

Too Early to Expect a Breakthrough on Iran

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

May 22, 2012

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[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.



Brief Analysis

While the upcoming talks in Baghdad are unlikely to lead to a breakthrough, Washington should use them to determine whether a deal is ultimately possible.

Another round of talks will take place between the United States, its negotiating partners in the P5+1 mechanism and Iran on May 23. While the venue of Baghdad is interesting -- and useful for an Iraqi government that would like to showcase its return to normalcy -- this round of talks will not be decisive. Nor should anyone expect that after two rounds of talks, Washington will suddenly be able to overcome its differences with Iran regarding nuclear ambitions.

This is not to say that Washington can afford to approach the talks with Iran without a sense of urgency. Iran continues to enrich uranium and has probably already accumulated four or five bombs' worth of material, and the United States has no interest in allowing this to continue under the guise of ongoing talks. Nor, of course, do the Israelis have such an interest. On the contrary, they fear Iran could drag out such talks to the point where, because of the depth, breadth, and redundancy of the Iranian nuclear infrastructure, Israel could lose its military option for setting back the Iranian nuclear program. Furthermore, no Israeli leadership is likely to accept the reality that it has surrendered its military ability to deal with an existential threat.

So Washington surely doesn't have the luxury of playing for time in these negotiations. Yet, realistically, these talks have not reached a point where success or failure can be predicted. Iran may now be prepared to talk about its nuclear program and some of the confidence-building measures that the P5+1 put on the table, but any more than that is unknown at this point. Clearly, Washington has to find a metric to assess whether these talks can lead somewhere and do so in a way that recognizes what President Obama has said about diplomacy with Iran: there remains a window for diplomacy to work but that window is closing.

The challenge is to test the meaning of the talks without conveying either desperation or a rush to premature

conclusions. The current approach of the P5+1 in the talks is guided by a confidence-building step-by-step logic that could work over time but runs the risk of letting Tehran play for time without revealing whether a real deal is even possible.

To be sure, the step-by-step approach could be structured both substantively and procedurally to address this concern. In terms of substance, the focus needs to be on those confidence-building steps that either stop the clock on the Iranian march to nuclear weapons capability or more clearly demonstrate that Iran is prepared to limit itself to having civil nuclear power while accepting tangible firewalls for preventing its conversion into nuclear weapons.

Some confidence-building steps that Iran could take to stop the clock include

- halting enrichment to 20 percent,
- shipping out all the 20 percent (and some portion of the 3.5 percent) material that has been accumulated,
- satisfactorily answering IAEA questions about the possible military dimensions of its nuclear program (the recent Amano announcement suggests movement in this direction), and
- accepting the enhanced transparency measures associated with the Additional Protocol of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation treaty.

Iran's acceptance of a more fundamental deal that would prevent the conversion of civil nuclear power into nuclear weapons includes a couple of possible scenarios:

- Iran forgoes enrichment and reprocessing and receives fuel from an international fuel bank
- Iran seeks enrichment, but accepts strict limitations on the level of enrichment to below 5%, on the amount of low enriched uranium that can be accumulated in the country, and on the number of centrifuges that could be operated, installed, and stored. Iran would have to agree to the intrusive verification measures needed to ensure that these limits are respected.

Clearly, Iran will want to discuss comparable measures to be taken by the P5+1 to reduce the economic pressure on the Islamic Republic, such as lifting of the more onerous sanctions. Iran must understand, however, that as long as its nuclear program advances, the economic pressures will also advance without reduction. Partial steps by them can only lead to partial steps in return.

What this highlights is that serious intensive discussions will be needed to flesh out the steps to be taken by each side, many of which are highly technical and understood in different ways by the two sides. What, for example, would it mean for Iran to adopt the Additional Protocol, and do the P5+1 and Iran share the same concept on the scope, location, and frequency of the inspections? Similarly, many of the provisions of sanctions may have multiple elements to them, some of which might be relaxed in response to tangible Iranian moves, but here again a thorough discussion would be required.

If nothing else, an outcome from the May 23 talks that would indicate seriousness would be that the talks become ongoing. Little can be achieved with monthly talks. The talks should be ongoing, with limited breaks for consultations in capitals and with expert-level discussions following up on the agenda of issues that require fleshing out.

It may be too early to expect a breakthrough, but it is not too early to have a process that allows Washington to determine if negotiations with Iran are meaningful and can lead to an outcome. Talks or a process for its own sake have never been the objective; nor is a deal that sets a bad precedent for the nonproliferation regime more generally. If the May 23 talks are headed in the right direction, they will produce a meaningful, specific, follow-up agenda and the talks will become continuous. One thing is for certain: there is no prospect of a deal if the talks are only intermittent.

Ambassador Dennis Ross, counselor at The Washington Institute, previously served as special assistant to President Obama and senior director for the central region at the National Security Council.



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

Military & Security [\(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

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

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)