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THE CURRENT: Biden is ready to resume nuclear talks with Iran. How will they respond?

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**Host:** Adrianna Pita, Office of Communications, Brookings

**Guest:** Suzanne Maloney, Vice President and Director, Foreign Policy, Brookings

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

On Thursday, the Biden administration formally announced their willingness to restart nuclear talks with Iran and spoke with their European allies about restoring U.S. participation in the 2015 JCPOA nuclear agreement with Iran.

With us today to talk about this and possible next steps is Suzanne Maloney, vice president and director of Foreign Policy here at Brookings. Suzanne, thanks for talking to us today.

MALONEY: Glad to be here.

PITA: So, it's no surprise that the Biden administration has made this move; this was part of what they campaigned on, restoring U.S. participation to a lot of its global agreements. However, what can you tell us about the timing of this? Does moving on reengaging with Iran within a month of his inauguration indicate where Iran ranks as a priority for Biden and his administration, or does this have any relationship to Iran's threat to block "short-notice" inspections by the IAEA, the International Atomic Energy Agency, a provision that's part of the nuclear deal?

MALONEY: Thanks, Adrianna. I think we see a couple of things happening here. One is that Iran is a real priority for the Biden administration. That said, there are a number of other priorities that the president has articulated from the earliest days of this administration, and Iran is no longer at the top of anyone's list, simply because we're dealing with a global pandemic, and there have been other shifts in the global climate that have created other priorities for Washington. But one can't simply look away from a situation in which the nuclear deal which had imposed some constraints on Iran's nuclear activities has frayed significantly, and Iran has expanded its nuclear activity steadily in a way that has reduced its breakout time from nuclear weapons capability. So this has to factor into any early administration activity.

There have been some who have been pressing for and hoping for almost a day one step from the Biden administration to reenter the deal. My sense is that was always both unrealistic and unhelpful. This is a complicated issue and it requires a thoughtful engagement with the United States and its allies and partners around the world, several of which were party to the original agreement. And it really requires some thinking about what the horizon for Iran policy should be. It's difficult to get anything done quickly, cheaply, and properly, as the saying goes, and on Iran policy I think getting it right is more important than getting it fast.

So while there has been actually some frustration that there wasn't a quicker move by the Biden administration, I think what we've seen over the course of the past few days is an indication from the president that there's readiness on the part of Washington to sit down with Iranian interlocutors in the context of a wider conversation with the other parties to the deal, about how to get back to some compliance with the deal, but as the president said in his speech at the Munich Security Conference, this is nuclear diplomacy that is the objective. It is not the sole objective of the administration to simply revert to the 2015 agreement, and that exposes a wider debate within the policy community in Washington.

There are many who believe that a quick and uncomplicated return to compliance with the 2015 agreement is preferable. It would provide the quickest pathway to sanctions relief for Iran and obviously the quickest pathway to a reversion to nuclear restrictions on Iran's activity. But it wouldn't address what even Secretary of State Blinken referenced in his confirmation testimony, which is a need for a longer and stronger deal, an agreement that addresses the impending timeline of some of the sunset clauses within the original nuclear agreement, as well as the wider array of concerns about the threat that Iran poses. And so I think what we've seen from the Biden administration is a recognition that diplomacy is important and urgent, but in fact it shouldn't be bounded by a simple goal of reversion to the JCPOA. It should be in fact, expansive. That's what I took away from the president's remarks at the Munich Security Conference today.

PITA: When the Trump administration walked away from the nuclear deal, it also engaged some further sanctions on Iran. How has Iran responded so far to the Biden administration's initial overtures, and how likely are they to agree to reengage in any kind of talks based on diplomatic gestures like these versus pressing for more material steps such as sanctions relief?

MALONEY: The Iranians have set this up as a game of chicken. They have been insisting that it was the United States that walked away from the deal back in 2018, and so therefore any first move should be made by Washington to simply reinstate all of its measures of compliance with the deal, which would provide Iran with substantial sanctions relief and economic benefits.

Of course, because Iran is not adhering to its own obligations under the deal, I think that's a laughable notion. There would be real no precedence for an American administration to provide economic benefits to Tehran without ensuring that there were some reciprocal concessions from the Iranians that could be guaranteed. And so we've been locked in something of a standoff, where both sides say the other should move first, and there hasn't been an opportunity for diplomacy.

Washington has now said they'll come back to the table. The Iranians have not yet committed to do so. But my expectation is that they will because they need some kind of an end to this impasse. They need better access to the international financial system that would be provided by any form of sanctions relief. And what I think and hope that they're seeing is that their attempts to engage in crisis diplomacy by threatening to walk away from compliance with the additional protocol that does provide additional IAEA access are not, in fact, producing the outcome that they hoped in terms of creating some incentive for unilateral concessions from Washington. That's never going to happen. It should not happen.

And I think there is some degree of pragmatism within Iran, so I do expect diplomacy to get under way. How successful it will be, how quick it will be, is very much to my mind up in the air. But the real goal here needs to be to get both sides talking about what a pathway looks like, and that's precisely what the president said today in Munich.

PITA: Iran is going to have some of its own presidential elections coming up this June. What role are any kind of internal politics and internal currents playing in how they respond and how receptive they're going to be?

MALONEY: Iran's Islamic Republic has real politics, and they're often bitterly fought contests for various elected offices. That said, I am less concerned about the timeline of the Iranian presidential election than I think many other analysts around Washington and on social media and elsewhere. Simply because I think we have now seen proof that the nuclear diplomacy as well as every other significant national security decision that is made in Iran is not made at the presidential level and is not really subject to shifts based on the changes in the office of the presidency. These strategic decisions are made by Iran's supreme leader, who is not elected but has been appointed for life, and who has made very clear that he will not endorse any kind of diplomacy that does not meet his basic prerequisites, which is retaining at least some significant aspect of Iran's nuclear activity, and ensuring that Iran gives as little and gets as much as possible.

So my presumption is that nuclear diplomacy can begin at any time. It can survive whatever happens in terms of the internal machinations around the Iranian presidential elections. I am far less concerned about the battle between so-called moderates and hardliners and others because ultimately the real decisionmaker here is the supreme leader and his office isn't changing except insofar as he is expected at some stage to pass from this earth. He's 82 years old; he has a legacy of wanting to protect his investment in this regime and in that sense, the time urgency is not so much around the presidential election, but around what I think is already emerging in terms of a jockeying for position around the eventual succession in that position.

So rather than fetishizing concerns about moderates or hardliners or reformists, we should treat the Iranian leadership as it behaves, as a unitary actor with a shared commitment to preserving the regime. And part of that shared commitment to preserving the regime includes a commitment to preserving the nuclear program. It will be a tough negotiation, but they will be prepared to negotiate because they need economic relief from the international community.

PITA: As we're looking ahead, I want to go back to some of your remarks earlier about "getting it right" versus "getting it quickly" and the Biden administration's goals for a "longer and stronger deal." Right now, of course, the focus is just on bringing Iran and the U.S. back to some form of the table. What other factors are going to play into getting this longer and stronger form of the deal; what are some of the other steps the Biden administration should be starting to think about, looking to that further-ahead goal?

MALONEY: There's no guarantees, first and foremost. And I think there's good reason why the nuclear issue was to some extent segregated from the rest of the long list of concerns about Iran's foreign and domestic policy when it came to the negotiations that took place during the Obama administration. But what we know is that a nuclear deal in isolation from policies that have some efficacy in blunting Iran's nefarious impact on the region, in ameliorating the really horrific treatment of Iran's own population, is not a durable nuclear deal. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action came under attack not simply from those who felt that its provisions were insufficient, but because the underlying bargain that at least some within the Obama administration hoped might prove true – that nuclear diplomacy could lead to regional diplomacy, that an Iran that would be willing to curb its nuclear activities would be willing to curb some of its other more provocative policies – that didn't actually play out, because there really was no linkage

between them. Iran had no further incentive to improve its behavior once it had gotten the sanctions relief from the nuclear deal back when it was implemented in early 2016.

So, what I hope the Biden administration does is to approach Iran as not simply a segregated set of problems. Iran is not simply a nuclear issue. It is a complex country that presents a threat to its neighbors, that has engaged in terrible repression against its own population, that is trying to get access to weapons of mass destruction, and we have to deal with this set of problems in a way that is integrated, that conditions progress in each area on progress in others.

There's another set of concerns that I think has often not received the attention it deserves, and that is the tendency of the Iranian government to seize individuals as hostages to use as leverage in its negotiations with the international community. We've seen yet another example of that with the news this week of an American citizen who joins a number of others who've been imprisoned on trumped-up charges by the Iranian leadership, in many cases for years. And this also has to be a high priority for the Biden administration, because any nuclear deal which can be held hostage by Iran's seizure of an individual American citizen is not going to be durable. So it's not an easy problem to solve, but I think that what we've seen – and this is not just on Iran, but on a whole range of issues from the Biden administration – is a real determination to dig in and dig deep, to think about the process and about the policy goal, not to impose undue urgency where that is unnecessary, but to try to get the policy right rather than to get the policy quick.

So, I'm encouraged by what I see from the Biden administration. It's not going to be an easy haul on Iran, but I think they've started off on the right foot.

PITA: All right. Suzanne, thanks very much for talking to us today about this.

MALONEY: Thank you, Adrianna.