs in the American basket. He sarcastically illustrated the point, narrating how naive top American diplomats could be, as the Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan testifies.

Conversely, the big question is also how naive would the Iranians be to place their eggs in the American basket when it comes to their national security. From details available so far, Iran’s response, which was transmitted to Brussels Monday evening mostly focuses on outstanding questions related to sanctions and guarantees around economic engagement. An EU spokesman reacted today, “We are studying it and are consulting with the other JCPOA participants and the US on the way ahead.”

An [IRNA report says](#) that Iran’s response is “calling for flexibility” from the US side, without elaborating, as a final deal is “closer than ever if the US accepts the requirements of a **sustainable, reliable deal** in action.” [Emphasis added.]

Iran’s Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian said yesterday that Iran has shown

enough flexibility and the US knows this and that it was the latter's turn "to show flexibility this time." Indeed, the IRNA report also adds vaguely that "the disagreement is over three issues, two of which have been orally accepted by the US, but Iran insists on including them in the text."

Importantly, Tehran's response falls short of a rejection of the EU's proposal. The Nour News, Iranian website linked to the Supreme National Security Council, [reported yesterday](#) after an extraordinary meeting chaired by President Ebrahim Raisi that a "final result" will depend on the US response to "the legal demands of Iran."

The bottom line appears to be that Tehran needs guarantees that the West's promise of economic engagement will not once again remain a chimera as it turned out with the 2015 deal. Conceivably, Iran wants this aspect to be included in the text of the agreement.

From available details, Tehran no longer makes an issue of the IAEA seeking Iran's accountability for the "missing uranium" or over the IRGC continuing to remain in the US watchlist of terrorist groups. But the emphasis is on the efficacy of implementation and the durability of the new agreement.

Past experience shows that unless the POTUS puts his weight behind the agreement, it becomes rudderless. The paradox is that the shelf life of a new agreement is far from certain, although no expiry date is put on its label. It all depends on the end-user — in this case, the western companies who may be wary about a long-term relationship with Iran, with an eye on Washington.

But then, Iran's oil is much sought-after today, and for a conceivable future, it will be an indispensable energy source for western economies. This was not the case previously in 2015 when Europe (and the US) could easily access Russian oil, which was in abundant supply at low prices.

In turn, the criticality of the Iranian oil to salvage the EU economies means that Brussels will now be a genuine stakeholder ensuring the implementation of the new agreement that lifts the sanctions on Tehran's oil exports and fire walling the deal in the near and medium terms.

Meanwhile, the expert assessment is that even if large scale investments are made by oil producing countries, there is a gestation period for the results in the form of increased production capacity to appear.

Then, there is also the question of the oil producing countries having their own interest in high oil prices. A [report in the weekend](#) showed that Saudi Aramco has doubled its profits due to the high oil prices.

Suffice to say, this time around, the market forces — high demand for oil and the need of the western economies to recover from recession — provide a reasonable guarantee that the EU and the US dare not upset the apple cart. Surely, Iran cannot but be aware of it.

The odds, therefore, may seem to be favouring the conclusion of the new agreement at Vienna. As a [statement on Monday](#) by the so-called Elders shows, there is no dearth of advice cajoling the Iranian regime to be reasonable and cooperative. And it is difficult to see how Tehran will let this moment pass as history.

That said, Tehran can also afford to wait. The status quo is not so bad, as some may make out. After all, Iran is selling its oil and generating appreciable income, and, importantly, the international environment has created more space lately for it to manoeuvre, while also advancing its nuclear programme. (See a [recent interview with Ali Akbar Velayati](#), senior adviser to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei on international affairs and a former foreign minister for over sixteen years during 1981 to 1997.)

[Fars news agency](#) which is close to the IRGC has quoted FM Amirabdollahian as saying that Iran has a “Plan B” if no agreement could be reached. As he put it, “failure to revive the pact would not be end of the world.”

From the American perspective too, Biden Administration cannot hope to make any political capital out of the deal in the November 8 mid-term elections as if this is some great arms control deal. Of course, Biden is sure to be criticised by the Republicans.

If anything, after the knife attack on Salman Rushdie and the purported plot to kill former White House national security adviser John Bolton, the optics are probably not congenial for the Biden team to have a photo-op with Iranian officials.

The Reuters has [noted](#) wryly in an analysis, “The lack of better policy options for Washington, and Tehran’s view that time is on its side, could leave the deal dangling.” Netanyahu probably senses that his matchbox like contraption may still have its uses. Elections are due in Israel on 1st November.

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