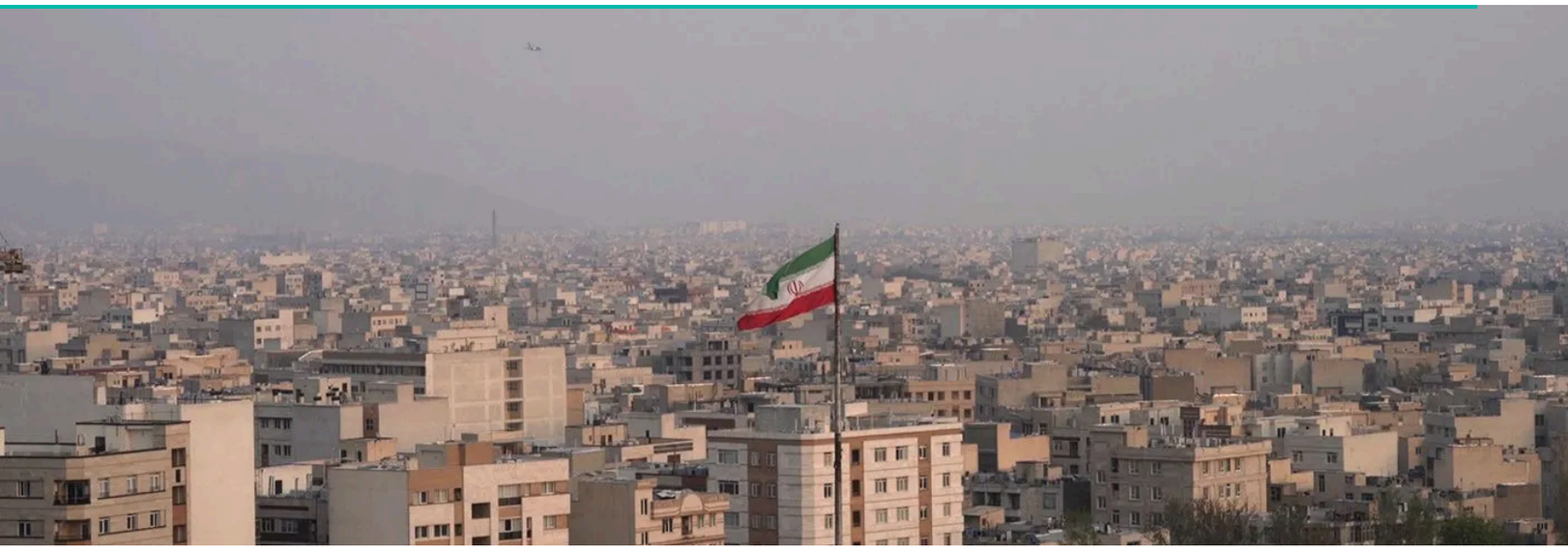

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ARTICLE

The United States and Iran Must Overcome Four Challenges for Nuclear Talks to Succeed

The challenges from previous negotiations reveal how much needs to be done.

By Eric Lob
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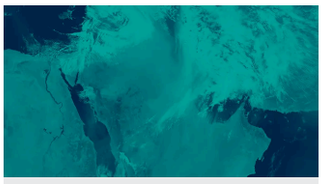

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Introduction

Between April and May 2025, the United States and Iran engaged in five rounds of nuclear negotiations, with a sixth round scheduled in mid-June. Two days before that round was set to begin, on June 13, Israel attacked Iran's military and nuclear infrastructure and personnel, among other targets, with American assistance. Nine days later, the United States directly intervened in what became known as the Twelve-Day War by bombing Iran's nuclear facilities at Fordow, Isfahan, and Natanz. Throughout the war, Tehran retaliated by striking Israeli military and civilian sites with drones and missiles. On June 24, Washington brokered a ceasefire after Tehran launched missiles at an American air base in Qatar. In Iran, the Israeli attacks killed several nuclear scientists and senior military commanders. They also killed 1,190 people, injured 4,475 of them, and displaced tens of thousands more. In Israel, Iranian drones and missiles struck military and civilian sites, despite the country's advanced air defenses. They also killed at least 28 people, wounded over 3,000 of them, and displaced many more.

This article seeks to illuminate how and why the United States and Iran engaged in an indirect and direct military confrontation while pursuing nuclear diplomacy. It argues that the following four factors created challenges for the negotiations and contributed to the conflict:

1. The vicious cycle of American coercion and Iranian confrontation escalated tensions and eroded trust between both sides during the negotiations.
2. Washington's preference for direct and comprehensive talks and Tehran's proclivity for indirect and interim ones were at odds.
3. Washington maintained a maximalist approach to Iranian enrichment levels and uranium stockpiles throughout the talks.
4. Israeli officials and U.S. lawmakers influenced and interfered in the negotiations.

If the United States and Iran decide to resume the talks, they will have to address these four factors to achieve a diplomatic deal and avoid another war.

American Coercion and Iranian Confrontation

The first factor that created challenges for U.S.-Iran nuclear negotiations was American coercion and Iranian confrontation that escalated tensions and eroded trust between both sides. The American coercion consisted of increasing economic sanctions against Iran, even after promising to pause them during the talks, and threatening military action by Israel and the United States if a deal was not reached. Shortly after starting his second term in early

February 2025, U.S. President Donald Trump authorized his military advisers to attack Iran if it assassinated him. He also signed an executive order that reinstated a maximum pressure campaign on the country that had not entirely ended under his predecessor, Joe Biden.

In early March, and in a coercive manner, Trump allegedly sent a letter to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei giving him sixty days to consummate a nuclear deal or confront serious consequences in the form of military strikes. Tehran initially responded to Trump's letter by refusing to negotiate with Washington and threatening it and Israel with military action if they attacked Iran. Tehran's confrontational response further raised tensions with Washington; it provoked Trump to impose more sanctions, promise to end Iran's oil exports, and again threaten military action.

Although American coercion increased tensions with Iran, it also incentivized Tehran to come to the negotiating table. Despite his defiant discourse, Khamenei reversed course on the negotiations by the end of March after his advisers warned him that more U.S. sanctions and military strikes risked toppling the regime. Since the Gaza war started on October 7, 2023, Iran had suffered strategic setbacks in the form of escalating tensions with Israel and the United States, degraded proxies and partners across the region, and the swift fall of Bashar al-Assad and his regime in Syria. Some scholars and analysts called these developments an "annus horribilis" for Iran. Considering these circumstances, Khamenei relented by agreeing to negotiations.

> **While American coercion created a diplomatic opening with Iran, the continuation of this coercion, combined with Iranian confrontation, generated heightened hostilities ahead of the first round of talks.**

While American coercion created a diplomatic opening with Iran, the continuation of this coercion, combined with Iranian confrontation, generated heightened hostilities ahead of the first round of talks. In early April, before the talks were scheduled to start and even after both sides had agreed to negotiate, tensions escalated even further. Trump announced that Israel would lead an attack on Iran's nuclear program if it was not fully dismantled. Iranian officials then defiantly expelled International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors and threatened to build more nuclear power plants and acquire a nuclear weapon. As expected, such statements set off alarm bells in Washington, Tel Aviv, and other capitals.

During the second round of talks in Rome on April 19, the United States rejected an offer by Iran to invest in its nuclear sector. Then, during the third round in Muscat on April 26, Washington again sought to impose a sixty-day deadline to reach a diplomatic deal and avoid military action. Tehran perceived the deadline as unreasonable because of the deep distrust that existed between both sides and the fact it had taken them multiple months to negotiate and sign the Iran nuclear deal, formally called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), between 2014 and 2015. During the third round, Iran's rejection of the deadline and its insistence on receiving partial sanctions relief before destroying or shipping stockpiles of highly enriched uranium caused the Trump administration to double down on coercion. They did so by increasing secondary sanctions and warning Iran again of military strikes if the next round did not produce results.

In response, Tehran postponed the fourth round of talks. As in the past, it also defiantly endorsed chants of "death to America" and threatened the United States and Israel with military action if they attacked Iran. Meanwhile, Trump insulted Iranians of all political persuasions by announcing the U.S. government would rename the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Gulf, even if he eventually backtracked on the plan.

Following the fourth round of talks in Muscat on May 11, the Trump administration continued with its coercion. Although it had promised to pause sanctions during the negotiations, it imposed more of them against Tehran in the areas of nuclear research and ballistic missiles. Later that month, Iran condemned the American sanctions and claimed again that Israeli strikes against it would be met with a "devastating and decisive response." After the fifth round of talks in Rome on May 23, the Trump administration finally paused sanctions in early June. The pause was intended as a goodwill gesture to persuade Tehran to accept a proposal on a deal. However, several days later, the administration imposed secondary sanctions on several dozen Iranian individuals and companies, which contributed to Iran rejecting the proposal.

After Tehran rejected the proposal, and even with a sixth round of talks scheduled in Muscat on June 15, American coercion moved into the phase of preparing for military action. In his speeches and statements, Trump admonished Tehran for becoming more aggressive in the negotiations and expressed less confidence in consummating a deal. He also warned that a war between Israel and Iran was increasingly likely and would cause considerable casualties. Trump reportedly reviewed a range of options from U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) for an American attack against Iran should the talks stall or fail. The U.S. military readied itself for such a scenario by evacuating personnel and moving equipment from embassies and bases in Bahrain, Iraq, and Kuwait. Meanwhile, Iran made military preparations of its own by reinforcing its air defenses and importing Chinese fuel for ballistic missiles. Once again, and consistent with its confrontational stance, Tehran warned that if the nuclear negotiations collapsed and military conflict ensued, it would attack American bases in the region.

On June 13, American coercion culminated in Israel's airstrikes against Iran as the opening salvo in the Twelve-Day War. Although the Trump administration initially insisted it had not been involved, it was later reported that the United States had given Israel tacit approval to carry out the attack with intelligence sharing and other assistance. Trump subsequently stated he supported the attack and justified it by saying the sixty-day deadline for a deal had passed. He also told Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to continue attacking Iran.

At the same time, Trump warned the attack could undermine efforts to limit Iran's nuclear program and said he hoped a diplomatic agreement with Tehran could still be achieved. To this end, Trump explored with Tehran the possibility of resuming the nuclear negotiations and preventing further conflict. However, he did so in a coercive fashion by using the prospect of American military action as leverage to demand Iran's unconditional surrender. Many inside Iran believed that Washington had deliberately deceived Tehran and negotiated with it in bad faith by using the talks as a smoke screen for the Israeli airstrikes. Whether this perception was accurate, it further eroded trust between the United States and Iran and made the prospect of a diplomatic agreement or negotiated settlement over Iran's nuclear program significantly slimmer.

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Meanwhile, Tehran continued its confrontational posture by threatening again to attack U.S. regional assets if it became more involved in the conflict, further raising tensions between both sides. Despite this threat, Trump ordered U.S. strikes using so-called bunker busters and cruise missiles against Iran's nuclear facilities in Fordow, Isfahan, and Natanz on June 21. To save face and deescalate tensions, Iran launched a limited and telegraphed ballistic missile strike on America's largest airbase in the region, Al Udeid in Qatar, two days later. Following the strike, and amid further fighting between Israel and Iran, Trump called for a ceasefire on June 24 to prevent a full-fledged regional conflagration.

In the wake of the war, American coercion continued as Trump announced he had abandoned all efforts to ease sanctions on Iran. The announcement came after Trump traded insults with Khamenei about the impact of the conflict after the latter continued to make confrontational comments about Iran possibly attacking more American bases.

Divergent Preferences

The second factor that derailed the U.S.-Iran nuclear negotiations was the divergence that persisted between Washington's preference for direct and comprehensive talks and Tehran's penchant for indirect and interim ones. Since the start of Trump's second term, and before the talks even started, he expressed a desire to directly negotiate with Iran over its nuclear program. While Trump demanded that the talks be direct, Tehran insisted they be indirect, as it had done during stalled negotiations with the Biden administration in 2022. The 2025 talks ended up being mainly indirect with Omani mediation, though they occasionally contained direct communication between American and Iranian officials led by U.S. Special Envoy Steve Witkoff and Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi.

There also existed a disparity between both sides' expectations for the talks. On one side, Trump aspired to achieve a comprehensive agreement that was better than the JCPOA after he unilaterally withdrew from it during his first term in 2018. Based on Trump's statements, the framework for such a deal would be zero enrichment, nuclear dismantlement, and the cessation of support to proxies by Iran in exchange for sanctions relief from and normalized relations with the United States.

On the other side, Iran intended to conclude an interim deal or series of them that contained confidence building measures before consummating a comprehensive agreement. As early as the first round of talks in Muscat on April 12, Tehran demonstrated its preference for this type of deal when presenting a three-stage plan that contained mutual concessions on a progressive basis. As a first step under the plan, Tehran would temporarily lower its enrichment levels to 3.67 percent for civilian or peaceful purposes and Washington would unfreeze Iran's financial assets and authorize its oil exports. In the second stage, Iran would permanently halt high-level enrichment, restore IAEA inspections, and implement the Additional Protocol of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) that allowed for surprise inspections at undeclared sites. In exchange, the United States would lift some sanctions and persuade the European, or E3, signatories of the JCPOA not to trigger the UN snapback sanctions against Tehran that were due to go in effect after being paused under the agreement. As a third step, Iran would transfer its stockpile of highly enriched uranium to a third country and Washington would remove the remaining sanctions. Additionally, the U.S. Congress would approve the agreement so it could not be changed or canceled by executive order, as Trump had done with the JCPOA in 2018. If Washington would promise to end its maximum pressure campaign, Iran would deescalate regional tensions by disarming and demobilizing its proxies, including Hamas, Hezbollah, al-Hashd al-Shaabi, and the Houthis.

American Maximalism

The third complicating factor was American maximalism concerning Iranian enrichment levels and uranium stockpiles. Throughout the five rounds of talks, Washington adopted the maximalist position of zero enrichment versus no weaponization, which was a nonstarter for Tehran. As a signatory of the NPT, Iran perceived itself as possessing the sovereign right to enrich uranium for civilian or peaceful purposes, even if it exceeded those levels after Trump had withdrawn from the JCPOA. In his letter to Khamenei in early March, Trump demanded that Tehran end uranium enrichment, dismantle the nuclear program, and stop supporting regional proxies in exchange for sanctions relief and normalized relations. American maximalism continued in early April before the first round of talks when Trump announced that Israel would attack Iran if it did not dismantle its nuclear program.

As with Iran's enrichment levels, the United States adopted a maximalist position on its stockpile of highly enriched uranium. During the third round of talks, Washington insisted it would not lift any sanctions until this stockpile was eliminated or exported. Per Iran's proposed three-stage plan, Tehran wanted Washington to lift some sanctions as an interim step and confidence building measure in exchange for Iran halting high-level enrichment, restoring IAEA inspections, and implementing the Additional Protocol of the NPT. Only afterward would Iran destroy the stockpile or transfer it to a third country in exchange for the United States lifting the remaining sanctions. Until then, Tehran insisted on keeping the stockpile in case Washington failed to follow through with the plan's first two stages.

During the fourth round of talks, and in a maximalist manner, the United States rejected a proposal from Iran to create a joint nuclear enrichment consortium with Arab states and American investment as an alternative to dismantling the nuclear program. Several days later, during his visit to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in mid-May, Trump maintained his maximalism by insisting again on zero enrichment, even after he had sent Tehran a proposal in which he purportedly compromised on the issue. Trump's statement prompted Tehran to reject the proposal, regardless of its contents, and refuse to relinquish the right to enrich uranium, even if doing so raised the risks of a military conflict. At the same time, and as a way to encourage the United States not to abandon diplomacy, Iran reiterated its willingness to eliminate or export its stockpile of highly enriched uranium in exchange for U.S. sanctions relief. Nevertheless, during the fifth round of talks, American maximalism continued as Washington again demanded that Tehran agree to zero enrichment and full dismantlement. As in the past, Iran rejected the demand and warned it would cause the talks to collapse.

> **During the fifth round of talks, American maximalism continued as Washington again demanded that Tehran agree to zero enrichment and full dismantlement.**

After maintaining a maximalist position during the five rounds of talks, and with a sixth round scheduled in mid-June, the Trump administration momentarily made a critical concession that could have comprised a major breakthrough and potential pathway to a deal. In early June, it sent Tehran another proposal, reportedly offering to assist Iran with building nuclear power plants and allowing it to enrich uranium on a limited basis for civilian or peaceful purposes until a regional consortium was created. Several days later, however, the Trump administration resumed its maximalism by insisting that Iran would not be allowed to enrich uranium at any level. As Tehran had previously done, it rejected the latest proposal. Even if the proposal contained a concession, the administration's maximalist statements caused Iranian officials to reject it and reaffirm their right to enrich uranium, maintain stockpiles, and preserve the program.

Israeli and Congressional Influence and Interference

The fourth and final factor that impeded the U.S.-Iran nuclear negotiations and increased tensions between both sides was the influence and interference of

Israel and the U.S. Congress. In early April ahead of the first round of talks, Netanyahu influenced Trump to announce that Israel would attack Iran's nuclear program if it was not fully dismantled. This demand was called the "Libya model" in reference to late Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi agreeing to dismantlement before his regime was overthrown by NATO intervention and a local rebellion. This announcement increased tensions with Tehran because it not only dismissed Iran's right to enrich uranium and maintain a peaceful program under the NPT but also expressed a desire for regime change.

Before the fourth round of talks, congressional Republicans announced that any agreement requiring their approval would necessitate Iran to end all uranium enrichment and fully dismantle its nuclear program, in addition to adequately addressing ballistic missiles and regional proxies. After the fourth round and during Trump's Middle East visit, congressional Republicans delivered a letter to him that again demanded zero enrichment and full dismantlement. They did so to preempt a new proposal Trump had sent to Tehran in case he compromised on enrichment.

Before the fifth round of talks, Netanyahu unsuccessfully tried to dissuade Trump from continuing the negotiations. Following the fifth round, Israel and members of Congress pressured Trump to reverse course on the uranium enrichment concession and reimpose sanctions against Iran. Netanyahu also threatened to strike Tehran's nuclear sites. However, Trump told him to hold off on doing so and refrain from further disrupting the negotiations. Trump claimed he was close to finalizing a deal that was contingent on more intrusive inspections. On June 13, two days before the sixth round of talks was scheduled to take place, Israel disrupted them by launching large-scale airstrikes against Iran's military and nuclear infrastructure and personnel, among other targets. The fact that Israel targeted Ali Shamkhani—who had been overseeing the negotiations and advising Khamenei on them—suggested it intended to sabotage the talks. After the attack, Tehran canceled the sixth round and suspended further negotiations indefinitely.

The Israeli airstrikes were not only a setback for U.S.-Iran nuclear negotiations but also the nonproliferation regime more broadly. Following the Twelve-Day War, on July 2, Iran officially suspended its cooperation with the IAEA. It did so after the IAEA had voted to censure Iran's nuclear program for the first time in twenty years for being in breach of the NPT. Tehran condemned the vote as being politically motivated and legitimating the Israeli strikes the day before they started. It also suspected that the IAEA had shared secret and sensitive information on Iranian nuclear facilities with the United States and Israel. Although Iran had violated the NPT by enriching uranium at levels that exceeded those needed for civilian or peaceful purposes, it perceived the strikes against nuclear facilities that were safeguarded and monitored by the IAEA as a violation of international law.

Iran's suspension of cooperation with the IAEA could be a possible prelude to its withdrawal from the NPT and weaponization of its nuclear program. These moves would be risky in that they would probably provoke more military action by Israel and the United States. In the days and weeks after the war, Iran's ceasefire with Israel remained fragile, while Trump threatened to attack again if Tehran rebuilt and repaired the program. Some analysts even believed a new Israeli strike by the end of the year was likely. Aside from the possibility of another war with Israel and the United States, Iran confronted the reality of the E3 reimposing the UN snapback sanctions that had been lifted under the JCPOA and were set to expire in mid-October—something Washington had pressured the Europeans to do since the start of the talks.

> **In the wake of the war, the nonproliferation regime was further set back by Iran's policy of nuclear ambiguity.**

In the wake of the war, the nonproliferation regime was further set back by Iran's policy of nuclear ambiguity. This policy was made possible by the contradictory statements and assessments of the damage done to the nuclear facilities at Fordow, Isfahan, and Natanz. On one side, Trump stated the U.S. strikes had been a spectacular success and obliterated the facilities. On the other side, domestic and international agencies, such as the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) and the IAEA, contradicted Trump's claim by concluding the strikes had set back Iran's nuclear program by only several months instead of years. Additionally, Tehran had allegedly anticipated the attack and removed stockpiles, centrifuges, and other material and equipment from the facilities in advance. Since Iran suspended cooperation with the IAEA, its inspectors were unable to access the facilities and assess the damage. This issue was aggravated by Israel having hit access roads to the facilities during the war.

Overcoming the Challenges

Even after the negotiations stalled and the Twelve-Day War erupted, the door on nuclear diplomacy was not completely closed. Trump still seemed motivated to fulfill his campaign promise of consummating deals and promoting peace in places such as Ukraine and the Middle East. With the possibility of renewed hostilities and the threat of snapback sanctions looming, Iran dialed down its discourse on withdrawing from the NPT and weaponizing its nuclear program. It also engaged in more diplomatic discussions with the E3 and IAEA over sanctions and inspections. At different times during and after the war, Washington and Tehran expressed a desire to resume the negotiations. Before doing so, both sides should address the four factors that presented challenges during the talks and prevented a deal from being reached.

First, the United States and Iran will have to end the vicious cycle of coercion and confrontation during the negotiations. Time will tell whether Washington can salvage any semblance of trust with Tehran after approving the Israeli air attacks and bombing Iranian nuclear facilities. One way Washington could do this is to guarantee it will not attack again and insist that Israel continue to abide by the ceasefire. If the United States and Iran return to the negotiating table, they should mitigate or eliminate the coercion and confrontation that escalated tensions and eroded trust between them throughout the first five rounds. To this end, the Trump administration could modify or drop the sixty-day deadline that Tehran perceived as unrealistic given the length of time it had taken to negotiate and sign the JCPOA. It should also follow through on its promise of pausing sanctions during the talks. Finally, Washington and Tehran should refrain from threatening each other with military action and minimize making public statements altogether until progress is achieved and a deal is reached. Implementing these measures would help build trust and confidence, which are just as important, if not more so, as the technicalities of diplomatic agreements.

Second, Washington and Tehran should come to a consensus on the format and expectations of the negotiations before continuing them. They could consider preserving their indirect talks with Omani mediation and occasional moments of direct exchange. This format provides flexibility if progress is made during indirect talks and if both sides wish to engage directly with each other to finalize the details of an aspect of the agreement.

> **The United States and Iran will have to agree on their expectations for a deal.**

In addition to the format, the United States and Iran will have to agree on their expectations for a deal. During the first five rounds, the Trump administration aspired to achieve a comprehensive agreement that offered sanctions relief and normalized relations with Washington in exchange for zero enrichment and full dismantlement by Tehran—conditions that were a nonstarter for Iran and will be further addressed below. Meanwhile, Tehran tried to reach an interim deal or series of them that contained confidence building measures and phased concessions by both sides. Before continuing to negotiate, the United States and Iran should decide whether they seek to sign a deal that is comprehensive or progressive. Either way, the first five rounds of talks showed that the scope of nuclear negotiations and a prospective agreement was confined to a specific set of issues. For Washington, these issues were restricted to security and included enrichment levels, uranium stockpiles, IAEA inspections, and regional proxies. For Tehran, they were limited to the economy and entailed economic sanctions, frozen assets, and oil exports, alongside approval from the U.S. Congress.

Third, Washington and Tehran will have to address the issue of American maximalism concerning Iranian enrichment levels and uranium stockpiles. Following the fifth round of talks, the Trump administration agreed to allow Iran to enrich at levels for civilian or peaceful purposes before the creation of a regional consortium. However, it quickly reversed course and reverted to maximalism by once again demanding zero enrichment and full dismantlement. Washington could create an opening and pathway to a potential deal by allowing Iran to enrich uranium at lower levels and assist it with building nuclear reactors for civilian or peaceful purposes.

The Trump administration also maintained a maximalist stance on Iran's uranium stockpiles by insisting they be eliminated or exported before lifting any sanctions. This stance conflicted with the three-stage plan that Iran had presented during the first round of talks. As a second step, Tehran had proposed partial sanctions relief in exchange for stopping enrichment, restoring inspections, and implementing the Additional Protocol of the NPT. It was only in the third and final stage that Iran would destroy or ship the stockpiles in return for full sanctions relief. After the fifth round, Tehran stated it would be willing to abandon the uranium stockpiles in exchange for sanctions relief. However, it did not specify whether it would do so without first receiving partial sanctions relief from Washington for having made the abovementioned concessions from the second stage of the plan. Within the framework of a future deal, and in a quid pro quo fashion, Washington could conceivably compromise on the enrichment levels and Tehran could do so on the uranium stockpiles before any sanctions are lifted.

Finally, the Trump administration should mitigate the influence and interference of individuals in Israel and Congress who impeded the negotiations and increased tensions. During the talks, Israel and members of Congress pressured Trump to maintain his maximalist position of zero enrichment and full dismantlement, especially at critical moments when he appeared ready to compromise. They also sought to sabotage the talks by swaying Trump to subject Tehran to more sanctions after promising to pause them. Finally, Israel disrupted the negotiations by attacking Iran and initiating the war. The latter was a setback for not only U.S.-Iran nuclear negotiations but also the nonproliferation regime more generally.

Throughout the talks, Tehran was well aware of this issue and asked Trump to prevent Israel from further interfering. In the end, this issue could be the most difficult one for Trump to manage. He has a close personal relationship with Netanyahu and cannot afford to ignore the pro-Israel lobbying and interest groups that influence Congress and other institutions. If Trump continued negotiating with Iran, he would be unable to completely bypass Congress because it would need to approve or ratify an agreement for it to be more durable. For Trump, the probability of gaining congressional approval appears low given the narrow Republican majority and the preponderance of members from both parties who support Israel and oppose Iran.

Conclusion

Despite having held five rounds of diplomatic talks between April and May, the United States and Iran engaged in military confrontation during the Twelve-Day War in June. The stalled talks and ensuing war were the outcome of the four factors detailed in this article. If the United States and Iran are willing and able to resume the negotiations, they will have to address all four factors to reach a diplomatic deal and avoid another war. To this end, they will have to break the cycle of coercion and confrontation and keep public statements to a minimum until progress and an agreement are achieved. Washington and Tehran will also have to agree on the format and expectations of the negotiations ahead of time. Furthermore, they will have to compromise on critical issues such as enrichment and stockpiles. Finally, the Trump administration will have to mitigate the influence of individuals in Israel and Congress who oppose the negotiations, while also gaining congressional approval of an agreement to make it more durable.

While addressing these four factors is a tall task, achieving a deal is possible because of the narrow scope of issues involved, with security being the focus for Washington and the economy being the priority for Tehran. In the end and beyond the technicalities, the success or failure of future negotiations will ultimately depend on the political will of both sides and their degree of trust in each other.

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