

Continued Tug of War on the Iranian Nuclear Issue

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Author : [Richard Rousseau](#)

Since 2002, the year the world first became aware of Iran's nuclear program, the international community has engaged in grueling negotiations with Tehran to ensure that this program is, and remains, a civilian one and does not become a covert means or mechanism, as many fear, for developing nuclear weapons.

While Iran repeatedly confirms the peaceful nature of its nuclear activities and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei reiterates that the Islamic Republic, considers nuclear weapons as immoral and contrary to Islamic precepts, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), in its latest report, says it is "increasingly concerned" about "the possible military dimension" of the Iranian nuclear program. (1) Meanwhile, an armed intervention by Israel becomes a more realistic scenario with each passing day.

After a stalemate that lasted fifteen months the P5 +1 countries (the five permanent members of UN Security Council, China, France, United Kingdom, Russia and the United States, plus Germany) resumed meetings with an Iranian delegation led by Said Jalili on April 14 in Istanbul and May 23 in Baghdad.

Despite the lack of concrete results, the meeting in Istanbul saw the return of Tehran to the negotiating table without any preconditions. Under strong international pressure, Iran actually abandoned its two main conditions before it would agree to sit down and engage in talks: the removal of the international sanctions and an unconditional acceptance of its right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes.

On behalf of the P5 +1 powers, Catherine Ashton, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, described the meeting in Istanbul as "constructive and useful" while the White House spoke of "a positive first step" in a "constructive atmosphere." Though there remain many doubts about the ultimate effectiveness of the ongoing talks and the good faith of the parties involved, the resumption of negotiations is in itself welcomed by those who seek a diplomatic solution to the crisis.

Meanwhile, Iran's nuclear program continues to advance. Despite resolutions by the United Nations condemning the program, international sanctions, computer systems sabotage, targeted killings and operational problems of various kinds, the Iranians have been able to add a significant number of new-model uranium enrichment centrifuges at its Natanz complex, while making fast paced progress at the underground – and therefore immune to military attack – enrichment facility at Fordow near Qom.

A long negotiation process plays into the hands of the Islamic Republic, since it is moving, slowly but inexorably, towards the technological threshold of being able to build a nuclear weapon, the stage beyond which the country will have all the necessary capabilities – tools, infrastructure, equipment, materials and knowledge – to produce a nuclear weapon whenever it wishes to. (2)

To avert such an outcome and prevent forceful action by Israel, whose effectiveness can certainly be open to question but whose dramatic consequences for the Middle East and international security are inevitable, (3) the next round of talks, after Baghdad, must achieve significant and quick milestones on the uranium enrichment issue.

The objective of these talks is to break the current stalemate, relieve tension and prevent the situation from getting out of hand. To achieve such objectives, it is necessary that both parties review their negotiating strategies, adopt a more incremental and pragmatic approach and move away from maximalist positions. Such changes would foster convergence between the negotiators, something which is essential if they are genuinely holding talks to reach a workable and sustainable agreement, while at the same time saving face.

If the conclusion of a final agreement is actually the goal of the negotiations, the P5 +1 powers must then abandon their primary requirement that Tehran fully renounce its right to enrich uranium. However, those who harbor the hope that Iran will accept such a humiliation obviously do not understand the Iranian leaders and the public mood. Asking Iran to halt its nuclear program is purely wishful thinking. Since such a demand would in all probability be brushed off by Tehran, it would actually play in the hands of the “hawks who wish to “resolve” the issue by taking fast and forceful action.

A more realistic compromise would be to allow Iran to enrich uranium up to 4-5%, a level sufficient for solely civilian use. The downside is that this proposal would be sub-optimal and certainly not conducive to a final agreement since it would leave intact Iran's ability to enrich uranium. On the other hand, this would establish a more promising basis for what will undoubtedly be long and arduous negotiations. The P5 +1 powers could obtain in exchange the assurance from Tehran that it will stop all enrichment above the level needed for regular power plants (twenty percent is the threshold above which the fissile material is very dangerously close to being suitable for military use). Such a deal would defuse the crisis and avert a possible war. (4)

To be successful, such a “quid pro quo” requires that both parties fulfill their commitments. Iran could be persuaded to stop its enrichment of uranium if the West assures it that the sanctions, which are severely affecting the country, will be softened or even lifted altogether. Let's remind ourselves that the postponement of the European Union's oil embargo is scheduled for July.

In return, the P5 +1 countries should obtain from Iran full transparency regarding its nuclear activities. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) should be given access to all sites used by Iran in its nuclear program. Tehran's openness and cooperation with the IAEA should be complete and non-conditional. Ideally, Iran should voluntarily and immediately implement control measures (Additional Protocol) under the aegis of the IAEA. (5)

Clearly, both parties would find these proposals not easy to accept or implement. Almost ten years of unsuccessful negotiations have inspired caution. Despite the need to ease the effects of the sanctions, it is not at all obvious that Iran is willing to reach an agreement. For U.S. President Barack Obama, a mountain of obstacles lie in the way, beginning with Israel's growing impatience with the cat and mouse game being played by Tehran, strong

resistance from many members of Congress (and prospective Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney) and Obama's own lackluster popularity in a presidential election year.

That said, there have been some positive signs in recent weeks. Both Washington and Tehran have become less intransigent on the uranium enrichment issue. Gary Samore, a top adviser to President Obama on issues of arms control and nonproliferation, recently said, alluding to the issue of enrichment, that the P5 +1 countries have undertaken the "negotiations" in order to determine which parts of the Iranian program will be allowed to continue. (6) In the same vein, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi has stated that "enrichment is Iran's right, but we can negotiate on what levels we can enrich." (7)

It is in everyone's interests that the ongoing talks bear fruit. One more negotiation failure would lead to a worsening of the present state of uncertainty set against the backdrop of a potential war.

Richard Rousseau is Associate Professor and Chairman of the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Khazar University in Baku, Azerbaijan and a contributor to Global Brief, World Affairs in the 21st Century (www.globalbrief.ca) and to The Jamestown Foundation.

(1) See <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2012/gov2012-9.pdf>

(2) There is a widespread consensus among observers that Iran has not yet made a final decision to acquire a nuclear arsenal, but rather aspires to obtain a "nuclear capability" to achieve the status of a "virtual nuclear power."

(3) On the difficulties of such a military undertaking, see Elisabeth Bumiller, "Iran Raid Seen as a Huge Task for Israeli Jets", *The New York Times*, February 19, 2012. For a debate about the pluses and minuses of an Israeli attack, see the collection of opinions given by the magazine Foreign Affairs. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/features/collections/the-iran-debate-to-strike-or-not-to-strike>

(4) Iran has always said that the 20% enrichment of uranium will be undertaken for civilian purposes only, and in particular for the production of medical isotopes at the nuclear reactor in Tehran (TRR). Part of the agreement should also consider the supply of highly enriched uranium to meet these needs. In case of interruption of supply, Iran would be allowed to resume enrichment.

(5) Further measures to increase mutual trust may include suspension for the duration of the negotiations of the installation of additional centrifuges or a reduction of operational expenses. The possibility that Tehran will grant voluntary access to IAEA inspectors to sites such as the Parchin military base is unlikely. For an extensive and detailed review of specific proposals for future negotiations, see the report from Pugwash, Prospects for Diplomacy with Iran, Washington, DC, 23 February 2012. <http://www.pugwash.org/>

(6) Los Angeles Times, April 27, 2012.

(7) Peter Crail, "P5 +1 and Iran Hold 'Positive' Talks," *Arms Control Today*, May 2012. http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2012_05/P5_plus_one_and_Iran_Hold_Positive_Talks

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