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Between US Sanctions, EU Inaction and Iranian Reluctance: The JCPOA, a Deal in Peril?

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On November 4th, Iran commemorated the fortieth anniversary of the takeover of the US embassy. This event celebrated every year under the names “*Anti-Arrogance Day*” and “*Student Day*”, appears as a pillar in the definition of the Islamic Republic’s identity. This revolutionary narrative is epitomized through the national motto; “*Independence, Freedom, Islamic Republic*”. In this national fiction, the seizure of the embassy has a deep significance; it symbolizes the victory of the *Oppressed* over the *Oppressors* and the deliverance of Iran from the claws of the Great Satan, an implicit reference to the US government. On the occasion, demonstrators gathered in major cities, chanting the slogan “*Down with USA*”.¹ Moreover, the authorities revealed new murals on the walls of the former embassy,

¹ “Massive Rallies in Iran to Mark Anti-Arrogance Day,” IRNA English, November 4, 2019, <https://en.irna.ir/photo/83542060/Massive-rallies-in-Iran-to-mark-anti-Arrogance-Day>; Jason Rezaian, “The Politics of ‘Death to America,’” *Washington Post*, October 8, 2013, sec. WorldViews, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/10/08/the-politics-of-death-to-america/>.

picturing more recent episodes illustrating the animosity opposing Tehran to Washington, such as the downing of an American drone by the Iranian forces, in the Persian Gulf.²

It is within this tense atmosphere that the Iranian government announced a fourth breach in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a deal aimed at limiting Iran's nuclear capacities. As a response to the unilateral withdrawal of the US from the JCPOA and following the intensification of the American sanctions that have severely impacted its oil exports, Tehran started to gradually reduce its commitments to the deal in May 2019.³ The recent breach focuses on uranium enrichment which has now reached 4.5 percent, while limited to 3.67 percent according to the deal.⁴

By reducing its commitment to the JCPOA step by step, the Iranian government intends to put pressure on the European signatories. As a matter of fact, Paris, London and Berlin have demonstrated only little willingness to thwart the American sanctions.⁵ Furthermore, the lack of reliability of the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX) jeopardizes the Iranian economic expectations derived from the ratification of the deal.⁶ While President Macron expressed his profound concerns, accusing Tehran of wanting to leave the JCPOA, Foreign Minister Zarif took to Twitter to denounce the inaction of his European counterparts in safeguarding the deal.⁷ The Iranian government explained that it could reconsider its recent position and fulfil, once more, all its obligations if its expectations were to be satisfied, that is to say; if the sanctions are lifted.⁸

Concerns of another kind were raised by a recent report of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), according to which "*natural uranium particles of anthropogenic origin*" have been detected in an undisclosed location.⁹ This report also confirms the intensification of Iran's nuclear activities.

These events illustrate the growing reluctance of Iran to maintain its commitment to a deal that offers only limited outcomes, in a country that faces a severe economic crisis. Deputy Foreign Minister

² Fotini Christia, November 11, 2019, "Tehran Paints Over Its Anti-American Murals," *Foreign Policy* (blog), accessed November 13, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/11/tehran-iran-anti-american-murals-united-states-weaker-laughable/>.

³ "Uranium Particles Found at Undeclared Iran Site," *BBC News*, November 11, 2019, sec. Middle East, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50382219>; "Iran Enriching At Fordow, IAEA Confirms, As Enriched Uranium Stock Grows," Radio Farda, November 11, 2019, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-enriching-at-fordow-iae-confirms-as-enriched-uranium-stock-grows/30264731.html>.

⁴ "Iran Begins Pouring Concrete For 2nd Nuclear Power Reactor," Radio Farda, November 10, 2019, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-begins-pouring-concrete-for-2nd-nuclear-power-reactor/30262795.html>.

⁵ "Iran Enriching At Fordow, IAEA Confirms, As Enriched Uranium Stock Grows."

⁶ "Iran Says INSTEX Has Not Been Fully Implemented," Tehran Times, November 11, 2019, <http://www.tehrantimes.com/news/441906/Iran-says-INSTEX-has-not-been-fully-implemented>.

⁷ *Macron Says Iran Move Signals Its Intent To Quit Nuclear Agreement*, 2019, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/macron-says-iran-move-signals-its-intent-to-quit-nuclear-agreement/30256456.html>; "(1) Javad Zarif (@JZarif) / Twitter," Twitter, accessed November 13, 2019, <https://twitter.com/jzarif>.

⁸ "European Countries Have Warned Iran of 'Breach of Its Nuclear Obligations,'" *BBC News Persian*, November 12, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-50385655>; "Iran Enriching At Fordow, IAEA Confirms, As Enriched Uranium Stock Grows."

⁹ "Uranium Particles Found at Undeclared Iran Site."

‘Arāqchī claimed that Iran will prioritize its national interests over the JCPOA.¹⁰ These recent developments also foreshadows a complicated time for President Rūhānī. The increasing dissatisfaction of the hardliners put his reformist administration into a precarious position. On the one hand, his government needs to ensure that the JCPOA will respond to the socioeconomic aspirations of his own electorate, while on the other hand, it must convince a very skeptical and conservatist audience about the benefits of the agreement. On November 11th, Rūhānī reasserted in a speech “*by continuing the nuclear deal, we will reach a huge political, defensive and security goal.*”¹¹

¹⁰ “Araghchi: National Interests Not JCPOA, Iran’s Highest Priority,” Islamic Republic News Agency English, November 8, 2019, <https://en.irna.ir/news/83546024/Araghchi-National-interests-not-JCPOA-Iran-s-highest-priority>.

¹¹ “Rouhani Touts Arms Sales As Benefit If Iran Sticks To 2015 Nuclear Deal,” Radio Farda, November 11, 2019, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/rouhani-touts-arms-sales-benefit-if-iran-sticks-to-2015-nuclear-deal/30264491.html>.

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