



Expert Explains: US-Iran nuclear talks— what has happened so far, why, and the road ahead

Just three months into Trump's second term, the US and Iran are talking for a deal he had walked out of in his first presidency. Iran has economic reasons to sit at the table, but there is a long way to go before the outreach becomes a handshake

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Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi speaks with the Iranian delegation after the negotiations in Muscat on Saturday. West Asia News Agency via (Reuters)

Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi and United States Special Envoy Steve Witkoff held indirect talks in Muscat on Saturday. Their objective is to reach a deal that ends US economic sanctions on Iran, in return for Tehran giving up its stockpile of enriched uranium and attempts towards nuclear weaponisation.

“The talks were conducted in an atmosphere of mutual respect...Both sides decided to continue the process in a matter of days,” Araghchi posted on X.

US President [Donald Trump first confirmed such talks](#) during a press conference with Israeli PM [Benjamin Netanyahu](#) on April 8. He has repeatedly expressed his desire for a deal, and threatened Iran with bombing, “the likes of which they have never seen before...if they don’t make a deal”.

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The Iranians have long agreed to negotiate, but “indirectly”, as an article in *The Washington Post* by Araghchi emphasised on April 9. Trump and Witkoff have repeatedly characterised any talk as “direct”. The two sides entered negotiations with several such fundamental differences, but they are at the table — a scenario few expected, least of all just three months after Trump took office and amid a large-scale US campaign against the Iran-backed Houthis. Why?

The change has been more in Iran than in the United States.

What has changed for Iran?

Iran is at a watershed moment.

The average Iranian is 32 years old, and the newer generations have not witnessed the three formative events that bind political leaders from older generations — the 1979 revolution, the Iran-Iraq War, and the only succession of a Supreme Leader (Ali Khamenei succeeded Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989).

In the last two decades, the Iranian regime has successfully weathered and neutralised threats from mass protests (usually led by the youth) through a mix of limited concessions and coercion. It has built a ‘resistance economy’ in response to Trump’s ‘maximum pressure’ policy since 2018.

Now (with Khamenei healthy but 85 years old), Tehran's priority is regime preservation and a reduction of threats (especially economic).

In August 2024, President Masoud Pezeshkian said Iran needed at least \$100B in foreign investment to achieve a growth rate sufficient to slow double-digit [inflation](#) and high unemployment rates. Iranian leaders, including Araghchi, are advocating doing business with the United States and deals like the one with Boeing in 2015 for 80 commercial aircraft (when the earlier nuclear deal took effect).

Recently, Pezeshkian even said Khamenei was not opposed to US entities investing in the Iranian economy as long as they were genuine investors.

The economic need for sanctions relief has helped Iranian reformists press for a nuclear deal, while conservative politicians (who hold a majority in the Iranian Parliament) voice caution but do not upend negotiation efforts.

In its neighborhood, the severe weakening of Iran's 'Axis of Resistance' (even if temporary) has coincided with a strong Arab interest in improving cross-Gulf ties. Capitals such as Riyadh, which vociferously opposed the 2015 nuclear deal (along with Israel), are now in favour of a negotiated settlement and greater economic integration.

Even Iran's extra-regional allies such as Russia, who largely stopped pushing Iran to give up nuclear enrichment after Tehran's support to Moscow over Ukraine — have freshly reiterated the preference for a deal.

How has the Iran-Trump equation evolved?

Tehran has a 22-year history of such negotiations; with the E3 (France, Germany, UK) since 2003, and with the United States since 2013. These often occurred alongside American military threats to improve Washington's bargaining position.

Following Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the Obama-era deal in 2018, Iran learnt two main lessons — that Tehran had to improve its bargaining position through greater uranium enrichment (which it eventually did, to 60%), and that the Washington

could not be trusted as a negotiating partner (Khamenei declared a ‘no war, no talks’ policy in 2018). Iranian acrimony towards Trump increased after the US’ assassination of Iran’s most celebrated General — Qassem Soleimani — in January 2020.

But Tehran’s need for sanctions relief, which had brought it to the 2015 deal, progressively increased. It needed to reconcile this need with an effort to pre-empt another 2018-like possibility. Hence, despite indirect negotiations in Vienna in 2021 and 2022 with the Biden administration, Iran remained non-committal to the older deal (without formally abrogating it).

In retrospect, this approach has been vindicated within Tehran as it allows fresh negotiations with Trump for a deal he can claim credit for. Abbas Araghchi’s recent article even blamed the Biden administration for the Vienna talks’ failure and asserted that “there is a chance for the United States to finally have a president of peace”, pandering to Trump’s personality.

What lies ahead?

At their very core, Washington’s and Tehran’s immediate objectives are aligned — Iranian nuclear disarmament, and economic engagement. Iran has consistently maintained that nuclear weapons are theologically prohibited (with Khamenei having issued a fatwa against them), and that nuclear enrichment is only a response to American aggression.

The question is if the Trump administration will push for more concessions, as it did in 2017, demanding the limiting/eliminating of Iran’s ballistic missile capabilities and a cessation of Iranian support to proxy groups.

Trump has a maximalist approach to deal-making — to first impose almost unacceptable terms substantiated by a strong bargaining position, and eventually settle for as many concessions as possible. Witkoff has confirmed that there is room for compromise. Hence, Washington’s position might not be entrenched. Its ally Israel, however, has been lobbying for an end to all Iranian nuclear activity (which Tehran categorically rejects), and a military approach to achieve this.

Even as Trump has declared that Israel will lead anti-Iran military action if negotiations fail, the US retains room to dilute its additional demands vis-à-vis Iranian strategic capabilities. Iran too has the ability to scale down its relationship with the Yemeni

Houthis (whose history reveals more autonomy than other Iran-backed groups). A blueprint for a deal has been available since 2015 and Khamenei has reportedly given Araghchi “full authority” for negotiations.

Should the Arab states boost the Iranian position during Trump’s upcoming visit to the region, Netanyahu’s ability to undercut US-Iran negotiations would be further dented. Also, while US Vice President JD Vance has asserted that a war with Iran is not in America’s interest, Tehran’s leaders have reciprocated this reasoning for Iran (unless militarily provoked). It is also uncertain if a deal is possible within Trump’s (initial) two-month timeline. US-Iran talks in 2013 had begun in March, but a blueprint was fully ready only by November, and in force only by 2015.

Ultimately, however, this seeming détente between Tehran and Washington will depend on their ability to silo negotiations from other regional developments, including Israel’s war in Gaza, Syria, and Lebanon.

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