



Possibilities Architects:  
Inspiring Ascending Beyond

## **Iran and the Two Pillars of Nuclear Negotiations**

Sasan Karimi

Assistant Professor, University of Tehran

Vice President for Global Affairs, PAIAB Institute

*Translated by Ghazaleh Ghafouri*

April 21, 2025

[www.paiab.org](http://www.paiab.org)

PAIAB Scholars

*The views and opinions expressed in articles published in this section are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily reflect the official positions or views of PAIAB.*

The second round of negotiations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States, held in Rome, Italy, under Omani mediation, was particularly significant. Although the circumstances leading to these talks were the product of months of careful effort and deliberation, the first round held in Muscat, Oman, was largely devoted to sounding each other out and assessing the parties' political will. Only a few messages were exchanged between the two sides, serving merely as a calm yet meaningful opening. It appeared that the partial easing of the threat from the United States, together with the psychological effects of the start of the talks, had a notable impact on the market and the domestic social climate. The second round, however, represented the initial step toward establishing a framework for the negotiations. Especially given Trump's remarks and Witkoff's tweet between the first and second rounds concerning U.S. priorities, including zero enrichment, it was essential to conclude their genuine stance rather than their media-driven messaging. Based on statements by Iranian and Omani officials, enrichment at the JCPOA level (3.67 percent) appears to have been accepted by the United States — an outcome that in itself represents an acceptable and politically significant position. However, it is still far too early to suggest that a genuine breakthrough has emerged in the talks between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States. Notwithstanding what Trump has stated against the JCPOA during both his previous and current presidential terms and his decision, based on that, to withdraw from the agreement, what has been heard thus far has been limited to the mutual return of both parties to their JCPOA commitments. At the same time, however, delving into the finer details, although bringing the parties closer, risks making the divisions more pronounced. It remains unclear what reciprocal measures will be offered in exchange for conceding Iran's technical nuclear concessions, which far exceed those in place at the time of the JCPOA. These include metallic uranium, 20-percent enrichment, 60-percent enrichment, and newly developed centrifuges—key bargaining assets that have become central to Iran's negotiation position since the United States' withdrawal from the agreement.

By contrast, there has so far been no indication that Witkoff, Trump, or other U.S. officials have spelled out what they are prepared to offer in return. Iran's nuclear negotiations rest on two principal pillars: the nuclear track, under which Iran is expected—through defined commitments and restrictions—to address

the concerns of the International Atomic Energy Agency and the other parties; and the sanctions-relief track, which constitutes the primary incentive for the Islamic Republic of Iran to enter these talks and subsequently fulfill its stated obligations. If, as has been the case so far, the focus of public statements remains on Iran's nuclear limitations and commitments, the talks will assume a disarmament character. One political consequence would be a reversal of the roles of claimant and respondent, creating the impression that the negotiations are not driven by the United States' unlawful withdrawal from the JCPOA and the obligations that followed from it, but rather by a need to address and monitor Iran's non-compliance and to secure a form of disarmament-type guarantees from Iran.

Although Iranian negotiators engage, in principle, from a position of equality and mutual respect, such U.S. posturing and narrative-shaping could, both during the negotiations and in their aftermath, lead to an erosion of Iran's position. From this perspective, those engaged in and influencing the negotiations are advised to place greater emphasis on holding the United States to its commitments and on ensuring that the outcomes of these talks deliver tangible benefits for the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Among the various priorities Iran must consider in matters related to the JCPOA, arguably the most critical is ensuring that the three European parties do not initiate the agreement's dispute-resolution mechanism, which could ultimately pave the way for the activation of the snapback provision. This is particularly significant given that the three European states are not fully aligned with the United States in the current environment. Beyond President Trump's dismissive and, at times, disparaging approach toward them in bilateral relations, their marginalization in the ongoing talks has only intensified the sense of humiliation—especially considering that they are formal parties to the JCPOA, whereas the United States unilaterally withdrew from the agreement without consulting them, yet now positions itself as the principal actor in the process. Moreover, Washington's refusal—along with Europe's inability—to serve as mediators or hosts for the negotiations has further compounded this pressure.

With respect to China and Russia as well, it is essential to maintain sustained consultation with both countries; one must not allow China and Russia to develop a sentiment similar to that of the Europeans namely, a sense of being sidelined or excluded from the process. At the same time, however, it must be acknowledged that the interests of these two actors much like those of certain regional states such as Saudi Arabia lie in ensuring that relations between Iran and the United States, and more broadly between Iran and the West, neither deteriorate into full-scale confrontation nor move toward full normalization. Accordingly, although Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia each stand to gain in various political, economic, and security domains from a measured improvement in Iran–U.S. relations, their support is likely to extend only up to a certain point; beyond that threshold, their posture may shift toward one of non-cooperation or even obstruction.

A crucial point to consider is the potentially disruptive role that Netanyahu and Israel may play in any process of de-escalation, a role that has not yet begun to manifest itself in an active or overt manner, which in itself is cause for concern. Given the political de-legitimization both Netanyahu and, more broadly, Israel have faced over the past two years, an improvement in the political standing of the Islamic Republic of Iran is arguably the last outcome that this regime would welcome or easily accommodate. From this point forward, it must be recognized that Trump will inevitably position himself as the ‘hero of the negotiation stage’ under any circumstances. In fact, these negotiations, particularly the aforementioned similarities between the current discussions and the provisions of the JCPOA, serve primarily to underscore that he is merely seeking to build and leave behind a legacy that allows him to claim he has accomplished what no previous U.S. president has managed to achieve. It is imperative to exercise due caution and avoid falling into the trap of Trump’s self-aggrandizement and narcissism, as occurred during the JCPOA process, stemming from domestic political divisions in Iran. Moreover, these reprehensible traits must not be exploited as leverage to attack each other’s political positions.