

# How to Muddle Through with Iran

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross)

Oct 19, 2014

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



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**By revealing all the offers that Iran has rejected, Washington could block Tehran's potential Plan B, which will likely involve constructing a reasonable public image in order to erode the international sanctions regime.**

It is no accident that hardly anyone involved in the Iranian nuclear negotiations has expressed optimism about meeting the November 24 deadline for a comprehensive agreement. The Iranian and U.S. governments are continuing to meet regularly -- most recently last week in Vienna -- but there are few signs of meaningful progress. Indeed, the essence of the deal that has always made most sense -- a rollback of the Iranian nuclear program in return for a rollback of sanctions -- seems increasingly beyond reach. Instead, the Iranians have been insisting on a rollback of the sanctions in return only for limited transparency on their industrial-size nuclear program. But Washington has insisted for a long time that, given Iran's past violations of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), limited transparency won't be enough. Further, it has already stated that it will not accept an industrial-scale program, although it is prepared to agree to a limited-enrichment capability.

So a comprehensive deal by November 24 appears very unlikely. To be sure, the Iranians could make last minute concessions on centrifuges -- their total number, as well as their output -- and the duration of the deal. In return, Washington could make further concessions at the eleventh hour. At this point, although not impossible, that appears the least probable of the outcomes likely to emerge over the next month.

## BREAKDOWN AND CRISIS

One negotiator from the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) told me that he expects that if there is no agreement before the talks end, the Iranians will take the lid off their program and rapidly ramp up their uranium enrichment program. Tehran would resume enriching uranium at 20 percent, increase its use of next generation centrifuges, and expand its stockpiles of enriched material. This would shrink the so-called break-out time that Iran would require to produce weapons-grade enriched uranium and potentially hide

it. And that, in turn, would mean that the United States could no longer be confident that it could prevent Iran from possessing nuclear weapons.

How would the United States respond? Its first step would almost certainly be to introduce more draconian sanctions against Tehran and mobilize international support for them. (The most important of these sanctions would be designed to greatly curtail Iran's ability to export its oil.) Notwithstanding the new sanctions, the Israeli government's temptation to launch a military strike against the Iranian nuclear program would surely grow -- not only because of the increased threat of Tehran's program, but also because the international community might be more forgiving of Israeli military action in circumstances where the Iranians appear to be rapidly accelerating their nuclear program.

So, is this dangerous sequence of events likely to take place? It's possible, but neither the P5+1 nor the Iranians are keen on escalation, so both sides are likely to look for a way out.

## A PARTIAL DEAL

One possibility would be to agree to an extension of the negotiations under the current terms. The benefit of such an extension, for the West, is that it would keep the Iranian program contained, and the Islamic Republic would not move closer to break-out capability. For their part, the Iranians would receive additional economic relief, even though the basic structure of the sanctions regime would remain intact. Jofi Joseph, a former U.S. National Security Council official, has argued that preserving the status quo is preferable to the uncertainty and danger of no deal as it still leaves room for the possibility of achieving a sustainable comprehensible agreement.

A possible variant of this scenario would be a partial deal in which both sides would formalize an agreement on several issues -- redesign of the Arak heavy water reactor, reconfiguration of Fordow into a research facility, enhanced verification protocols for nuclear inspectors -- and continue the dialogue on the areas where there are still significant disagreements. In each case, diplomacy would continue and there would be no new sanctions. Washington would have to accept that it could not roll back the Iranian program immediately, although it would still hope to do so over time.

There are merits to this approach, but there are also reasons to doubt its practicality. It would essentially recognize a new status quo for Iran's nuclear program, in which Iran is only two-or-three months away from being able to break-out to producing weapons-grade enriched uranium. Unless the current decline in the price of oil creates significant new pressures on Iran, it is hard to see why, in this case, the Iranians would be willing to make concessions on the scope of their enrichment program that they have rejected until now. Should the United States accept what might amount to a new status quo? Those who say "Yes" clearly fear the risks of the alternative and believe that the region is troubled enough as is. To be sure, that is what the Iranians may be counting on: Middle East fatigue in Washington and the broader international community.

Ultimately, an extension of this sort may not prove possible because of political pressures in the United States. In the absence of a significant rollback of the Iranian nuclear program, the U.S. Congress is unlikely to accept continued restraint: Indeed, should the November election produce a Republican majority in the Senate, new sanctions against Iran are likely if the current negotiations fail. U.S. President Barack Obama would retain the ability to veto new sanctions legislation, but he would likely face enormous political pressure to sign it into law.

## MUDDLING THROUGH

Another approach would be to respond to the upcoming negotiating deadline by muddling through and avoiding any formalized agreement or extension. There would be an implicit understanding that Iran would limit its program and that there would be no additional sanctions. There would probably be a formal break in the P5+1 talks for a few months, but continued meetings from time to time between the Iranian foreign minister and the EU foreign

policy chief or even Secretary of State John Kerry would take place to see whether negotiations might be resumed. If nothing else, this would show that diplomacy was continuing.

As with the extension option, the muddling through approach would be motivated by mutual concern that a breakdown of talks could lead to a crisis and an escalation that all sides seek to avoid. Mutual concerns about the threat posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS, also known as the Islamic State), could add to the incentive that both sides have to avoid confrontation. Muddling through, moreover, would have important political benefits. Under this option, neither side would have to defend an extension agreement, a possibility both have dismissed, and that important political constituencies oppose. Indeed, many international negotiating processes have continued past declared deadlines when reaching an agreement was not possible, but there was a mutual desire not to see a collapse -- the many junctures at which Israeli-Palestinian talks have stalled fit this model.

That said, in this instance, muddling through would be a particularly tricky political high-wire act, and there is no guarantee that both sides would be able to pull it off. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and other conservatives in Iran are unlikely to show restraint in the absence of an agreement. That will especially be the case if new sanctions are being promoted -- which is highly likely if members of the U.S. Congress see no explicit or formal commitment on Iran's part to limit its program. Muddling through has merits, but it would be hard to sustain.

## **PLAN B**

**G**iven how little the Iranians have been willing to concede in the talks, it is quite possible that they have a Plan B that depends on circumventing the negotiations. For example, their strategy could be to concede nothing more in the talks, and if there is no agreement or extension, to continue to generally observe the outlines of the existing interim deal. By keeping the lid on their nuclear program for now and declaring that Iran has no interest in acquiring a bomb, they could make an appeal for sympathy from the international community -- a task that's far easier with President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif at the helm of the Iranian government -- and eventually request an end to the sanctions regime. That is to say, it's possible that Tehran has calculated that the sanctions regime will erode over time even in the absence of any concessions from Iran, provided it looks reasonable and Tehran asserts that it has no interest in acquiring nuclear weapons. With that in mind, it makes sense that even as Iran has offered little flexibility in the negotiations, Zarif has been active in public diplomacy, suggesting at every opportunity that Iran has been very forthcoming in the talks -- and declaring that Tehran is prepared to limit the size of its program to its current levels for the duration of any mutually agreed upon comprehensive deal.

Although Iran may well have a Plan B of this sort, there is scant evidence that the P5+1 has one of its own. Indeed, even as the Iranians talk of their flexibility in the negotiations, the P5+1 has tended to reveal very few details about its own approach, in hopes of not complicating progress toward an agreement. That has left the group at a distinct disadvantage, by leaving the international community -- and the Iranian public -- with the impression that Tehran has been the more conciliatory side. But that is demonstrably untrue. The P5+1 has shown remarkable flexibility during the talks, agreeing to allow Iran to avoid suspending uranium enrichment, despite UN Security Council resolutions mandating it do so; accepting that Iran should be treated like any other NPT signatory after the full implementation of the comprehensive agreement despite its past transgressions; acquiescing to Iran's insistence that it not acknowledge that it pursued a nuclear weapons program; not including the Iranian ballistic missile program in the proposed comprehensive agreement; accepting Iranian arguments against converting its Arak facility to a light water reactor and shutting down the Fordow facility; and accommodating the Iranian insistence on not dismantling centrifuges (instead, they would perhaps reduce output, disconnect the pipes, and be flexible on how many centrifuges might ultimately still operate).

This record should be the foundation of the P5+1's Plan B. The United States and its partners should now (or at least

very soon) spell out how much they have offered the Iranians, and how the Iranian's have rejected far-reaching terms that would have provided them what they say they want -- civil nuclear power. By revealing all the offers that Iran has rejected, Washington would block Tehran's potential Plan B, which relies on constructing a reasonable public image. By doing so, the P5+1 would also be signaling that the sanctions regime will remain in place, and even possibly expand, in the near future. Ironically, the West's Plan B might make an agreement more likely by conveying to the Iranians that they have a lot to lose by failing to strike a deal. But even if there is no agreement, Washington could use it as leverage, internationally and domestically. Having shown that it is prepared to compete with the Iranians in the court of public opinion and elsewhere, the United States might more credibly ask Congress not to implement any new sanctions that it adopts for another three months, in order to see if Iran can be convinced, under these new circumstances, to agree to a comprehensive deal.

Ultimately, there appears to be little likelihood of a comprehensive deal at the present time. If that is the case, the P5+1 should be thinking carefully about what will happen after the November 24 deadline. It would be a big mistake to wait until November 25 before considering the likely alternatives.

*Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. This article originally appeared on the [Foreign Affairs website. \(http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142219/dennis-ross/how-to-muddle-through-with-iran\)](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142219/dennis-ross/how-to-muddle-through-with-iran) ❖*

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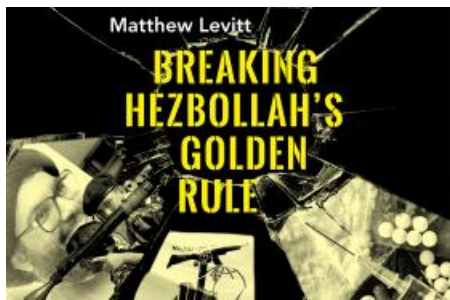
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