

A Fragile Thaw: What the Renewed Optimism In US–Iran Talks Really Means

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After years of mutual hostility, diplomatic breakdowns, and economic warfare, a glimmer of hope has emerged from the latest round of nuclear talks between the United States and Iran. The third round of discussions, facilitated by Oman and involving expert-level delegations, concluded last Saturday with signs of seriousness and substance absent from previous encounters. Yet, while both sides project cautious optimism, the path to a comprehensive agreement remains riddled with geopolitical landmines, domestic political pressures, and deeply entrenched mistrust.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi described the latest talks as “more serious,” underscoring that the delegations finally engaged in detailed technical discussions and even exchanged written proposals—an essential step in any genuine negotiation. His remarks suggested that the talks moved beyond rhetorical posturing into the domain of problem-solving. American officials, for their part, characterized the meeting as “positive and productive,” echoing a sentiment not heard since the collapse of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) under the Trump administration.

Still, the enthusiasm should be tempered. Araghchi was quick to point out that “significant differences remain”—on both the specifics of nuclear enrichment and the broader contours of any future agreement. In other words, while the sides have entered the forest, they are far from the clearing.

Negotiating Within Red Lines

The heart of the matter remains uranium enrichment. Iran is adamant about its right to enrich uranium on its own soil, a right it views as a sovereign prerogative, not a

bargaining chip. Tehran has been particularly vocal in rejecting any comparisons to the “Libyan model,” where a nuclear program was dismantled, or the “Emirati model,” which relies on imported fuel. A willingness to compromise on the *level* of enrichment is emerging, but only if paired with ironclad guarantees that the United States will not renege again, as it did under President Trump.

That demand for guarantees is not trivial. To Iran, the collapse of the JCPOA proved that American commitments can be undone with the stroke of a presidential pen. As a result, Tehran may look to international players—chiefly Russia and China—to serve as external guarantors of any future deal. A trilateral meeting between these powers has already occurred, signaling that Iran is hedging against a repeat of past betrayals.

In return, Iran appears ready to permit comprehensive inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and a technical delegation from the agency is set to arrive in Tehran in the coming days. This is a significant gesture of transparency, but again, not without expectations. Iran is seeking the full and effective lifting of sanctions and has even floated the idea of accepting US investment, including the construction of nuclear power reactors. This is more than just a technical proposal; it’s a political overture aimed at making any agreement harder to undo.

Trump’s Balancing Act

On the American side, President Trump—now in his second term—faces a delicate balancing act. In a recent interview, he struck a notably restrained tone, expressing hope that “an agreement can be reached without the need for a strike in Iran.” He also insisted that he would not be dragged into a war by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, stating flatly, “I will lead” if diplomacy fails.

That statement may be aimed as much at his domestic audience as at foreign adversaries. Trump, who remains deeply unpopular among Democrats and faces considerable scrutiny from his own Republican base, must project strength while showing a capacity for strategic engagement. For a president seeking reelection and perhaps to burnish his foreign policy legacy, a deal with Iran—if framed as an American victory—could prove politically advantageous.

Yet Trump's administration remains under the influence of hawkish officials who have long sought to curb not just Iran's nuclear ambitions, but its regional power projection and missile program. The Wall Street Journal has reported that the US is pushing to include missile restrictions in the current talks, a demand Tehran has consistently rejected. These maximalist goals could torpedo progress before it begins.

Politics at Home

The ultimate challenge for both sides may not lie in Vienna or Muscat, but back home. In the US, the Iran file is a partisan minefield. While some Democrats are supportive of diplomacy, many Republicans remain skeptical of any deal that does not include complete denuclearization and constraints on Iran's regional influence. Without bipartisan support, any agreement reached by the Trump administration could be politically fragile, vulnerable to congressional pushback or future reversals.

In Iran, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei remains the final arbiter. While he has endorsed negotiations—at least tactically—his patience for perceived Western duplicity is limited. Domestic hardliners, particularly those affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), are wary of any concessions that might weaken Iran's missile program or regional deterrence. For President Ebrahim Raisi's administration, success at the negotiating table must be balanced with maintaining legitimacy among powerful conservative constituencies.

Conclusion: A Narrow Window

The current round of diplomacy represents a critical window of opportunity—but not an open door. The willingness to talk in technical detail, the participation of atomic energy experts, and the quiet backing of major global players suggest that a deal is theoretically within reach. But history teaches us to be cautious.

This is not the first time optimism has surfaced in US–Iran relations, only to be crushed under the weight of politics, pride, and power calculations. *If the sides can anchor their ambitions to realistic goals—limited enrichment, verifiable oversight, phased sanctions relief—there may be a way forward. But if maximalist demands prevail on either side, this fragile thaw could quickly refreeze.*