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THE CURRENT: Will Natanz attack, uranium enrichment derail nuclear diplomacy with Iran?

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(MUSIC)

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

As talks between Iran and the U.S. are set to resume in Vienna this week, Iran announced that it will begin enriching uranium up to 60% purity – short of the standard needed for a nuclear weapon, but a further step out of compliance with the 2015 nuclear deal that the U.S. is hoping to rejoin in some form.

With us to discuss the implications of Iran's move for the ongoing negotiations is Robert Einhorn, a senior fellow with the Arms Control and Non-Proliferation Initiative here at Brookings. Bob, thanks for talking to us this morning.

EINHORN: Sure, Adrianna, thanks for having me.

PITA: Iran's announcement followed an attack this weekend at one of its nuclear facilities in Natanz. What do we know about this attack and why is Iran responding in this way?

EINHORN: Well, what we know is that Iran plans to begin enriching uranium to 60%, which is a step closer to weapons grade of 90%. And it's also going to add about 1000 advanced centrifuges to its operation at Natanz.

Why did they do this? I think there was a combination of reasons. It felt it needed to show its adversaries, and I'm really talking about Israel and the United States, that it would respond strongly to attacks against Iran. To show its adversaries that there would be consequences that would be damaging to their interests. Clearly there were also domestic pressures to push back hard against this attack.

This was not the first attack against Iran's nuclear program. Last summer there was destruction of a large assembly facility for advanced centrifuges. The attack was assumed by the Iranians to have been conducted by Israel. More recently, there was an assassination against a very prominent Iranian nuclear scientist named Fakhrizadeh, considered to be the J. Robert Oppenheimer of Iran's nuclear weapons program. And years ago, under the Obama administration, there was a cyberattack called Stuxnet that did significant damage to Iran's centrifuges at Natanz. So, this was not new; this was the most recent of recurring attacks to sabotage Iran's program. And the Iranian government, I think needed to show its domestic audience that it wouldn't take such attacks lying down.

Iran also wanted to strengthen its negotiating position in the Vienna talks on returning to compliance with the JCPOA. These began a couple of weeks ago; they're indirect talks. The Americans and Iranians aren't meeting with one another, but the Europeans are serving as intermediaries. And Iran's

recent nuclear build-up over the last year or so has been intended to put pressure on the United States to return to the Iran nuclear deal – the JCPOA – and to remove sanctions against Iran.

The recent attack against Natanz may have slowed this nuclear build-up and weakened pressure that the Iranians hope to place against the United States, and so the Iranians probably felt that they had to restore the negotiating leverage by doing something pretty dramatic like enriching to 60% and installing an additional 1000 advanced centrifuges.

PITA: So, 60%, as you mentioned, isn't weapons grade, but it is quite a sizeable step up. So, one of the big questions here is just how worried should people be if Iran does in fact make this move and starts producing 60% pure uranium?

EINHORN: Clearly, it's worrisome, Adrianna. It's another step toward the ability to enrich to weapons grade, which is roughly 90%. Under the JCPOA, they were allowed only to enrich to 3.67%. Then when they decided to get out of their nuclear restrictions, they first went to 4.5% and then up to 20% but you see, even before the JCPOA, they had been enriching to 20% and they had a rationale for doing so because 20% enrichment is needed to fuel their research reactor in in Tehran.

But this is the first time, this move to 60%, which is supposed to begin, I'm told, on Tuesday, is the first time that they've been above 20%. It has no convincing peaceful justification, so it is worrisome. And even if they only begin this process, they will gain valuable information about how to step up their enrichment and even if eventually they returned to the JCPOA, it won't be possible to unlearn the knowledge that they've gained by beginning this process.

But you know, in my view, the move to 60% does not signal that Iran is preparing to move quickly to 90% and build nuclear weapons. Experts believe they only intend to produce very small quantities of 60% and mainly to demonstrate that they have the capability to do so, as a kind of warning that they're prepared to go further, if their diplomatic demands aren't met. And just yesterday, the U.S. intelligence community issued a report in which it said, Iran is not currently undertaking key nuclear weapons development activities. So, this development is worrisome but it's not alarming, in my view. It's not an indication that Iran is preparing, in the near future, to go for nuclear weapons.

PITA: To bring us back to the diplomatic track, these talks in Vienna, as you mentioned, being facilitated by the JCPOA signatories to try and bring Iran back into compliance and the U.S. back into the deal, what effect have we seen this announcement have on the future of these talks? Tell us some more about your thoughts on how this will affect the negotiations going forward.

EINHORN: My own hope is that it won't have an adverse effect on the negotiations. I think both the Biden administration and Iran's Rouhani administration hope that this attack won't adversely affect efforts to restore the JCPOA. The Biden administration wants to roll back Iran's nuclear build-up and the Rouhani administration wants the United States to remove sanctions, so both sides have an incentive to continue these negotiations.

I find it interesting that soon after the attack Iran sent its delegation back to Vienna to resume negotiations. I think it's also interesting that Iranian officials have characterized the attack as an effort to prevent Iran from gaining the sanctions relief that would result from a return to the JCPOA. I think what Iranian officials are telling their domestic audience is that they won't be intimidated, that they will persist in

the negotiations to gain the economic benefits of restoring the JCPOA, so for now talks will continue. But I think events in the region could seriously complicate or perhaps even derail diplomacy.

Recently, Israel attacked an Iranian vessel in the Red Sea and just on Tuesday, Iran attacked a ship owned by an Israeli businessman in the Persian Gulf. So far, apparently, no casualties in either the maritime attacks or in the in the attack on the Natanz enrichment facility. But the situation could easily escalate and get out of hand and if that happens, domestic pressures on both sides could mean a hardening of negotiating positions and reduce prospects for agreement on returning to the JCPOA. So I think hopefully, the impact of the attack will be minimal on the negotiations but, but you can't count on that.

PITA: All right, and finally, what are some options for the U.S. and its allies to de-escalate some of those tensions, particularly to try and keep a lid on the tensions between Israel and Iran in the region.

EINHORN: Well, I think, at this stage, quiet diplomacy will be required. All sides, including Iran, Israel, and United States, should be encouraged to show restraint, to avoid belligerent actions and provocative rhetoric. The Europeans, Russians, and Chinese should do what they can to urge to urge Iran not to engage in dangerous retaliatory steps. In other words, to be content with its actions in terms of boosting enrichment levels and advanced centrifuges and not to take dangerous steps, whether it's in terms of maritime activities or other activities. And the Europeans and the Biden administration should call on Israel not to engage in activities that could further heighten tensions. Now, of course, the Biden administration is not going to say anything to Israel to suggest that the United States does not support actions the Israelis believe are essential to protect Israeli security. But I think the Biden administration should can and should encourage Israel at this stage not to escalate the situation in a way that could damage prospects for diplomacy. But I think to be effective, any such encouragement to Israel would have to be pursued through private diplomatic channels.

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

EINHORN: My pleasure, Adriana.