

# The Need for Speed in Negotiations with Iran

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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## Talks with Iran are gaining momentum, but its centrifuges are still enriching uranium, and its Arak facility may soon be capable of producing plutonium.

**T**oday, two days of talks begin in Vienna between experts from the P5+1 (the United States, Russia, China, Britain, France, and Germany) and their Iranian counterparts, who will discuss technical issues relating to Tehran's nuclear program and international sanctions. The meeting will help lay the groundwork for the next round of diplomatic negotiations, scheduled to take place in Geneva on November 7-8.

Expectations of progress were reinforced earlier this week by comments made after separate talks between Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency. In a rare joint statement, both sides called the talks "very productive" -- a departure from their eleven previous meetings in recent years, which failed to make progress in resolving what the IAEA has called the "possible military dimensions" of Iran's nuclear program. The statement also indicated that a document discussed in past meetings has been set aside and a new approach has been taken.

Although the P5+1 and Tehran have agreed to keep the contents of their negotiations secret, the general aim of the talks has been for Iran to reduce its capacity to enrich uranium and certain other nuclear activities in return for relief from sanctions, which are strangling the country's economy. The main hurdles include verification of any concessions Iran makes and the sequencing of any reduction in sanctions.

Despite public statements suggesting progress, the actual advances so far appear to be limited to atmospheric. Further progress will require Tehran to make concessions that some Iranian political figures have ruled -- at least publicly -- as not open for negotiation. Ceasing production of enriched uranium and stopping the installation of more centrifuges would be an important initial indication of good faith. Equally important would be a changed attitude

toward verification, including prompt and full implementation of all provisions of the IAEA's Additional Protocol, which Iran agreed to in 2003. This goes hand in hand with verification of the military-related questions the agency has raised since 2004, as well as concerns over the plutonium-capable IR-40 heavy-water reactor at Arak, which is steadily approaching its commissioning.

The Obama administration appears anxious for negotiations to succeed, though it has also stated that no deal is better than a bad deal. If the talks collapse, international support for sanctions would likely begin to fall apart, reducing U.S. leverage. The world is watching, particularly U.S. allies in Europe and Asia, as well as regional friends like Israel, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. Last week, Riyadh indicated disappointment with Washington for its lack of resolve in Syria and its apparent conciliatory attitude toward Iran.

Washington appears to believe that time is on its side, with Iran's nuclear advances still reversible. From a technical point of view, that is debatable. And any concessions granted to Iran, such as allowing it to enrich uranium at all, would soon be demanded by other countries that have previously been denied those rights. Indeed, rewarding Iran in this way for noncompliance with its nonproliferation commitments would seem indulgent.

In the Middle East, many are concerned that Iran's progress puts it on the cusp of becoming a de facto nuclear power. Perception being a reality, Tehran is emerging as the regional hegemon, and an agreement with the West would be seen as Washington confirming this status. Even at this delicate stage, then, Washington needs to negotiate expeditiously, achieving tangible progress that defangs Iran and eases the fears of U.S. allies.

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