

Diplomatic distance doesn't mean diplomacy stops



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OPINION

The fifth round of indirect talks between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States concluded on May 23, 2025, in Rome, Italy. Like the previous four rounds, this session was hosted by Oman, with the Omani foreign minister acting as mediator. The two negotiating teams were led by Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi and Steve Witkoff, the US president's special envoy. So far, none of the rounds have resembled the previous ones or been even remotely predictable.



Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi (front) departs a consultation session with his team.

● MIZAN

Negotiation does not equal agreement

Recently, within Iran, there has been a misconception that merely engaging in negotiations is some kind of achievement or a sign of inching closer to an agreement; Whereas, "negotiation" does not necessarily mean an agreement is at hand. Countries even hammer out deals during wartime. Therefore, dialogue does not automatically add up to an agreement. It is crucial to distinguish between "negotiation" and the "result of negotiation".

The gap in positions, or even unrealistic views — from either the American side or Iran's frustration with those views — is no reason to call off talks. The act of negotiating alone is also not a sign that the atmosphere or conditions are positive. Hence, simply holding talks cannot be interpreted as either positive or negative. What matters is the content of what is said during the discussions. Otherwise, just negotiating by itself doesn't carry much weight.

Reports paint rosier picture

Given that certain disagreements are real, especially on the core issue of enrichment, it is unlikely there is much difference between the media narrative and the substance inside the negotiation room. In the first to third rounds, differences were less pronounced due to a focus on generalities, political will, and initial frameworks. So, the gap between public statements and private talks was narrower. But once the discussion moved to more sensitive topics like enrichment, sanctions, enriched materials, and other details, these differences surfaced equally in both the talks and media coverage. It seems that the reports released about the negotiations sometimes paint a picture more positive than the reality inside the room.

Assessing three-phase cycle of talks

There has been a recurring three-phase cycle of pre-negotiations, negotiations, and post-negotiations across all rounds: Initially, both sides hold back

and appear to be consulting and deciding. Then, especially the American side turns up the heat by adopting tougher stances, pushing maximalist positions, and putting out public messages and media posturing to create psychological pressure and gear up Iran for the next round.

Once formal talks begin, their tone becomes more measured and realistic, although the core content — such as insisting on zero enrichment — remains unchanged. The only difference might be in how proposals and ideas are presented, which tends to be more precise and calculated.

In the end, although no concrete result is reached, both sides agree that the negotiation process has not ground to a halt, and neither side issues negative reports. This overall pattern has been observed in the last four rounds. However, how closely this image aligns with reality is a question not easily answered.

Proposed options far from Iran's views

Among the possible ideas floated are

concepts like a "temporary freeze on enrichment," which seem impractical. Other plans include forming a consortium. Iran opposes removing enriched material from the country and believes that if enrichment is done abroad, it cannot replace domestic enrichment. However, proposals such as establishing a consortium near the Persian Gulf but on Iranian soil might be among the ideas put forward.

These proposals, if implemented, must satisfy the Americans and align with Iran's positions as well. It seems there is a long way to bridge the gap and reach such a balance point.

Baseless expectations play into opponent's hands

Society should brace itself for the possibility that no agreement will materialize. Such baseless expectations will, in practice, play into the hands of the opposing side and America's allies, and becoming conditioned in this way also negatively affect the market. Therefore, we must face reality and gear

ourselves up for new circumstances as it is unlikely a deal will be reached in the short or even medium term that significantly impacts the country's economic and social situation. Consequently, the market and internal structures must line up with the existing conditions.

We are at the start of a challenging and obstacle-filled path, still grappling with the first major hurdle — enrichment. Even if we get past this stage, challenges like the speed and manner of lifting sanctions, which sanctions will be lifted, the US president's authority to remove them, and preventing the re-imposition of sanctions under new guises remain critical. US law requires congressional cooperation for these actions, so the president's hands are not entirely free. Therefore, even if we navigate through the "enrichment bend," the road ahead will not be straightforward.

The article first appeared in Persian on IRNA.



Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi (L) meets with his Omani counterpart, Sayyid Badr Albusaidi, during the fifth round of discussions with the US.

● OMANI FOREIGN MINISTRY

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