

# What Would Be a Good Deal on Iran's Nuclear Programme?

by [Michael Herzog \(/experts/michael-herzog\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Herzog \(/experts/michael-herzog\)](#)

Michael Herzog was appointed Israel's ambassador to the United States in 2021. Previously, he was an international fellow at The Washington Institute.

**O**n October 1, BICOM senior visiting fellow Brig. Gen. (ret.) Michael Herzog briefed journalists on a BICOM conference call, providing his assessment of Iranian president Hassan Rouhani's diplomatic offensive and the requirements for a successful deal to set Iran back from nuclear breakout capacity. The following is a summary of his remarks.

### What are the reasons for being wary of Rouhani's charm offensive?

We should test Rouhani's intentions and give diplomacy a chance, but there are several reasons to be cautious about the charm offensive. First, nobody should expect the regime to change overnight. It is the same system. The one who calls the shots is still the supreme leader, Khamenei. They have spent years investing in their nuclear programme, which they will not give up easily. They are feeling the heat from the sanctions more than many thought, which accounts for their changing position, but there is a long track record of Iran hiding its capabilities and cheating. Rouhani himself invested many years as head of the programme and chief negotiator, and he is on record boasting how under his period as chief nuclear negotiator, Iran managed to greatly expand its enrichment capacity whilst negotiating with the West.

Against this background one has to look at the advancement of the nuclear programme itself. A year ago, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu presented a red line at the UN of not allowing Iran to acquire sufficient 20 per cent enriched uranium for one bomb. Whilst the Iranians were careful not to cross this line, they managed to marginalise it. Whenever they have got close to this line they have converted much of the material into oxide form, but this can be converted back within a matter of weeks.

They have also installed many more centrifuges and newer and faster centrifuges. If unabated, it is estimated that from mid-2014 they will be able to reach one bomb's worth of enriched material within several weeks, starting with their stock of 3.5 per cent enriched uranium. So the stockpile of 20 per cent enriched uranium is less relevant.

This complicates the diplomatic picture because until now the negotiations focused on this one element of enriching to 20 per cent. This was considered most urgent because it is easy to breakout fast from 20 per cent. But this focus on 20 per cent enriched uranium has neglected all other elements of the programme, including the quantity and quality of centrifuges, weaponisation, and the plutonium track in Arak, which is even more dangerous than uranium enrichment.

### What would make for a good deal on Iran's nuclear programme?

The conditions that Netanyahu has set out (stopping all enrichment, removing all enriched material, closing the Fordow enrichment facility, and stopping the plutonium track) are maximalist conditions, but one cannot expect the Israeli government to be the first to show flexibility on a critical issue of national security. In real terms, Netanyahu probably knows that a deal will not necessarily be along Israel's exact conditions.

Nonetheless, the Iranians are dangerously close to critical breakout capacity, so slowing them down or even stopping the clock is not sufficient. The clock needs to be set back. The critical elements for a good deal are as follows:

The most important element is to ship out the enriched uranium, including low enriched uranium. They should be left with an amount less than one bomb's worth, so if they decide to violate the agreement and breakout it will take them a long time. The enriched material could be sent back to Iran as fuel rods or metal plates which they cannot use militarily. If that happens, the question of symbolic enrichment on Iranian soil is of lesser importance.

There needs to be intrusive inspections, including to all sites which are suspected by the IAEA of being related to weaponisation research, such as Parchin, which the IAEA has been demanding access to for years.

The plutonium track needs to be solved. Once the Arak heavy water reactor (which is capable of producing weapons grade plutonium) becomes hot it will be impossible to stop it. Israel took out the Iraqi reactor at Osirak in 1981 before it went hot, and according to media reports, did the same with a Syrian reactor in 2007, so the situation is very dangerous.

There needs to be a strict timeframe. It would be best if during talks the Iranians freeze their programme, so the clock is stopped. If the Iranians insist on continuing their programme, there must be a very limited timeframe, otherwise they are just buying time until they reach a critical breakout capacity.

The heaviest sanctions should be left in place until it is clear the Iranians are serious. If the major sanctions are lifted and then they fail to fulfill their obligations, it will be very difficult to regain the momentum and build up the pressure again.

*Michael Herzog is The Washington Institute's Milton Fine International Fellow.* ❖

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