

War in the Middle East

U.S. and Iran Conclude a Round of Nuclear Talks, With More to Come

This article is by David E. Sanger, Farnaz Fassihi and Lara Jakes.

Iran and the United States wrapped up a second round of diplomatic talks over Tehran's nuclear activities on Saturday, setting an agenda for rapid-paced negotiations that, according to Iranian officials, would not require the dismantlement of the country's extensive nuclear infrastructure.

Abbas Araghchi, Iran's foreign minister, said after meeting Steve Witkoff, President Trump's envoy, that an expert group would meet in the coming days to discuss technical details, including setting the maximum levels to which Iran could enrich uranium, the size of nuclear stockpiles it could retain and how compliance with any agreement could be monitored and verified.

But implicit in that description of the future negotiations was an assumption that President Trump would be willing to back down from the administration's original insistence that all of Iran's major nuclear sites and long-range missile arsenals must be subject to what Michael Waltz, Mr. Trump's national security adviser, recently called "full dismantlement."

The question of whether to allow Iran to retain the ability to produce nuclear fuel — with the risk that it could use it to create a bomb — has sharply divided Mr. Trump's advisers. Those divisions have broken out in public in recent days, even as Mr. Witkoff, a real estate developer and friend of the president, was preparing for the talks that took place on Saturday at the residence of the Omani ambassador in Rome. Oman is acting as mediator in the talks.

Iran hawks in the administration, led by Mr. Waltz and Secretary of State Marco Rubio, have argued that it is far too risky to leave Iran with the ability to make its own nuclear fuel.

And agreeing to limits on how much uranium Iran can possess and how much enrichment it can perform exposes Mr. Trump to the critique that he is simply replicating key elements of the 2015 Obama-era nuclear agreement, which he called a "disaster" and ultimately ripped up in 2018.

Iranian officials have said that they will not disassemble or destroy the nuclear infrastructure in



Iran's military on Friday in Tehran. Iranian officials have said that they will not disassemble or destroy their nuclear infrastructure.

which they have invested billions of dollars. Mr. Witkoff has told administration officials privately that if they insist on full dismantlement, he is unlikely to emerge from the talks with a deal — the only way to avoid a military attack on Iran's facilities, Mr. Trump has said. Israel has been pressing for military action against Iran's nuclear sites, which would likely involve the United States.

Speaking after the talks ended, a senior administration official noted "very good progress in our direct and indirect discussions," meaning that the parties spoke face to face as well as through their Omani host.

In private conversations leading up to the session, the Iranians told American officials that they were willing to reduce enrichment levels to those specified in the 2015 agreement struck with the Obama administration: 3.67 percent, the level needed to produce fuel for nuclear power plants.

Since Mr. Trump pulled out of that accord, Iran has been enriching to far higher levels of around

60 percent purity, just shy of what is needed to produce a nuclear weapon. That gives Tehran two options: race to produce weapons-grade fuel, or negotiate with the United States to return to the original levels in the 2015 accord.

But that second option would expose Mr. Trump to the critique that after declaring the decade-old agreement a "disaster" and scrapping it, he is getting nothing better. "What's happening in Rome and Oman, in an irony of ironies, is the resurrection of something looking pretty close" to the agreement Mr. Obama approved, and that Mr. Trump disparaged, said Aaron David Miller of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

It may be the best Mr. Trump can get. Mr. Witkoff paved the way for such an agreement, describing in an interview on Tuesday that a possible agreement that would essentially allow Iran to produce fuel at low levels, with careful inspection and monitoring. But he was forced to backtrack. He then posted on social media that the

U.S. position was that "Iran must stop and eliminate its nuclear enrichment and weaponization program." The key word was "eliminate."

Mr. Witkoff did not speak immediately after the negotiations — the second round in two weeks — ended on Saturday afternoon in Rome. Oman said those technical negotiations would take place in Muscat, its capital, in the coming days.

When pressed last week on whether the United States could live with Iran having a limited nuclear-enrichment capability, American officials dodged the question, saying only that Mr. Trump had vowed that Iran would not be permitted to have a nuclear weapon.

Mr. Witkoff will now have to brief Mr. Trump and his administration colleagues about the latest round of talks. Officials familiar with the internal debate say that Mr. Waltz and Mr. Rubio, both of whom were harsh critics of the Obama-era deal when they served in Congress, remain opposed to

leaving Iran with any nuclear production capability.

On Friday, Mr. Rubio said that any deal must keep Iran from ever possessing a nuclear weapon. "It has to be something that not just prevents Iran from having a nuclear weapon now, but in the future as well," he told reporters on a trip to Paris.

Mr. Trump himself has been vague about the strategic objectives of the negotiations, other than to repeat that Iran must never get a bomb — a declaration that avoids the critical question of whether the United States can live with an Iran that is a "threshold state," able to produce a weapon on short notice.

Ali Vaez, the Iran director of the International Crisis Group, said that talks advancing to the technical phase showed a level of pragmatism, suggesting that the discussion of dismantling Iran's nuclear program was mostly public posturing.

Iran has raised the possibility of a joint venture to run its nuclear enrichment facilities, an option

that would allow the Trump administration to declare it has struck a different kind of deal than the Obama administration did.

It is unclear if the United States or a third country, preferably one of Iran's Arab neighbors in the Persian Gulf, would be the partner, offering an extra layer of assurance that its program is peaceful, according to Mr. Vaez and a senior Iranian official familiar with the discussions. The official declined to be named because of the sensitivity of the talks.

The concept of an Iranian nuclear program that is a joint venture with either Arab countries or the U.S., Mr. Vaez said, "creates an extra layer of eyes and ears on the ground to safeguard the peaceful nature of its nuclear program."

The senior Iranian official also said that Iran was open to transferring its stockpile of enriched uranium to Russia or another nation, much as it did in early 2016 as the Obama-era deal went into effect. Iran has since dramatically increased the size of that stockpile, and has enough 60 percent enriched material to make upward of six nuclear bombs if it chooses to weaponize the material.

(Unlike the 2015 negotiations, France, Germany, Britain, Russia and China have been frozen out of these talks.)

Mr. Araghchi told Iranian media traveling with him in Rome that the Americans had not brought up any other issue outside of the nuclear program. "We have told them our negotiations is about the nuclear issue, and we will not discuss anything else," he said.

Hamid Aboutalebi, a former diplomat and political adviser to former President Hassan Rouhani, said in an interview from Tehran that it was a positive sign that talks were moving forward, but that many challenges remained before an agreement could be reached. "The real challenge isn't the technical details; we did negotiate these details before," he said. "The issue is staying power. Without a stable political and diplomatic foundation, even the most meticulous technical agreement won't hold."

Iranian media and some conservative pundits posted a photo of miniature Iranian and U.S. flags side by side on a table, a departure from the typical burning and stomping of the American flag that has become a staple of demonstrations by government supporters.

Over 300 More Palestinian Casualties Are Reported

By ADAM RASGON

JERUSALEM — New Israeli attacks in a renewed military offensive in Gaza killed scores of Palestinians, the territory's health ministry said on Saturday.

The ministry said that 92 dead and 219 wounded people had arrived at hospitals over the previous 48 hours. Gaza health officials do not differentiate between civilians and combatants in casualty counts.

Since the collapse last month of a cease-fire between Israel and

Hamas, Israel's military has embarked on a major bombing campaign and seized territory in Gaza. Israeli officials have said the military is targeting militants and weapons infrastructure in a bid to compel Hamas to release more hostages held in the enclave.

More than 1,700 people have been killed in Gaza since the cease-fire fell apart, and more than 51,000 people have been killed since the war began in October 2023, according to the health ministry.

On Saturday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel indicated talks to free hostages and stop the war in Gaza were still at an impasse. He insisted Israeli government would not end the war until Israel destroys Hamas in Gaza, ensures the territory will no longer pose a threat to Israelis, and returns all the hostages.

"As a nation that desires life, we have no alternative other than to continue fighting for our very existence until we achieve victory," Mr. Netanyahu said.

Hamas has said it will not free all of the hostages unless Israel ends the war permanently.

Israel's renewed offensive has exacted a heavy price on civilians struggling to find places to shelter and reinforced a feeling among Palestinians in Gaza that nowhere is safe.

On Friday, the Israeli military told The New York Times that Mawasi, a narrow strip of coastal land in southern Gaza, was no longer considered a "humanitarian zone." Earlier in the war, the Israeli military repeatedly instructed Palestinians to go to Mawasi, which it had described at the time as a "humanitarian zone."

Large numbers of Palestinians are still living in the Mawasi area in tent encampments.

Since the cease-fire broke down, Avichay Adraee, an Arabic-language spokesman for the military, has instructed some Palestinians to go to shelters in Mawasi without describing the area as a "humanitarian zone."

While many Palestinians in Gaza were still under the impression that the area held a special status, it is not clear whether the Israeli military ever informed them that it was no longer designated a "humanitarian zone."

The health ministry's statement on Saturday did not clarify where the people were killed in



Mourners on Saturday at Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis, Gaza, near the bodies of Palestinians killed in an Israeli offensive.

the latest round of bombings. But the Palestinian Civil Defense, an arm of the Hamas-run Interior Ministry, said it had recovered bodies in northern and southern Gaza over the previous two days.

Securing food and water in Gaza has become an increasingly difficult task as Israel continues to block the entry of aid supplies and commercial goods and as humanitarian groups struggle to guarantee the safety of their workers.

On Tuesday, the results of a survey of 43 aid groups showed that almost all had either suspended or reduced their operations in Gaza since Israel resumed its offensive in March.

"Survival itself is now slipping

out of reach and the humanitarian system is at breaking point," the leaders of 12 humanitarian groups said in a joint statement, adding that they were demanding that "all parties" ensure the safety of aid workers and permit "unfettered access of aid into and across Gaza."

"Let us do our jobs," they said. On Thursday, UNRWA, a United Nations agency that aids Palestinians, said that the latest effort to vaccinate against polio in Gaza had been "postponed until further notice," citing both Israeli airstrikes and evacuation orders.

Hundreds of thousands of children in Gaza have received shots since 2024, according to UNRWA.



Damage at Al-Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza City last Sunday after bombing by Israeli warplanes.

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Pedro Bruno B. de Souza,

Secretary of State for Infrastructure, Mobility and Partnerships.

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