



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Situation Assessment | 8 May 2025

US-Iran Nuclear Talks: Background, Obstacles, and Prospects

Unit for Political Studies

US-Iran Nuclear Talks: Background, Obstacles, and Prospects

Series: **Situation Assessment**

8 May 2025

Unit for Political Studies

The Unit for Political Studies is the Center's department dedicated to the study of the region's most pressing current affairs. An integral and vital part of the ACRPS' activities, it offers academically rigorous analysis on issues that are relevant and useful to the public, academics and policy-makers of the Arab region and beyond. The Unit for Political Studie draws on the collaborative efforts of a number of scholars based within and outside the ACRPS. It produces three of the Center's publication series: Assessment Report, Policy Analysis, and Case Analysis reports. .

Copyright © 2025 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. All Rights Reserved.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is an independent research institute and think tank for the study of history and social sciences, with particular emphasis on the applied social sciences.

The Center's paramount concern is the advancement of Arab societies and states, their cooperation with one another and issues concerning the Arab nation in general. To that end, it seeks to examine and diagnose the situation in the Arab world - states and communities- to analyze social, economic and cultural policies and to provide political analysis, from an Arab perspective.

The Center publishes in both Arabic and English in order to make its work accessible to both Arab and non-Arab researchers.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat

Al-Dayaen, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha

+974 4035 4111

www.dohainstitute.org

Table of Contents

- I: Background 1
- II: Three Rounds of Negotiations 2
- III: US Ambiguity 3
- IV: The Iranian Position 4
- Conclusion 5



The United States and Iran have now sat three rounds of Omani-mediated negotiations, through which Washington seeks to restrict Iran's nuclear program, while Tehran hopes to lift economic sanctions. The negotiations began on 12 April 2025, in Muscat, Oman, followed by a second round in Rome, Italy, and a third round in Muscat, again on 19 and 26 April respectively. The negotiations took place at the homes of Omani Foreign Minister Badr al-Busaidi in Muscat and Rome, with the US and Iranian delegations in separate rooms. Washington stated that the negotiations were both indirect and direct, referring to a brief meeting between the heads of the two delegations in the first round of negotiations, US envoy Steve Witkoff, and Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi.¹

I: Background

During a meeting between Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the White House on 7 April, the US president announced "direct talks" between Washington and Tehran "at the highest level",² news that Tehran denied at the time. Since the beginning of his second term, Trump has emphasized his desire to conclude a new nuclear agreement with Iran, threatening a military intervention if Iran does not halt its uranium enrichment program. The 2015 nuclear agreement limited Iran's permitted uranium enrichment to 3.76 percent, sufficient for a civil program. However, Tehran has doubled its enrichment to 60 percent purity since 2019, following Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear agreement. In March 2025, Trump sent a letter to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, urging him to come to the negotiating table and warning him of further sanctions and large-scale military strikes, including those targeting Iran's nuclear facilities. Although Khamenei initially refused to enter negotiations under threat, he later reversed his position and agreed to indirect negotiations with the US via Omani mediation.³

For weeks, the US has been working to strengthen its military capabilities in the region in the context of its war against the Houthis in Yemen and a possible escalation against Iran. In early April, Washington deployed B-2 bombers to the Indian Ocean in a warning to Iran to push it to negotiate over its nuclear program. B-2 bombers can carry bunker-buster bombs that target Iranian nuclear facilities deep in mountains. After the first round of negotiations, Washington deployed the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson and its strike group to the Arabian Sea, joining the aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman, to exert further pressure on Tehran. Iran also faces severe economic sanctions as a result of Trump's 2018 "maximum pressure" policy, which includes banning other countries from purchasing Iranian oil.⁴ Subsequently Iranian oil exports declined, foreign companies abandoned the country,

¹ Jennifer Hansler & Sophie Tanno, "US and Iran Express Optimism Following Second Round of Nuclear Talks," *CNN*, 19/4/2025, accessed on 5/5/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRoJ>

² "Full Text of Trump, Netanyahu in Oval Office: 'We're Having Direct Talks with Iran'," *The Times of Israel*, 7/4/2025, accessed on 5/5/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRAq>

³ Jon Gambrell & Amir Vahdat, "Iran's Foreign Minister Says He will have Indirect Talks with US Envoy over Tehran's Nuclear Program," *Associated Press*, 8/4/2025, accessed on 5/5/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRHO>

⁴ Amira El-Fekki, "New Satellite Photos Show U.S. Carrier Deployed for Middle East Attacks," *Newsweek*, 15/4/2025, accessed on 5/5/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRZu>

and the currency lost nearly 90 percent of its value against the US dollar. Making matters worse, the country underwent a debilitating fuel and electricity crisis over the winter of 2024 - 2025.⁵

Conversely, the US also faces challenges should it pursue a military option – as Israel has demanded – against the Iranian nuclear program. Trump's foreign policy approach is based on avoiding unnecessary wars that are not directly related to US national security. Furthermore, doubts surround the ability of any US or Israeli military action, or even a joint campaign, to completely destroy the Iranian nuclear program. An attack could temporarily disrupt the program and delay the "breakout time" for building a nuclear bomb. But any military action against Iran could lead to the expulsion of UN inspectors and accelerate its transformation into a nuclear state.

II: Three Rounds of Negotiations

While the first round of negotiations between the two countries in Muscat determined the course and format of the talks,⁶ the second in Rome established a framework for how the negotiations would proceed. According to Araghchi, the two sides agreed to begin developing a framework for a potential nuclear agreement, and a US official described the round as having made "very good progress".⁷ On 23 April, an expert-level meeting was held between the two countries in Muscat, which an Iranian official described as "difficult, complex, and serious". On 26 April, the third round was held again in Muscat, during which the two sides, according to Araghchi, exchanged written points and engaged in "deeper and more detailed discussions". A senior US administration official described the meeting as "positive and productive".⁸

Although the two sides agreed to hold a fourth round of negotiations in Rome on 3 May 2025, they were postponed for logistical reasons, according to the Omani Foreign Minister, with a date to be determined later.⁹ The decision appears to have been prompted by new sanctions announced on 30 April by the US State Department against companies it says are linked to Tehran and the illicit trade in Iranian oil and petrochemicals.¹⁰ The following day, a day before the fourth round of negotiations, US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth warned Iran against its support of the Houthis in Yemen.¹¹ However, these events are unlikely to lead to a collapse of the talks, as both sides seek to avoid sliding toward war.

5 Golnar Motevalli, "Iran Dangles 'Trillion Dollar' Incentive for Trump in Deal Talks," *Bloomberg*, 28/4/2025, accessed on 5/5/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRCz>

6 Barak Ravid, "U.S.-Iran Nuclear Talks Held in Rome as Trump Backs Diplomacy over Strike," *AXIOS*, 19/4/2025, accessed on 5/5/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zSfj>

7 Parisa Hafezi, "Iran, US Task Experts with Framework for a Nuclear Deal after 'Progress' in Talks," *Reuters*, 19/4/2025, accessed on 5/5/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zSot>

8 Jon Gambrell, "Iran and the US Hold Hours of Expert Talks in Oman over Tehran's Rapidly Advancing Nuclear Program," *Associated Press*, 27/4/2025, accessed on 5/5/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRr7>

9 Filip Timotija, "US, Iran Nuclear Talks Postponed, Oman Says," *The Hill*, 1/5/2025, accessed on 5/5/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zSaf>

10 "Maximum Pressure Sanctions on Illicit Traders of Iranian Petroleum and Petrochemical Products," U.S. Department of State, 30/4/2025, accessed on 5/5/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zSpt>

11 Kasra Naji & Maia Davies, "Next Round of Iran-US Nuclear Talks Postponed," *BBC News*, 1/5/2025, accessed on 5/5/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRMA>

III: US Ambiguity

The overall strategic goal, frequently reiterated by Trump, evades the question of whether the US is willing to coexist with a reality in which Iran would be able to enrich uranium, regardless of the enrichment level, which would enable it to produce a nuclear weapon at will.¹² The 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran provided for this reality, and Iran has continued to enrich Uranium since Trump withdrew. The deal allowed Iran to maintain its nuclear infrastructure and facilities, as well as its centrifuges. On this basis, some officials in the Trump administration argue that the Iranian nuclear program must be completely dismantled, an arrangement Netanyahu also demands, insisting that the only agreement Israel would accept is the dismantling of the program, similar to what happened in Libya in 2003, under US supervision. If this does not happen, the "military option" would be inevitable.¹³ On the other hand, some within the Trump administration believe this option is unrealistic and that Iran cannot accept it. If Washington insists on this condition, Trump will be forced to wage war with Iran, as he has threatened repeatedly. The Trump administration has yet to settle these discussions regarding Iran.

The first camp, which believes in the priority of a diplomatic solution, even if it entails maintaining a limited and tightly monitored Iranian nuclear infrastructure, includes Vice President JD Vance, Defence Secretary Hegseth, and Witkoff, who has informed Trump administration officials that insisting on the complete dismantling of Iran's nuclear program would preclude any agreement. Therefore, the only alternative would be to strike Iranian nuclear facilities, and face all the security, political, and economic repercussions this would entail for US interests.¹⁴

The second camp, which calls for the complete dismantling of Iran's nuclear program, includes Secretary of State Marco Rubio, National Security Advisor Mike Waltz (recently fired by Trump), and Senator Lindsey Graham, a close Trump ally. This group believes that maintaining Iran's nuclear program and facilities will expose Trump to significant criticism, repeating "the mistake" of the Obama administration, which Trump previously described as a "disaster".¹⁵ This group also argues that Iran is weaker than ever due to the damage Israel has inflicted on the capabilities of its allies (especially Hezbollah in Lebanon), the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, and the strikes targeting the Houthis in Yemen. They believe that Iran is more vulnerable today than before, as a result of the strict US economic sanctions imposed on it, the increased US military presence in the region, and Israel's success in October 2024 in destroying Tehran's strategic air defences during an attack. This would leave its sensitive nuclear and military sites highly vulnerable to future attacks.

Witkoff stated on 14 April, after the first round of negotiations, that he did not rule out allowing Iran to continue enriching uranium to the 3.67 percent level required for a peaceful nuclear energy

¹² David E. Sanger, Farnaz Fassihi & Lara Jakes, "In Iran Talks, Trump Is Edging Toward Reviving an Old Deal," *The New York Times*, 19/4/2025, accessed on 5/5/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRCc>

¹³ Ron Crissy, "Nuclear Deal with Iran Only if Follows Libyan Example, PM Says," *Ynet News*, 9/4/025, accessed on 5/5/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRWu>

¹⁴ Sanger, Fassihi & Jakes.

¹⁵ Ibid.

program, provided assurances were given that it was not manufacturing ballistic missiles capable of carrying nuclear weapons or producing actuators that could detonate nuclear bombs. This is a clear indication of the discord withing Trump's cabinet. However, he retracted his statement a day later, asserting that Iran must "eliminate" its enrichment and "weaponization",¹⁶ which Iran categorically rejects. Rubio went further, insisting that Iran must halt uranium enrichment under any agreement with the US and that it will only be allowed to "import enriched material" for a "civil nuclear program."¹⁷

IV: The Iranian Position

Iran emphasizes its right to enrich uranium, but it is willing to accept certain restrictions on this. It has outlined the conditions it seeks in the nuclear agreement as follows:¹⁸

1. The agreement must include the lifting of sanctions on Iran.
2. Obtaining credible guarantees from Trump that he will not withdraw from the nuclear agreement again, as he did in 2018.
3. Iran will not completely dismantle its nuclear infrastructure, including uranium enrichment centrifuges, a complete halt to enrichment, or a reduction of its stockpile of enriched uranium below the levels agreed upon in the 2015 agreement.
4. The negotiations must not include Iran's missile program, which Tehran considers outside the scope of any nuclear agreement.
5. The US must pressure Israel to refrain from threatening to attack Iran.

Reuters quoted an Iranian official as saying that "Iran understood in indirect talks in Oman that Washington doesn't want Iran to stop all nuclear activities, and this can be a common ground for Iran and the US to start a fair negotiation".¹⁹ In return, Iran raised the possibility of establishing a joint venture to manage its nuclear enrichment facilities, an option that would allow the Trump administration to claim a difference from the Obama administration's deal. The Iranian foreign minister called on the US to invest in his country's nuclear program and help build 19 nuclear reactors as part of an additional security measure.²⁰ A senior Iranian official also indicated that his country is open to transferring its stockpile of enriched uranium to Russia or another country, just as it did in early 2016 when the Obama-era nuclear deal entered into force.²¹

¹⁶ Lazar Berman & Jacob Magid & Tol Staff, "Netanyahu: Bad Iran Deal is 'Worse than no Deal'; Trump: A deal is 'going to happen'," *Time of Israel*, 28/4/2025, accessed on 5/5/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zS9j>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ravid.

¹⁹ "Iranian Official Rules out Ending Enrichment, Discussing Missiles," *Iran International*, 18/4/2025, accessed on 5/5/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zREh>

²⁰ Vivian Nereim, Farnaz Fassihi & Jonathan Swan, "What's at Stake in the Iran-U.S. Nuclear Talks," *The New York Times*, 26/4/2025, accessed on 5/5/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zROI>

²¹ Sanger, Fassihi & Jakes.

Conclusion

It is difficult to determine whether Washington and Tehran will be able to reach a new nuclear agreement, given the differences between them regarding the agreement and its terms. However, it can be said that there is a tone of cautious optimism on both sides, based on the mutual desire to avoid war. The most prominent sticking point in the negotiations appears to be whether Iran will be allowed to retain its nuclear facilities and the ability to enrich uranium, even to the levels required for civil energy production – that is, to 3.67 percent. Trump is under pressure from within his administration and from Israel not to return to an agreement similar to the one concluded by the Obama administration. However, there are those proposing additional measures to improve that agreement, which may include stricter monitoring of Iranian nuclear activities, joint ventures to manage nuclear facilities, and making Iran's safeguards permanent.²²

Meanwhile, Iran finds itself in a more vulnerable position than it was prior to October 2023, compounded by growing popular discontent with the severe impact of economic sanctions on Iranians' living standards. Therefore, it is keener to reach a nuclear agreement that does not violate its red lines. The Israeli factor remains an obstacle, with Netanyahu insisting that any agreement with Iran must dismantle its facilities, transfer its nuclear equipment abroad, and stipulate a complete ban on enrichment.²³ Netanyahu also insists on an end to Iran's ballistic missile program and to its support for Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Palestinian resistance movements, a demand Tehran outright rejects. Leaks indicate the Israeli government is laying pressure on Washington to allow it to carry out military action against Iranian nuclear facilities, if limited,²⁴ but the Trump administration is resisting this action so long as there is a possibility of reaching an agreement.

²² Ibid.

²³ "Amid U.S.-Iran talks, Netanyahu Says Iran's Entire Nuclear Program must Go," *Reuters*, 28/4/2025, accessed on 5/5/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRVJ>

²⁴ Erin Banco, "Exclusive: Israel still Eyeing a Limited Attack on Iran's Nuclear Facilities," *Reuters*, 19/4/2025, accessed on 5/5/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zS1D>