

US and Iran reach agreement amid escalating pressure, tensions and threats

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The US has agreed an informal and limited deal with Iran over its nuclear programme in a bid to stymie growing relations between Tehran and Moscow, as Washington prepares to escalate the war in Ukraine against Russia.

Following more than a year of indirect talks, Iran's clerical bourgeois nationalist regime has apparently agreed not to process uranium beyond the 60 percent level, to release several jailed Iranian-American dual nationals, to stop attacks on American forces by its regional allies, and to not transfer ballistic missiles to Russia.

In return, the US has agreed not to tighten sanctions, seize oil tankers or seek punitive resolutions against Iran at the United Nations or the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). It has also agreed to the unfreezing of some Iranian assets in third countries for non-sanctionable activities, including food and medicine imports.

The details are sketchy, with the Biden administration refusing to comment or confirm the arrangements, which do not constitute a formal written accord. In part at least, this is to avoid triggering the 2015 US Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act, which requires any nuclear agreement reached with Tehran to be approved by Congress, which is openly hostile to any such deal. The Republican Party has lashed out at the news, with former Vice President Mike Pence, who is running for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination, calling the deal "the largest ransom payment in American history to the Mullahs in Tehran."

In the last week, Iran has transferred four Iranian-Americans imprisoned in Tehran's Evin Prison to house arrest, including Siamak Namazi, Emad Sharghi and Morad Tahbaz, jailed on charges of spying, and two other unnamed Americans, one a scientist and the other a businessman, one of whom had already been released to house arrest. They will be allowed to return to the US once \$6 billion of Iran's frozen oil revenues in South Korea and \$4 billion in Iraq have been transferred via the central bank in Qatar to Iran. The cash will provide a crucial lifeline for President Ebrahim Raisi's regime, which is struggling with a \$10 billion budget deficit, although it can only be spent on food

and medicine. According to Iran's state news agency, IRNA, the US will then release five Iranians held in American prisons.

A report in the *Wall Street Journal* last week said that Tehran had decided to lower the quantity of enriched uranium it possesses and dilute some of the uranium already enriched back to 60 percent—far higher than that agreed under the 2015 nuclear accord that the Trump administration unilaterally abandoned in 2018—while slowing the enrichment process. This may indicate that Tehran is prepared to come to a broader agreement with Washington and the European powers.

Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, speaking at a televised news conference, said Tehran was committed to resolving its nuclear dispute with world powers through diplomacy, saying, "We have always wanted a return of all parties to full compliance of the 2015 nuclear deal."

These developments come after the US ramped up the pressure on Iran, even as Washington's allies in the Gulf have normalised relations with Tehran. Saudi Arabia has reopened its embassy in Tehran, while Amir-Abdollahian has held talks with his counterpart in Riyadh.

Last month, the US Navy said it had intervened to prevent Iran from seizing two commercial tankers in the Gulf of Oman, while the Pentagon had sent additional F-35 and F-16 fighter jets and two warships to the region following what it claimed was Iran's seizure and harassment of commercial shipping vessels. Washington is said to be considering a plan to put US Marines on commercial tanker ships to deter Iranian efforts to seize ships in the Strait of Hormuz, through which 20 percent of all oil shipments pass.

The Biden administration, using the threat of US sanctions, has forced Pakistan to suspend its natural gas pipeline project in Iran. It is a major blow to both Iran and Pakistan. The latter is plagued by persistent power shortages that lead to 18-hour blackouts in rural areas and 6-to-10-hour load-shedding in cities.

Tehran announced that it has the technology to build a supersonic cruise missile, saying, "The supersonic cruise

missile will open a new chapter in Iran's defense program, as it is extremely difficult to intercept a cruise missile flying at supersonic speeds."

Washington's objectives in restarting the on-off talks abandoned a year ago and seeking some sort of accommodation with Iran are to disrupt the growing ties with Russia, which cut across US geostrategic interests, and to ease escalating tensions in the Middle East. The covert aerial and maritime war carried out by the US and its attack dog Israel, which jointly strike Tehran's Syrian and Lebanese allies on a weekly basis, has threatened to erupt into open military conflict.

Under President Ebrahim Raisi, whose conservative faction opposed the 2015 deal, Tehran had sought to take advantage of the Russia-Ukraine war and western sanctions on Russia to stress Iran's importance to both Russia and China, while keeping open the option of an agreement with the US. His government, desperate to get rid of ever-tightening sanctions that have wrecked the economy, leading to soaring inflation and widespread poverty and provoking mass opposition from workers and young people, had largely withdrawn its preconditions for a deal, including that the US withdraw its designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organisation.

Last year, the US walked away from the deal when it was revealed that Russia was using Iran-supplied drones in the US-NATO-provoked war against Russia in Ukraine.

Weeks later, mass protests broke out over the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini after her detention by the corrupt clerical regime's morality police. Fueled by popular anger over the desperate social and economic conditions, they spiraled into mass demonstrations that lasted for months and were suppressed with arrests, lethal force and the execution of at least seven protesters. Many protesters, including minors, remain in jail without trial, despite a widely publicised amnesty.

The imperialist powers were unable to use the protests to engineer regime-change in Iran, but the Raisi government has continued to face protests by Iran's retirees, whose pensions have become worthless, and sporadic strikes by teachers and oil and other industrial workers, who bear the full brunt of the US-imposed economic sanctions—compounded by the kleptocracy's handling of the pandemic and climate crisis. Tehran has responded with intimidation and repression, executing some 278 people so far this year.

In the run-up to next month's anniversary of Mahsa Amini's killing, the authorities have intensified the enforcement of the regime's dress code for women, sending the Islamic Hijab police patrols back onto the streets, closing several firms and well-known startups whose workers failed

to wear the hijab, and arresting at least 12 women activists. Female celebrities who challenged the hijab law have been given sentences of up to two years, with actor Azadeh Samadi ordered to undergo psychological treatment for "antisocial personality disorder." The *Guardian* reported that some women had been denied the chance to take university exams and that a religious court had ordered a woman to wash corpses for burial as punishment for not wearing a headscarf.

The judiciary is taking increasingly harsh measures against journalists, activists and film directors, issuing new sentences and re-arresting those recently released from detention to politically intimidate critics of the regime. Maysam Dahbanzadeh, a political activist released from Evin prison in May, was given a new six-year prison term for "orchestrating gatherings intended to commit crimes against national security," and "forming a group to disturb the nation's security." Ali Asghar Hassanirad, a former political prisoner, has been detained without explanation.

The Tehran-based journalists' syndicate reported the judiciary had sentenced two journalists, Saeedeh Shafiei and Nasim Soltanbeigi, to three-year and seven-month terms, respectively. According to the International Federation of Journalists, 13 journalists are currently in jail.

The prominent film director Saeed Roustayi, whose 2019 film *Law of Tehran (AKA Just 6.5)* exposed Iran's horrendous drug problem and the police's brutal response, was given a six months' prison sentence for showing his film *Leila's Brothers* at last year's Cannes film festival. The film, which won the International Federation of Film Critics award, tells the story of a family struggling with economic hardship in Tehran. It had been banned in Iran after it "broke the rules by being entered at international film festivals without authorisation," and the director had refused to "correct" it as requested by the culture ministry. Roustayi and the film's producer Javad Noruzbegi were found guilty of "contributing to propaganda of the opposition against the Islamic system."

Last year, Iran ordered internationally acclaimed filmmaker Jafar Panahi, 62, to serve a six-year jail sentence for inquiring after his fellow directors Mohammad Rasoulof and Mostafa Aleahmad, who had been detained by the police.



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