

Engage Iran

Blocking of Iran-linked websites does little for efforts to revive n-deal and reverse sanctions

The U.S.'s decision to block dozens of Iran-linked websites at a time when both countries are trying to revive the nuclear deal is unnecessary provocation. The U.S. has accused the sites, including Iran's state-owned Press TV, of spreading disinformation. In the past, the U.S. had cracked down on Chinese and Iranian media over similar allegations. The move comes days after Iran elected Ebrahim Raisi, a hardline cleric, as President. The election of Mr. Raisi, who has been sanctioned by the U.S. for his alleged role in the execution of political prisoners and other rights violations, has already escalated tensions between the two countries. **Iran's sharp response to the move on the websites, has been that the U.S. was trying to "muzzle free speech".** Even if one ignores Iran's rhetoric, the U.S.'s move hardly serves its declared purpose of fighting disinformation. When America seized the website of the semi-official Iranian news agency, Fars, in 2018, it switched to an Iranian domain and was back online. The U.S. should not act like despotic regimes that take knee-jerk actions towards media platforms with critical coverage. The way to fight disinformation campaigns is to promote information and strengthen independent journalism. Besides aiding the Iranian narrative that America remains hostile, the U.S. decision could also create hitches in the diplomatic process under way.

The Biden administration had hoped for reaching an agreement with Tehran on reviving the nuclear deal before the June 18 Iran presidential election. **After multiple rounds of indirect talks in Vienna, along with other world powers, a final agreement has not been reached, but all parties have expressed faith in talks.** The Biden administration had shown a willingness to reverse Donald Trump's maximum pressure policy and revive the **deal that would cut off Iran's path towards the bomb in return for lifting sanctions.** Iran, embattled by sanctions, economic woes and protests, has responded positively to the U.S.'s overtures. But there have been bottlenecks. One, when the Trump administration pulled the U.S. out of the nuclear deal and reimposed sanctions, Iran started rebuilding its nuclear programme with higher-level fuel enrichment and production of centrifuges. **Now, the U.S. wants Iran to return to the terms of the original agreement, while the Iranians want the sanctions lifted first.** Two, the Biden administration also wants to discuss Iran's ballistic missile programme and its regional activities. Mr. Raisi has rejected such demands outright. Known for his hardline domestic and foreign policy views, he would take over the presidency in early August. **Mr. Biden's best chance to revive the nuclear deal is to do it before then. Both sides should focus on the diplomatic path, aimed at achieving a pragmatic agreement first that addresses the most critical issues – Iran's expanding nuclear programme and America's sprawling sanctions regime.**