Is “Freeze for Freeze” a Viable Pathway to Re-engage Iran?

Event Transcript:

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Good morning and welcome to CSIS. I’m Jon Alterman, senior vice president, Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy, and the director of the Middle East Program. It is my pleasure to welcome you to this presentation on “Is ‘Freeze for Freeze’ a Viable Pathway to Re-engage Iran?” To discuss this very important and timely question, we have three remarkable experts to help join us in the discussion. First is my colleague at CSIS, deputy director and senior fellow of the Project on Nuclear Issues here at CSIS, Eric Brewer. From 2017 to 2018 Eric was director for counterproliferation at the National Security Council. Joining us from Prague, we have Hannah Kaviani, who’s a journalist with Radio Farda. She has followed Iran as a journalist since 2008. She’s spent more than 10 years closely watching Iran’s nuclear negotiations and nuclear negotiation strategy.

And third, we have Henry Rome. Henry is a senior analyst with Eurasia Group where he focuses in part on Iran. Prior to joining the Eurasia group, he worked in Iran at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government. Henry is really to my mind one of the most thoughtful Iran analysts in Washington and somebody whose views I always look forward to reading. We have, I think, a very timely set of issues. We have a Biden administration that is keenly interested in negotiating with Iran and we have an Iranian government that seems on the one hand to be interested in negotiating, on the other hand, to be demonstrating its hostility. We’ve seen forces aligned to Iran attack U.S. facilities in Iraqi Kurdistan. We’ve seen Iran doing more aggressive things on the proliferation front. Why don’t we start with Eric. From a technical perspective, what have the Iranians been doing on the nuclear file that people might consider provocative and what do you think it means for the prospect of the Biden administration negotiating with Iranians on the nuclear file?

Eric Brewer:

Thanks, Jon. Thanks for the introduction. Great to be with you and great to be with Hannah and Henry as well. I think a lot of this can be traced back to a law that was passed by the Iranian Parliament in December that called for some aggressive and provocative steps on the nuclear front that Iran has really carried out quite expeditiously since the passage of that law. Iran has done things like expand the use of advanced centrifuges at its nuclear facilities. It has begun enriching to 20 percent enriched uranium, which is much higher than the 3.67 percent that was allowed under the nuclear deal and also higher than sort of the four percent that it went to following the Trump administration withdrawal from the JCPOA.

It’s also started producing uranium mill, which is really a big deal because of the role of that process in forming the core of a nuclear weapon. That’s something that Iran knows, that’s something that the international community knows. So it has been quite provocative. Then of course, the most recent step that is called for under the law—which is for Iran to stop implementing the additional protocol and a lot of the added transparency measures that were there under the JCPOA that allowed the IAEA to have some pretty powerful inspection provisions and monitoring tools, allowed it to watch really in near real time a lot of really important Iranian nuclear activities, allowed it to request access to undeclared nuclear facilities and to go there and take samples.

There’s some important and powerful tools that were core to the JCPOA, many of which have now been lost. Although Iran has managed to reach that last minute deal with the IAEA that at least provide for some of those monitoring mechanisms and for the IAEA to be able to access those down the road in three months. There’s also been some provocative statements by Iranian officials, including the Supreme Leader, who talked about how Iran will go to whatever level of enrichment it needs to for its nuclear needs, including 60 percent enriched uranium, which is much higher and gets you much closer
to that 90 percent level. The intelligence minister also stated that if pushed, Iran might change its mind and ultimately build nuclear weapons.

All of this to say is that a lot of these tactics are part of the strategy we've seen from Iran for a long time now on the nuclear program, which is that it's trying to raise the temperature, it's trying to raise the pressure on the United States, and in the Biden administration, in this case to force the United States back into the nuclear deal and provide sanctions relief. That's what Iran wants in this case: sanctions relief. It cares a little bit less about whether the United States actually rejoins the deal. That's where it's headed. But obviously, it's trying to do that and calibrate those steps in a way that avoids provoking a harsh international reaction, putting Iran even in a worst position. But my read of the situation—particularly before Iran struck that deal with the IAEA and perhaps even moving forward—is that there's a risk that Iran is overplaying its hand a little bit.

The moves that I just described moments ago, these are more aggressive than a lot of what Iran has done today and what Iran did after the Trump administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA. If you remember after that time, Iran took a year off where it said, “hey, we're going to sort of hit pause. We're not going to do anything.” And then a year later, Iran started slowly and gradually rolling back its nuclear commitment. It telegraphed its moves every 60 days. It said, “hey, 60 days from now, we're going to do X. And we're telling you in advance what that is.” Iran did it in a very calibrated way. But what we've seen since December is that Iran is playing hardball a little bit more and it's moving more aggressively. It's moving out faster. The steps it's doing, tinkering with inspections, are far more provocative than the smaller gradual moves that Iran was doing before.

I think the risk that Iran runs in doing this is that after four years where the United States under the Trump administration was perceived as the aggressor and the opposite actor, that table's going to be flipped and where Iran is now going to be in those shoes and it's going to lose its status as the aggrieved party. I think the big question looming right now is whether Iran is going to attend these talks that are trying to be arranged, where the United States is an invited guest of the JCPOA members. And I hope it does because I think that's the most important step in the near term to get diplomacy back on track and see if we can strike a deal or get back into the JCPOA.

Jon Alterman:

Let me ask Hannah this question. You've watched the Iranians negotiate a lot. Are the Iranians overplaying their hand? Have they learned the right lessons from the way the United States negotiates, or are the Iranians playing with fire? Is this likely to get them where they want to go do you think? Can they not help themselves or is this risking it all?

Hannah Kaviani:

Well, first of all, thank you for having me and hellos to everybody. You mentioned this past decade of experience of mine. And I want to use that and have all of us think for a second if we have seen any of these moves by the Iranians before. I sensed this a lot in the past two, three weeks that there was this thing going on, that there was a feeling of a crisis mode. If it's a crisis that something is really going wrong, something is happening in the atmosphere between Iran and the United States, and Iran and the Europeans as well. It's not just the United States in this sense, because Europeans were very much involved in this, especially the steps that Eric mentioned. And I think it was not that much of a crisis in the past two, three weeks as it was portrayed, or as maybe Iran wanted to portray. It was not that. I think we have seen since, especially during the talks that led us into the JPOA and afterwards—the very long negotiations which resulted in JCPOA—we have seen so many of these instances that there was a
situation that we felt like, “oh, things are really falling apart and they're not going to reach a deal. This is not happening. It's impossible.” And then it happened.

I want to say that the crisis was not there or if it was there, it was not so serious. What we're seeing today—at least looking at the comments of President Rouhani a few hours ago and of Supreme Leader Khamenei from a few days ago—that it's quite apparent that Iran wants this thing, Iran wants JCPOA to be revived, Iran certainly wants sanction relief and Iran is ready for a meeting to talk and negotiate the way back to JCPOA. And I say this because this has been said by the Iranian officials; Foreign Minister Zarif has mentioned this since November, just right after the Biden election. We heard him say that this would need some technical talks.

If he's phrasing this or portraying this as “technical talks” rather than “negotiations,” I don't know why he's using “technical talk” so much. Maybe because there are some stumbling blocks—which we can talk about what can those things be—but it's obvious that Iran wants back. If it's playing with fire, we don't know, because as Eric knows very well, Iran has threatened to even leave the NPT down the line if this thing doesn't work out. It's the unspoken clause of the letter Hassan Rouhani wrote to the four plus one leaders and threatened that Iran down the line can even leave the NPT. But I don't think that Iran can go there because it needs so much and it shows it every day. Now we had Foreign Minister Zarif speaking with the South Koreans. It's clear that they want to go back if the US, how Iran says, goes back into the deal.

Jon Alterman:
Let me ask Henry, you've been paying attention to the Iranian economy for a long time. You keep an eye on Iranian political pressures. How much urgency do the Iranians feel to make a deal? We've seen two years of a maximum pressure campaign by the United States that certainly didn't collapse the regime. But do they feel now that they don't have a choice but to come back into the deal?

Henry Rome:
Thanks, Jon and whole CSIS team and great to be here with Hannah and Eric. I think it's correct that the economy is under a severe amount of pressure. U.S. sanctions remain quite powerful. They haven't been reduced in intensity at all since President Biden took office. I think they are poised to continue that way unless there's progress on the diplomatic front. Just a few statistics to throw out: inflation remains around 30 percent—that's I think a low-ball estimate, which has a grinding effect on basic economic activity. Growth is expected to be tepid this year, between 1.5 to three percent, but coming off quite a low baseline after several years of severe contraction.

And while Iranian oil exports may be as high as one million barrels per day, I think it's worth emphasizing that the Iranians themselves have been quite clear that the government is not actually getting the revenue that one would expect from selling one million barrels per day. So even if that number has improved over time, the actual money that the government gets to play with—in terms of paying salaries, in terms of funding other expenditures—just isn’t there. I think often in Washington, there's a binary between “the economy is on the verge of collapse”—however one would define collapse—or the “economy is completely resistant to sanctions and they can keep going like this indefinitely.” And I think neither is really true. I think it's frankly down the middle.

The question to tie it back to the earlier conversation is “how do these economic realities interact with the political economy and political pressures?” I think there's a bit of a countervailing impulse from the Iranian leadership that while there is this significant economic pressure, at all costs, the Iranians do not want to appear desperate. They do not want to appear that they need a deal more than the United States does. I think they consider that integral to maintaining their leverage in these negotiations. So I
think we’re seeing both of these play out. As a final point, I did want to draw some distinction between the positions of the president and the Foreign Minister Zarif as separate from the Supreme Leader and the Supreme Leader’s office. I think from the point of view of President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif, I mean, their time is almost up. The election is in June, a new president takes over in August.

I think they view I think in quite a rational political way, that resurrecting, or at least making major progress on JCPOA before that, is key to their future political survival and key to that of their allies. I think the Supreme Leader does not have the same calculation. I think there’s a certain degree of ambivalence from his point of view, whether there's progress immediately before or after the election. On the one hand, he wants to generate some positive economic—either actual progress or hints of it—to try to generate more optimism and drive turnout in the election, and on the other hand, there is a bit of caution about trying to really empower Rouhani and Zarif and their cadre of people to perhaps undermine his plans for the election. I think this is a point that Hannah and others outlined before, but I think it's important to emphasize.

Jon Alterman:
Thank you. Given that background that we've heard Eric, Hannah, and Henry lay out, is the right negotiating approach this idea of “freeze for freeze,” we do something small, we try to build confidence, we try to create the feedback loop? Eric, you’ve spent a lot of time thinking about nuclear negotiations. Are we in the place where we should have confidence building measures? And how should we think about actions by the Iranians that seem to refute confidence building measures?

Eric Brewer:
I don't want to be too pessimistic here. I certainly think there's a role that confidence building measures can play. And you can take some steps to reverse the mistrust that's built up over four years of the Trump administration. I think the United States has done a few things in this regard. It has made a decision that snapback did not take place. It's reversed that call, the last administration, which I think is smart in its own right, but I think that's obviously a positive step. It's also done away with some of the added restrictions on Iranian diplomats. Again, a good signal on a positive step. And as I alluded to earlier, we've seen Iran pull back from the worst possible outcome with the IAEA that keeps some of that monitoring in place.

I think there's probably a few things you could do in addition to that to help at least normalize or reduce the tensions that exist. One of those things may be for the United States to waive sanctions that have been imposed on certain types of nuclear cooperation projects that were permitted under JCPOA, that I think the expert community on this resolutely views as in the U.S. non-proliferation interest because it makes these facilities less able to be used for nuclear weapons. I think that's another step that the United States could take that wouldn't yield any major leverage that it has. I think there's small things like this. But I don't think you're going to get to a place where Iran is rolling back some of the steps that's taken or that the United States is actually providing sanctions relief.

I think that's still probably a bridge too far. The first option, in my mind, is to at least test the waters and see if the United States and Iran can achieve a return to the JCPOA, because that's what the United States has signaled that it wants, that's what Iran has said that it wants. It would be a little bit strange to come into those meetings and first try for the freeze for freeze deal, before trying to do the return that both the United States and Iran claim to wan, and the Iranian position has certainly been one that has been consistent, even under the Trump administration. They have talked about the goal to return to the deal and then we can have conversations about what follows next, although some of the recent comments roll that back a bit.
Jon Alterman:
Let me ask Henry about that if I can. Are we going to be able to get back to the JCPOA and then work the other stuff later, do the following stuff? Can we do the big thing early and get back to status quo ante?

Henry Rome:
I think fundamentally, yes, that there is a clear path forward here. Though I would say—and I want to underscore that I think Eric's initial steps about talking about rolling back the waivers or rather issuing waivers related to non-proliferation steps and others that have been thrown around, such as removing objections to an IMF loan—I think those are good ideas. I think they should be thought of in the narrow context of “what do we need to do to bring Iran to the table” and nothing more. I don't think we should get carried away with the idea that each side should do reciprocal positive measures outside of the context of negotiations. Here I harken back a bit to the one episode of U.S.-Iran history under the George H. W. Bush administration, in terms of this idea of goodwill for goodwill, which I won't bore the audience with this story, but because Javad Zarif, the Iranian Foreign Minister, used this phrase just a few weeks ago.

The lesson from that episode was that if the two sides aren't really talking to each other and don't have a clear understanding of what steps are equivalent to what steps and how there is clear, coordinated, synchronized efforts forward, I think it just breeds further mistrust and can frankly collapse and end up in a worse place than you started. To underscore, I think the goal is to get back to negotiations and what happens at the table, I think that's where you can talk about smaller steps that would build confidence. But I think it has to be within a context of the two sides talking, whether it's technical talks, or informal talks, or whatever branding the Iranians want to put on it, I think that I would offer the United States a fundamental goal right now.

Jon Alterman:
Hannah, if we're in those talks and we see actions like the attacks by forces aligned with Iran against U.S. facilities, if we saw another event like the attack on those Saudi oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais. or bombing of tankers in the Gulf of Oman like we saw in May 2019, how should the United States think about these things that happen outside the negotiation room and outside the space of the nuclear issue? How should those affect discussions on nuclear issue? Should the United States ignore them, should the United States respond as if there are no talks going on? It seems to me clear that this is part of a concerted Iranian government efforts.

Hannah Kaviani:
Well, you're a better person to answer this question. But that's why events like this—although the nature of the events which you mentioned are different than ones where the supposed role of the Iranian proxies are debated, especially the recent one in Erbil where the Iran-align group denied its role in an attack in Erbil—but that's why there are these events that make the situation volatile and fragile. That's why extending the time to fix the situation with this JCPOA—to not fix it, but maybe stabilize the situation with the JCPOA—becomes necessary and it's important that it happens.

I'm sure that the U.S. administration has a better answer than me here sitting in Prague, but obviously there are certain elements inside the U.S. policy when it comes to the Middle East that are also important, or as important as the situation with the nuclear deal, especially as we saw in the first weeks of the Biden administration and how it decided to act on an issue like Yemen. These are the that by not having Iran at the table, or by not convincing Iran to play a positive role in that process, is not going to
be solved. Stabilizing the JCPOA situation to many today sounds like a better idea to go and take care of other concerns when it comes to Iran in the region and the groups that it's supporting.

But back to how these things are going to work, how these steps or baby steps are going to work with Iran. I understand Eric's point on the non-proliferation front, but I also think that those kinds of steps are not going to be enough—at least from what we hear from the Islamic Republic today, from all officials all over the board, they are not going to be convinced. The Supreme Leader is not going to be able to convince his own followers with the steps such as the ones on non-proliferation and where it doesn't include something like sanction relief or IMF loan.

Jon Alterman:
So I want to start bringing in some questions we've gotten from the audience and Professor Jeff McCausland from Dickinson College asks whether you think that these attacks in Iraqi Kurdistan on U.S. facilities are a demonstration of a divided view in Iran or an effort to show Iranian independence? Is this the good guys and the bad guys fighting a shadow war and the bad guys trying to undermine negotiations, or does this represent a strategy by the Iranian government in your view?

Hannah Kaviani:
Well, there are different views about this issue, because it depends on if we're going to consider the Islamic Republic as a united front or if we're going to divide the Islamic Republic into certain factions and groups and we want to consider those who are in favor of negotiations and those who are not. This really depends on how we look at the Islamic Republic. In my opinion, it can be both scenarios. We have seen several events in the past weeks and months, that when some diplomatic development was happening or was supposed to happen—if it was a foreign trip of an Iranian official or a foreign delegation going to Iran—how much had to do with these kinds of diplomatic developments, I cannot say because finally, there was not enough evidence to show who was doing what. But it is clearly happening. I can't say for sure if it's the Islamic Republic or the factions within the Islamic Republic who are not in favor of it.

Jon Alterman:
Let me bring in Henry. You've spent a lot of time thinking about Iranian politics and the way these manifest themselves. You mentioned we have the presidential elections coming up in June. Is that a deadline? Is it an opportunity? How should we think about the importance of presidential elections as shaping both what the Iranians might be willing to do, might be able to do, and whether that provides more of an opportunity or more of a threat for U.S. negotiators?

Henry Rome:
For President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif, the June election is a deadline. I don't think we should think of it that way. The Iranians tend to overplay in negotiations with the United States the role of domestic divisions as a way to force action from the United States. The “you need to help us against our hard liners at home” attitude that I think we've had over the years. I think, frankly, that doesn't hold up in this case when it comes to the election. I think the Islamic Republic at a strategic level has made a decision that it wants to get back into the JCPOA under certain circumstances and that wouldn't change whether an extreme, radical president is elected, or a run of the mill conservative is elected.

I don't think we should get into—“we” as coming from an American point of view—the kind of trap of thinking that the elections are a deadline that we have to make progress with the current team because I think it carries a few assumptions. One that I just mentioned in terms of the person that comes next
will be more difficult to work with. I think there's also an assumption that the United States wouldn't be
able to work with the same team, which I think also hasn't held up over the years. For example, Abbas
Araghchi, who has been the deputy foreign minister and is quite close to the Supreme Leader, has been
involved over several administrations in nuclear talks, either at the forefront or more behind the scenes.
From a strategic level, Iran has made a choice and I think the United States should really be driven by
ensuring it achieves its objectives as opposed to being cornered into this June deadline.

Jon Alterman:
When I did an event with Jake Sullivan for CSIS in June, Jake had the interesting phrasing that the
election of Rouhani was not irrelevant toward the outcome of nuclear diplomacy, but it was also not
dispositive, which I think is very much in the lines that you're suggesting, that it might affect some of the
coloration, but the strategic decision is to move forward. Eric, when you're negotiating this stuff, we
have a series of challenges. It's not just getting back into the JCPOA, it's figuring out all the other stuff
that needs to be negotiating, not least fixing what went wrong with the JCPOA and particularly sort of
the snapback from an Iranian perspective. The Iranians never saw the economic benefits that they
anticipated. In your view, when does that get addressed in the negotiations? How fixable are those
problems? And we have a question on our list of whether there needs to be a snapback provision on the
Iranian side too. How do you think about that?

Eric Brewer:
I think some of the issues you raised—whether it's the future of snapback and some of those other
issues—I think risks that Iran might not fully enjoy the benefits of the sanctions relief that come with a
deal, I think those are things that get addressed for the most part in follow-on agreements. There are
probably some things that the United States can do, even when we get back into the JCPOA, that help
ease some of the constraints that Iran has on benefiting from sanctions relief. But I think things like
snapback, the risk that a future U.S. president could walk out of another deal and reimpose sanctions
unilaterally, those things are way, way too complicated to address as part of getting back into the
JCPOA.

I think Iran knows that and public comments on this have shifted over time and now can recognize those
things needed to be put off. That’s one thing that the United States can offer as a carrot for follow-on
negotiations on the nuclear issue, which Iran has more recently thrown up some barriers to and said,
“this is it, the JCPOA is it.” But I think putting things on the table—like more extensive sanction relief,
being willing to be flexible on things like snapback—and considering those things is important, because
those are going to be the Iranian demands. We have a set of demands that are going to come in, we're
going to want to extend timelines in nuclear restrictions, we're going to want to enhance transparency
measures. Well, guess what, Iran is going to have its own ones.

Jon Alterman:
And as Mohammed Eslami, one of the audience participants, suggested, there are also Europeans
involved in these talks, plus Russians and Chinese. Are there key differences in the approach that you
see toward reentering JCPOA, toward ongoing negotiations between the United States and the E3?

Eric Brewer:
I don't think there's huge differences on returning to the deal and getting back in. You may start to see
some fissures open up when conversations begin about how to build on the deal, because these are
things that I think haven't really been thought through on any of these sides and if the U.S. goal is to
lengthen and strengthen the nuclear restrictions in the JCPOA, and also address regional issues, and also address missile issues, how you sequence all of those, how do you do them in separate tracks. So I think there's a lot to be thought through that just hadn't been done.

I could easily see some differences emerging between the United States and Europe on the one hand, and Russia and China on the other, as you start to tackle some of these broader issues where the interests of all the different parties are more complex than they are when it just comes to issues like non-proliferation. I think there could be some stumbling blocks there. I think the relationships between the United States and Russia, the United States and China, now are just not what they were when the JCPOA was negotiated, although Russia and China were helpful in that regard. I think when it comes to these additional steps and going further, I think that's going to be harder.

On should we be hemmed in by the election deadline? I would completely agree with Henry's comments and Hannah's comments that she made in this regard. I don't think we should let the Iranian election cause us to do other things that we wouldn't otherwise do. I would see this window as a somewhat valuable window where we could potentially make progress because of the interest of the Iranian administration. And I guess, I would differ a little bit where I do think the president of Iran does matter. I think, yes, the regime can make a strategic decision and the Supreme Leader is obviously the final decision maker in this regard. But I do think having a more hardline Iranian president can frustrate, prolong, and make talks harder because let's be honest, a lot of what it comes down to is the details of these discussions. And so I think that the president can and will matter for the future of dialogue.

Jon Alterman:

Is there a consensus on this panel of whether Javad Zarif is likely to continue as foreign minister after August?

Hannah Kaviani:

That's a decision for the Supreme Leader of Iran I would say.

Henry Rome:

I would say unlikely he continues as foreign minister. I was thinking of this point this morning, Jon, about whether he could potentially continue to serve as an almost special envoy to America in a mirror image of what the U.S. State Department has. I think it's possible. But I would see this falling more towards folks like Araghchi to carry this on if it went past August.

Jon Alterman:

Because Zarif—as many of my Trump administration friends have bemoaned—is an incredibly effective speaking to Western audiences. My friend Tom Warwick at the Atlantic Council asked, "Who's winning the information war?" And I would even push it to play out the information war over the next six months. Do you think this is something where the Iranians are going to be able to assert message dominance and shift things in their direction or as I think Hannah was suggesting, are they risking losing their position as the aggrieved party? Can the Biden team shift it, not only in the United States, but around the world toward the Biden approach? How is the information war playing out and how will it play out for whoever wants to take it?

Henry Rome:
I’d offer that the script has somewhat flipped over the past few weeks, that I think the Biden team has done a concerted job of making it clear that they are willing to re-engage, renegotiate, and that it's basically up to the Iranians to decide how you take it from there. I think that view would probably prevail in Western Europe as well. Russia and China, as Eric indicated, differ from the United States and the Europeans on a number of Iran related issues setting aside the nuclear front. But I would offer that. I think if the Iranians play quite hard to get over the next few months, that that would be to their detriment not to recognize that there's an opportunity at play here.

**Eric Brewer:**
I’ll also hop in and I agree with Henry. I think the one instance where that could potentially change is if and when we get to the discussion on the scope of U.S. sanctions relief and how that's going to play out as part of the return. That might be another area where Iran steps up its messaging game and find some potential narratives that it wants to advance and exploit as part of that, because I think that's going to be contentious. That's going to be a contentious discussion about return to the deal. Probably more so than the sequencing of the technical steps on the Iranian side.

**Jon Alterman:**
How do you see the politics playing out in the United States and Iran, as we get toward basically giving stuff to the other side? Is there a view, Hannah, among the Iranian public that the JCPOA approach didn't work and Rouhani got taken? Is there skepticism that there will be goodwill coming from the United States? And Eric and Henry from a U.S. side, when you start sending money to the Iranians and then suddenly whatever happens with it, whether it's with Houthis or Hezbollah or anybody else, it becomes “because the Iranians have money, because they made a deal, that's why more people are dying, that's why they're more terrorists riding high.” Let's start, Hannah, with the Iran side. Is there an appetite to go down this road again to really try to make a new agreement or even get into older one?

**Hannah Kaviani:**
I'm glad you asked because this is very important, especially because in the United States, this is a totally different thing. But in Iran, this is something that has to do with the everyday life of each and every Iranian when it comes to sanctions, tensions with the West, each second of it has an impact on the life of an ordinary Iranian. That's why they arenews savvy, they're following every step of the way. If they are as enthusiastic as they were in 2013, ‘14, ‘15, things have changed. There is no question. Iranians have seen different things throughout these years. They've seen protests, they have seen killings, crackdowns, executions, downing of a civilian plane. They have seen enough.

But that doesn't mean that if they are against the regime, that doesn't mean that if they recognize the human rights violations—and I'm not speaking from the streets of Tehran, I'm sitting in Prague. It's true. I want to be realistic here—but there is no question that there is a portion of the society which thinks that less tension, less sanctions is going to benefit my personal life. How enthusiastic or how much welcoming they will be, if they would go and welcome a foreign minister at Tehran airport, I’m not sure about that. They are not happy about many things, especially in the past couple of years. But obviously, they are looking forward for a better life, which might come from less sanctioned pressure on the country.

**Jon Alterman:**
So let me just follow up because we have a question from one of my former star students, Sahar Nowrouzzadeh, who's now at the Belfer Center, where Henry escaped from. She asked if you can share
thoughts on how Iran's nuclear decision-making and P5+1 unity might be affected in the near term if the United States doesn't at least immediately provide some relief from sanctions previously imposed and suspended under the JCPOA, for primarily nuclear related matters, but then re-imposed under counter-terrorism authorities under President Trump.

Hannah Kaviani:
It's not going to work. I don't think it's going to work, because there have been discussions in the past weeks in some circles. I think Henry has some ideas about this too. But I think those sanctions, which have been changed in nature from non-proliferation to terrorism related and so on, I don't think it will work. But obviously, as we have heard from so many different officials in the past weeks from Europeans, from Americans, from analysts, this is not an easy path forward.

Jon Alterman:
Henry, do you have a view on that?

Henry Rome:
I think the question speaks to two different issues and it's an extremely precise question here. One issue is the fact that the United States and Iran will need to negotiate over sanctions relief, because the Trump administration for very transparent purposes tried to make it more difficult for a subsequent administration to relieve sanctions, by issuing relabeling of specific sanctions designations under terrorism authorities. That's part of the reason why I think this process is going to be a lot longer and more difficult to negotiate than I think many anticipate, because it will require untangling these. I think the Biden administration kind of politically and from national security reasons cannot simply revert to January 20, 2017 status quo ante, which is what the Iranians have called for.

The second part of the question, which is equally important here, is as this drags on—if my view of this is right, which it might not be—but let's just assume that this takes a longer time than just a couple of months, I think we do see a return to—as Eric said—Iran had kind of stepped back over the past five days or so from the brink. I think we will see over time as Hannah's kind of witnessed the Iranians using nuclear capabilities to dial up or dial down pressure in very precise increments. The IAEA's reporting just yesterday indicates that Iran for instance has been keeping a fairly consistent level of production of low enriched uranium, even though they've been installing a huge number of advanced centrifuges, which says to me that they're making a choice to keep production at a moderate level and not ramping up significantly. The flip side of that is of course that yes, we can ramp up significantly if we choose to. I do think that as this goes on, there will be a lot of signaling in that nuclear realm from the Iranian side.

Jon Alterman:
Let me ask Eric to both reflect on that and also reflect on if we get to the point where the Iranians are signaling a lot, how do you think that affects the politics in the United States? How would it affect the U.S. willingness to continue to go down this road? Because they say that the politics will be alert to this. And the answer will still seem to be, I think among some, that the Iranian response to U.S. concessions is more bad behavior. First, you're right and second, how do you deal with the politics?

Eric Brewer:
I think this gets back to the other question too. It's sort of “what is the domestic political angle to all of this?” I think the more that Iran does on the nuclear front, I think that makes it harder politically and this is true for the discussion of sanctions relief as well. Like you talked about earlier, Jon, as soon as
sanctions relief starts happening and Iran has access to its money, there's a political reaction to that in
the United States. I think a lot of that is misplaced, personally. But I think we can't ignore the politics of
this. For me, that's one of the reasons why I think a return to the JCPOA itself is almost easier in some
ways than trying to craft a smaller deal, because you're trying to come up with new arrangements.
Those new arrangements may need to go back to Congress. There are some hurdles there.
There's also additional things United States can do on this front. We talked about the regional issues a
second ago. But I think the United States can walk and chew gum at the same time, where we try and
work with Iran to get a deal—whether that's a return to the JCPOA or some sort of freeze for freeze—
and we continue to push back against regional activities in the missile program. I do think one of the
things that the Biden administration should consider is continuing with some of the efforts by the Trump
administration to enhance interdictions against some of Iran's conventional proliferation. Those things
can still take place. They're valuable in and of their own right and there are also things that, politically
speaking, show that the United States is not ignoring these other very objectionable Iranian activities. So
I think those are things that can and should be done.

Jon Alterman:
Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman, who's the KRG representative, asked the quite relevant question of “how do
you avoid the neighborhood becoming the battleground for this sort of squabbling between the United
States and Iran over the nuclear file? How do you keep the KRG from becoming the victim of either the
success or the failure of these negotiations?” Eric, it goes right to the point you were making that you
have to have a policy toward all these things, but there's a way in which they can get sucked in, and they
can be tied, and if it doesn't go well, it could all go poorly for everybody. Is there a way to guard against
that? Should we insulate some of these issues or is it all of a piece?

Eric Brewer:
I think that the general practice of the Obama administration on this was right. I mean, I think you keep
the nuclear issue separate, you work on that, you deal with that, you base your decisions there on your
interests vis-a-vis nuclear issues and you deal with these other complications in separate ways and
separate channels. You don't let those types of things change your policy vis-a-vis the nuclear issue.
That's still something that can and should be done. I will also note that I think when the United States
was in the JCPOA, the regional situation was a little bit better in terms of attacks against U.S. forces. The
answer isn't always “we need to go harder against Iran's malign activity in the region because otherwise
it's going to endanger the JCPOA or some sort of nuclear negotiations.” But I don't think we should let
ourselves become confused by these issues and have them bleed over and alter our interests and
objectives in ways that aren't particularly helpful.

Jon Alterman:
Henry, Hannah, do you want to come into that before I ask you an unfair parting question?

Henry Rome:
I would make one point to kind of borrow a phrase I believe from David Ben-Gurion, the idea or the
construct, the idea that the United States can counter Iran as if they're no negotiations and pursue
negotiations as if there's no outside conflict with Iran. I think we can do both at the same time and I
think they positively reinforce each other.

Jon Alterman:
The last question as we close out is the most unfair, which is I want you to predict where we're going to be July 1. Are we going to have a big deal, a little deal, no deal? Is there going to be a perception of having some momentum and on the brink of more stuff, or is there going to be confusion and a sense that the Iranians have to figure out what they want before we can move forward? I guess, the very short version is should Rob Malley plan a vacation in July or not? Hannah, do you want to lead off?

Hannah Kaviani:
I think he will deserve a vacation in July because, honestly, I want to go back to the title of this meeting, which is “freeze for freeze.” I think it's a bit problematic to talk about freeze for freeze and not mention that for the United States, the freeze should be freeze over a non-participation in a nuclear deal. And if Iran is insisting on that that means that the United States will at least announce a willingness, or its intention in a formal way, to go back into the deal. If that is the scenario, then I would say that that is the momentum that you're talking about until July 1 and a vacation for Rob Malley.

Jon Alterman:
Eric, do to buy that?

Eric Brewer:
I take a slightly different take. I think come July, I'm hopeful we'll be in one of two places, either on our way towards returning to the JCPOA, with both sides coming back into compliance and taking steps in that regard, or at least some type of deescalated pause if you will on some of the nuclear activities. But I think this really depends on two things. The first is whether or not Iran is willing to come to the table, not just once, but we need to have a sustained dialogue. We're all kind of wrapped around the axle on whether or not everyone's going to end up back there under the invitation of the EU. But we need to not just do that once, we're going to need to do it many, many, many times. And so the question is can we do that? Can that process be sustained? That's the first big question. I think, as we talked about earlier, the other question is "can the United States and Iran agree on the terms and the scope and the type of sanctions relief?" That is the other big question. Those two things are really what I'm going to be paying a lot of attention to over the coming months when we try and all think about predicting where we're going to be in the summer.

Jon Alterman:
Henry is already on Cape Cod. So I think you're already planning your vacation. Are you going to stick around on July 1, or what's going to happen?

Henry Rome:
I do hope for everyone's sake that we're all able to contemplate the word vacation by July 1. I want to say specifically, I think the United States and Iran and the remaining parties will be in talks in July, they will not have returned to compliance with JCPOA yet. I think the United States will probably—either to get Iran to the talks or perhaps in the beginning of talks—issue some small measure of sanctions relief, but not a whole lot. I think there will be an overall positive trajectory, but talks are messy. You have to negotiate the sanctions issues, which we've talked about briefly as well as I think a U.S. political imperative to secure some Iranian commitment to follow on negotiations and regional/missile negotiations as well. So I think it won't be a quiet summer no matter how you cut it.

Jon Alterman:
Thank you very much. Thank you to our audience for your participation, your excellent questions. Thanks very much to my very thoughtful and insightful panels. I learned a lot and I’m grateful to you. We are going to not only post the video, we'll post a transcript of the talk for your reference as soon as we can get it up. Thank you for joining us today. Thanks again to the panels and we hope to see you all again soon. Have a good day.