

SPECIAL EDITION

What Next For Iran and the P5+1

The Middle East Program would like to share a special edition of our *Viewpoints* series, "What Next for Iran and the P5+1." Thirty-two experts from the Middle East, Europe, and the United States, including many former Wilson Center scholars and fellows, have contributed to this special edition.

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Haleh Esfandiari, *Director, Middle East Program, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*

On November 24, as the clock was ticking down on the deadline the negotiating parties had set for a final agreement on Iran’s nuclear program, Iran and the P5+1 announced they were extending negotiations for another seven months. The deadline had been missed; the two sides were gearing up for another set of grueling negotiations. Clearly the red lines each side had set for itself—their minimum requirements for a deal—failed to come together. After 14 months of negotiations, the two sides remained far apart on most of the critical issues: the number and quality of centrifuges Iran could keep, the disposition of enriched fuel in Iran’s possession, the intrusiveness of future IAEA inspections, the extent of allowable Iranian nuclear research, the timeline for sanctions relief, and the duration of the agreement itself.

Yet negotiation leaders on both sides expressed optimism that a deal could be reached in the next round of talks with reportedly new agreed deadlines: March 1 for a political framework agreement and July 1 for a final agreement. At the same time, both sides stressed that the road ahead remained difficult.

What to make of this mixed message?

The Wilson Center’s Middle East Program invited a group of top experts in the field, and a number of former Wilson Center scholars and fellows from the United States and around the world, to help provide an answer and to share their views on what the results of the just-ended round of negotiations mean and what the next round might produce.





Daniel Brumberg, *Special Advisor for Iran and North Africa, United States Institute of Peace*

It is tempting to conclude that the decision to extend the P5+1 Iran nuclear negotiations until July 2015 merely represents a bid to keep a dying patient alive. But while this extension could open space for spoilers to cause trouble, I see some reason for very cautious optimism.

Having come so far, the United States and Iran have much to lose from a collapse of talks or from slipping into a void of endless tactical maneuvering. For both, failure could invite an escalation of U.S.–Iranian conflict, an outcome that neither wants, particularly in light of the security challenges posed by ISIS. Moreover, for President Hassan Rouhani, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, and their domestic allies, the prospects for reopening the Iranian political and economic system begins with a nuclear agreement. The paradox is that while this link between domestic dynamics and international diplomacy is spurring President Rouhani on, it also presents a difficult challenge. The prospect that the credit and benefits of successful negotiations will accrue to President Rouhani gives their rivals every impetus to oppose or undermine a deal. For this reason, he and Foreign Minister Zarif are loath to make major concessions. Their chances of exiting this difficult dilemma depend on Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. While his ultimate “red lines” are hard to read, they may not be as fixed as some assume.

To get an agreement, the Supreme Leader will have to conclude—or be convinced—that a deal is not a slippery slope to a full diplomatic entente with the United States that the hardliners oppose, or a process of internal political détente that could re-polarize the internal political arena. I can imagine such an outcome, one that could slowly pry open the domestic political arena while facilitating the efforts of Iranian leaders who support a more constructive foreign policy to advance their twin agendas. But it remains far from clear that domestic politics in Tehran or Washington would allow this outcome, even if it would represent a win-win for the United States and Iran.



Patrick Clawson, *Director of Research, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*

Reaching a nuclear agreement—whenever that happens—is only the start of the story. At least as important is whether the deal sticks. For Iranians, if the economy improves after an accord, the deal looks good; if the economy stagnates, the agreement looks bad. If Iran’s economy does not quickly improve apace with public expectations, disappointment with President Hassan Rouhani—already a common sentiment in Iran—may grow.

The reality is that the impact of a nuclear deal on Iran’s economy is likely to be a complicated story. Trade sanctions will be eased only in a phased process after Tehran has demonstrated that it is implementing the deal’s provisions. Many restrictions will remain in place, such as U.S. sanctions related to terrorism. The lifting of limits on bank transfers, which is what Iran wants most, may not have much impact. Nervous about regulators’ strict enforcement of rules, banks are “de-risking” by withdrawing from business in countries seen as potentially problematic. Iran’s economic problems are extensive, going well beyond sanctions. The lower oil prices alone may be such a drag on the economy that lifting sanctions may not bring the expected relief.

On a more positive note, the very announcement of a deal may boost public confidence, leading to more investment, and encourage European businesses to reengage with Iran. Plus, if the problem of banks’ reluctance to deal with Iran can be solved, restoring Iran’s access to more of its frozen foreign exchange reserves could have a noticeable impact, particularly in the first few years before the trade sanctions change much.

In short, it is by no means clear how Iranians will assess the economic impact of a deal. If Iranians feel the deal has brought little, then any accord could eventually collapse and each side will blame the other for the breakdown.



Kaveh Ehsani, *Assistant Professor, International Studies Department, DePaul University*

Decades of hostility and mutual distrust, compounded by seriously divided domestic politics, yet again prevented the reaching of an accord in Vienna. At the heart of the

deadlock is a mutual lack of strategic vision, a mutual lack of political courage, and a debilitating self-righteousness.

First, regarding a mutual lack of strategic vision: both sides are buying time without having a clear end point in sight. The United States and its partners want to curtail Iran's enrichment without rethinking the long-standing "rogue state" designation that calls for isolating Iran and continuously threatening to destabilize it. This is precisely why the divided Iranian regime pursues the costly and dangerous nuclear program with some tacit public support. The P5+1 insistence that Iran ceases enrichment for a return to the status quo of the 1990s as a best case scenario will remain a stumbling block unless a more comprehensive strategic pact is considered where sanctions are lifted, Iran begins to be treated as a regional player, and the implicit and explicit threats of regime change are convincingly removed. Shared regional strategic interests in ending the Syrian civil war and preventing the emergence of ISIS and the Taliban should not only serve as the basis for cooperation, but also help build trust for the ongoing nuclear talks.

Second, regarding a mutual lack of political courage: both parties lack the will power to accept the domestic political costs of a more comprehensive normalization of relations. For the United States this is clear—less so in the case of Iran because we believe that Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has the last word there. Not so. Like Ayatollah Khomeini, Khamenei's much more powerful predecessor, Iran's current Supreme Leader has to play a balancing act. He has lost plenty of political capital, and even the Revolutionary Guards are divided over the strategic calculations of the rising regional chaos and the increasingly restive domestic public. For Supreme Leader Khamenei sanctioning a deal requires not only a "face-saving" compromise, as our pundits like to repeat, but very tangible material (such as the lifting of sanctions) and strategic benefits.

Third, regarding the debilitating self-righteousness: in a [2013 Washington Post editorial](#), President Hassan Rouhani called for a "Time to engage." The fact that the talks are continuing is itself a positive sign. Let us hope the next few months witness a further reduction of the polemical rhetoric on both sides. Too much is at stake in the region for this continued self-indulgence.



Farideh Farhi, former Public Policy Scholar, Wilson Center, and independent researcher and Affiliate Graduate Faculty, University of Hawai'i at Manoa

The November 24 deadline for the Iran nuclear talks came to pass with indecision and ambivalence. But two things proved to be certain: 1) there are deep differences between the United States and Iran regarding the extent of Iran's program and sanctions relief; and 2) there is apparent unanimity that abandoning talks is the worst possible outcome.

Although Secretary John Kerry and various P5+1 foreign policy chiefs have suggested that progress has been made on some of the most vexing issues, it is not all clear how the significant differences that could not be bridged in the past year can be overcome in the next seven months. Indeed, each side's expectation for further compromise on the other side will continue to remain the chief stumbling block to a comprehensive solution.

At the same time, the commitment to lessened tensions exhibited by all parties is by itself an achievement, even if generated out of fear of an even worse situation and not a positive vision of what the future of U.S. relations should look like. It suggests the prevalence of common sense in the executive branches of both Iran and the United States and appreciation of the enormous stakes involved regarding the future of Iran and its role in the Middle East in general.

In Iran, where the stakes and impact are higher, politicians across the political spectrum, with the exception of a few, have shown unprecedented discipline in their support of the country's nuclear team irrespective of the results. This discipline at the top is likely to continue out of choice or necessity. It may even be solidified in the face of economic challenges. But it is impossible to predict the broader impact of another seven months of uncertainty on the Iranian economy and society. Much will depend on the way the Rouhani administration manages the economy in the midst of falling oil prices and continued sanctions as well as the Obama administration's commitment and ability to restrain forces that are determined to pressure Iran further.



Hanin Ghaddar, *former Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center, and Managing Editor, NOW News (Lebanon)*

World powers and Iran failed to reach an agreement on November 24, but nobody left the table. The short-term extension of talks indicates that both sides are hoping an agreement will be reached in June. During the next seven months, the region will face more sectarian tension and violence as Iran will try to use most of its regional bargaining chips in an attempt to maintain its nuclear ambitions.

Iran's nuclear program strengthens its regional power. The perception is that Iranian officials have from the beginning connected the negotiations to Iran's regional standing. For Iran, which now plays a key role in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq, the goal of the program is this regional hegemony. One cannot survive without the other.

Therefore, Iran will probably now use this role more vehemently in an attempt to convince the American administration to give them a more "friendly" deal. So in the very near future, any political solution in Syria or potential coordination in Iraq will face challenges. Iran's hardliners will make sure their voice will be heard in the region, through Qassem Suleimani's Quds brigades in Iraq and Syria and Hezbollah.

In the long run, Iran cannot afford war, and what it really wants is the United States to lift sanctions. The extension of the talks could result in pressure on Tehran to make concessions. Even without more sanctions, the collapse of global oil prices will further strain Iran's economy.

By the end of June, Iran could be too strained economically to maintain its regional role or to convince Iranians of any nuclear victory. Therefore, the United States should use this opportunity to strike a better deal: eliminate—not freeze—Iran's capacity to build a nuclear weapon, and weaken Iran's regional hegemony, especially in Syria.

Maybe then a better political solution could be reached.



Jubin Goodarzi, *Deputy Head, International Relations Department, Webster University, Geneva*

The failure of Iran and the P5+1 to reach a comprehensive agreement on Tehran's nuclear program by the November 24 deadline bodes ill for the future. It makes the prospects for concluding a final accord by July of next year even more problematic. Hardliners in Tehran fear that an agreement may strengthen the hand of pragmatists who desire better ties with the West. In Washington, Republicans who are hostile towards Iran will take control of both houses of Congress in January.

This is not to say that the recent progress is doomed to fail. However, it should be underscored that the sanctions and their prolongation are decreasing the possibility of positive change within Iran. The majority of Iranians want to live in a free society and have open contacts with the outside world. However, two developments over the past five years have greatly undermined the position of the people and weakened civil society. First was the wave of repression by the regime following the unrest in response to former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's "re-election" in the 2009 elections. Second were the sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union in 2010–2011 which harmed the population and impoverished Iranian society.

The independent middle class which is vital for economic growth, political development, and social stability has shrunk as many businesses have gone bankrupt or downsized due to the sanctions. Although the sanctions have undoubtedly harmed the regime, they have paradoxically strengthened its position vis-à-vis the population in financial and economic terms due to the decline of the independent bourgeoisie. Those businesses that had links to the regime have been able to stay afloat while those that did not have sunk. People are now more dependent on government aid and handouts. At present, Iranians are only thinking of survival and getting by day-to-day. Few entertain thoughts about political reform and freedom. Hence, the sanctions have made internal change in Iran more problematic.

Positive change can come about in Iran through action by domestic and outside forces. The internal element, the people and civil society groups, is critical. The West needs to re-think its policies to ensure developments move in a positive direction not only on the nuclear issue, but also on other fronts. In the long run, the emergence of a moderate and progressive Iran is essential for ensuring regional stability and international security.



Bernard Hourcade, *Global Fellow and former Public Policy Scholar, Wilson Center, and Senior Research Fellow Emeritus, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), Paris*

Victory for both sides? Yes, or at least a political success for the Obama and Rouhani/Khamenei administrations, because after 35 years of cold war both countries have resumed daily de facto diplomatic and political relations. The nuclear issue was efficiently used by all partners of the negotiations as a tool to resume relations on a strong foundation.

The main problem is not so much the agreement, but, rather its implementation, to avoid what happened to the agreement of October 2003. Fortunately, both sides have taken the needed time and agreed on a modus vivendi—a roadmap to fill the holes that they have left in the agreement, step by step, far from the ideological debates and the media lights.

In Iran and in Western countries, the opponents to any form of compromise are still strong, but it will be difficult for them to oppose this “agreement with holes,” which will likely be a long-term process. The Iranian radicals are scared of the social and cultural consequences of a political opening. Israel, Saudi Arabia, and some Western lobbies seem to be resigned—all of them will have to deal with a major turn in the regional balance of power: the “return of Iran,” or more precisely the arrival of the Islamic Republic of Iran as a regional power and as a proactive, rather than a reactive, state.

What is at stake now is the political management of the future sustainable stability of the Middle East, a task that Saudi Arabia and its partners were unable to fulfill. The nuclear debates, with or without a comprehensive agreement, have been a key to opening a door. The questions to know now are who will use that door and for what.



Meir Javedanfar, *Iranian politics lecturer, Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, and Iranian–Israeli Middle East analyst*

“*Tamdid-e Omid*,” meaning extension of hope, is how the Iranian reformist daily *Shargh* described the recent joint decision by Iran and the P5+1 to extend the negotiations until next July.

And much hope from now until next July is needed by those who want the negotiations to succeed, because until then the position of hardliners on both sides is going to become stronger.

The Republicans who will be taking over the U.S. Senate are likely to become more vociferous against President Barack Obama until next July. Let’s not forget that they are already furious with President Obama's recent immigration reforms. In retaliation they could become more adamant in undermining President Obama's negotiations with Iran.

At the same time, we in Israel could have early elections by then. Iran is likely to become one of the main issues in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s reelection campaign. This time he could become even more aggressive toward Iran than in the last elections in January 2013, because other hardliners, such as Naftali Bennett—Israeli Minister of the Economy and the leader of the Bayit Yehudi party (Jewish Home)—are becoming more popular among Israeli conservatives at Prime Minister Netanyahu’s expense.

Meanwhile the hardliners in Iran are also likely to continue their campaign to isolate President Hassan Rouhani. For example, they have already made life unbearably difficult for him in the Iranian Majlis (parliament). His Minister of Science, Research and Technology, Reza Faraji–Dana, [was dismissed in August](#) by this overwhelmingly conservative body. And since then, parliament has rejected [four of President Rouhani's nominees for the post](#).

Then there is Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei himself who has the last word on Iran's nuclear program. He has always been a conservative. As Iran's post-revolution history shows, the only time he has been flexible is when he has been under pressure. And if from now and until next July he decides that Iran could live with sanctions by relying more on trade with other countries such as Russia, then chances of a deal will evaporate.



Bijan Khajepour, *Managing Partner, Atieh International*

The announcement of an extension of the nuclear deal on November 24 will lead to diverse reactions among economic stakeholders. While Iran's government will try to maintain the positive momentum that the interim deal has generated, the wait-and-see mode of many of the economic players will continue until it is more certain whether a comprehensive deal will be achieved. The current hesitant mode of many of the investors in the Iranian market undermines the country's economic potential. Large sums of capital are currently locked in unproductive hedging mechanisms (such as investment in gold and hard currency) while the economy actually needs them in productive investments that could generate the needed jobs and economic growth. The impact of the wait-and-see mode is mostly felt in the property market, which has been stagnant for some time—considering the significance of the housing market for job creation and growth in Iran, an end to the current mode cannot come soon enough.

At the same time, a growing number of businesses inside and outside Iran will continue to look for ways to position themselves for the opening of the Iranian market. The interim nuclear deal has already generated an economic momentum in trade between Iran and the West and this trend will continue, mainly focusing on business sectors that are not subject to existing sanctions. Though all companies are hampered by banking sanctions, the mere size of the Iranian market and the abundance of opportunities will attract many companies that will try to look for viable trade and banking solutions to work with Iran. Other companies, who will have to wait for actual sanctions relief, will continue to look for ways to position themselves for the anticipated future opening of the market. There is no doubt that the growing interaction between Iranian and international companies will pave the way for a number of initiatives, joint ventures, and increased trade as soon as the relevant sanctions are removed.



Rami Khouri, *former Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center, and Founding Member and Senior Policy Fellow, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut*

The extension in the negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 reflects welcomed wisdom and rationality on both sides and a deeper expectation that a final, permanent agreement will be reached in the months ahead. My main takeaways:

1. The maturity, patience, and seriousness on both sides are impressive, and a far cry from the almost lunatic threats, insults, and deprecations that had defined Iranian–American–Israeli exchanges in recent years. Both sides need to reach an agreement because the cost of failure is too high all around, especially given the precarious state of the Middle East where both Iran and relevant foreign powers are deeply engaged and invested—and therefore vulnerable to retaliatory punitive mischief in case of failure.
2. Technical issues related to both the Iranian nuclear industry and sanctions on Iran can be addressed seriously and dispassionately, and disagreements gradually resolved, if hysterical positions and wild accusations are ignored. Instead both sides can focus on practical reciprocal measures that meet their needs. Simultaneity and reciprocity of concessions, it is confirmed again, are critical elements for success.
3. Decisive leadership everywhere can overcome extremist ideological positions of domestic foes. In particular, the continuing serious negotiations are a big blow to the power of the pro–Israel lobbies in Washington, D.C. that had argued for zero uranium enrichment in Iran.
4. Iran has provided an important lesson for the world on how a firm, law–and–legitimacy–anchored position on the right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes can be vindicated if a country does not allow itself to be pushed around and threatened by primarily American–Israeli–driven accusations and assumptions that are rarely supported by hard, credible evidence. Self–respect, it seems, is a useful diplomatic tool when one has facts at hand to reinforce one’s case.



Cliff Kupchan, *Chairman, Practice Head for Eurasia, and Iran Director, Eurasia Group*

The trite but ineluctable question: what can they solve in the next seven months that couldn't be resolved over the past year? Yes, the low oil price puts new pressure on Iran, and President Barack Obama really wants a foreign policy legacy. But as of today, there's a new and central fact: both sides gave it their best shot in Vienna, and they didn't come very close. The size of Iran's enrichment capability, the speed of sanctions relief, and a host of other issues haven't been resolved.

A deal is still doable, though it's less likely today than it was on November 23. Two other trajectories are now quite possible.

The Joint Plan of Action (JPOA) could well become a very long-term interim agreement. It freezes Iran's nuclear program—keeping the Israelis mildly content—and provides some sanctions relief for Iran. If neither side will bend on substance, keeping the JPOA in place as a partial agreement may be the best we can do. It's not stable in its current form—Iran can conduct centrifuge research and development that the United States will find unacceptable, and the agreement doesn't give Iran much sanction relief. But with some nips and tucks, the JPOA could last a long time.

Alternatively, and of concern, the U.S. Congress could take over the show. A new sanctions bill will likely move in the next Congress, which would remove more Iranian oil from the market and add new measures. The Republicans would need 13 Democratic votes to override a veto; that's possible if talks still stall. Then we've got real trouble. The P5+1 coalition could crack as Russia and China say enough on sanctions. And Iran could walk from the talks.

The academic community should maintain its focus on helping craft innovative ways to reach a deal. But we've now got to move on and think through the dynamics of a partial deal, and the implications of a risky outcome that's dictated by Congress.



Ellen Laipson, *President and CEO, Stimson Center*

If we take the high road, the extension of the talks is certainly better than some of the alternatives and need not precipitate an unraveling of what has been achieved to date. In fact, the parties have agreed to continue to implement the current measures, including Iranian production restraint and Western payments of frozen assets. The diplomats who have been engaged in the long slog of talks with Iran over its nuclear activities must be both disappointed and relieved by the decision to extend the negotiations until June 2015. The months of consultations and creative thinking, not to mention persuading big governments to endorse new negotiating positions, have been preoccupying for senior officials in all the participating countries. It will be challenging to sustain that level of intensity and bureaucratic focus, and one should worry that the momentum will be lost now that the timeline is extended. Secretary of State John Kerry acknowledged that more time does not necessarily make the task easier. But the talks did not collapse, the parties did not accuse each other of bad faith, and a quick return to belligerent new punitive measures is not likely. Polling suggests that publics in both the United States and Iran accept that compromise will be required for a deal—and one can hope that the politicians and power brokers are listening.



John Limbert, *Distinguished Professor, International Affairs, U.S. Naval Academy*

For 35 years Iran and the United States have agreed only that the other side represents absolute evil. In 2013, however, Tehran and Washington decided to pursue an accord on Iran's disputed nuclear program. The two sides, within the framework of the P5+1, moved beyond the quibbling and sterile exchanges that had characterized their meetings for years.

New words were heard. Both U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif described encounters as "productive" and "positive," novel descriptions of any Iranian-American encounter since 1979.

Changes of tone represent progress in relations that for 35 years consisted of trading threats and insults. Whatever happens with the nuclear negotiations, the United States and Iran stand now in a place very different from where they were during the long

freeze. There is new professionalism and the ability to forego the empty rhetoric that for decades had masqueraded as “negotiation.”

It remains ironic that the two sides agreed to focus on the almost intractable nuclear question. The United States has put great effort into resolving technical and legal issues such as centrifuges, inspections, and enrichment. The Iranian side, however, has different issues: national pride and status, and that elusive, powerful goal of “justice.”

On the nuclear question, a wise former U.S. ambassador said to former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad: “What you want, we cannot deliver; what we want, you cannot deliver.”

With 35 years of stored mistrust, we should recognize that the intricate mix of political and technical issues has made it too hard for the sides to say “yes.” We should find other areas—Afghanistan or combating extremist groups—where mutual interests and benefits of cooperation are obvious. Once both sides realize that agreeing with an old enemy will not bring down the sky, we can return to the nuclear issue with a better chance of agreement.



Robert Litwak, *Vice President for Scholars and Academic Relations and Director, International Security Studies, Woodrow Wilson Center*

At the outset of the P5+1 negotiations with Iran last January, three outcomes were possible—a *breakthrough* (yielding a comprehensive agreement), a *breakdown* (marking the end of diplomacy), and *muddling through* (a decision to keep negotiating).

A complete breakdown was unlikely because all the parties, especially President Hassan Rouhani and President Barack Obama, were heavily invested in the process and the collapse of the talks carried a significant risk of escalating into a full-blown crisis. A breakthrough was possible, but would have required a strategic decision by the Tehran regime to accept an agreement with the P5+1 allowing Iran to retain a bounded uranium enrichment program in return for intrusive inspections to ensure that Iran’s “civil” nuclear program is not a masquerade for a weapons program. From a technical perspective, such an agreement was within reach. The United States had years before

fallen off its diplomatically untenable position of a full rollback of the Iranian program. Hence, the negotiations have been focused on limiting, not eliminating, Iran's uranium enrichment capability. (This is the point of contention between Obama and his congressional critics.) The hedge for a weapon inherent to its mastery of the nuclear fuel cycle is Iran's strategic sweet spot—keeping the option for the bomb open while avoiding the international and regional costs of overt weaponization.

That the negotiations were not able to reach a technical agreement on this basis is testimony to the quintessentially political character of the issue. In Iran, the nuclear question is a proxy for the more fundamental debate about the relationship of the Islamic Republic with the United States and the outside world—or, in former President Hashemi Rafsanjani's words, whether Iran is a revolutionary state or an ordinary country. The extension of the talks—muddling through—is a reflection of that persisting tension with no assurance that it can be resolved by June 2015.



William Luers, *Director, The Iran Project*

With the November 24 announcement that the P5+1 talks with Iran will be extended, both sides have indicated how serious and determined they have been and how complex the talks are. In my lifetime I have not witnessed a more complicated negotiation involving: 2 states that have not had official contact for 35 years and have developed mutual distrust; 7 nations representing separate points of view; a cluster of technical, scientific, and intelligence issues that are unprecedented; large, powerful domestic oppositions; and forceful opposition from some of our closest friends. It is of little wonder the talks have dragged on.

The opposition to the talks in the United States and Iran has been heard. Negotiators did not give up on vital interests. What lies ahead is likely to be even bolder political opposition inside Tehran and Washington and continued bargaining in Vienna to achieve a deal that the American and Iranian administrations want and must have with a narrative that works in Iran and the United States. Meanwhile it remains unclear how the United States and Iran might discuss collaboration in Syria, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and with ISIS.

This delay will cause no increased threat to the United States and friends in the region. The November 2013 Joint Plan of Action provides substantially more security for the United States and the world than existed before. Iran's nuclear program is no longer growing—it has either been frozen or reduced. The inspections regime of Iran's nuclear facilities has also been extended and made more frequent. Some of the facilities of greatest concern are visited daily by International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors. The 20 percent enriched uranium stockpile has been eliminated.

The U.S. Congress, while maintaining a watchful eye over the negotiations, should not take actions that cut off further negotiations. If Congress breaks up the talks, then they will own the potentially catastrophic consequences, including a declining U.S. leadership in the world and possibly a war.



Suzanne Maloney, *Senior Fellow, Saban Center, Brookings Institution*

If time is the obstacle to resolving the Iranian nuclear crisis, then the November 24 decision to extend negotiations for seven additional months would represent an encouraging step forward. But as U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry conceded, “These talks aren't going to suddenly get easier just because we extend them.” In fact, just the opposite—a variety of factors will conspire to complicate what is already an excruciatingly thorny problem.

After a year of intensive diplomacy, the failure to agree upon even the outlines of a deal raises doubts about whether the impasse is indeed reconcilable. The world may have to settle for crisis management with Iran rather than conflict resolution. This would be a tolerable outcome for Washington and may even be a preferable outcome for the Iranian leadership. But it would be a tragedy for Iran.

As long as a comprehensive resolution remains out of reach, the sanctions that have slashed Iran's oil revenues will remain in place. International adherence to the measures may fray around the edges, particularly if the incoming Republican Congress adopts provocative new measures. Still, the United States' unilateral financial sanctions will continue to force the world to choose between Iranian and U.S. markets. In reality, this is hardly a choice at all.

The Islamic Republic can and almost surely will survive. Despite an always boisterous political debate, there is greater consensus on key foreign policy issues—including the nuclear issue—today than at any point in recent history. And Iran’s diversified economy and its experience in imposing austerity will enable the state to muddle through the hit to the state’s budget from sanctions and falling oil prices.

Still, the sanctions will continue to lower growth rates, reduce the number of jobs available, provoke exchange rate instability, intensify other economic vulnerabilities, and attenuate the country’s ties to the world. And as since 1979, the Iranians will suffer the brunt of their government’s disastrous decisions.



Aaron David Miller, *Vice President for New Initiatives and Distinguished Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center*

Woody Allen once famously quipped that 80 percent of success in life is just showing up. But he was wrong—much of success in life is showing up at the right time. This is true in spades for negotiations too. And the failure to reach a comprehensive deal with Iran on the nuclear issue reveals something about the timing of this deal that wasn’t quite right.

Clearly, urgency is a critical factor in negotiations. There has to be sufficient quantities of pain and gain to make big decisions. And at least on the Iranian side there really wasn’t. Here’s why:

First, no matter how flexible the negotiators wanted to be, it was the leaders in Tehran—one in particular—whose views prevailed. And neither President Hassan Rouhani nor Foreign Minister Javad Zarif could convince Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei that Iran’s leverage would diminish in the face of a Republican-controlled Congress.

Second, however painful sanctions were, Iran has readjusted and managed to find ways to muddle through. It’s not perfect and Iran is hurting, but Tehran’s threshold for pain is a good deal higher than we believed.

Third, whatever Iran's other material interests in cutting a deal, its values—dignity, pride, and the importance of a nuclear weapons capacity in defiance of Western demands—were more important.

Fourth, the regional situation has persuaded the mullahs that Iran's centrality in U.S. policy is only increasing. America needs Tehran to stabilize Iraq and Syria and to fight ISIS. It may be misguided, but the fact that Iran believes it's winning suggests that there was less urgency to settle and much more incentive to wait.

Finally, if an agreement was to have been reached, Iran would have had to be paid much more in terms of easing and suspending sanctions. And no U.S. negotiator—or president—was in a position in this highly charged political climate to do that.



William Miller, *Senior Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center*

The negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 on the nuclear status of Iran have been extended until July 1, 2015. There is great disappointment that a final agreement could not have been reached by November 24 after a year of intensive negotiations. Nonetheless, an agreement that is satisfactory to all parties can still be attained, although it will be far more difficult to achieve.

The principles that have already been agreed to are crucially important. These principles are: 1) Iran will remain a non-nuclear weapons state; 2) Iran will have the full right to use nuclear energy and materials for peaceful purposes under the terms agreed to as a Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) signatory; 3) Iran has agreed to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitoring, inspections, and safeguards in accordance with the requirements of the NPT, including the Additional Protocol; 4) the IAEA has effective means to monitor and verify Iran's observance to the terms of an agreement, provided that the IAEA receives Iran's full cooperation; and 5) economic and other sanctions imposed against Iran related to its nuclear program will be removed.

Iran's declaratory policy that is based on religious rulings by the highest authorities in Iran states that nuclear weapons and all weapons of mass destruction are forbidden. It

is expected that the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran will not permit any nuclear weapons activities.

There is no reason to believe that the technical gaps that remain between the parties' positions cannot be bridged in ways that are perceived by all parties as fair and just.

The United States, Iran, the United Kingdom, Russia, China, France, and Germany as major world powers should work together expeditiously to finish the last stages of the agreement and should be given the full support of their government institutions and peoples in this difficult task. This agreement is critically important to maintaining world peace and will strengthen the international non-proliferation regime, creating a more secure future for our children.



Payam Mohseni, *Iran Project Director and Fellow, Iran Studies, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University*

In the wake of yet another extension in the nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1, the next step for the United States to move toward a final comprehensive agreement with Iran is to engage with those Iranians it likes the least—the hardliners. Crafting a sophisticated agreement capable of persuading Iranian hardliners and the Revolutionary Guards to accept a final deal is essential to moving the negotiations forward. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and his moderate team of negotiators are constrained by the hardliners who, in turn, have nothing to lose if negotiations fail. While the lifting of international sanctions is commonly considered to be the main economic incentive for Iran to agree to a deal, we should be aware that many U.S. sanctions will remain against key hardline actors in the Iranian regime for non-nuclear related reasons. In other words, those hardline elements most opposed to the current talks—the spoilers—are also the ones that have the least to gain from their success. If Rouhani does not get a final deal, however, the moderates are the ones with the most to lose as they have staked their legitimacy on these talks. By engaging the hardliners, and including them in the conversation, the United States can actually strengthen the hand of the moderates and increase the chances for the talks to succeed. It will also allow the United States to discuss its larger concerns about Iran's role in the region, including the mutual fight against ISIS, energy security, and the possibility to form more inclusive governments in Iraq and Syria.



Afshin Molavi, *former Public Policy Scholar, Wilson Center; and Senior Research Fellow, New America Foundation*

As the Vienna talks on Iran's nuclear program ground to an anti-climactic seven-month extension, Iran observers should now turn their eyes this week to... Vienna again? Yes, the OPEC ministerial meeting on November 27 in Vienna takes on added importance in a time of declining oil prices pinching Iran's economy further, leaving the Islamic Republic less fiscal space to maneuver amid a strangling sanctions-environment that inhibits growth.

Iran wants OPEC to cut production to prop up a declining oil price, hovering at \$80 per barrel for the benchmark Brent Crude—a fall of nearly 30 percent since June. In late October, President Hassan Rouhani was quoted as saying that “the country's main source of income, oil revenues, has been cut by some 30 percent.” He noted further: “We have to deal with the new condition and the global economic conditions.”

One of “the new condition(s)” is the rise of U.S. shale oil production. From 2010 through today, U.S. shale oil has added more than 3 million barrels of production to the world market, bringing U.S. oil production to nearly 9 million bpd (barrels per day). Iran's oil production was only 2.77 million bpd in October, a far cry from Iran's potential and well below ambitious targets of 4 million bpd set by Minister of Petroleum Bijan Namdar Zanganeh. In short, U.S. shale oil has virtually added another Iran—and then some—to world oil markets in the last three years.

What's more, Iran's exports fell to 1.25 million barrels per day in August, according to the Joint Organisations Data Initiative—a near record low over the past three decades. Oil markets are oversupplied by about 2 million bpd, owing partly to new production as well as slowing demand in China and Europe. That's why markets virtually ignored the loss of a million barrels of Iranian crude over the past two years.

Iran needs an oil price of anywhere between \$135 (IMF figure) to \$143 (Bloomberg data figure) per barrel to achieve a break-even sales price to maintain fiscal balance. Iran can hardly afford to run deficits.

OPEC cannot come to Iran's rescue, nor does it wield ultimate market-making power, but a significant cut will tick prices upward, offering Iran some much-needed relief. This will not be a panacea, and Iran's oil sector—like its general economy—will continue to flounder and underperform without a comprehensive nuclear deal.



Alireza Nader, *Senior International Policy Analyst, RAND Corporation*

Iran and the P5+1 (United States, UK, France, Russia, China, and Germany) have decided to extend the year-long negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program. The decision to do so does not come as a great surprise, as the negotiations involve very complicated technical and political issues. And while it is disappointing that a comprehensive decision has not been reached, the extension is better than the alternatives.

A break down in nuclear talks could lead the U.S. Congress to enact additional sanctions, which in turn could prompt Iran to loosen the constraints on its nuclear program and even escalate by enriching uranium to a higher degree. This would send Iran and the United States on a dangerous collision course that would heighten the chances of military conflict over the nuclear program.

At the same time, the extension raises political pressure on President Barack Obama. Congress is deeply skeptical of Iran's intentions and would no doubt come under additional pressure to increase sanctions at a crucial time. But new sanctions before the conclusion of nuclear talks could also help Iran win the blame game; Tehran could claim that it is trying to bridge its differences with the P5+1 while being stymied by new American sanctions.

At the same time, the Iranian government must understand that negotiations are not open-ended. Iran will continue to receive limited sanctions relief of about \$700 million per month, but this pales in comparison to the estimated \$100 billion of its frozen funds. Iran's failure to reach a deal in the next few months could have disastrous results for its economy. It is time for the Iranian government to show greater flexibility. It may have gained a few additional months, but in the long run, time is not on its side.



Rouzbeh Parsi, *Senior Lecturer, Department of Human Rights Studies, Lund University*

Since the Joint Plan of Action was agreed upon in November 2013, the interaction between the P5+1 and Iran has reached such a level of regularity that it no longer makes headlines. This achievement, a necessary component of real negotiations, should not be forgotten as hardliners on both sides now clamor for tougher stances and harp on it saying that “no deal is better than a bad deal.”

In the last month it has become clear that the negotiations are going well enough for there to be hope of success. Yet there is enough built-in resistance (suspicion, overestimating one’s own strength and underestimating that of the counterpart, and domestic and foreign spoilers) to, yet again, let the moment slip by.

Most likely both sides have taken another step toward coming to terms with what has been clear to everybody from the start: no one is going to emerge from these negotiations as a clear winner because both sides will have to make painful concessions.

The surprise is that they decided on a lengthy extension of seven months. While we can speculate on the reasons for this, one thing is clear: the extension is not just a breath of air for the negotiators but also a real possibility for the spoilers to derail the negotiations, including the U.S. Congress, hardliners in Tehran, and U.S. allies Saudi Arabia and Israel. The gamble of the negotiators seems to be that whatever they have not been able to bring themselves to finalize so far is within reach and that an extension is worth the risk of having the whole process derailed by opponents of a deal. One can only hope that the Obama and Rouhani administrations will keep up the momentum and straighten every remaining question while trying to make Tel Aviv and Riyadh understand that a deal is to everyone's benefit.



Trita Parsi, *former Public Policy Scholar, Wilson Center, and Founder and President, National Iranian American Council*

Despite the decision to extend the nuclear talks for another seven months, the two sides came very close to agreeing on a political framework the weekend of November 22 in Vienna. The positive and optimistic attitude both sides demonstrated after the announcement of the deal is not just spin—they know they are close to a breakthrough.

Still, the uphill battle to reach a deal just got steeper. Immediately after the interim deal last year, the Democrat-controlled Senate pushed a sanctions bill that stood in direct violation of the Joint Plan of Action. Had it passed, it would have scuttled the talks. The bill had the support of 59 Senators, but the White House managed to prevent it from reaching the floor, much thanks to Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid.

But in a few weeks, the Senate will be in Republican hands. Incoming Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has already indicated that he would hold a vote on new sanctions legislation shortly after taking office. Powerful interest groups announced immediately after the extension decision that they would push for these new measures.

Despite the optimism of the U.S. negotiating team, the reality is that the political landscape in Washington is fast becoming more hostile toward the negotiations. The President's congressional allies are still backing the talks, but they need tangible progress to sustain their support.

Rather than being on the offensive and selling a deal, the Obama administration will be playing defense over the next few weeks, protecting the talks from an onslaught of congressional criticism and measures aimed at killing diplomacy. President Hassan Rouhani will do the same in Tehran. Their best bet is to reach a deal on a political framework long before the March 1 deadline.



Abdulaziz Sager, *Chairman, Gulf Research Center*

The news that no agreement was reached during the current round of negotiations over Iran's nuclear program did not come as a surprise to the Gulf region. What the outcome shows is that the so-called narrowing of differences between the P5+1 and Iran remains incomplete. The view from the Gulf region is that at this stage no agreement has become an unacceptable outcome for all parties. Whatever the obstacles at the moment, there is also the conviction among the GCC states that some form of agreement will eventually be reached in order to end the controversy over Iran's nuclear program. The commitment of all sides to continue negotiations with a new deadline being put forward indicates the likelihood of an eventual agreement.

This is what the GCC states anticipate, and as a result they are preparing themselves to calculate the consequences of such a development and an eventual agreement. Here the real issue is that a nuclear agreement will open the door for the rehabilitation of Iran in the international (Western) community, and ultimately lead to the re-building of U.S.-Iranian relations. While there are concerns about the nature of a new era of U.S.-Iranian ties and its impact on the region, it is also the case that the actual consequences of such a development cannot be predicted or assessed. Nevertheless, the rebuilding of trust between Iran and the main Western powers alone—a result of the negotiations so far—is an achievement for Iran.

An agreement will have the positive outcome that it will remove the possibility of a regional war that could possibly be triggered by an Israeli military attack. Yet doubts about Iranian intentions will continue because other core issues of concern for the GCC states about Iran remain unresolved.



Michael Singh, *Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and Managing Director, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*

In negotiations, agreement is possible if a deal's value exceeds that of each party's best alternative, and if it gains the support of the necessary constituencies on both sides and among other parties with the power to block or bolster it.

By these metrics, U.S. diplomacy with Iran is not yet positioned for success. Iran's need for a comprehensive deal with the United States—a prospect unwelcome amongst Iranian hardliners in any event—was diminished by the Joint Plan of Action. That agreement both provided to Iran nuclear concessions it will seek to pocket even if no subsequent deal is reached and offered time and space to recover from what had been an accelerating economic decline.

Even as a deal appears less necessary to Iran, the alternatives likely seem less alarming, as both increased sanctions and the “military option” have diminished in credibility. The result is a reduced incentive for Iran to accept a deal, to which the Obama administration has responded by improving the deal's terms in a manner that has alarmed the constituencies—both Congress and regional allies—whose support will be necessary for an agreement to succeed.

The question, therefore, is not whether an extension was merited, but how to change the negotiating dynamics so that the next iteration of talks is more successful than the past year's efforts. To this end, President Obama should:

- along with the EU, warn Iran that the concessions in the Joint Plan of Action expire with that agreement, and that no substantive enhancements to the P5+1 offer will be forthcoming;
- communicate more transparently with Congress and allies and find plausible modifications to the U.S. negotiating stance that could assuage their concerns;
- work with Congress to impose sanctions if talks do not succeed by a certain date, improve enforcement of existing sanctions, and devise a mutually agreeable approach to sanctions relief—and to penalizing Iranian cheating—if a deal is reached;
- push back on destabilizing Iranian activities in the Middle East.



Barbara Slavin, *Nonresident Senior Fellow, South Asia Center, Atlantic Council, and Washington correspondent, Al-Monitor.com*

There was no dancing in the streets of Tehran on November 24, just another day of dashed expectations. Despite the efforts of President Hassan Rouhani to portray the latest round of nuclear negotiations as a victory, there will be no significant sanctions

relief for many more months, just a dribbling of Iran's own oil revenues. The failure of Iran and the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany to reach even the outlines of a comprehensive deal during high-level talks in Vienna means that the “wheels” of Iranian factories will continue to spin more slowly than Iran’s centrifuges.

The long extension of last year’s interim agreement is particularly worrisome. While it is better than no agreement at all, opponents of U.S.–Iran reconciliation will certainly use the next seven months to try to sabotage any deal that would trade a limited Iranian uranium enrichment program for major sanctions relief. If the incoming Republican-led U.S. Congress tries to enact new sanctions, that will only reinforce the distrust of Iranian hardliners and undermine the already limited ability of Rouhani and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif to compromise on the nuclear issue. Rouhani may also be inhibited from taking other steps to curb the excesses of the Iranian security state.

If there is a silver lining, it is that U.S. and Iranian diplomats will continue to have a reason to meet periodically to discuss the nuclear program and perhaps other pressing regional issues, such as the menace of the group that calls itself the Islamic State. But the chances for enhanced cooperation—particularly to reduce the level of violence in Syria—look slim in the absence of a nuclear deal. More and more, the nuclear talks are beginning to resemble the long-running unsuccessful U.S.–led efforts to achieve peace between Israelis and Palestinians, with process substituting for peace.



Shibley Telhami, *Anwar Sadat Professor for Peace and Development, University of Maryland, College Park, and Senior Fellow, Center for Middle East Policy, Brookings Institution*

The Obama administration was bracing itself for congressional pushback no matter what came out of the latest round of nuclear talks with Iran. A compromise agreement would have been inevitably attacked by congressional Republicans and certainly by Israel. Total failure would have put the administration in an impossible position. While extending the talks is also being criticized by congressional critics as a waste of time—and some are already talking about imposing additional sanctions—the extension gives the administration a bit of a breather and even allows it to project a sense that it was hanging tough in the negotiations. This, too, is how Iran’s president is explaining the

missed opportunity to his hardline critics. And there is a bit of celebration in Tel Aviv and Riyadh, two capitals that feared an agreement would undermine their interests.

But as soon as the dust settles, every party will redraw its tactics. The new U.S. Senate will have its hands full, and the president's executive order on immigration may have lowered the Iranian issue just a bit on the Republican agenda. The fact that Iran is not much of a U.S. public opinion issue at the moment because the public is focused on ISIS as the biggest threat in the Middle East may also help. But as a leading congressional Democrat who has been a key ally of the president told me on the eve of the midterm elections, the White House is mistaken if it thinks the Iran issue will not come back in a big way in Congress. Sure, there is no agreement to defend, so no one can accuse President Obama of selling out to Iran, but it's always better to have something imperfect to defend in order to rally the congressional supporters and the public than to have nothing. The administration can hope that the troubled Iranian economy and the threat of more sanctions by the new Congress can give it a little more leverage with Tehran in the coming months. And the President himself may grow bolder in challenging congressional Republicans as he contemplates the alternatives to a compromise deal. But regional, Iranian, and domestic forces arrayed against a deal will not go away, and they may find in the extension a new opportunity to derail a deal. It will not get any easier.



John Tirman, *Executive Director and a Principal Research Scientist at MIT's Center for International Studies*

The continuation of talks is preferable to outright failure, of course, but extension comes with a set of hurdles that may prove crippling. First and foremost are the Republican and Israeli lobby opposition in the United States that will use this period to undermine the president. Most directly, they could strip away his authority to suspend sanctions. Republican majorities will be eager to humiliate President Barack Obama on Iran, and there may be enough Democrats who would go along with this to override an Obama veto.

Second, as details of the deal's rough outlines become public, the opposition can mount attacks on the weak areas—the number of centrifuges in particular—and insist loudly that Iran would have a short breakout path in a race to a weapon. This

“breakout” worry is a false construction, because Iran is very much deterred from moving toward nuclear arms. The consequences of doing so could be catastrophic for the Iranian people and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Yet much media and political gossip will focus on breakout as if it’s a completely independent phenomenon.

Third is a “black swan.” Unexpected things happen in the world (and some things that look accidental but are not) that can upset relations and shatter fragile diplomacy: a hostile encounter in Iraq or Syria, a sunken tanker in the Gulf—there are many chilling scenarios. The longer a period of diplomacy stretches out, the more likely something will go awry.

It’s disturbing that the diplomats failed to conclude an agreement; it is a failure of political will rather than misunderstandings or a need to sort out details. It will now be more, not less, difficult as spoilers do their work. The news media welcomes the doubters, because they’re good copy. But this is the situation at hand, and we can only hope that Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, European Union High Representative Catherine Ashton, and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry can move decisively to a favorable conclusion.



Roberto Toscano, *former Public Policy Scholar, Wilson Center; President, Intercultura Foundation, Italy; and former Italian Ambassador to Iran and India*

No deal in Vienna. Pessimists talk of failure; optimists say that it is only the postponement of an agreement in both sides’ interest that will eventually be reached.

We could probably have recourse to use the tired simile of the half full/half empty glass. But there is a problem: it is the glass itself that is now at stake. Plenty of people would like to break it, both in Washington and in Tehran.

The fact is that the nuclear issue has never really been about the bomb, or at least not mainly. It is about Iran’s relations with the United States, about its regional role, about the geopolitical competition across the Persian Gulf, about the Israeli government’s need for an issue bigger than the Palestinian problem, and, last but not least, about the future of Hassan Rouhani’s centrist presidency.

It's about the politics, not the centrifuges.

The negotiations were conducted by the two sides with goodwill and top diplomatic skill (rarely had one seen at work together the likes of Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and former Deputy Secretary of State William Burns). An agreement had been reached—according to some sources—on 95 percent of the issues. The last step needed for a positive conclusion was political, both for Washington and Tehran.

We do not know what really stuck and who really stalled. The guess is that, rather than the number of centrifuges or the breakout time, what turned out to be unsolvable was the demand of the P5+1 for some immediate, upfront delivery in terms of reductions and limitations on the part of Iran in exchange for a merely gradual lifting of sanctions.

Besides, neither President Barack Obama nor President Hassan Rouhani really has a free hand. If President Rouhani has a skeptical Supreme Leader to convince, President Obama has a hostile and Netanyahu-sensitive Congress with whom he has to deal. And that will not improve between now and the new June deadline.



Jim Walsh, *Research Associate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Security Studies Program*

What's next for the P5+1? Apparently, quite a bit of work.

News that the negotiations over Iran's nuclear program are to be extended cannot be described as anything other than a disappointment, and the fact that the extension is for some seven months suggests that the differences between the two parties are deeper than observers thought.

Obviously, it is better that the deadline be extended rather than have the talks collapse. The Joint Plan of Action has been, by far, the single most effective tool for reducing the dangers posed by Iran's nuclear program and for building confidence between the parties. The end of the Joint Plan would have been a disaster. Iran's program would have been left unconstrained and with far less transparency.

Still, one cannot help but suspect that the parties may have missed their last, best chance to resolve the dispute. Few analysts expect that President Barack Obama and President Hassan Rouhani will be in a stronger position politically seven months from now. And during this period, those who oppose diplomacy will seek to cause mischief. A new U.S. Congress, for example, may attempt to impose new sanctions in an effort to scuttle the negotiations. Others in the region may act in similarly unhelpful ways. There is also the possibility that changes in the U.S.–Russian relationship over the next several months or events on the ground in the Middle East could present new obstacles.

In short, things may get harder, not easier. And if the result is that this opportunity slips away, then President Obama and his team will have some difficult explaining to do. Why has the president myopically focused on “breakout time” as the measure of an agreement, despite the fact that the metric itself is deeply flawed and that the risks are overstated? How ironic it would be if the president, who spoke in Prague about a world without nuclear weapons, managed to fritter away the single most important opportunity of his presidency for reducing the nuclear threat.



Robin Wright, *Wilson Center–USIP Distinguished Scholar*

The continued deadlock between Iran and the world’s major powers over Tehran’s nuclear program is one of those glass half–full, half–empty predicaments.

This is the bad news: there’s no deal after a year of unprecedented, in–the–weeds talks among slews of experts from Iran and the world’s six major powers. To extend, yet again, signals a rigidity of positions that may ultimately make a deal elusive. Now the process will drag on another four months to reach a political agreement, with another three months, until June 30, to draft all the technicalities for long–term implementation.

The danger is that the process will lose momentum and potentially even credibility during the interim. Diplomacy also too often gets derailed by events on the ground, whether among the players or within the volatile Middle East. And after the U.S. election this month, both houses of Congress will have Republican majorities, which could also make winning support for an agreement made by a Democratic

administration harder. Any deal will be scrutinized—and effectively get enmeshed in domestic politics—far more in seven months than during the last days of a Democratic-controlled Senate.

But there is some good news too: all sides seem sincere in their commitment to keep trying to prevent Iran from producing a bomb. President Hassan Rouhani went on national television the night of November 24 and predicted there will be a deal and dismissed naysayers. The diplomacy has already produced one important result: the atmospherics between the United States and Iran have changed dramatically during the past year. After 35 years of tensions, the two countries have opened their own dialogue that has produced discussions of a few issues on the sidelines. Officials at the highest levels of the two governments actually know each other fairly well now—and communicate by phone and email in between the talks. It may not be rapprochement, but it is an important beginning.

In Vienna on November 24, Secretary of State John Kerry said, “We have made real and substantial progress on some of the most vexing challenges, and we now see the path toward potentially resolving some issues that have been intractable.” New ideas had emerged over the weekend that all parties are taking back home to discuss. “Given how far we've come over the past year—and particularly in the last few days—this is certainly not the time to get up and walk away.”

Fair enough. The alternatives—breakdown, new tensions, even the possibility of confrontation down the road—have no attraction either.



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