



Saudis Using Their Nuclear Program as Leverage to Kill JCPOA: Ex-Iranian Negotiator

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – Seyed Hossein Mousavian, a former Iranian nuclear negotiator, said the Saudis are using their nuclear program as a leverage to “incentivize” US President Donald Trump to mount pressure on Iran and ultimately undo the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

February, 28, 2018 - 16:31 | Nuclear |

“...the Saudis have put a lucrative nuclear business deal on the table for Trump. Their main goal is that if the US accepts enrichment & heavy water in Iran, it should accept it in Saudi Arabia, or else Iran’s enrichment & heavy water should be revoked. Of course, they do not care about Israel’s enrichment and reprocessing capabilities. So by providing this lucrative deal and giving immunity to Israel’s nuclear activities, the Saudis aim to incentivize Trump to pressure Iran more and undo the nuclear deal,” Mousavian told Tasnim.

Seyed Hossein Mousavian is an Iranian policymaker and scholar who served on Iran’s nuclear diplomacy team in negotiations with the EU and International Atomic Energy Agency. He currently resides in the United States, where he is a visiting research scholar at Princeton University.

Following is the full text of the interview.

Tasnim: According to a report recently carried by the New York Times, Britain, France and Germany are trying to create a “successor deal” to the 2015 nuclear agreement between Tehran and world powers in an attempt to appease US President Donald Trump. The proposed instructions stipulate that the Europeans agree to three key fixes: “a commitment to renegotiate limits on missile testing by Iran; an assurance that inspectors have unfettered access to Iranian military bases; and an extension of the deal’s expiration dates to prevent Iran from resuming the production of nuclear fuel long after the current restrictions expire in 2030,” the same report said. What is your take on this?

Mousavian: The Europeans want to convince Trump to remain in the deal and believe Trump needs to feel he has achieved more than Obama. The discussions they are having with the Trump administration now center on Iran’s regional role, ballistic missile program, and the JCPOA’s “sunset clauses” and “inspection terms”. The biggest sticking point is the sunset clauses. Trump wants the deal to extend indefinitely, while based on the New York Times’ report, the Europeans are apparently willing to discuss an “add-on” or “successor” deal.

However, my take on it is that:

First, the European powers understand that they cannot change the JCPOA’s terms or join Trump in his quest to undo the deal.

Second, the Europeans believe that since the sunsets will not be an issue for the next six or seven years, engaging Iran on what happens after will not hurt and can convince Trump to remain in the deal. As such, the potential scenario is that the Europeans are seeking to open a door with Iran to discuss what happens after the deal and what can be agreed on missile program and regional issues, in exchange for Trump not violating the deal and keeping it in place.

Tasnim: It seems that the Europeans are most comfortable with enforcing new limits on Iran’s ballistic missile development and testing and, in fact, are using the alleged “flaws” mentioned by the US as an opportunity to curb the country’s missile capability. Do you believe so?

Mousavian: The European powers understand that piece-meal negotiations with Iran on its ballistic missile program will never get anywhere because the Saudis have more advanced missiles with longer range and the Israelis even have nuclear missiles. They know that the only path for serious negotiations on Iran’s missile program would be to have a conventional arms arrangement applied on a region-wide basis. And given that Iran’s expenditures on conventional arms are far less than the other regional powers, the biggest challenge to achieving this will be the Arab Persian Gulf states and Israel. So the Europeans’ biggest constraint will be those and given this, they would be wise to get the US to support them in any initiative for regional arms control.

Tasnim: Saudi Arabia is trying to fish in troubled water with reports suggesting that the Trump administration is opening talks with Saudi Arabia on a potentially lucrative atomic energy agreement. Riyadh is exploring a “civilian” nuclear energy program, possibly without restrictions on uranium enrichment and reprocessing that would be required under a US cooperation deal. The Saudis have reportedly indicated they might accept such curbs if a separate nuclear deal with Iran is tightened. They are after a nuclear deal in the shadow of the JCPOA. What is behind the Saudi nuclear program?

Mousavian: My understanding is the Saudis' reading of Trump's mindset is that he is after "deals" and business. Given they seemingly want up to 20 nuclear power plants, the package they have put on the table for US nuclear companies will easily be for over \$100 billion. So the Saudis have put a lucrative nuclear business deal on the table for Trump. Their main goal is that if the US accepts enrichment & heavy water in Iran, it should accept it in Saudi Arabia, or else Iran's enrichment & heavy water should be revoked. Of course, they do not care about Israel's enrichment and reprocessing capabilities. So by providing this lucrative deal and giving immunity to Israel's nuclear activities, the Saudis aim to incentivize Trump to pressure Iran more and undo the nuclear deal.