

Is French initiative a step forward in bringing Iran and US to the table?

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After a dangerous period following the September 14 attacks on Abqaiq and Khurais, intense efforts to de-escalate and kickstart negotiations between Iran and the US were made at the 74th UN General Assembly (UNGA) in New York. The French initiative for US-Iran talks gathered broad support but, in reality, the results remain limited.

French President Emmanuel Macron was the most active mediator between Iran and the US during the UNGA. His latest plan to decrease US-Iran tensions is laid out in a four-point document which, in exchange for the lifting of post-2017 US sanctions, invites Iran to agree to the following:

The Islamic Republic is never to acquire nuclear weapons

It is to fully comply with nuclear commitments and accept negotiations on a long-term framework for nuclear activities

It will refrain from any aggression

It will seek genuine peace and respect in the region through negotiations

Macron failed to get President Hassan Rouhani's explicit consent on the four-point document. Rouhani said he agreed in principle with the document but had issues with its wording and said that it was not possible for him to agree to such an important document over a few hours, without first assessing its potential consequences and risk of misuse by other actors.

The particular point of wording should dampen any sense of achievement surrounding the French mediation effort. For the Iranians, the language is problematic because it requires Iran to implement policies it already claims to subscribe to. Indeed, the first two points tackle issues that are already covered within the JCPOA, while the last two points go against Iran's self-portrayal as a peaceful actor in the region and is therefore difficult to accept. This is highly problematic because, in the French view, the last two points infer that Iran would accept negotiations on its ballistic missile programme and regional links to groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis.

It is clear that nothing has changed despite the revived hopes for new negotiations. Iran's foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, stated bluntly that Macron's document did not contain Iran's views

and that European parties to the JCPOA would be met with a fourth round of retaliatory measures if they did not meet their obligations under the agreement before the November deadline.

There remain three major obstacles to negotiations:

Sequencing Iran's top priority is for the US to take the first step by lifting sanctions prior to any negotiation. Above all, Iran wants to avoid the impression that it is pliable under duress and that any future disagreement with the country could be resolved through sanctions. Holding talks with President Donald Trump while sanctions were in place would also be politically costly to Rouhani, who would be liable to severe criticism at home. In the event of a decision by the US to lift sanctions prior to negotiations, the Iranian side may find faults in that move, as the sanctions are very extensive and therefore unlikely to be fully lifted by executive order.

Modus operandi Spontaneous diplomatic efforts miss the point that Rouhani and Trump do not share the same parameters on the matter of setting up talks. While Trump generally has the autonomy to make decisions and the ability to respond swiftly to new diplomatic initiatives, Rouhani is tied to a much heavier set of restrictions in terms of freedom of action, public image and political hierarchy. Content It is clear from Rouhani's "more for more" rhetoric at the UNGA that Iran is open to new additions to the JCPOA considering Abbas Mousavi, the foreign ministry's spokesman hinted that this was backed by the highest echelons of power However, what such additions would be remains vague and there is no consensus within the Islamic Republic's leadership as to what new arenas of negotiations are permissible. The two burning topics of ballistic missiles and support to proxies, both prioritised by opponents to the JCPOA, remain red lines for Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and will lead to a quagmire down the line if negotiations are undertaken.