

Iran, US conclude talks in 'constructive atmosphere'

Both sides agree to reconvene next week



International Desk

Iran and the United States concluded the first round of long-awaited negotiations on Tehran's nuclear program, during which the two sides exchanged their positions "in a constructive and mutually respectful atmosphere."

Iran's Foreign Ministry's spokesman Esmail Baqaei in a post on his Telegram account said that Iran and the US agreed to continue the negotiations next week. Baqaei said that after nearly two and half hours of talks, the two countries' top negotiators had a brief direct conversation in the presence of Oman's Foreign Minister Badr bin Hamad al-Busaidi.

Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, a key

architect of the 2015 nuclear accord, led the Iranian delegation while US President Donald Trump's special envoy Steve Witkoff, a real estate magnate, headed the US team.

In an interview after the talks, Araghchi said the two sides showed their commitment to advance the talks to reach an agreement that is desirable for both parties.

"I think we came very close to a basis for negotiations", the Iranian foreign minister said.

"At our next meeting, if we can finalize that basis, we will have gone a large part of the way."

"Neither party wants fruitless negotiations and prolonged talks," Araqchi underlined.

Araghchi said that Iran has the determination necessary to reach an agreement, adding that "progress in these negotiations will not be easy and requires the will of both parties."

Oman's top diplomat, who mediated the talks, said they were held in a "friendly atmosphere" and launched a quest for a "fair and binding agreement."

The negotiations in Oman are aimed at resolving a dispute once settled nearly a decade ago under the 2015 nuclear agreement from which Washington withdrew later – a move that has created a political row between Iran and the West since then.

National interests

Before the negotiations, Baqaei said Iran has one "very clear" objective in the talks and that is to secure its national interests.

He noted that prior to the negotiations, Araghchi outlined Iran's positions during a meeting with his Omani counterpart, which were to be communicated to the American side.

"We are giving diplomacy a genuine and honest opportunity so that through these negotiations, we can advance not only the nuclear issue but more importantly for us, the issue of lifting sanctions," Baqaei said.

After the talks with his Omani counterpart, Araghchi said Iran intends to reach a fair and honorable agreement with the US.

"Our intention is to reach a fair and honorable agreement from an equal position, and if the other side also comes from the same position, then hopefully there will be a chance for an initial understanding that will lead to a path of negotiations," Araghchi said.

Ready for compromise

The American negotiator Witkoff told The Wall Street Journal earlier that "our position today" starts with demanding that Iran completely dismantles its nuclear program – a view held by hardliners around Trump that few expect Iran would ever accept.

"That doesn't mean, by the way, that at the margin we're not going to find other ways to find compromise between the two countries," Witkoff told the newspaper.

"Where our red line will be, there can't be weaponization of your nuclear capability," he added.

Ahead of the talks in Oman, Trump, who revealed the negotiations on Monday, said that, "I want Iran to be a wonderful, great, happy country, but they can't have a nuclear weapon."

Trump's threats

Trump last month sent a letter to Iran's Leader via the United Arab Emirates, saying he wanted a deal to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and to avert possible military strikes by the US and Israel.

Iran insists its nuclear activities are entirely peaceful and it will never seek to develop or acquire nuclear weapons.

Trump has warned the US would use military force if no deal was reached and Iran has repeatedly said it won't negotiate under pressure.

Iranian military officials and Armed Forces have repeatedly underlined the country's preparedness to defend the country.

Will US firms enter Iran's economic scene?

Major US companies are closely watching the events in Muscat today. For nearly five decades, the United States has been engaged in a push-and-pull battle with Iran. This has resulted in a freeze in the economic relationship between the two countries.

The last time the two sides attempted economic cooperation, former US president Bill Clinton ordered a major oil and gas contract canceled. That contract was snatched away by France's Total.

Times have changed. Unlike Clinton, Trump has no appetite to leave any economic benefit from a deal with Iran to Europe.

Thousands flee as Israel seizes Rafah in new Gaza 'security zone'

Israel announced on Saturday that its military had completed the takeover of a new corridor in southern Gaza, advancing its efforts to seize large parts of the war-battered Palestinian territory.

The military also announced a sweeping evacuation order for tens of thousands of residents of Khan Yunis and surrounding areas in southern Gaza ahead of a planned strike after projectiles were fired from there earlier in the day.

The seizure of the "Morag axis" came while Hamas expected "real progress" towards a cease-fire deal to end the war in Gaza, an official from the group told AFP, with senior leaders from the Palestinian movement scheduled to hold talks with Egyptian mediators in Cairo later on Saturday.

"The IDF (military) has now completed its takeover of the Morag axis, which crosses Gaza between Rafah and Khan Yunis, turning the entire area between

the Philadelphi Route (along the border with Egypt) and Morag into part of the Israeli security zone," minister of military affairs Israel Katz said in a statement addressed to residents of Gaza. "Soon, IDF operations will intensify and expand to other areas throughout most of Gaza, and you will need to evacuate the combat zones."

"In northern Gaza as well — in Beit Hanoun and other neighborhoods — residents are evacuating, the area is being taken over and the security zone is being expanded, including in the Netzarim corridor," he added.

Since a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas collapsed in mid-March, Israel's renewed offensive in Gaza has displaced hundreds of thousands of people while the military has seized large areas of the war-battered territory.

Top Israeli officials, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, have repeatedly said that the ongoing assault aims to pressure Hamas into

freeing the remaining 58 hostages held in Gaza. Hamas said the offensive not only "kills defenseless civilians but also makes the fate of the occupation's prisoners (hostages) uncertain."

In a separate announcement, the military ordered residents of Khan Yunis and surrounding areas to evacuate after the air force intercepted three projectiles fired from south Gaza earlier in the day.

The United Nations had warned a day before that expanding Israeli evacuation orders were resulting in the "forcible transfer" of people into ever-shrinking areas, raising "real concern as to the future viability of



Palestinians as a group in Gaza." Gaza's health ministry said on Friday that at least 1,563 Palestinians had been killed in Israeli attacks since March 18 when the cease-fire col-

lapsed, taking the overall death toll since the war began to 50,933. Dozens of these strikes have killed "only women and children," the UN human rights office said Friday.

Breakthrough deal could ...

Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi wrote in The Washington Post on Tuesday that Iran was "open to welcoming businesses from around the world" and stressed it was the US, not Iran, that "kept American enterprises away from the trillion-dollar opportunity" in its economy.

A day later, President Masoud Pezeshkian confirmed that the Leader "has no objection to foreign investment, even from American investors, provided it is not accompanied by plots, subversion, or wrong policies."

Years of sanctions have scared away foreign investors and left many sectors crying out for capital. For instance, the petroleum industry alone, which is seen as the backbone

of Iran's economy and main foreign currency cash cow, would need \$125 billion in investment, according to the oil minister, over four years in order to reach the targets stipulated in the country's Seventh Development Plan. Such a hefty sum seems out of reach domestically.

Sanctions have also pushed up production and export costs by making it harder to get hold of raw materials and essential equipment. The weakened rial has only piled on the pressure, threatening Iran's edge in global markets. Iran's disconnection from global banking has held up export revenues, with some funds wasted in attempts to get around sanctions. Any deal that clears the way for sanctions removal and opens the door to foreign capital, including those of US

companies, could breathe life back into Iran's production and exports. It could also help revamp crumbling infrastructure that has long suffered from underinvestment.

Sectors like oil and gas, petrochemicals, power generation, renewables, automotive and tourism could be lucrative for foreign investors as they are all in dire need of sizable investments to stay afloat and scale up.

To hit its 8% economic growth target over the next four years, Iran has no choice but to bring in foreign capital and modern technologies. If Iran's negotiators in Oman can stand their ground and seal a win-win deal that lifts sanctions and brings investment back, it could go down in history as a turning point where Iran's economy would start to blossom.

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