

# How to Think about Obama's Deal with Iran

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

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## 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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**The agreement is neither a "breakthrough" nor an "abject surrender" but rather "a cap for a cap," with a limited rollback on each side for the next six months.**

**D**espite all the fanfare that greeted its arrival Saturday night, the "first step" deal between world powers and Iran is neither a breakthrough heralding the end of the conflict over its nuclear program nor a precursor to allowing the Islamic Republic to rush toward a bomb. For those who claimed the clock was ticking and the Iranians were edging closer to a breakout capability, this agreement stops the clock for the next six months -- assuming Iran lives up to its end of the bargain. And the transparency measures, which grant much greater access than previously, certainly reduce the Iranian incentive to cheat on the agreement for its duration.

So if it's not a breakthrough or an "abject surrender," as one prominent critic claims, what is it? The deal should be seen for what it is: "a cap for a cap," with a limited rollback on each side for the next six months. The Iranians cap enrichment at 20 percent, their centrifuges at just below 20,000 and the advancement of their heavy water plant. They convert their stockpile of 20 percent enriched material to a somewhat more reassuring form. The United States, along with its partners in the negotiations, agrees in turn not to add to sanctions that are imposing a terrible squeeze on the Iranian economy, while providing limited access to hard currency currently denied, easing trade on precious metals, auto and aircraft parts, and facilitating trade on non-sanctioned items such as food and medicine.

And what has this deal achieved? At a minimum, there is now more time to see if a comprehensive agreement is possible without the clock ticking further and shrinking Iran's window for breaking out to a nuclear weapon. As for the Iranians, they need not negotiate amid the imminent threat of new sanctions. (Congress might still choose to vote on a fresh round of sanctions, lawmakers are signaling, but only apply them if there is no deal at the end of the six-month period.)

The real issue now is what we do with that time. One urgent order of business for the Obama administration is to address the concerns of those who lament the deal instead of dismissing them. The Israelis fear that the sanctions

will fray as countries and companies begin to position themselves for a post-sanctions future. This is not fanciful but it is also not a given. Similarly, the Israelis worry that the first step will be the last, and essentially leave Iran poised with a breakout capability. The White House must reassure them that it understands these reservations and takes them seriously.

Israeli, and for that matter Saudi, fears go to the heart of whether this deal loses us critical leverage and whether we have the will and the means to press the Iranians. Both allies worry that the Iranians will see our readiness to sign on the dotted line as an indication that the United States can ultimately live with a "just-in-time" Iranian nuclear program -- one that leaves it with the option of going for a weapon at a time of its choosing.

One way to address Israeli concerns is to emphasize a determination to fully enforce the sanctions we are *not* easing. Secretary of State John Kerry has said as much, but closely collaborating with Israel on making sure sanctions are not being evaded would help rebuild trust.

From the outset of the Obama administration, there was an intensive effort with Israel to identify the sanctions that could have the greatest effect on the Iranian economy, the Iranian efforts to evade sanctions and the countries that were working with the Iranians to do "workarounds." Why not intensify those joint efforts again and quickly plug possible holes? Similarly, let the Israelis, Saudis and others know that we will continue to send top Treasury officials to countries and companies that signal interest in resuming commercial activity with Iran with the purpose of emphasizing, privately and publicly, the reputational costs and economic risks of doing so.

There's a message for Iran here, too: If you think you need not budge on the nuclear program, and that the sanctions will collapse of their own weight, think again. The Iranians -- and others -- must know that the only way Iran can achieve real relief from sanctions will be to roll back its nuclear program. Full stop.

And this gets at the larger point. Those who fear the consequences of this initial deal worry that the United States is so concerned about diplomacy failing that it will, in fact, accept a bad deal that leaves Iran in a position where it has a breakout capability. Saying that no deal is preferable to a bad deal is a good slogan. But the Israeli and Saudis, among other critics, have no idea what the Obama administration thinks a bad deal might be. The text of this interim agreement reveals little in this regard, even while it says the comprehensive deal that follows it will address "mutually defined enrichment programs with mutually agreed parameters consistent with practical needs." Will the Iranians define their enrichment needs as limited?

For our friends, the answer is no -- and worse, they see that even if we are not explicitly conceding "the right to enrich," we are accepting it in practice. All the more reason to let them know what we consider a bad deal and will not accept: anything that fails to roll back the Iranian program to small numbers of centrifuges, permits more than a bomb's worth of enriched uranium in-country, allows a heavy water plant and lacks transparency measures sufficient to verify these limitations.

Defining a bad deal will not only reassure our friends; it will also help sustain our policy at home and ensure the Iranians have no illusions about what we can accept.

*Dennis Ross is counselor at The Washington Institute and former senior Middle East advisor to President Obama.*



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