



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

# US-Iran prisoner exchange why is everyone lowering expectations of a possible nuclear deal?



The release of 5 American citizens from captivity in Iran is a significant step towards easing tensions between the West and Tehran, even though both sides have been reluctant because the thaw carries internal risks for each party. President Joe Biden's administration is determined to pursue the limitation of Iran's nuclear programme by the end of his term, as one of the most important goals of his policy in the Middle East. There is no direct information from either side. Unrelated events have been part of it, such as the release of 5 Americans in Iran, 5 Iranians in the US, and the unfreezing of Iranian billions in South Korea. After the release of the detained Americans in Iran, US State Secretary Antony Blinken lowered expectations regarding the nuclear deal: "We're not engaged on that". However, he does not deny it: "But we'll see in the future if there are opportunities".

## New US sanctions against Iran

For US President Biden, bringing home detained US citizens is a top priority. This is a risky policy because it involves negotiations with rogue regimes, which exposes him to criticism of being soft and tolerant towards US enemies. But it is also a policy that delivers a lot, because there is nothing similar to the effect of countrymen returning home after imprisonment in some of the cruellest countries, such as Iran, Russia or Rwanda. However, on the day after the release of the prisoners from Iran, Washington imposed sanctions on the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and the former president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, for the arrest and imprisonment of US citizens without evidence, including former FBI agent Robert Levinson, about whom there has been no information for 16 years. The administration wants to give the impression of a firm policy towards Iran, regardless of the prisoner exchange episode. Furthermore, it does not want this one-time thaw with Iran to provoke criticism to the extent that it would jeopardise "indirect talks" regarding the limitations on Iran's nuclear programme.

## Tehran plays hardball too

At the same time as the exchange of prisoners, Tehran made a move that should mean it is still just as firm towards the West. The Iranian regime does not have to consider its public opinion or political opponents, so its moves represent a message to Western governments that it has not lost its edge. Iran has withdrawn the designation of as many as one third of the International Atomic Energy Agency's experienced inspectors, undermining the Agency's ability to fulfil its mandate and control the development of Iran's nuclear programme. Even though it has joined the UK, France and Germany in a shared protest over the decision, the US has refrained from more open and bilateral criticism of Tehran for expelling a group of UN inspectors. The US will coordinate its opposition and continue to persuade Iran not to interfere with the UN monitoring mission with its 3 European partners.

## The money will follow any future deal with Tehran

The prisoner exchange, as significant as it is for Washington, is secondary for the Tehran regime. The essence of the whole deal for Tehran is \$5.9 billion, released from South Korean banks and made available under controlled conditions. After allowing Iraq to pay Iran its debt of \$2.7 billion last June, the frozen \$6 billion will mean a lot for Tehran in solving economic and social problems in a country where as much as 60% of the population has been exposed to poverty. The pressure on Tehran to limit its nuclear programme will probably be accompanied by financial incentives at every step - the unfreezing of funds abroad, or the easing of certain sanctions. The UN and Western sanctions played a role because they reduced Tehran's blackmailing potential, forcing it to make concessions in order to alleviate the difficult social situation due to long-term isolation. The exchange of prisoners was another example of this.

## The Israel factor

A significant step in the "invisible" process of curbing Iran's nuclear programme will be the meeting between Joe Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in New York this week - the first since Netanyahu became prime minister in December last year. With an ultra-conservative administration, Israel is a fierce opponent of any deal with Iran over its nuclear programme. It believes any agreement will be deceptive and another chance for Tehran to develop weapons and attack Israel. Biden will not ask his long-time Israeli friend for approval to pursue a deal with Tehran. His agreement to meet with Netanyahu is already a significant concession to the Israeli prime minister, whose government is in an internal crisis over controversial judicial reform. Because of this, Netanyahu's government will be significantly legitimised by the live meeting with the US president, demonstrating that Washington is still its partner. Netanyahu might then refrain from condemning any possible agreement between the US and Tehran to limit Tehran's nuclear programme.