

Viewpoints
No. 54

Iranian Nuclear Talks Plow Ahead

Michael Adler

Public policy scholar, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

Despite a spiraling crisis in Ukraine and discontent in Israel and Saudi Arabia, the Iranian nuclear talks have hit their stride. At a meeting in March in Vienna, Iran and six major powers talked through the nitty-gritty of intractable issues, even if both sides made clear that it was too early to expect any breakthroughs.

March 2014

Middle East Program





Despite a spiraling crisis in Ukraine and discontent in Israel and Saudi Arabia, the Iranian nuclear talks have hit their stride. A meeting this month in Vienna was the second round in a drive to hammer out a comprehensive agreement to guarantee that Iran will not seek nuclear weapons. Iran and six major powers talked through the nitty-gritty of intractable issues such as the right to enrich. A senior U.S. official described the discussion as “respectful, professional, and intense.” The official said the talks “dove more deeply and at a more detailed level into the substance of key issues more than we have ever previously,” even if both sides made clear that it was too early to expect any breakthroughs.

Over a decade after Iran was discovered to be hiding nuclear work that could lead to a bomb and six months after a diplomatic breakthrough that ended frosty non-communication between long-time adversaries the United States and the Islamic Republic, the fact that there is serious dialogue is already an accomplishment.

But there is a long way to go and not much time. The two sides are aiming for a final agreement by July 2014. The March 18-19 meeting in Vienna followed a first round in Vienna in February. These talks on a final agreement came after an interim accord reached last year that created the framework for negotiations. In a joint plan of action, Iran and the six major powers – the United States, Russia, China, Britain, Germany, and France – agreed that Iran would not expand its nuclear work during the time of the talks and, in return, would get partial relief from sanctions that have slashed its oil sales and crippled its economy. The two sides will meet again in April. The July deadline for reaching a resolution may be extended six months until next January.

The most noteworthy aspect of the March round was that it was not affected by the escalating crisis in Ukraine, where Russia has annexed the Crimean peninsula and threatens to expand its intervention further. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov, who represented his country in Vienna, said after the talks that Russia might take “retaliatory measures” over Iran if it faced international pressure for its actions in Crimea. Moscow did not want to do this but “the historic importance of what happened in the last weeks and days regarding the restoration of historical justice and reunification of Crimea with Russia is incomparable to what we are dealing with in the Iranian issue,” he told the Russian Interfax news agency.

Russia’s pulling back from unity with its other negotiating partners in the so-called P5+1 could scuttle the talks. The six powers have succeeded in bringing Iran to the negotiating table by presenting a united front, most notably over imposing United Nations sanctions. A reduction of this pressure due to a divide among the six could encourage Iran to hold out on making concessions toward a nuclear deal. Russia could signal its dissent from the P5+1 in a number of ways. For instance, it could help Iran sell more oil or deliver the S-300 missiles that would be effective against air attack and which Iran has bought but Moscow has refrained from actually shipping.

Still, there would be costs for Russia in letting Iran off the hook. Russia is not doing the West a favor in joining the nuclear talks as an active participant. The fact is that Russia, like the United States, wants to stop Iran from getting nuclear weapons. Iran is in Russia's neighborhood, and Moscow does not want the Islamic fundamentalists it faces in central Asia to have potential access to Iranian nuclear weapons.

Ukraine is not the only potential poison for the talks. Key U.S. allies Israel and Saudi Arabia worry that the United States is so anxious for a deal with Iran that it will let the Islamic Republic retain a nuclear weapons capability, especially by continuing to enrich uranium. Both Israel and Saudi Arabia have said this is unacceptable, but the reality is that Iran is almost certain to be able to enrich after a final deal, even if its nuclear program will be reduced and closely monitored.

Israel has made a lot of noise about this. The Saudi concern is every bit as deep, and this is certain to be a major topic when President Barack Obama visits the Saudi kingdom this month. Saudi Arabia, which had wanted the United States to act militarily against Iran's nuclear program when tension was high, now fears a nuclear deal could be the first step in a rapprochement between Iran and the United States that would threaten Saudi interests. Riyadh is concerned about Iranian activity against it in the region, in places like Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain, Yemen, and eastern Saudi Arabia, an oil-producing area where Shias live. The Saudis work actively against Iranian influence. The last thing they want to see is Tehran's ability to project power enhanced by having the bomb.

The question is whether the Iranian nuclear negotiations, already fragile in their chance of success, can be shaken by external factors or whether the United States and Iran are both too committed to reaching a nuclear deal for this to be denied. A deal is, of course, still a long shot. The two sides disagree sharply on all the key issues, and the political aims of the two sides also clash in the talks. European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said in Vienna that the P5+1 had discussed enrichment, the Arak reactor, civil nuclear cooperation, and sanctions at their meeting. The gaps between the United States and Iran on these matters are deep indeed. Iran wants to enrich; to keep its Arak reactor, which is under construction and would eventually be able to produce plutonium; to not dismantle the some 19,000 centrifuges it has installed; and to be freed from sanctions. The United States wants enrichment to be sharply cut back and for construction to stop on the Arak reactor.

These are diametrically opposed points of view, and they could prove fatal to any agreement. But there are technical fixes, which, as one diplomat said, could be moved around to make the Rubik's cube of a compromise align. A deal may be struck on enrichment, playing off a reduction in the number of the centrifuges refining the uranium, in return for close surveillance of not just the enrichment sites but the workshops where the centrifuges are made. The Arak reactor could be modified to be a light-water reactor, which is less of a proliferation risk than the currently planned heavy-water reactor. Still, the devil is in the details, which will make or break an accord.

Details can, of course, bend to the will of diplomats who know that a comprehensive agreement is the only alternative to letting Iran get the bomb or having to bomb Iran. President Obama is

anxious to avoid new conflict in the Middle East, and Iran needs to get rid of sanctions in order to save its economy. These two points of view give, in some sense, the talks their own dynamic, independent of international developments. Wouldn't it be ironic if the U.S.-Iranian axis for the talks turned out to be more stable than the world crises spinning around it?



The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Wilson Center.

Viewpoints Series

Tunisia's Islamists Struggle to Rule

Viewpoints No. 1 (April 2012) by David Ottaway

Fostering the Next Generation

Viewpoints No. 2 (April 2012) by Moushira Khattab

Algeria's Islamists Crushed in First Arab Spring Elections

Viewpoints No. 3 (May 2012) by David Ottaway

Syrian Refugees: Lessons from Other Conflicts and Possible Policies

Viewpoints No. 4 (updated August 2012) by Rochelle A. Davis

Morocco's Islamists: In Power Without Power

Viewpoints No. 5 (August 2012) by David Ottaway

The Arab Awakening: Is Democracy a Mirage?

Viewpoints No. 6 (August 2012) by Roberto Toscano, Moushira Khattab, Fatima Sbaity Kassem, and Daniel Brumberg

Iran is Reversing its Population Policy

Viewpoints No. 7 (August 2012) by Farzaneh Roudi

Voting as a Powerful Tool for Women

Viewpoints No. 8 (October 2012) by Hanin Ghaddar

The Uncertain Fate of U.S.-Egyptian Relations

Viewpoints No. 9 (November 2012) by David Ottaway

The Demon's Besieging Lebanon: Iran's Tighter Grip

Viewpoints No. 10 (November 2012) by Hanin Ghaddar

Iran's Nuclear Program: A Change in the Winds?

Viewpoints No. 11 (November 2012) by Shaul Bakhash

Has the Arab Spring Lived Up to Expectations?

Viewpoints No. 12 (December 2012) by Various Authors

Reflections on the Adoption of UNGA Resolution Banning Female Genital Mutilation

Viewpoints No. 13 (January 2013) by Moushira Khattab

In 2013, Rise of the Right in Elections Across the Mideast

Viewpoints No. 14 (January 2013) by Robin Wright

Women's Rights Under Egypt's Constitutional Disarray

Viewpoints No. 15 (January 2013) by Moushira Khattab

Repression's Diminishing Returns: The Future of Politics in Egypt

Viewpoints No. 16 (January 2013) by Joshua Stacher

Mali: The Time for Dithering is Over

Viewpoints No. 17 (January 2013) by David Ottaway

Iran's Pivotal Presidential Election

Viewpoints No. 18 (January 2013) by Shaul Bakhash

Young Saudis and The Kingdom's Future

Viewpoints No. 19 (February 2013) by Caryle Murphy

Sanctions and Medical Supply Shortages in Iran

Viewpoints No. 20 (February 2013) by Siamak Namazi

The Nuclear Issue: Why is Iran Negotiating?

Viewpoints No. 21 (February 2013) by Bijan Khajehpour, Alireza Nader, Michael Adler

The Syrian Refugee Crisis is Pushing Lebanon to the Brink

Viewpoints No. 22 (February 2013) by Amal Mudallali

The Resistible Rise of Islamist Parties

Viewpoints No. 23 (March 2013) by Marina Ottaway

As Islamists stumble in Egypt and Tunisia, the Arab Spring turns wintery

Viewpoints No. 24 (March 2013) by Adeed Dawisha

Violence Unsettles Tunisia's Democratic Transition

Viewpoints No. 25 (April 2013) by David Ottaway

Learning Politics in Tunisia

Viewpoints No. 26 (April 2013) by Marina Ottaway

Morocco: "Advanced Decentralization" Meets the Sahara Autonomy Initiative

Viewpoints No. 27 (May 2013) by Marina Ottaway

Rouhani's Surprising Election
Viewpoints No. 28 (June 2013) by Shaul Bakhash

Lebanon's Existential Threats
Viewpoints No. 29 (June 2013) by Amal Mudallali

The Domestic and Foreign Policy Challenges of the New Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani
Viewpoints No. 30 (June 2013) by Various Authors

Egypt: Islamist Ascent, Islamist Descent
Viewpoints No. 31 (July 2013) by Haleh Esfandiari

Mohamed ElBaradei From Vienna to Cairo: A Transition
Viewpoints No. 32 (July 2013) by Michael Adler

Can Rouhani Resolve Iran's Economic Conundrum?
Viewpoints No. 33 (July 2013) by Bijan Khajepour

Hizbullah's Roll of the Dice in South Lebanon
Viewpoints No. 34 (August 2013) by Amal Mudallali

Iran and Syria at the Crossroads: The Fall of the Tehran-Damascus Axis
Viewpoints No. 35 (August 2013) by Jubin Goodarzi

Upcoming UN Meeting Revives Hope for U.S.-Iran Dialogue
Viewpoints No. 36 (September 2013) by Barbara Slavin

Back to the Drawing Boards
Viewpoints No. 37 (September 2013) by Nathan J. Brown

The U.S. Administration's Policy in Iraq
Viewpoints No. 38 (September 2013) by Joseph Sassoon

American Policy in Lebanon: Stabilization Through Dissociation
Viewpoints No. 39 (September 2013) by Amal Mudallali

Iran's Rouhani Puts U.S.-Saudi Ties to the Test
Viewpoints No. 40 (October 2013) by David Ottaway

U.S. Policy toward Syria: Making the Best of a Bad Situation?
Viewpoints No. 41 (October 2013) by Mark N. Katz

American Policy in the Maghreb: Counterterrorism is Not Enough
Viewpoints No. 42 (October 2013) by Marina Ottaway

Tunisia's Islamist-Led Democracy Founders
Viewpoints No. 43 (October 2013) by David Ottaway

Confrontation Over Iran's Nuclear Program
Viewpoints No. 44 (November 2013) by Michael Adler

Breaking Taboos
Viewpoints No. 45 (November 2013) by Haleh Esfandiari

Iraq's Kurdistan Takes a Giant Step Toward Independence
Viewpoints No. 46 (December 2013) by David Ottaway

The Egyptian Constitution: Mapping Where Power Lies
Viewpoints No. 47 (December 2013) by Marina Ottaway

A Dream Constitution
Viewpoints No. 48 (December 2013) by Moushira Khattab

Can the Iranian Nuclear Issue be Resolved?
Viewpoints No. 49 (January 2014) by Bijan Khajepour

The Hague Tribunal and the Hariri Assassination
Viewpoints No. 50 (January 2014) by Amal Mudallali

Egypt's Referendum: The Constitution is not the Issue
Viewpoints No. 51 (January 2014) by Marina Ottaway

Reflections on Iran's Tumultuous Revolution: 35 Years Later
Viewpoints No. 52 (February 2014) by Shaul Bakhash

Iraq: Tackling Corruption and Sectarianism is More Critical than the Outcome of Elections
Viewpoints No. 53 (March 2014) by Joseph Sassoon

Edited by Kendra Heideman and Mona Youssef
Designed by Kendra Heideman
Middle East Program
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars