**Iran calls for US ‘political statement’ on commitment to nuclear deal**

Foreign minister Hossein Amirabdollahian seeks assurance that Washington will not abandon JCPOA accord again

Iran has proposed that the US Congress makes a “political statement” of its commitment to a nuclear accord with Tehran as talks in Vienna to revive the deal reach a critical juncture. In an exclusive interview with the Financial Times, Hossein Amirabdollahian, foreign minister, said Washington had failed to address Iran’s demand for guarantees that no party is able to abandon the deal, as the US did under former president Donald Trump in 2018. Tehran also wants all sanctions imposed by Trump to be lifted. “As a matter of principle, public opinion in Iran cannot accept as a guarantee the words of a head of state, let alone the United States, due to the withdrawal of Americans from the JCPOA,” Amirabdollahian said, using the acronym for the accord, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Experts say it is virtually impossible for the Biden administration to provide the legal assurances Tehran demands. But Amirabdollahian said he had told Iran’s negotiators to propose to Western parties that “at least their parliaments or parliament speakers, including the US Congress, can declare in the form of a political statement their commitment to the agreement and return to the JCPOA implementation”. President Joe Biden wants to revive the 2015 deal, under which Iran agreed to curb its nuclear activity in return for the easing of sanctions. But while indirect talks between Washington and Tehran are taking place in Vienna, US and European officials have repeatedly warned that — given the nuclear gains Iran has made since 2019 — time is running out to save the accord. Biden said the US would return to the deal if Iran agreed to reverse the aggressive advances it had made to its nuclear programme over the past three years, with the republic enriching uranium at its highest ever levels and close to weapons-grade. Amirabdollahian said: “Iran’s commitments are as clear as a mathematical formula. It is absolutely clear what we are supposed to do and how these measures will be verified through the IAEA [the UN nuclear watchdog]. Therefore the other side can have no concern; But we remain concerned primarily about the guarantees [that the US would not withdraw].” Expressing Tehran’s frustrations with Washington’s position as weeks of talks in Vienna appear at risk of stalling, Amirabdollahian said: “We are facing problems during this period because the other party lacks a serious initiative.” Iranian analysts say hardliners, who have taken control of all arms of the state since President Ebrahim Raisi won June elections, can only agree to revive the accord if they can make the case that it is an improved version of the 2015 deal. Many hardliners criticised former president Hassan Rouhani for accepting what they deemed to be weak terms when his government signed the accord with the Obama administration, the UK, France, Germany, Russia and China. Shortly after the talks resumed late last year — after a five-month hiatus following Raisi’s election — US and European officials accused his negotiating team of reneging on previous compromises agreed by Rouhani’s centrist government. Diplomats and analysts say the EU-brokered negotiations had been more constructive in recent weeks. A senior US official said last month that the negotiations in January “were among the most intensive”, adding that “we made progress narrowing down the list of differences to just the key priorities on all sides”. But the official warned that “we only have a handful of weeks left to get a deal” because of Iran’s nuclear advances. The other crucial issue for Iran is the scale of sanctions relief any agreement would provide. Amirabdollahian said that Iran wanted the negotiations to lead to the “total lifting” of sanctions. The challenge, however, was that the Biden administration was only willing to remove the economic sanctions authorised by Trump, he said. “This is not all we are looking for. That Trump unilaterally and unjustly imposed sanctions on real and legal entities in Iran under some allegations as Iran’s missile programme, regional issues or human rights is not acceptable,” Amirabdollahian said. “This is also one of the challenges which remains on the negotiating table in Vienna.” Trump infuriated Tehran by sanctioning dozens of senior Iranian officials, the office of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader and religious foundations. He also designated the elite Revolutionary Guards, the powerful state security force, as a terrorist organisation. Amirabdollahian said US officials had sent “many messages” to have direct talks with Iran, but ruled out any such move. “Our last response to Americans and intermediaries was: any direct dialogue, contact and negotiation with the US would have very huge costs for my government,” the foreign minister said. “We are not ready to enter into the process of direct talks with the US if we do not have a clear and promising outlook to reach a good agreement with sustainable guarantees in front of us.” He added that Tehran had indicated to the US that if Washington’s “intentions are genuine, you should take some practical and tangible steps on the ground before any direct talks and contacts can take place”. This could include unfreezing billions of dollars of Iranian petrodollars stuck in foreign central banks because of Trump’s sanctions or a presidential executive order to lift some of the sanctions, he said. Despite Iranian leaders hardening their language in recent days, Amirabdollahian said that in “general, we are optimistic”. “We also welcome a good deal in the shortest time however this deal must uphold the rights of the Iranian people,” he said.