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## Assessing the US-Iran Nuclear Talks



Image by Javad Esmaeili.

### **No Attack–For Now**

The New York Times reported April 16 that the Trump administration has decided not to approve an attack on Iran for now. Apparently, those in the administration who are not convinced an attack would eliminate Iran’s nuclear program, and who worry about a wider war, have prevailed over hawks who want the attack to go ahead in conjunction with Israel.

According to the Times: “Almost all of the plans would have required U.S. help not just to defend Israel from Iranian retaliation, but also to ensure that an Israeli attack was successful, making the United States a central part of the attack itself.”

That degree of US involvement may have steered Trump away from endorsing it, much to the apparent displeasure of the Netanyahu government.

Trump has given Iran two months to decide whether or not to negotiate a new nuclear deal. Says Trump: “I think that Iran has a chance to have a great country and to live happily without death. That’s my first option. If there’s a second option, I think it would be very bad for Iran, and I think Iran is wanting to talk.”

The war talk is backed by deployment to the Middle East of two aircraft carriers and to the US base at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean of around a half-dozen B-2 bombers capable of carrying 30,000-pound bombs meant to destroy Iran’s underground nuclear program.

### **The Devilish Details**

The administration’s pressure tactics may not work. Some reports say Iran has been assured that the US isn’t demanding the complete elimination of Iran’s nuclear enrichment program, but other reports point to enrichment as a central issue. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has said that Iran has no need to enrich uranium and should instead import its nuclear fuel. Trump reportedly is seeking agreement either to destroy Iran’s enriched uranium or remove it, possibly to Russia. Iran contends that it has a sovereign right to enrich. And that’s just one point of contention.

Consider this: The Omani foreign ministry, which is brokering the US-Iran talks, said the goal of the talks was to reach “a fair, sustainable and binding agreement ... to ensure that Iran is completely free of nuclear weapons and sanctions, while preserving its right to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.”

Let’s examine the fine print here:

“sustainable and binding agreement”: As Trump has already shown, an agreement with one US administration isn’t binding on another. He simply abandoned the 2015 deal.

“Iran is completely free of nuclear weapons”: How will Iran’s enrichment program be subject to international inspection?

“free of sanctions”: That would be a major step for this administration to take, considering that it has used sanctions in the past to bring the regime down.

“right to develop nuclear energy”: The US has granted that right, but it collides with the enrichment issue.

In short, the same issues that plagued US-Iran negotiations 10 years ago are back again. But this time, Iran must negotiate with an administration that is under Israeli pressure to go to war if it doesn’t get what it wants.

### **Problems at Home May Help**

The US-Iran talks have now moved to the “expert level.” That doesn’t mean an agreement is within reach. “Agreeing to technical talks suggests both sides are expressing pragmatic,

realistic objectives for the negotiations and want to explore the details,” said Kelsey Davenport, the director for nonproliferation policy at the Arms Control Association who has long studied Iran’s nuclear program.

The devil is in the details. Sanctions on Iran are probably a key topic at these expert-level talks, as are measures to ensure that Iran’s nuclear energy program is separate from any bomb-making facility. Exactly which sanctions on Iran might be removed, and what level of uranium enrichment would be acceptable to both sides, are central questions. Iran’s foreign minister said on April 26 that he is “extremely cautious about reaching an agreement.

In the best of worlds, a US-Iran nuclear deal should stand a good chance of getting done, mainly because both sides have strong incentives based on troubles at home. Iran’s economy is in a shambles, and its public is uneasy. Neither Russia nor China is in a position to bail it out. Removal of sanctions would be a major benefit, especially to Iran’s oil exports.

On the US side, the Trump administration’s global tariff hikes, particularly on China, are producing more backlash than a rush to Washington to renegotiate terms of trade. Trump’s entire domestic program is in upheaval, and his hope to engineer a peace deal between Russia and Ukraine seems increasingly improbable. And let’s recall what Trump said about the nuclear deal President Obama worked out with Iran: one of “the most one-sided transactions the United States has ever entered into.”

### **Diplomatic Possibilities**

One approach to a breakthrough agreement is a US easing of sanctions on Iran as Iran produces evidence, under international inspection, that it has halted uranium enrichment. Elimination of the sanctions would depend on evidence that Iran is moving back to the very low level of enrichment—under 4 percent—that it agreed to in the 2015 nuclear deal with Obama.

Beyond that narrow agreement, perhaps a way forward can be found—a confidence building framework—that would eliminate the Israeli threat of attack and stop Iran’s support of Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen. But such a far-reaching deal seems beyond the plans of all the parties.

“I think we’re going to make a deal with Iran. Nobody else could do that,” Trump predicted last week in an interview with Time magazine. He’s wrong on the facts, but let’s hope he’s right in his prediction.

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