

# Evaluating the Upcoming Nuclear Talks with Iran

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Oct 15, 2009

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

Iran's nuclear program will be the topic of three important upcoming events: an October 19 meeting of nuclear experts from the P5+1 (the five permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany), an October 25 International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspection of the recently revealed Qom facility, and a follow-up meeting between Iran and the P5+1 shortly thereafter. The long-range goals of the United States and its allies with respect to Iran's nuclear program, as well as how to induce Iran to agree to these objectives, have been a matter of significant dispute. Nonetheless, in the near term these upcoming events can provide some benchmarks for progress. Three issues stand in the forefront: resetting Iran's nuclear clock, creating transparency through verification, and resolving the fundamental issues between Iran and the international community.

### Resetting the Nuclear Clock

So long as Iran continues to race ahead with its nuclear program, negotiations risk being overtaken by events: the window for talks depends on Iran's inability to manufacture a nuclear weapon. For this reason, the focus has been on convincing Iran to suspend its nuclear enrichment so that it cannot produce enough low-enriched uranium (LEU) to use as feedstock for the highly enriched uranium necessary for a nuclear bomb.

The October 1 Geneva agreement between Iran and the P5+1, however, resulted in a different means of reducing the risk of an Iranian "breakout." Rather than reducing the amount of LEU Iran produces, the new approach focuses on reducing the amount of LEU Iran has on its soil. Iran agreed to ship 80 percent of its current LEU stock -- 1,200 kilograms -- to Russia, which would leave Tehran with too little LEU from its declared facilities to make a bomb. If the deal goes ahead, various government estimates suggest that Iran will need eighteen months to produce enough LEU to return to its current level of 1,200 kilograms. For this reason, the P5+1 told Iran -- in no uncertain terms -- that prompt shipment of the full 1,200 kilograms to Russia is essential.

Since the Geneva meeting, however, Iran -- not surprisingly -- has stalled. In an attempt to rewrite the deal, Iranian leaders offered instead to ship 100 kilograms per month -- an amount that would leave the regime with a stockpile sufficient for producing a bomb. Such efforts to rework an already negotiated agreement are all too typical of past business deals negotiated by the Islamic Republic, which in many cases have stalled for years before finally falling through completely.

## Transparency and Verification

No deal is worthwhile if Iran cheats in a way that reduces the effectiveness of the agreement. The standards for Iran's compliance must be based on past performance: Tehran's two-decade history of lying, concealing, and refusing to live up to its treaty obligations demands extreme vigilance. Clever, lawyerly rationales for actions that undercut the deal are not acceptable. The essential requirement is that Iran become transparent.

A key indicator will be whether Iran follows through on offers it has made. Foreign Minister Manoucher Motaki stated in New York that Iran has no undeclared nuclear facilities under construction -- a detail that the IAEA needs to confirm through visits to sites of concern. In addition, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad told the Washington Post that Iran would make its nuclear scientists available to the IAEA -- which in the past, Tehran has repeatedly refused to do.

Another critical indicator will be Iran's willingness to answer a series of questions laid out in recent IAEA reports and to address IAEA staff concerns appearing in the leaked annex to an agency report. Although the IAEA management deemed the evidence supporting these concerns insufficient reason to include the annex in the public report, these concerns nonetheless merit investigation.

## Resolving Underlying Differences

The Geneva agreement was limited to resetting the nuclear clock and addressing verification concerns; no progress was made on resolving the underlying differences between Iran and the international community. Iran continues to insist it will plow ahead with its enrichment and missile programs. Although the P5+1 did not emphasize its long-term objective, diplomats from each country clarified that Iran must act in accordance with the Security Council resolutions calling for Iran to suspend its nuclear and missile programs until it has restored the international community's confidence in its purely peaceful intentions.

Some have suggested that existing Security Council resolutions are unrealistic and that any agreement must allow Iran to have limited enrichment. Perhaps so. But the international community as a whole -- not the dictates of one or a few powers -- must decide on this matter. So long as the UN resolutions remain intact, international diplomacy should aim at achieving compliance with those orders. Premature capitulation would be particularly unwise, as it would indicate a willingness to accept less than what the Security Council has ordered at a time when Iran has shown no willingness to change its position.

## Two Great Dangers

The upcoming meetings pose some grave risks for Western interests if the issues become muddled or if the Iranian regime feels empowered to crack down at home.

Once Iran and the P5+1 are in negotiations, public opinion could lose sight of what is at stake. When Iran simply refused to negotiate, the storyline was simple: Iran's hardliners were unreasonable liars, and something had to be done. With negotiations underway, the picture becomes more complicated, and those who do not follow the issue closely could easily think that the best approach is to continue negotiating, no matter what the obstacles. Preventing such confusion will require that each P5+1 government share in and present a clear and consistent narrative.

The other danger is that Iranian hardliners -- who view the nuclear talks in no small part through the lens of their repercussions on local politics -- will feel empowered to crack down on dissenters. The June presidential elections effected a deep societal and leadership split, and Tehran may attempt to present the negotiations as proof that the international community not only accepts the regime but is bending to its will. The Geneva meeting was portrayed in this manner despite the significant Iranian concessions that marked the event. Since Tehran is actively engaged in negotiations with the P5+1, hardliners may feel that they would pay little in terms of international relations for a

brutal crackdown at home. The West -- hopefully joined by Russia and China -- should voice human rights concerns at all opportunities. In Geneva, for example, when the Iranian representative stated that Tehran wanted to discuss an agenda broader than the nuclear issue, the U.S. delegate readily agreed but noted that the United States would bring up human rights issues.

Although it is unclear whether the current U.S. strategy regarding Iran's nuclear program will be successful, upcoming events should clarify whether Iran is stalling for time. The more Iran stalls, the more the international community must press Iran's political leaders, and impede Iranian access to needed technology and finance.

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Policy #1592

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