

COMMENTARY

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In Support of Direct U.S.-Iran Talks

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Widely spread rumours circulating within the media in recent days suggest that the United States and Iran have agreed to enter into bilateral talks soon after the US presidential elections in an effort to end the impasse over Iran's nuclear programme, which the US suspects is designed to produce nuclear weapons—a suspicion Iran emphatically refutes. Although both countries have denied the “reports,” the question is whether or not it is wise for the US to engage Iran directly. There are those who implore the US not to enter into bilateral talks as this will give the Ayatollahs more time to come even closer to acquiring nuclear weapons. Conversely, other voices strongly endorse such a move as it offers the prospect, however slim, of success that would avert the use of military force by the U.S., Israel, or both aimed at preventing Tehran from obtaining nuclear weapons.

Recently, Israel's Defence Minister Ehud Barak made it known during his visit to the U.K. that Iran has slowed its production of uranium and is using some of its 20 percent enriched uranium to produce nuclear rods for medical purposes. He went on to say that this development has pushed back Iran's efforts to reach the point of no return by eight to ten months. Regardless of what evidence is behind Barak's assessment, the mere fact that such a pronouncement (which was corroborated by US intelligence) has come from Israel's Defence Minister provides a new impetus for the US to further pursue diplomatic efforts, including direct talks with Iran.

I, for one, fully support direct negotiations, not because I believe they will necessarily bear fruit but because the United States needs to exhaust every possible option before it resorts to military means that will potentially result in ominous regional and global repercussions. Israel should support direct talks between the US and Iran. Indeed, if the talks lead to an agreement satisfactory to Israel it will spare the country from a major military entanglement with unpredictable consequences. If, however, the talks fail it will provide Israel the moral right and greater international support to take whatever measures deemed necessary, including military means, to eliminate the Iranian threat.

Beyond this, however, there are multiple reasons why such talks should be held, provided that strict rules of engagement are established in advance that can potentially improve the chances of success and at the same time, prevent Iran from utilizing the talks to its advantage and test its resolve one way or the other. The rationales behind holding such talks are as follows:

1. U.S.-Iran bilateral negotiations will not only establish whether or not Iran continues to vie for time because of the crippling sanctions, but will also exert insurmountable pressure on Iran, clearly indicating to them that this may well be their last chance to reach an agreement and that failing to do so could lead to dire consequences.
2. Given that the Middle East remains in turmoil in the wake of the Arab Spring, adding fuel to the fire at this juncture is unnecessary, especially if there is more time to act, as both the US and Israel agree that there is.
3. Holding such talks will send a clear message to Russia and China that the United States has exhausted every option and that the onus falls on Iran's shoulders for failing to come to terms with the international consensus that was articulated in three UNSC resolutions, all of which Russia and China supported.
4. Talks will garner the full support of the European community, which will back the US before it resorts to the military option. America's European allies are extremely concerned about the consequences of a military attack in the absence of an agreement.
5. The Arab states see Iran's nuclear programme also in the context of the Sunni-Shiite conflict, and a nuclear, Shiite Iran gives it the upper hand in its deadly rivalry with the Sunni Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia, in securing regional hegemony. For this reason, the Arab states endorse striking Iran as a last resort to prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons, albeit they prefer any peaceful solution that may emerge from U.S.-Iran bilateral talks.
6. The new American administration needs to demonstrate to the American public that it would not dismiss any opening for a diplomatic solution, including direct talks with Iran given the potential entanglement of the US in another violent conflict, if not outright war, in the Middle East, to which most Americans would be completely opposed.
7. Notwithstanding Israel's deep concerns over Iran's intentions and open enmity toward its existence, it is determined to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons but still prefers a peaceful solution provided that it guarantees that Iran will not be permitted to acquire such weapons in the future.
8. For Iran, direct talks with the US have several advantages, as they know full well that the changing dynamics in the conflict over its nuclear programme will only lead to dire consequences. For this reason, the Ayatollahs may rethink their position, especially if they can conclude an agreement without losing face.

9. An agreement with the US basically removes the hovering threat to the Ayatollahs' power base. Indeed, for the Iranian clergy, retaining power trumps the acquisition of nuclear weapons. Moreover, although the government boasts about its ability to cope with the sanctions, the economic conditions have deteriorated to an alarming level and lifting the sanctions as a result of an agreement with the US may well save the economy from complete collapse.

10. Finally, contrary to their public protestations against the U.S., the Iranian leadership might well welcome direct talks with the US as this would enhance their stature, particularly if they conclude a deal that appears to be advantageous. Such an outcome is possible since Iran has never admitted to pursuing nuclear weapons and might agree to a drastically contained nuclear programme and still emerge as "victorious."

To improve the chances of success in these talks, a stringent set of rules of engagement must be in place. Based on prior negotiations between the P5+1, the duration of the negotiations should be established in advance: not to exceed 60 days and without the possibility for extension. This will prevent the Iranians from playing for time and assure the Israelis, who are extremely sceptical of Iran's intentions, that Tehran can gain little during this limited period.

The US must certainly use the carrot-and-stick strategy. Although there must be no easing of the sanctions already in place during the negotiations, no new ones should be added as long as the US is convinced that Tehran is negotiating in good faith.

Iran must allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to conduct its inspections during the negotiating process unimpeded, unfettered and unannounced, with open access to all nuclear facilities. Iran must agree to answer all questions posed by the IAEA without delays or reservations to demonstrate its keenness to end the conflict peacefully.

The negotiations should be conducted on a continuous basis not only to create an atmosphere of urgency but to also disallow room for stalling (with the exception of allowed breaks for consultations).

However, it should be noted that with or without direct negotiations with Iran, Tehran is not likely to give up entirely on its "right" to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes. Hence the key questions for the United States are: under what circumstances can Iran maintain any nuclear facilities to enrich uranium on its soil, is the US prepared to accommodate Iran in this regard and what kind of monitoring system will Tehran have to agree to? Whereas direct U.S.-Iran negotiations are desirable, the new US administration must have a clear objective in mind prior to entering any negotiations. The likelihood of moderating Iran's Shiite extremism may well be slim, but more than anything else the Ayatollahs wish to remain in power and a deal with the US would considerably improve this prospect. Thus, the more secure the Ayatollahs feel, the greater concessions they are likely to make.

The bilateral U.S.-Iranian negotiations will force Iran to choose between becoming a part of the solution or remaining the source of problems, in which case Tehran knows it may pay a dear

price, including but not limited to a regime change, which the Ayatollahs want to avoid at all costs.

Note: This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal. Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/in-support-of-direct-u-s-iran-talks/>

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