

How to Solve Obama's Iran Dilemma

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

Jan 26, 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.



Articles & Testimony

A deal with Iran may or may not be possible, but convincing Congress to prepare new sanctions without adopting them yet should be much easier.

The six-month clock on the nuclear deal with Iran has finally begun to tick, but nobody seems optimistic. President Obama puts the chance of translating this interim agreement into a comprehensive deal to ensure that Iran cannot build a nuclear weapon at less than 50 percent. The Iranian deputy foreign minister, Abbas Araqchi, believes that may be high -- and points out that nothing the Iranians have accepted is irreversible. Indeed, he says they can undo the steps they have taken, including suspending the enrichment of uranium to 20 percent, in a day. The U.S. government, meanwhile, says that this first-step agreement offers Iran very limited sanctions relief. And with the sanctions architecture intact, the United States can quickly ratchet up the pressures on the Islamic Republic if it violates the deal or if a comprehensive deal proves unachievable.

Why are both sides so downbeat? And what will give us the best chance of producing a lasting agreement?

To begin with, the comprehensive deal will be difficult to achieve precisely because it is about rollback. The interim agreement, officially called the Joint Plan of Action, was essentially a "cap for a cap." The Iranians cap their program in the sense that they agree not to add to the number of centrifuges or to the overall amount of enriched uranium they have accumulated at the 5 percent level (though they must reduce to zero the 20 percent enriched material they have already accumulated). The Iranians are, however, allowed to build new centrifuges to replace ones that are damaged or break down, and they may continue research on even more modern and efficient centrifuges. In return, the United States promised to adopt no new sanctions for the next 6 months, while relaxing sanctions related to petrochemicals, precious metals and the Iranian automobile industry and allowing Iran to access \$4.2 billion in previously blocked funds.

Producing a cap for cap was not easy, but is far less difficult than producing a rollback for a rollback. And that is what the negotiations are now about: Can the United States and its allies get the Iranians to roll back their nuclear program

and infrastructure in return for a rollback of the sanctions on banking, commerce, shipping and insurance that have proven so onerous to the Iranian economy?

It should be doable in theory. After all, the U.S. position -- and that of the so-called P5+1 grouping of world powers, America's partners in these negotiations -- is that Iran can possess civil nuclear power so long as it is not in a position to break out to a nuclear weapons capability. That is what the Iranians say they are doing: They insist that they only seek civil nuclear energy and don't want nuclear weapons. Their president, Hassan Rouhani, has even said that Iran is prepared to adopt transparency measures to assure the rest of the world of Iran's intentions. But in practice, what theoretically sounds bridgeable may not be so easy, particularly given the legacy of distrust and the scope of the Iranian nuclear program.

Consider, at a minimum, two elements of that legacy from a U.S. perspective. The Iranians have yet to answer the International Atomic Energy Agency's questions about the "possible military dimensions" of their nuclear program, which involves, among other things, experimentation with nuclear trigger devices; in addition, they have now built nearly 20,000 centrifuges and accumulated approximately 5-6 bombs' worth of enriched uranium. And you can throw in a third suspicious element: Iran's infrastructure also includes the development of a heavy-water plant that is grossly inefficient for producing electricity, but not for generating plutonium for nuclear weapons.

With the Iranians proclaiming that their nuclear infrastructure is about their dignity and independence -- and that international demands are about denying them each -- one can assume that they will resist an extensive rollback of their program. Yet, they will not get the extensive sanctions rollback they seek without a massive reduction in their nuclear infrastructure. While the Obama administration is not demanding zero enrichment and the complete dismantlement of Iran's enrichment facilities, as some on Capitol Hill are calling for, it is not prepared to accept Iran as a nuclear threshold state. In other words, Iran must not be left with a nuclear infrastructure that is sufficiently robust and advanced that it can break out to nuclear weapons at a time of its choosing.

How far back is rolled back enough? President Obama has said publicly that Iran can't have either a heavy water plant or its enrichment facility at Fordow, and it must also reduce the number of its centrifuges -- though he has maintained ambiguity on what that number would be. I am one of those who believe that the United States can accept a limited enrichment program for Iran, but I think the number of centrifuges must be small, certainly less than 10 percent of what they have now (nearly 20,000). That number, moreover, cannot include any next-generation centrifuges, which even now the Iranians are trying improve with new advances. In addition, Iran must have less than a bomb's worth of accumulated enriched uranium in the country. All that will be a bitter pill for the Islamic Republic to swallow.

Indeed, there is nothing in what Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, President Rouhani or Foreign Minister Javad Zarif are now saying that suggests they believe they will have to reduce their program along these lines. Their concept at this point would no doubt leave them as a nuclear threshold state. Many observers, me included, believe that has been their goal all along.

So how can Obama break the impasse? The only chance of getting Iran to give up this objective is for Iran to believe that the cost of pursuing it is simply too high. President Rouhani's desire to end Iran's isolation and the sanctions that have done such damage to its economy has largely stopped the clock on the Iranian nuclear program. Clearly, Ayatollah Khamenei has accepted enough of Rouhani's logic to support him at least to this point. It was not inducements that got us this far, but the pressure of the sanctions.

And that highlights an interesting gap between the White House and Congress. Senators like Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) and Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) believe that we must keep up the pressure if we are to have any chance of getting the Iranians to agree to roll back their nuclear program. The president and Secretary of State John Kerry argue that

additional pressure now -- at least in the form of a new sanctions bill -- would undercut Rouhani, empower the hard-liners around the supreme leader and give the Iranians an excuse to walk away from the negotiations. Some in the White House have gone so far as to say that those who support sanctions now are choosing a path of war. Not surprisingly, such rhetoric has not won the White House more adherents.

I find the argument that adopting sanctions now will end diplomacy and make war the only option to be ironic. Ironic not because I necessarily agree that the choice at this point is, in fact, that binary, or that I am convinced that additional sanctions adopted now will produce the end of diplomacy. Ironic because most of the administration's critics -- and certainly the Saudis, Emiratis and Israelis -- are all convinced that President Obama will not use force against the Iranian nuclear program under any circumstances.

But that is not the Obama administration's argument. The administration is saying: If you undercut our effort at diplomacy -- and legislating sanctions now will do that -- you leave war as the only option. That hardly suggests President Obama is retreating from his oft-repeated declaration that all options are on the table. It is true that he does not want to be left with force as the only option. Who does? But the White House's position should not give the Iranians any comfort. In effect, it is saying that if diplomacy fails, force will be inevitable because Iran cannot become a nuclear weapons state.

Adding to the irony for me is that the most likely way for the supreme leader to back Rouhani is for him to see the consequences of not doing so. Rouhani has little chance of being empowered if the supreme leader thinks Iran can have its yellow cake and eat it too. If Khamenei thinks the sanctions will collapse of their own weight or that there is no prospect for the use of force or that the United States is desperate for a deal, there is no prospect of the Iranians accepting that they must roll back their program to the point of not being a threshold state.

Some argue that the United States must insist that Iran be allowed no enrichment and dismantle the means for it. From the standpoint of strengthening the global non-proliferation regime, that would be the best outcome. But I agree with the Obama administration's opposition to this posture for two reasons: First, I suspect there is a point where the supreme leader will see the absence of a face-saving compromise, such as a U.S. acceptance of Iran's having rights to limited enrichment, as constituting a surrender that will threaten the Islamic Republic. He has repeatedly argued against making concessions to what he calls the "arrogant powers" because it will only feed their appetite to keep pressing for concessions until they achieve their aim of wholesale regime change. Second, if diplomacy fails, the United States will be far more credible in reinforcing sanctions or using force -- or both -- if it puts a proposal on the table that the rest of the international community will find serious and plausible. Excluding limited enrichment will deny us that plausibility; including it will allow us to unmask Iran's true intentions if diplomacy fails: They want nuclear weapons, and not just civil nuclear power.

Is it possible to reconcile Congress's belief that we need to adopt sanctions with the administration's view that it will undercut diplomacy? I think so. But it will require lawmakers to accept the argument that adopting new sanctions now will allow the Iranians to walk away while our P5+1 partners blame us instead of them. Even the French, who tend to adopt the hardest line among the P5+1, now buy into this logic. Diplomacy is about taking away excuses, not giving them.

If Congress needs to recognize that, the administration needs to recognize the importance of being willing to add to the pressure and of working with the Hill to that end. For example, if the Iranians can create facts in anticipation that diplomacy might not work, so should we. When the Iranians are doing work on new and more advanced centrifuges -- ones more powerful than their current IR-2s, which are already 4-5 times more efficient than their first-generation centrifuges -- they are sending a signal to us about what they will do if diplomacy fails. The administration can match that by agreeing with key members of Congress on which new sanctions it would be prepared to adopt if there is no follow-on agreement to the Joint Plan of Action.

This is an elegant solution: Congress would not adopt the new sanctions during the life of the Joint Plan of Action, but the Hill would know that the administration is preparing the ground to increase the pressure in a meaningful way -- and so would the Iranians, our partners and the international private sector, which is exploring the new business climate in Tehran. We would be giving the negotiations a chance while denying the Iranians an excuse.

A deal with the Iranians may or may not be possible, but one with Congress? That should be much easier.

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

Politico

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

TOPICS

[Proliferation \(/policy-analysis/proliferation\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](#)