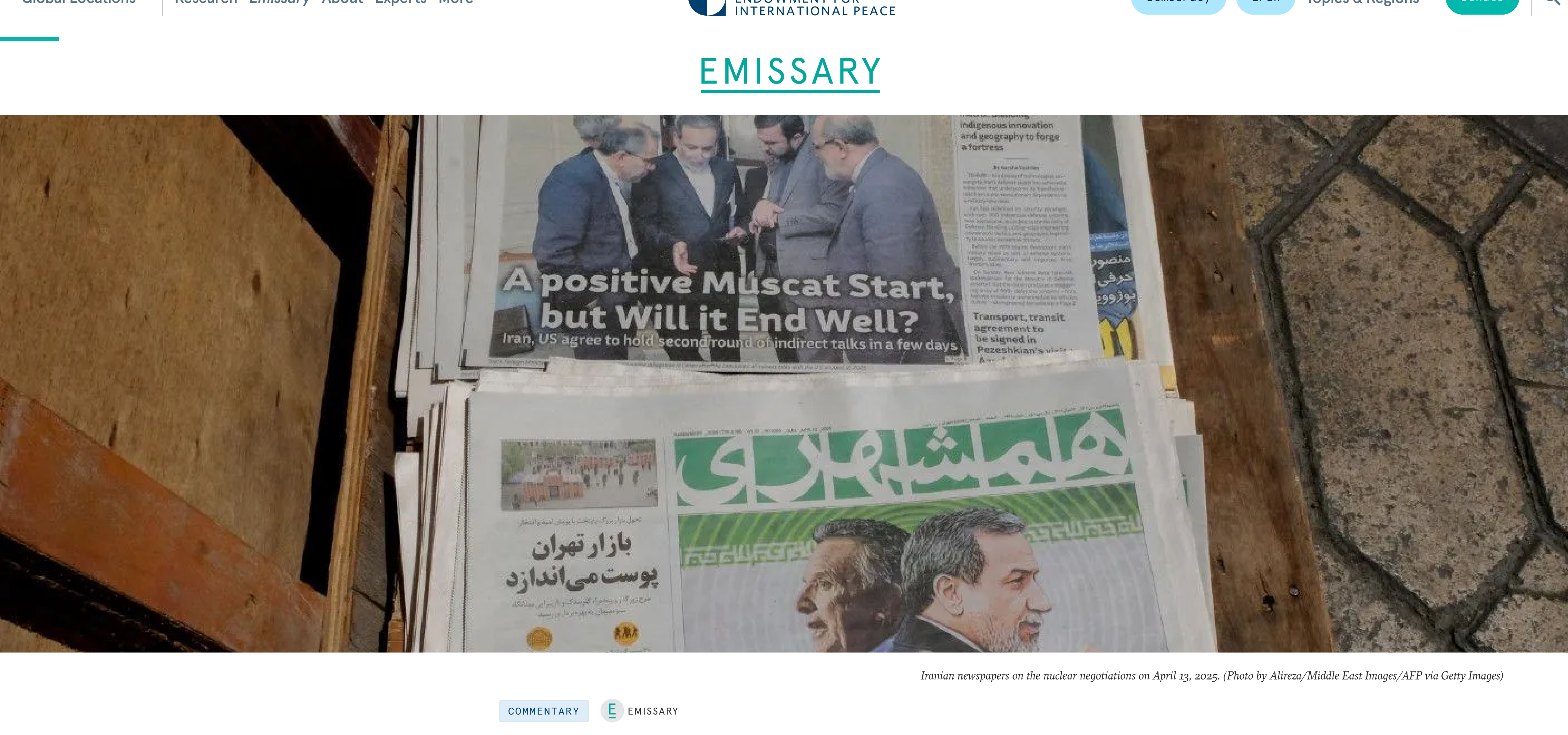


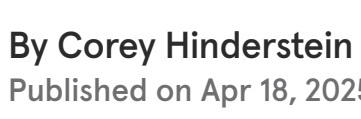


Iranian newspapers on the nuclear negotiations on April 13, 2025. (Photo by Alireza/Middle East Images/AFP via Getty Images)

COMMENTARY E EMISSARY

Five Lessons for the Current Iran Nuclear Talks

Tehran's nuclear program is in a very different position than it was a decade ago, but key aspects from the JCPOA negotiations remain relevant.



By Corey Hinderstein
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Last weekend in Oman, the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump took the first steps toward a nuclear negotiation with Iran. The indirect discussions went well enough to warrant a second round, held this weekend. As the two sides move toward a substantive negotiation over the future of Tehran's nuclear program, they should look back at the negotiations to conclude and implement the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015 and draw five lessons for the current process.

Monitoring and Verification Matter

The debate over the nuclear program comes down to a key question: How much weapons-grade enriched uranium can Iran produce, and how quickly, if it decided to make a nuclear weapon?

The Iranian nuclear program is in a very different position than it was a decade ago. Now, Iran has more nuclear material, more machines (gas centrifuges) to produce that nuclear material, and more advanced types of those machines. It also has years more experience designing, manufacturing, and operating gas centrifuges. This is not speculative—it is captured in the regular monitoring reports of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which have continued even since the Trump administration withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018.

As a result of this sophistication, no new nuclear deal will be able to roll back Iran's capabilities to where they were before the JCPOA. What Iranian scientists have learned cannot be destroyed, even if the machines, material, and facilities can. This is true, regardless of whether destruction comes via a negotiated arrangement or a military strike. Iran's technical knowledge would persist for a generation, even if it agreed to a full dismantlement of its current program, which is unlikely.

For this reason, verification and monitoring will be even more important than they were in the JCPOA—when they were a central element. Since foolproof barriers to reconstitution of the program are impossible, early and definitive notice of any decision to stray off the path of the negotiated terms will be vital. This verification would need to address misuse of declared capabilities and detection of undeclared activities.

Luckily, the United States has been investing in the future of verification (though those programs are now rumored to be the targets of funding cuts). Integration of advanced tools and techniques has been central to increasing the IAEA's knowledge over years of inspections and monitoring in Iran. Sustaining these domestic investments in new tools and involving technical experts early in the negotiation to define monitoring and verification measures will be instrumental to build the confidence of the region and the world in any future agreement.

Although the U.S. [Annual Threat Assessment](#) still concludes that Iran is not building a nuclear weapon, it does report much more internal debate about doing so. Press reports have indicated concern by the United States and Israel that Iran has taken preliminary steps that would shorten its path to manufacturing a nuclear bomb if its leaders decided to do so. Because of Iran's recent progress on uranium enrichment, any new deal should include verifiable restrictions on the activities that would indicate moves toward making a nuclear weapon. Early warning is how the United States and its allies gain confidence in their ability to mount a response—military or otherwise—to Iranian weaponization, and confidence in that warning is a valuable deterrent to Iran changing its posture.

Knowledge Is Power

The nuclear elements of any deal with Iran must rest on the foundation of a solid technical understanding of nuclear material production, nuclear weapons, and civil nuclear fuel cycles. The United States brings both general expertise and detailed insight about Iran's programs specifically. The Iranians will bring a full suite of experts to their side, and the U.S. team needs to be equally loaded.

The nuclear elements of the JCPOA were built (and sold) on a concept called “breakout time”—the calculated time it would take for Iran to use the material and enrichment technology left in the country to produce enough material for one nuclear weapon if it decided to do so. Because of Iran's increased operational experience, breakout time may no longer be the right construct for the current negotiations. But the U.S. side does need the tools to technically benchmark potential deals to confirm that negotiated constraints are meaningful.

In doing these calculations, technical knowledge is vital. Understanding the capabilities and operational realities of Iran's uranium enrichment program is key to deciding what capability should remain in Iran under a deal.

Although there isn't one correct answer, there are ways to design residual capability to maximize warning time and breakout time. Understanding what Iran can do with the capability that it has will be a cornerstone of determining if a deal is in the best interest of the United States, its allies, or the region.

The important work of modeling prospective solutions will not be done at the negotiating table. It will be done back home, by experts at U.S. national laboratories. The United States has been building the capability to do this sophisticated modeling for more than a decade—across administrations—and it is critical to backstopping the diplomatic effort. The negotiating team should also include nuclear weaponization experts to inform the design of provisions that address concerns about the steps needed to turn enriched uranium into a bomb.

Technical experts do need to be involved—ideally, in the room—to make any deal credible, and their expertise needs to be heeded. When Trump was negotiating with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un during his first term, the delegation included technical experts. This is a good precedent that should be repeated for Iran, especially when the United States doesn't have a [world-renowned physicist](#) as a principal negotiator.

Strength in Numbers

The United States didn't fly solo in the JCPOA negotiations. The combination of the EU3 (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom), Russia, China, and the United States was a powerful show of leverage in negotiation and demonstrated a collective interest in the outcome. Each country had a slightly different set of strategic and tactical priorities. At times, this resulted in a negotiation before the negotiation, but it led to a powerful consensus when the conclusion was reached.

This coalition brought leverage to the negotiation, including pressure related to sanctions and trade. From Iran's perspective, European participation is still vital, because the U.S. sanctions being negotiated most profoundly limit trade with Europe. If the Europeans are not at the table, assessing the practical benefits Iran is likely to realize in any deal is much more difficult. The partners also brought nuclear expertise needed to inform the outcome and implement the deal. For example, Russia removed near 20 percent enriched uranium to convert to levels further away from weapons-grade. China played a key role in scoping the conversion of a research reactor in Iran that would have produced plutonium well-suited to nuclear weapons, if its construction was completed.

A multinational, unified front was especially important during the implementation phase of the deal. Differences were raised on a near daily basis that required consultation, legal opinions, new negotiations, and constant vigilance. The ability to regroup with the other members of the Joint Commission (established under the deal to monitor implementation and resolve disputes) meant that the partners had the ability to present a united front when Iran tried to “renegotiate” through implementation. Of particular note, each country retained a de facto veto in this process. Especially now, it is critical to build support for any negotiations and involves allies, partners, and (perhaps) adversaries if the negotiators want to maximize the chances of successful and sustainable implementation.

In addition, expanding the circle of those supporting negotiation and implementation was necessary. Oman then, as now, facilitated discussions. Norway, Kazakhstan, South Korea, and Japan provided key services and support, and many countries contributed financially and technically to the IAEA to enable its resource-intensive monitoring and verification mission.

A recognition that strategic priorities can be met even when details take longer to resolve may prove valuable.

Don't Rely on “All or Nothing”

It is a truism of negotiation that nothing is agreed unless everything is agreed. When it comes to a nuclear negotiation with Iran, this principle can do more harm than good.

For example, the lack of trust between parties in 2015 led negotiators to develop a two-stage process. The successful implementation of the Joint Plan of Action allowed partial steps on all sides to set a better foundation for the more dramatic impact of the JCPOA. Enabling smaller actions, and some reversible technical steps, demonstrated good faith on the part of the parties. With the trust even more severely challenged now between and among the possible partners, a “crawl, walk, run,” approach may make even more sense.

In addition, it is OK to leave certain technical arrangements unresolved as long as they don't disrupt implementation of the strategically significant elements of a deal. During the JCPOA negotiation, some placeholders were included in the deal while other elements were subject to detailed negotiation. At the end of the process, certain pieces just were not resolved.

For example, paragraph 59 of Annex 1 noted that some fuel for Iran's research reactor under construction could be made in Iran and not count toward the enriched uranium cap if it had qualities that would make it unusable in nuclear weapons. Defining those qualities required a highly technical discussion of reactor fuel specialists. Instead of walking away from the text, all sides agreed to create a process to discuss the issue, and the United States had a veto in those discussions. In the end, an esoteric technical question did not become the barrier to reaching an agreement that all sides determined had merit.

A recognition that strategic priorities can be met even when details take longer to resolve may prove valuable.

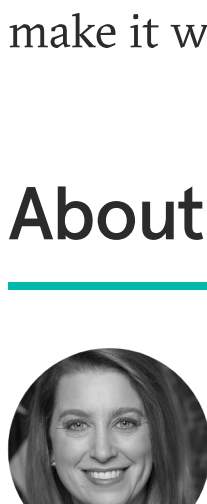
All Sides Must “Win”

An agreement is reached when all sides believe they have won. This is entirely possible if the negotiators have complementary positions and clear strategic objectives. If the end goal for the United States is to avoid a destabilizing, dangerous nuclear arms race in the Middle East, a deal should be achievable. The chances are increased if, as reported, Iran may be downgrading its baseline expectations in response to Israel's degradation of Tehran's regional proxy network under former president Joe Biden and Trump's more aggressive and unpredictable rhetoric.

In the end, as with any negotiation and as unpalatable as it may seem, an agreement over Iran's nuclear program will have to be perceived as beneficial by all parties. Trump was right when he wrote in *The Art of the Deal*, “Deals work best when each side gets something it wants from the other.”

While not perfect, such a nuclear deal was achieved once, and it may be possible again. An Iran able to spring a nuclear weapon on the region and the world on short notice and without pretext is a dangerous enough situation to make it worth the effort.

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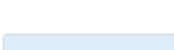
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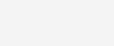
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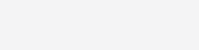
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