

Iran and US Want the Other to Go First

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Robert Malley

There has been disturbing Middle East news coming out of the Biden Administration. There was the quite unnecessary choice of the pro-Islam anti-Israel Robert Malley as the new Special Envoy on Iran. There was the naming of Maher Bitar, a Palestinian-American with a history of anti-Israel pro-BDS activism, as the National Security Council's Senior Director for Intelligence Programs. There were statements from the Administration signaling its willingness to rejoin the JCPOA without major changes. There was the deliberate snubbing of Israel by President Biden who, two weeks into his administration, had still not called Prime Minister Netanyahu, even though he did manage to call the leaders of Canada, Mexico, the UK, France, Germany, NATO, Russia and Japan, in that order. This was no oversight, but a deliberate semaphoring of Biden's displeasure with Netanyahu for his

aggressive campaigning, through the world media, against an American return to the original Iran nuclear deal.

The good news is that President Biden keeps reiterating, unchanged, that he will remove sanctions only after Iran returns to “full compliance” with the JCPOA. His Secretary of State, Tony Blinken, has repeated this requirement set out by Biden, just in case the Iranians might have deluded themselves into thinking that there was a split within the Administration on this score that Iran might exploit. On his first full day in office, Blinken told a news conference that Iran had first to prove it was in full compliance with the deal, which would require study by the Americans, before any sanctions would be lifted.

Here was his unambiguous statement on Iran:

Iran is out of compliance on a number of fronts. And it would take some time, should it make the decision to do so, for it to come back into compliance and time for us then to assess whether it was meeting its obligations.

Meanwhile, Iranian officials keep saying there is no chance of Iran rejoining the nuclear deal until after all American sanctions have been lifted. The Supreme Leader said in a televised address on January 8 that “We are not insisting nor in a hurry for the U.S. to return to the deal. But what is logical is our demand, is the lifting of the sanctions. These brutal sanctions must be lifted immediately.” Similar sentiments – and the same demand for the lifting of sanctions – have been expressed by President Hassan Rouhani, by Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif, who helped negotiate the original deal, and by several other top officials in Tehran. They all agree: It’s up to America to make the first move, by removing all of its sanctions.

Meanwhile, in a kind of steady point-counterpoint, Secretary of State Tony Blinken continues to insist that America will

wait for Iran to make the first move. On Wednesday, January 27, Blinken said Washington will return to its commitments under the nuclear deal only after Iran first returns to full compliance. Such a precondition highlights a dispute that is set to become one of the Biden administration's most formidable challenges.

It is amusing to watch the Iranians claim, with feigned insouciance, that they are really in no hurry to return to the nuclear deal, that they are managing quite well, thank you very much, and can wait out the Americans until, in Washington, the leaders come to their senses. In fact, Iran is economically in a terrible fix. Its revenues from the sale of oil have gone down by 96% in the past three years. The rial has similarly lost 90% of its value since 2018. Out of 83 million Iranians, 60 million now live below the poverty line. The Iranians have had to cut their subsidies to the Houthis in Yemen, and slashed nearly in half the amounts they give to Hezbollah. They are whistling in the dark, pretending to be able to ride out this storm, but those American sanctions have had a devastating effect on Iran's economy.

Both sides have now staked out two irreconcilable positions. Each insists that the other go first, performing a veritable [Jihad Watch](#).