

EU-Iran relations post-Vienna: the way forward

Eldar Mamedov and Amanda Paul

After 18 days of marathon talks over Iran's nuclear programme, the E3 plus 3 (US, Russia, China, Britain, France, Germany) and Iran agreed on the final text of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), opening a new chapter in relations between Iran and the West after a 12-year standoff.

The agreement, which is expected to sharply curb Iran's nuclear programme, includes the enforcement of strict UN inspections in order to make any attempt to produce nuclear weapons all but impossible and easily detectable, with Iran obliged to allow UN inspectors to enter all its sites, including military ones, a 96% reduction of low enriched uranium to 300kg and a two-thirds reduction of its enrichment capacity. The Trade embargo on conventional weapons will last another five years, and eight years in the case of ballistic missile technology. Once the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has verified that Iran has taken steps to reduce its nuclear programme the deal foresees the lifting of all UN Security Council sanctions, as well as the multilateral and national sanctions specifically related to Iran's nuclear programme, including steps on access in areas of trade, technology, finance, and energy. If at any point Iran fails to comply, the sanctions will snap back into place.

For the past decade the EU made a conscious choice to condition progress in relations with Iran on a single issue: ensuring that the country's nuclear programme is of an exclusively peaceful nature. Concerns over Iran's nuclear activities impeded cooperation in virtually any other area where the EU and Iran had common interests, including fighting drug trafficking from Afghanistan, the refugee crisis, stabilising Iraq, the war in Syria, the fight against ISIS, energy cooperation and trade and investment. The nuclear deal presents an opportunity to move beyond the current policy of containment towards constructive engagement, via a careful step by step approach in a whole host of different areas. No issue of mutual interest should be taboo.

What next?

The agreement needs to be quickly ratified and implemented. While the UN Security Council is expected to approve the deal within days, getting it past US Congress and the Iranian Majles is not going to be easy. The agreement is expected to be a hard sell in the US Congress, which will have 60 days to mull it over. Opponents of the deal in the US, principally Republicans and pro-Israeli constituencies, use the concerns of the US' allies as one of their main arguments. However, this narrative applies almost exclusively to Israel and Gulf monarchies, most notably Saudi Arabia. The prospect of better US-Iran relations alarms Saudi Arabia and a number of other Sunni Gulf states, which are not only suspicious of Shiite Iran and its regional ambitions, but are also concerned about what a warming of US-Iran ties could mean for their relations with Washington. While US President Barack Obama has vowed to veto any congressional effort to block the agreement, opponents would be able to 'kill' it if they can find a two-thirds majority in both chambers, which would override the veto. However, such a scenario seems unlikely as senior Democrats issued early statements of support.

Not surprisingly, the Israeli government reacted negatively to the deal, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu labelling it a "historic mistake". While in a speech on 15 July, Obama stressed that "the US will continue its unprecedented efforts to strengthen Israel's security – efforts that go beyond what any American administration has done before", he also underlined that "without this deal, there would be no agreed-upon limitations for the Iranian nuclear program...which would be far more destabilizing and far more dangerous".

While the EU3 (UK, France, and Germany) are the closest allies of the US, their voices are virtually non-existent in the US domestic debate. In this respect it could prove useful if the EU were to become more visible, explaining the reasons for its own support of the deal and in stressing transatlantic unity. Europe should furthermore stress that this is a multilateral deal, and make it clear that, should the US Congress choose to act unilaterally and shoot down the deal, the EU would honour its commitments under the JCAOP and proceed with the termination of sanctions upon verification of the Iranian compliance by the IAEA. The EU should also use the leverage that it has

gained with Iran, in particular during the last few months, to engage with the Majles to step up the ratification process of the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement and Additional Protocol to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, the key monitoring mechanism at the disposal of the IAEA.

At the same time, the EU should begin to put in place a strategy for future relations with Iran, including opening an EU Delegation in Tehran. This could be kicked off with a strategic discussion in the European Council along with the establishment of an inter-institutional task-force tasked with identifying specific areas and projects for EU-Iran relations. This should be an inclusive process involving politics, business and civil society. These could include the following:

Enhanced dialogue on regional security issues: Iran has a significant geostrategic importance, influencing, one way or another, all the crises currently unfolding in the region. It is also one of the only regional states to have a properly functioning state security apparatus, which has helped the country resist threats from ISIS. With Iran completely opposed to ISIS and Al-Qaeda, cooperation with Iran on building a counter-ISIS strategy for Iraq, Syria and the broader Middle East is one possibility. While the interests of the EU and Iran are aligned in Iraq, in Syria they diverge as a consequence of Tehran's support for the Assad regime. Nevertheless, Iran has a major role to play in ending the civil war in Syria and if the EU is committed to creating a more stable region it must take on board the views of all regional stakeholders. The UK and France should therefore remove their objections to Iran's participation in the Geneva talks and invite Iran to join.

Afghanistan: The EU and Iran interests are most aligned in Afghanistan in terms of the fight against the twin dangers of drug trafficking and extremism. A high-level dialogue could be established in this respect. In the long run Central Asia could be accessed through Iran and Afghanistan.

Energy cooperation: Iran is in urgent need of Western technology to upgrade its energy sector, which is currently inefficient and outdated. As a recent EPC Policy Brief by David Ramin Jalilvand on ['After a nuclear deal – What next for Iranian oil and gas?'](#) underlines, "a nuclear accord would substantially benefit Iran's energy sector, especially regarding co-operation with Europe. Unlike US sanctions, the EU's energy and financial sanctions were adopted only in relation to Iran's nuclear activities. As such, a nuclear accord would open the door for trade between the two sides as well as the return of European energy companies". The EU should develop an energy partnership agreement with Iran.

Human rights: Iran's human rights situation is a matter of significant concern and detrimental to the country's image and EU-Iran relations. The EU should respond positively to the readiness of the Iranian Foreign Ministry to engage in a human rights dialogue. To make such a dialogue effective, it should be focused on clear, achievable goals: reduce the rate of executions, including freezing all executions of juvenile offenders, and the eradication of torture. To have a meaningful impact, the Iranian judiciary should be involved as well. Training for security forces, judges and prosecutors in EU countries could be envisaged. Iran needs to be convinced that human rights is not a foreign policy tool but a genuine concern.

Sectorial cooperation in areas such as environment protection, water management, infrastructure development and planning, technology transfer, academic and cultural exchanges.

While such cooperation would be a win-win situation for both sides, it may not be so easy to establish as significant differences between member states on the level of engagement with Iran, remain, for various reasons, including alliances with other Gulf States. However, at the same time, the creation of a web of interdependence will help rebuild trust and act as an incentive for both EU and Iran to avoid the derailment of relations at some point in the future.

Amanda Paul is a Senior Policy Analyst at the European Policy Centre (EPC). Eldar Mamedov, Political Adviser in the European Parliament writing in his personal capacity.