

SEVEN MONTH EXTENSION OF P5+1 NEGOTIATIONS? WE'D BE LUCKY WITH SEVEN WEEKS

I must confess that I repeatedly put off writing this post. Similarly, the P5+1 countries and Iran now have repeatedly put off finalizing a deal that assures the West that Iran's nuclear program has no chance to quickly move to a nuclear weapon. I had been operating under the assumption that a final deal would be announced at the November 24 deadline. After all, everything seemed aligned to make a deal seem necessary for both sides. Iran's economy has been reeling under sanctions for years, but Rouhani's push for "moderation" had silenced hardliners in his country who see any deal as capitulation. How long Rouhani can hold them back, however, seems to be the biggest mystery. Barack Obama has been waging war seemingly all over the planet, so a deal to avoid another one would be a huge accomplishment for him. And with a new Republican majority set to take over the Senate, meddling by Senate hawks is assured.

But no agreement was reached on Monday's deadline. Even worse, rumblings that at least a "framework" would be announced also proved to be false. In fact, the framework target is now four months away, with another three months built in to iron out the technical details within that framework.

Jeffrey Lewis sees this long timeframe as delusion:

One wonders what the parties are thinking. Is there any reason to believe that this problem will be easier to solve in four months' time? Is there any reason to think that, in fact, the

parties have four months? Allow me to be the bearer of two items of bad news.

First, the 114th Congress will pass new sanctions legislation. This year, the White House held off the Menendez-Kirk sanctions bill in the Senate by the narrowest of margins. (The House passing sanctions is a formality at this point.) Proponents had the votes – 60 co-sponsors, including 16 Democrats – but then-Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid refused to let it come to the floor.

Incoming Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell won't be so accommodating.

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Second, Iran is continuing research and development on a new generation of centrifuges. A few weeks ago, there was a minor kerfuffle when the International Atomic Energy Agency reported that Iran was test-feeding a new centrifuge under development called the IR-5. The issue was that Iran had not previously fed uranium hexafluoride into that type of machine. The Iranians denied this was a violation. (The definitive answer depends on "technical understandings" in the implementation agreement that the EU will not make public.)

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With another extension, though, Iran is free to continue its R&D work on new generations of centrifuges – including resuming testing of the IR-5 and eventually the IR-8.

Oh, yes, the IR-8. The IR-5 is a prelude to this much bigger problem. Iran has declared a new centrifuge model called the IR-8 to the IAEA. (One of these bad boys is sitting at the "pilot" enrichment facility, saying, "Feed me, Seymour.") The IR-8 is about 16 times more capable than the existing

centrifuge types installed at the Natanz fuel enrichment plant.

Even the New York Times editorial page sees the situation as desperate, with extremists starting to salivate over the mayhem they can cause:

The next seven months could be perilous. As the negotiators seek an agreement that has eluded them over the past year, they will also have to guard against the hard-liners – in the United States, Iran and Israel – who have been gaining strength and now have more time to try to kill a deal.

These hard-liners are primed for the fight. After Iran and the major powers missed their Monday deadline to conclude negotiations, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee said it was “essential” for Congress to impose new sanctions on Iran. More sanctions may be appropriate at some point but definitely not now.

New sanctions could empower Iran’s hard-liners, give Tehran an excuse to walk away from negotiations and split the coalition of major powers. And they could also cause Iran to move toward producing a nuclear bomb, the outcome this whole negotiating exercise is intended to prevent.

That the Times would actually call out Israel and AIPAC as the problem on the US side is remarkable. Make no mistake that it is AIPAC and Israel that drive the madness being spouted by Mark Kirk, Bob Menendez and hardline Republicans in Congress. Reigning in their madness will not be easy, and it seems to me that the best option for containing them is to conclude the final deal as quickly as possible. I see no way that they can be held at bay for seven months. Even seven weeks sounds like a stretch at this point.

Fortunately, Iran's Supreme Leader is out with comments today that will hold Iran's hardliners at bay for a while. From Thomas Erdbrink:

Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, expressed support on Thursday for the extension of talks with Western powers on the country's nuclear program.

"I do not disagree with the extension of the negotiations, as I have not disagreed with negotiations in the first place," Ayatollah Khamenei said in a speech published on his personal website.

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His remarks are almost certain to mean that Iranian hard-liners opposed to the talks, who had stepped up their criticism in recent weeks, will have to moderate their stance, and they assure that politicians will not question the extension.

But is there any shot at a rapid agreement? Laura Rozen thinks that there is, based on what she saw as real progress in the final hours before Monday's deadline:

Two narratives have emerged from the Iran final deal nuclear talks held in Vienna this week that resulted in the decision to extend the talks another seven months, with four months to try to reach a political accord.

One narrative, suggested by US and other Western officials, is that though some progress was made, it came late, and amid continued significant gaps on core issues that necessitated extending the negotiations into next year.

The second narrative, held by some Iranian officials, is that there was substantial progress, even in the final days, that some thought they could

rapidly build upon to finalize the political agreement in a matter of days or weeks. "We were there," a senior Iranian official told some interlocutors, suggesting he was disappointed Western counterparts did not decide to stay in Vienna over the next week to try to advance the deal.

"After our American friends enjoy [the] Thanksgiving holiday, we will be working hard," Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif told journalists at a press conference in Vienna Nov. 24, perhaps hinting at disappointment that talks did not continue here this week.

Let's hope that Zarif is correct and that short work can be made of closing the final gaps on a permanent agreement. Because even though Khamenei has put his hardliners at bay for the time being, ours are hard at work and can scuttle the deal in fairly short order.