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THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR ISSUE: what next?

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No agreement was reached within the deadline that the two sides (the 5+1 and Iran) had agreed, and yet it would be a mistake to describe the situation as one of failure, and even of stalemate. The negotiation is still on, and the intermediate results that have been reached are very significant, very substantial. More important still, neither side can really envisage a breakdown of the negotiation: President Obama, in particular, cannot afford another focus of confrontation at a time when the Syria/Iraq situation is definitely not under control and threatens further regional destabilization; President Rohani's chances for implementing his program of moderate reformism are totally dependent from the success of the nuclear negotiations, and would most probably be doomed by a failure, since the hardliners within the regime could easily convince the Supreme Leader to turn the page and shift back to a radical political platform, similar to what had characterized the Ahmadinejad years.

So, why a breakthrough was not possible? It is difficult to assess what the real stumbling block might have been, who stalled and why. When talks took off in a serious mode under negotiators of the caliber of Bill Burns, US Deputy Secretary of State, and Javad Zarif, the Iranian Foreign Minister, it was clear that the US – the real interlocutor, with all respect for the EU, Russia and China – had abandoned the demand (totally deprived of a basis in the NPT) that Iran would stop all enrichment (“zero centrifuges”). From that point on, the discussion shifted to concrete aspects such as number of centrifuges and disposal of enriched uranium. Still, the problem remained, in the sense that Iran would like to preserve its rights while accepting more intrusive inspections (Additional Protocol and beyond), whereas the US remained keen in demanding the dismantling of a number of centrifuges out of the 10 thousands presently functioning. Yet, one is justified in guessing that the real difficulty was not in numbers and procedures – typical matters where a quantitative compromise is always possible – but rather in the asymmetry, unacceptable for the Iranians, between the demand of “deliverables” of an immediate, upfront nature in exchange for gradual scaling down of sanctions. In other words, centrifuges should be dismantled, sanctions phased out.

On the other hand, if we want to understand what is at stake behind and beyond the nuclear negotiations, we should shift from diplomacy to politics, both in the Iran and in the US.

The overwhelming consensus in Iran is that without a solution of the nuclear issue it will not be possible for the country not only to overcome the present economic difficulties, but also to attain the more long-term, vital goal of being accepted as a “normal” country by the international community – a goal that cannot be reached without being first recognized as such by Washington. What is interesting is that such goals are shared by a wide majority of Iranians, and also by most groups and tendencies within the regime. Normalization of relations with the US, as a necessary passage to normalization of relations with the international community as a whole, are – however – both desired and feared by the regime and in particular by the Supreme Leader, worried that it will not be necessarily possible, given the demands of a substantial part of the Iranian population, to keep things under control once the ideological core of the Islamic Republic’s identity, the hostility to the US, is abandoned. It is not to be taken for granted that the Iranian regime will be able to pull off what the Chinese regime could do: normalize relations with the US and maintain authoritarian control over both state and society.

Thus Khamenei still maintains his “green light” for the prosecution of the negotiations, but hardly a day goes by without him expressing his skepticism on the good faith of Americans as well as reiterating that Iranian nuclear rights are not negotiable.

If we were to identify, however, the possible source of a failure – still quite possible – we would point in the direction of Washington rather than Tehran. No doubt that Obama wants an agreement with Iran, both because he has come to the conclusion that he cannot pick another fight in the Middle East, and because he is convinced that Iran’s help in tackling the frightening IS threat is of vital importance. Taking note in a positive way of Iran’s air strikes against IS, as was recently done by Kerry, is a clear sign in this direction. No one is formulating a specific link between these two different issues, yet everyone, both in Washington and in Tehran, is well aware of the fact that they are objectively connected.

In other words, what is at stake today goes much beyond the nuclear issue – an issue, incidentally, that has always been instrumental for both sides. We are talking about the regional role of Iran, the balance in the Gulf, the future of Iraq, the possibility of checking the onslaught of Sunni jihadists. This is all very clear for Iranians, but not only for them. The Saudis, the Israelis, and especially the majority within the US Congress (especially now that the Republicans have gained also the control of the Senate) are more afraid of a solution of the nuclear issue than of an Iranian military nuclear capacity. No serious analyst, and especially no one who knows anything about the Iranian regime, buys the scary scenario of Tehran acquiring a nuclear bomb and using it next– in the mode of a suicide bomber - against Israel.

The fact is that the many enemies of a nuclear agreement see a “normal” Iran, an Iran that is no longer isolated, as an unacceptable alteration of present geopolitical equilibria.

The agreement must face more enemies, and very powerful ones, than objective difficulties. This is why it is not possible to be too optimistic about its chances.