

US, Iran to resume talks as enrichment standoff threatens deal

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The US flag is seen hung upside down at the former US Embassy in downtown Tehran on April 19, 2025, in Tehran, Iran. — Majid Saeedi/Getty Images

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WASHINGTON — When nuclear talks get underway in Rome on Friday, US and Iranian officials will test whether progress can be made on the thorny issue of uranium enrichment.

After four previous rounds of talks, the two sides have failed to agree on a deal that would curb Iran's nuclear activity in return for the lifting of crippling US sanctions. Iran, which insists its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only, says it's prepared to scale back enrichment but won't halt it entirely.

The Iranian position is at odds with what US Special Envoy for the Middle East Steve Witkoff said was a "very, very clear red line" for Washington. He told ABC's "This Week" on Sunday that a future deal cannot "allow even 1% of an enrichment capability."

Days later, Secretary of State Marco Rubio offered a slightly different view of the Trump administration's expectations for a deal. Asked Wednesday whether the United States would maintain sanctions on Iran until it abandoned all enrichment, Rubio stopped short of saying yes.

"We believe an acceptable deal with Iran is one in which they will not enrich, because if they can enrich, they can weaponize," Rubio said.

The Trump administration faces scrutiny from its own party over the deal it's exploring with Iran. Last week, more than 200 congressional Republicans signed a letter urging President Donald Trump to hold the line and demand a total ban on uranium enrichment.

Under the 2015 nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Iran was allowed to keep enriching uranium at low levels for civilian nuclear power and research. Its enrichment level was capped at 3.67% and its uranium stockpile reduced to 300 kilograms (661 pounds).

The country's nuclear scientists are now enriching uranium at 60% — a technical step away from the weapons-grade level of 90%. A leaked International Atomic Energy Agency report in February said Iran was enriching nearly a bomb's worth of uranium each month.

Ali Shamkhani, a top adviser to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, recently told NBC News that Iran is prepared to get rid of its stockpiles of uranium that could be weaponized. But Sasan Karimi, an Iranian diplomatic adviser and adjunct professor at the University of Tehran, said the Iranian negotiating team on Friday will not compromise the Islamic Republic's ability to enrich.

"The Iranians will resist robustly about the enrichment right," Karimi told Al-Monitor, adding that yielding to American demands would cause "difficulties for the Iranian political system."

As it endured years of sanctions, the Iranian government has always maintained that Tehran is entitled to uranium enrichment as a signatory of the 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

"The morning after, everybody [in Iran] would say, 'If you could have frozen the enrichment or canceled it out, why didn't you do it 20 years ago?,'" Karimi said.

There is a potential way to thread the needle on enrichment that's been floated around in Washington. Negotiators could frame a potential agreement so that it includes language acknowledging Iran's "right to enrich" but also includes a commitment from Iran that it won't.

For now, neither party is showing any sign of softening its stance.

"We are not waiting for their permission on enrichment," a defiant Khamenei said in an address Tuesday. "The Islamic Republic has its own enrichment policy and will pursue it."

Gregory Brew, a senior Iran analyst at Eurasia Group, says a “mini deal,” as opposed to a comprehensive agreement, is the most likely outcome from the current talks, in part because the administration’s rhetoric on zero enrichment would be hard to walk back in the short term.

“Witkoff could say publicly, 'We've agreed to this deal. Iran can keep enriching.' ... And [Trump] says, 'This is the greatest deal of all time,' and everybody falls in line,” Brew said. “But Trump's flexibility notwithstanding, this is still an administration that is going to be conscious of looking like they're getting a bad deal.”

A narrower agreement might involve limited Iranian concessions on their 60% uranium enrichment and informal assurances that Tehran restrain its regional proxies — namely Yemen’s Houthis and Iraqi militias — in exchange for less aggressive US enforcement of sanctions.

A temporary deal would also kick the can down the road on so-called snapback sanctions. The European signatories of the JCPOA — France, Britain and Germany — have until Oct. 18 to restore UN Security Council sanctions that were suspended under the 2015 nuclear deal.

Tehran has threatened to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and would likely accelerate its nuclear program if sanctions are reimposed, undermining any chance of a more permanent agreement with Washington.

Joining Witkoff in Rome on Friday is Michael Anton, the State Department’s director of policy planning who leads the US technical team in the talks. Anton's participation suggests this round could be more substantive, moving beyond a general framework for a deal.

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