

Talking with Tehran: An Overview of U.S.-Iran Nuclear Negotiations

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“Even in the darkest days of the Cold War, we had links to the Soviet Union. We are not talking to Iran, so we don’t understand each other. If something happens, it’s virtually assured that we won’t get it right.”

Adm. Mike Mullen, former Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff ¹

In brief

- Formal discussions between the U.S. and Iran on nuclear issues have been limited to a handful of meetings over the past several decades.
- While a nuclear deal has proved elusive thus far, talks with Iran have yielded promising proposals that could be the basis of a future agreement.
- Rather than abandoning diplomacy, the U.S. should continue to engage Iran to find a diplomatic solution and avoid an unquantifiable military conflict.

Introduction

Months of slow progress in nuclear negotiations with Iran have some pundits calling for a faster solution to the standoff – abandoning talks, ratcheting up sanctions, even military strikes.

These recommendations tend to stem from the belief that the U.S. and Iran have engaged in sustained, substantive talks on the nuclear issue.

In fact, just the opposite is true. What some characterize as “nine years of negotiations”² between the U.S. and Iran has actually been a handful of face-to-face meetings and a few written communications (most exchanged through third parties) spread out over the course of nine years.



Release of the P5+1 Statement on Iran, July 2006

This overview of U.S. nuclear negotiations with Iran shows that, regardless of the outcome of the current talks, diplomatic solutions to the impasse have not been exhausted. Before turning to aggressive actions that could provoke a wider conflict in the Middle East, it makes sense to make every effort to engage Iran.

A Timeline of U.S.-Iran Diplomacy

The U.S. broke diplomatic ties with Iran in 1980, shortly after Iranian militants stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and took approximately seventy hostages. U.S. interests in Iran were assumed by the Swiss government; Iran was represented in the U.S. first by Algeria, then by Pakistan.³

For over thirty years, therefore, face-to-face negotiations between Iranian and U.S. officials have been rare. Discussions of Iran's nuclear program have been even rarer.

A series of events following the diplomatic break (the Iran-Iraq war, Iran Contra Affair, and Iran Air Flight 655) further estranged the two countries.⁴

1995 saw the first round of U.S. economic sanctions on Iran. The U.S. continues to increase sanctions today.⁵

The aftermath of September 11th brought a promising thaw to U.S.-Iran relations. Iran and the U.S. cooperated on Afghanistan operations in 2001 and participated in the 2002 Bonn Conference on Afghanistan. Further discussions broke down when the U.S. did not take up a 2003 offer from Iran (transmitted via Switzerland) for bilateral negotiation of a “grand political bargain.”⁶

2007 saw the first formal talks between the U.S. and Iran in 27 years. The topic of discussion was not nuclear, however, but rather the situation in Iraq.

Initiating talks on Iran's nuclear program proved difficult. In 2006, the U.S. joined the Russia, China, and the EU3 (France, Germany, and the UK) to offer Iran a comprehensive proposal.

The U.S. did not join the EU3 presentation of the proposal in 2006, however. It was not until July 2008 that the P5+1 – the EU3 plus Russia, China, and the U.S. – presented a revised version of the June 2006 proposal in a face-to-face meeting.

Discussions in fall 2009 over a fuel swap proposal ultimately fell apart. The P5+1 and Iran resumed talks 14 months later, meeting in Geneva in December 2010 and in Istanbul in January 2011.

The 15-month hiatus following these talks was broken in April 2012, when the P5+1 and Iran met in Istanbul.

This meeting was followed by meetings in Baghdad and Moscow. High-level political talks were followed by technical talks between EU and Iranian officials.

Nuclear Proposals

Negotiations on Iran's nuclear program have not yet yielded a lasting, comprehensive agreement on Iran's nuclear program. Some have argued that failure to achieve an agreement thus far shows that negotiations will never work. This argument, however, ignores the whole history of negotiations with Iran.

A comprehensive look at Iranian nuclear negotiations and the proposals that have resulted shows that progress can be made through engagement.⁷



Secretary Clinton with EU High Representative Lady Catherine Ashton, September 2011

In fact, engagement with Iran has yielded several promising agreements. These have included:

- **The Tehran Declaration (2003) and the Paris Agreement (2004)**

In talks with the EU3, Iran agreed in October 2003 to suspend uranium enrichment and processing, allow IAEA inspections, and sign the Additional Protocol to the Nonproliferation Treaty.

The Tehran Declaration was the basis for ongoing talks that yielded the 2004 Paris Agreement, in which the EU3 recognized Iran's right to peaceful enrichment and Iran agreed to voluntarily suspend enrichment under IAEA monitoring.



*Deputy Secretary of State Burns
with the heads of each P5 delegation, June
2012*

- **The P5+1 Fuel Swap Proposal**

In October 2009 the P5+1 and Iran came close to closing a deal in which Iran would give up low enriched uranium in exchange for higher enriched (but not weapons-grade) uranium that could be used as in fuel rods for the Tehran Research Reactor.

While the deal fell through, elements of this are a key part of proposals on the table today.

- **The Moscow Step-by-Step Proposal**

In July 2011 Russia outlined a step-by-step plan in which Iran would agree to answer questions concerning its nuclear activities in exchange for gradual lifting of Western sanctions.

A phased approach, experts say, may be the best solution to the current standoff.⁸

Conclusion

Critics of the ongoing negotiations with Iran argue that diplomatic avenues have been exhausted and that the administration is “[clinging] to a ‘process’ that is going nowhere.”⁹

These arguments fail to take into account the historical context of nuclear negotiations with Iran. Even including the three recent P5+1 meetings, the U.S. and Iran have engaged in very few formal discussions over the past several decades.

Previous efforts to engage Iran, while failing to produce a comprehensive agreement, show that diplomacy can produce concrete results.

The consequences of dismissing negotiations before every option has been explored are serious. Taking the wrong tack with Iran could lead to a conflict that would be disastrous for both sides.

Rather than dismissing negotiations, the U.S. should commit to engagement, understanding that the recent talks with Iran have just begun to address the misunderstandings and mistrust that grew from decades of not talking.

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Endnotes

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3. U.S. Department of State, Background Note: Iran. February 1, 2012. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5314.htm>
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6. Glenn Kessler, "In 2003, U.S. Spurned Iran's Offer of Dialogue." The Washington Post, June 18, 2006. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/17/AR2006061700727.html>
7. For a comprehensive history of Iran nuclear proposals, see analysis by Kelsey Davenport, The Arms Control Association, April 2012. http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Iran_Nuclear_Proposals
8. Hossein Mousavian, "Real Solutions To Nuclear Deadlock With Iran." The Boston Globe, March 31, 2012. <http://m100group.wordpress.com/2012/04/01/real-solutions-to-nuclear-deadlock-with-iran-by-hossein-mousavian/>
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