

The Baghdad Nuclear Talks: Three Steps to Help Diplomacy Succeed

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Brief Analysis

Although Washington may be tempted to take whatever progress it can get from this week's nuclear talks, the only agreement worth having is one that resolves Western concerns about Iran's nuclear activities while lessening the threat of military conflict.

Given that Wednesday's Iran nuclear talks in Baghdad are unlikely to produce a decisive outcome, a central challenge for U.S. and EU-3 (i.e., British, French, and German) negotiators will be to manage the tension between a slow-moving diplomatic process and the much faster progress of Iran's nuclear program and international sanctions, as well as possible Israeli military plans to stymie the program. For Washington, resolving that challenge means insisting on measures from Iran that bring its nuclear weapons progress to a full stop, allowing sanctions to continue expanding during the talks, and coordinating closely with regional allies regarding acceptable outcomes.

THREE SCENARIOS

The April 13-14 nuclear talks in Istanbul were reportedly characterized by a positive "atmosphere," but little if any discussion of substance. Neither the P5+1 (i.e., the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) nor Iran put forward proposals, and the only agreed outcome was to hold a second round of talks and, in the interim, "expert-level" consultations between Ali Bagheri, deputy to Iranian negotiator Saeed Jalili, and Helga Schmid, deputy to EU foreign policy chief Baroness Catherine Ashton. Given the tentative nature of the Istanbul meeting and subsequent consultations, a breakthrough nuclear agreement, much less a "grand bargain" on all issues, is highly unlikely this week. Instead, three outcomes are strong possibilities:

- *Iranian intransigence.* Although there have been mixed signals from Tehran regarding the regime's willingness to consider a nuclear compromise (see [PolicyWatch 1939 \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-)

[analysis/view/prospects-for-success-in-the-iran-nuclear-negotiations](#)), even those Iranian officials who have discussed a compromise have publicly mentioned terms unlikely to be accepted by the P5+1 -- namely, a full lifting of Western sanctions in exchange for, at best, a partial freeze on nuclear activities. Iran may, as it did in October 2009, simply refuse to take the P5+1's "yes" for an answer and decline terms that Western analysts would deem generous. Although this may appear irrational, Tehran currently has strong incentives to keep the negotiating process alive if only to stave off more severe punitive action. Under such circumstances, Iran has previously demonstrated a great reluctance -- if not inability -- to change course on core policies. In a sense, the regime has proven to be its own worst enemy, alienating potential allies by refusing to engage in even a show of compromise or conciliation.

- *Indefinite negotiations.* The Baghdad round, like the Istanbul talks, could simply prove inconclusive, resulting in further rounds of talks. As indicated above, this would fit with an Iranian strategy of maintaining the pretense of diplomatic cooperation in order to buy time and drain momentum from the international pressure campaign, while avoiding compromises or commitments. It would also comport with any belief in Tehran that upcoming U.S. and European elections will result in policy changes, or that the usual summer peak in oil demand will sap enthusiasm for further sanctions. Although a seemingly positive yet nonsubstantive outcome was hailed as a sign of progress in Istanbul, Washington and some of its allies would view such a result as a failure in Baghdad.
- *Interim agreement.* The most substantive outcome that can be expected in Baghdad is an interim agreement of some kind. Generally speaking, such a deal could take three forms: (1) an agreement on "principles" for further negotiations that stops short of committing either side to specific steps; (2) a "work plan" to address the International Atomic Energy Agency's outstanding questions, without reference to the more difficult issues (i.e., the status of Iran's enrichment and reprocessing programs, nuclear facilities, and enriched uranium stockpiles); (3) most optimistically, the first phase of a multistep agreement to resolve the nuclear dispute that specifically addresses the three difficult issues just mentioned. Any such agreement raises the problems of compliance and follow-up -- Iran might purposefully misinterpret or fail to implement the terms of a deal, or the interim arrangement could effectively become a final deal without addressing Washington's core concerns.

Given that even the most optimistic of these scenarios offers merely incremental progress toward a nuclear resolution, the Obama administration will face a thorny challenge post-Baghdad. The implementation of any agreement, much less any follow-up agreements, will likely be long in unfolding, especially given Tehran's penchant for delay. In the meantime, the nuclear program will presumably continue to expand until an agreement is reached, and even then parts of it may be left unfettered. At the same time, additional U.S. and EU sanctions already on the books will take effect at the end of June, and Congress is likely to expand them absent a breakthrough. More seriously, Israel is reportedly contemplating military action in the near term and is unlikely to find any of the above outcomes satisfactory.

HOW TO SYNCHRONIZE THE CLOCKS

To buy time for diplomacy to succeed, the Obama administration must take steps that, paradoxically, make diplomacy more difficult. Nevertheless, the only agreement worth having is one that resolves Western concerns regarding Iran's nuclear activities and lessens the threat of military conflict. A deal that leaves Tehran with a significant residual nuclear weapons capability or fails to address the concerns leading Israel to consider a military strike may be easier to achieve, but would have little value.

First, any interim agreement should require Iran to fully halt its progress toward nuclear weapons; this will ensure that subsequent negotiations do not simply serve as cover for further advancement along that line. This means insisting that Iran comply with all of the relevant resolutions adopted at the UN Security Council and IAEA Board of Governors by fully suspending its enrichment and reprocessing activities and fully cooperating with IAEA inspectors, as well as that it take additional steps such as dismantling the Fordow site and yielding its enriched

uranium stockpiles.

Some analysts have suggested that these steps are unrealistic. Yet the P5+1 are willing to provide fuel for Iran's research reactor, and Russia already provides fuel for the Bushehr power reactor, so there is no reason for Iran to have a uranium enrichment program. The only barrier to fully suspending that program is Tehran's objection, which is precisely what Western diplomacy and sanctions are designed to overcome. Of course, it may take longer to convince the regime to make these concessions than it would to secure agreement on more modest nuclear limitations. To sharpen and accelerate Iran's choice, the Obama administration should make clearer that the alternative may be U.S. or Israeli military action. It should also cease making statements that appear to oppose to undermine that threat.

Second, until a satisfactory and irreversible halt to Iran's nuclear program is achieved, the Obama administration should not object to full implementation and even expansion of sanctions by the EU and Congress -- in fact, it should support such actions. This would help Tehran understand that only a mutually agreed resolution, and not the diplomatic process itself, will bring relief from pressure.

Third, Washington should consult closely and frequently with Israel, Gulf states, and other concerned allies in advance of negotiations. Given that the United States could be drawn into a regional war with Iran regardless of an agreement between Tehran and the P5+1, it is important that any such agreement also satisfy these allies' concerns. It is particularly important that Washington and Israel agree in advance on what constitutes an acceptable agreement with Iran. Advance coordination will also increase the likelihood that allies express support for the U.S. strategy before and after talks, which was pointedly not the case after the Istanbul round, when Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu characterized the talks as a "freebie" for Iran, prompting a public rebuke from President Obama. Such public displays of division among allies can only prove heartening to the Iranian regime, which has endeavored in the past to sow disputes among the P5+1.

Michael Singh is managing director of The Washington Institute. ❖

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