

Deal demands running into red lines, hard stances: *Former envoy*

INTERVIEW

The fifth round of indirect negotiations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States concluded in Rome, Italy's capital, on May 23, 2025. These talks once again took place under the roof of the Omani ambassador's residence, with the Omani Foreign Minister acting as mediator. The backdrop featured the US officials' insistence on halting enrichment inside Iran, the imposition of a new wave of Washington sanctions on Tehran, and Iran's warnings against potential Israeli military strikes on its nuclear facilities. These developments, both on the surface and behind the scenes, carried a weight that can still heavily influence the trajectory of talks between Tehran and Washington. Mostafa Alaei, former Iranian ambassador to Venezuela and the country's Geneva representative, shared his insights on these negotiations and the challenges facing the Iranian and American negotiating teams.



Mostafa Alaei

We witnessed the fifth round of talks between Iran and the US start with a more pessimistic atmosphere than previous rounds. What factors have thrown a wrench in the negotiation process?

ALAEI: The Iran-US talks are truly different compared to other international negotiations. The two countries have deeply rooted and complex disputes dating back 47 or 48 years. These entrenched differences make building bridges anything but straightforward. Negotiations naturally have their ups and downs. A hard stance from one side doesn't necessarily mean talks have hit a dead end. This is especially true for Iran-US talks, which tend to go through peaks and valleys and depend on various factors.

One key factor is the internal political climate in the US. There is no consensus on Iran there. So, to cater to different factions — whether moderate or hardline — figures like Witkoff or Trump may throw out tough positions that seem stringent from our perspective.

Israel's situation also throws a spanner in the works. The Gaza conflict and pressures from Israeli lobby groups on the Trump administration restrict any softening of stance. These pressures may come directly from Netanyahu or stem from the ongoing Gaza situation, forcing their hand toward a tougher line.

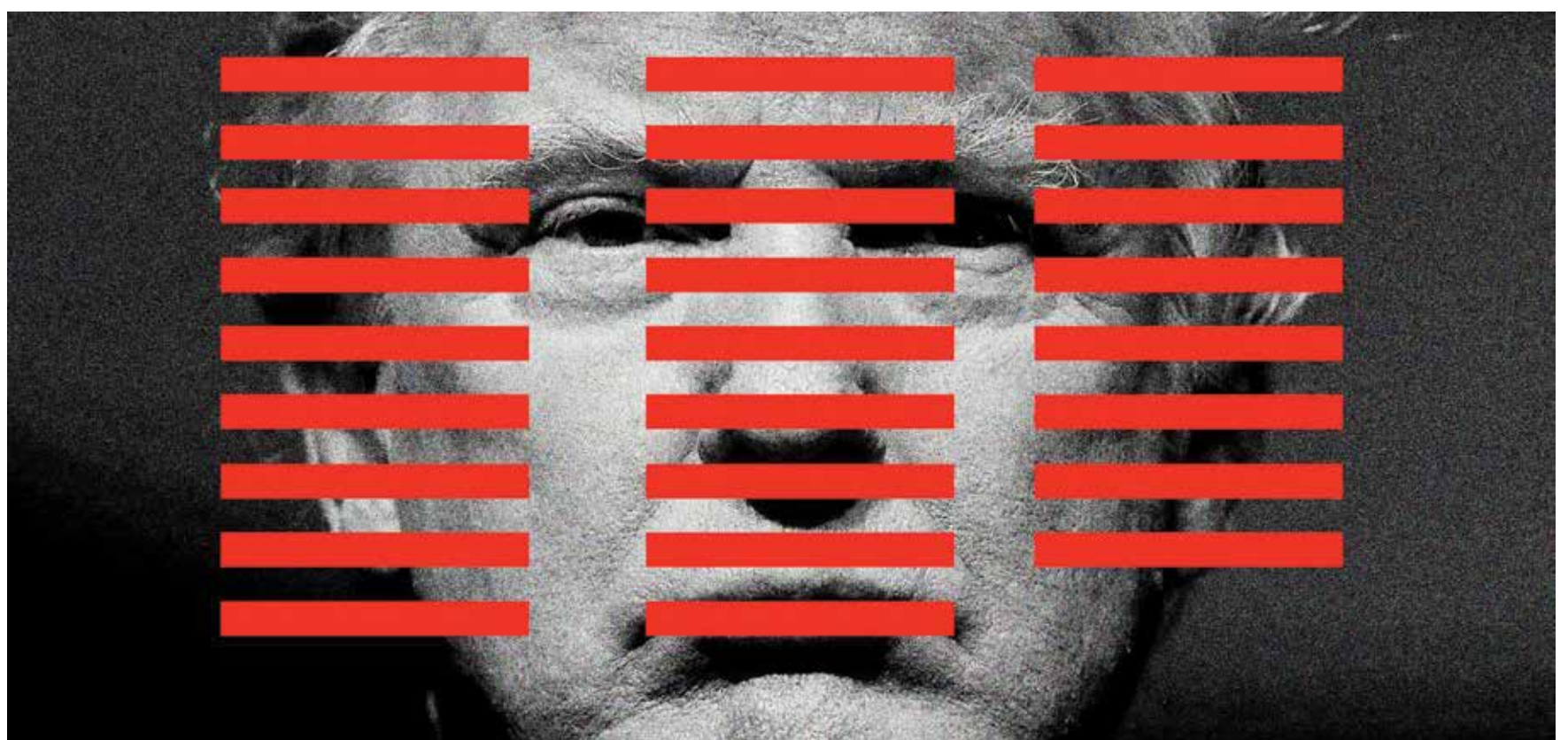
In sum, negotiations are naturally volatile, and drawing red lines doesn't always mean a final stubborn stance. Sometimes these lines are put on the table to gain leverage, not to call off the talks.

The US government insists on zero enrichment inside Iran, previously described as a maximalist position outside the negotiation room, but Witkoff's team seems to double down on this. Could this stance stall the talks?

Every country has its own playbook in negotiations. Whether bilateral or multilateral, countries usually kick off with their highest demands. The goal is to lay down a broad claim so that they can later scale back and reach an agreement.

Reaching a deal always means running into red lines and tough positions, which can be worked through if the atmosphere allows for give and take. Each side tries to strike a balance — giving something to get something in return — toward a final agreement. So, Witkoff's announcement of a red line doesn't necessarily mean the talks are at an impasse.

Both sides seem to want a deal for different reasons. The US aims to put a lid on China's growing influence in the Middle East, especially the Persian Gulf, which China is trying to muscle into. Trump



THE ATLANTIC

wants to cut off China's hand in the region by controlling the situation, which requires a deal with Iran.

Iran also wants a deal, partly due to internal pressures, to lift sanctions while preserving its principles and improving the country's economic and political situation.

Persian Gulf Arab states, while not wanting to fan the flames of Iran-US tensions, have stated during Trump's Saudi visit that enrichment should be either allowed for every country in the region or not all for Iran as well. Could a regional nuclear consortium be a middle ground, and what is Iran's view?

The consortium idea is highly technical and requires expert input. What is certain is that Iran doesn't want to buy into handing over its enrichment equipment, skills, or technology to other countries or removing them from Iranian soil.

A workable model might allow Iran to keep its equipment and expertise domestically while collaborating with others on operation, construction, or sales. This could be hammered out in talks. But if the consortium means Iran loses control over these capabilities, it's unlikely Iran will sign off on it.

Other paths exist for enrichment agreements. The demand to "zero out" enrichment needs clarification. One option might be suspension — a temporary halt, not a full stop, which Iran has done before.

Suspension could be a step if matched by sanction relief. So, "zeroing out" could mean a condi-

tional, temporary suspension implemented step by step. However, Iran's foreign minister recently shot down this option, emphasizing enrichment will continue.

Iran's team and foreign minister have expressed doubts about the US side's seriousness and willpower. Does Trump's team genuinely want a deal, or are they just playing for time to justify other options later?

It doesn't seem Trump views these talks merely as a time-buying tactic or a public relations move to prepare for other options including military action.

Given Trump's recent trip to Riyadh and meetings with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, his

active regional presence aims to put a shine on economic and commercial ties. He wants to turn the Middle East into a platform for growth, trade, and profit.

Profit, investment, and economic development don't jive with war or military conflict. So, Trump is unlikely to use the talks as a smokescreen for future military options.

Europeans appear unhappy with being sidelined in Iran nuclear talks, and their pace with Iran doesn't match Iran-US talks. Will Europe become a stumbling block, and how can they be brought on board?

Europeans are upset about being left out in the cold by Trump on

major global issues like Ukraine and Gaza. They don't want to be sidelined on sanctions and the nuclear issue, which is crucial to their security.

For Europe, Iran's nuclear file is as important as Ukraine's file, and they want a seat at the table. Though sidelined so far, they hold a key lever — the "snapback" mechanism — the expiration time for which is rapidly approaching.

Using snapback has consequences for Iran. So, Iran could turn the tables by looping in Europe as indirect partners in the talks — not direct participants, which wouldn't be wise — but by keeping them in the loop on outcomes and impacts.



Negotiations are naturally volatile, and drawing red lines doesn't always mean a final stubborn stance. Sometimes these lines are put on the table to gain leverage, not to call off the talks. Every country has its own playbook in negotiations. Whether bilateral or multilateral, countries usually kick off with their highest demands. The goal is to lay down a broad claim so that they can later scale back and reach an agreement.



US President Donald Trump (L) holds up a pen given by Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani on May 14, 2025.
ALEX BRANDON/AP