

Iran: The Narrowest Window For Detente

CURT MILLS

April 2, 2021

The Biden administration consented to new informal talks with Iran on Friday, after months of dashing hopes of restrainers, progressives.

Throwing a bone to his left flank, as well as to prominent conservative allies of restraint, Joe Biden's administration announced on Friday the resumption of some indirect talks with Iran. They are set to take place next week through intermediaries in Vienna, Austria.

For weeks, the progressive wing of the Democratic Party had assailed the new president for an unexpectedly hawkish line on Iran. These swipes followed airstrikes on Iranian proxies in Syria earlier this year and the apparent, active disinterest on the part of the administration in swiftly returning to the nuclear accord brokered by its Democratic predecessor. Biden supporter Rep. Ro Khanna, a hardline foreign policy restrainer, this week panned Biden's national security team for its "disappointing start," and previously warned Biden to stop "playing chicken" with Iran.

Rubbing it in, this week the socialist periodical *Jacobin* proclaimed: "Joe Biden is killing the Iran deal," that is, finishing the work of Donald Trump. For its part, Iran tried to play it cool Friday with its state press chiding any "step-by-step lifting of sanctions." Behind the scenes, however, the government is seen as likely set to accept any serious sanctions relief it can get, after years of pummeling at the hands of President Trump. The informal nature of the current talks suits both sides, with Iran's foreign minister Javad Zarif emphasizing what's not on the agenda next week: "No Iran-US meeting," before adding, "unnecessary."

Longtime critics of Zarif and the deal are certainly plussed. Richard Goldberg of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies and formerly of the Trump White House, concluded on Friday that Biden administration is "offering terrorism sanctions relief to Iran without any demand it halt" its regional, malign behavior, as part of the salvo to have informal talks. Goldberg charged such a move "shatters" promises made by Antony Blinken, Biden's secretary of state. FDD's leadership had previously hailed Blinken, seemingly trying to cultivate him as an ally for the organization's *de facto* regime change policy preference.

Citing the Goldberg comments, a conservative proponent of the deal, Justin Logan of the CATO Institute, said "Periodic reminder that the Trump administration sanctioned Iranian entities on terrorism grounds which were already sanctioned on nuclear grounds. Why do this? To make it harder politically to return to the nuclear deal."

Foreign policy realists frequently make the case that conflating violent, regional behavior on the part of Iran and its cadre of Shia militias is a tendentious sleight of hand, equating Shia state thuggery with Sunni millenarian terrorism, the likes which struck the U.S. on September 11. The leadership of the Republican Party disagrees, perhaps most prominently former Secretary of

State Mike Pompeo, who has branded swathes of the Iranian high command terrorists, and who oversaw the assassination of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani on such grounds last year.