



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

US-Iran prisoner exchange deal - Is the nuclear deal nearing?



The US-Iran deal to exchange prisoners and unblock billions of dollars of frozen Iranian assets might be implemented before the end of October unless some major obstacle emerges.

Without providing any specifics regarding the execution of the complex diplomatic arrangement, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan stated last week that things "remain on track" for the time being. This diplomatic arrangement is being supported and carried out in collaboration with 3 additional countries.

It is definite that the agreement, which has been in development for between a year and a half and 2 years, is approaching the finale and the return of 5 American citizens detained in Iran.

According to this week's statement by the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson, even though the agreement does not stipulate a time frame, its full implementation will require a "maximum of 2 months".

A win-win situation, but risks remain

There is almost no danger of the deal being jeopardised during that period. About \$6 billion of Iranian money, frozen in South Korean banks due to sanctions, has started to flow in tranches to Tehran through intermediaries in Qatar.

At the same time, Tehran authorities released 4 out of 5 American citizens from the infamous Evin Prison. They placed them under house arrest until the finalisation of the deal, at which point they would board a plane and return home.

The main points of the agreement are already being implemented, step by step. This means that both parties are satisfied and agree (with caution) to finalise it, with all the risks this will involve.

While freeing up a substantial sum of Iran's frozen revenue from oil sales, the prisoner exchange is ultimately a win-win solution for both sides.

But this is only one step from which far-reaching conclusions should not be drawn (yet) that a historic thaw has occurred between the US and Iran.

"Nothing about our overall approach to Iran has changed. We continue to pursue a strategy of deterrence, of pressure and diplomacy", said Antony Blinken, US State Secretary, last week.

Tehran interested in money

With this agreement, the regime in Tehran will achieve its priority goal, a large amount of much-needed money, to repair the dramatic social situation in the country, where 60% of the population is exposed to poverty and hunger.

Also, Tehran is already using the deal extensively to establish its position with the domestic public, shaken by long-lasting protests against repression and the murder of activist Mahsa Amini a year ago.

As mediators between the US and Iran who assisted in putting the deal into effect, particularly its financial component, Qatar and Oman will claim significant points in the regional struggle for prestige and power.

Washington has been rightly cautious about

spreading optimism, even though they have good reason to be pleased, simply because no deal with Tehran could be considered done until it is done.

The agreement is a "positive step", said Secretary Blinken, but he added that American citizens "are not home yet".

Biden will be accused of being tolerant

The return of Americans of Iranian origin home will definitely be a successful day for the Biden administration since it will happen just one year before the presidential elections in which the US president expects to win a new term.

However, these will also be when he will be exposed to attacks of being tolerant towards the regime in Tehran more than before.

After the first confirmation that a deal was on the table, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu opposed it and said that no agreements should be reached with Tehran and that the unfrozen funds would be used to fund "terror elements sponsored by Tehran".

Biden's deal will also be under attack at home from the Republicans, who, like him, will be in the middle of the campaign, saying that he "paid a ransom to the blackmailers" from Tehran.

Still, the prisoner exchange and another thaw in Iran's sanctioned billions are in line with Biden's campaign promises to reinstate the deal to control Iran's nuclear programme, from which his predecessor, Donald Trump, withdrew in 2018.

A step towards curbing Iran's nuclear programme

That is why the episode with the exchange of prisoners and the unfreezing part of Iranian assets in foreign banks was calculated to lead to an agreement on curbing Iran's advanced nuclear programme and putting it under international supervision.

To that end, there was another recent unfreezing of \$2.7 billion of Iraqi debt for Iranian oil, to which the US consented last June.

Washington's concessions, such as the prisoner exchange and the unfreezing of some Iranian assets abroad, aim to raise mutual trust from the current zero.

This will be essential to the more significant deal: to stop Iran's nuclear programme before it uses it as a weapon.

After all, this step-by-step diplomacy with Iran already had a similar course once, at the beginning of 2016, when the now rejected nuclear agreement, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), started to be implemented.

Its implementation had been preceded by the exchange of prisoners between the US and Iran when 4 Americans returned home from captivity in Iran.