



A New US-Iran Nuclear Agreement: What are the Chances?

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What is ViTTa?

NSI's Virtual Think Tank (ViTTa) provides rapid response to critical information needs by pulsing a global network of subject matter experts (SMEs) to generate a wide range of expert insight. In support of US Central Command (J3), ViTTa was used to address four questions regarding geopolitical stability in Iran. ViTTa efforts are designed to provide highly customizable and compelling analyses, reports, and briefings that consider varied perspectives across disciplines, challenge assumptions, provide actionable insights, and highlight areas of convergence and divergence.

Question of Focus

[Q1] In the next five years, how likely is it that Iran will be willing to negotiate a new nuclear treaty with the United States?

Subject Matter Expert Contributors

Mr. Eric Brewer (Center for Strategic and International Studies), **Dr. David Edelstein** (Georgetown University), **Prof. Anoush Ehteshami** (Durham University), **Mr. Ilan Goldenberg** (Center for New American Security), **Dr. Daniel Markey** (Johns Hopkins University, SAIS), **Mr. Richard Nephew** (Columbia University), **Dr. Robert Spalding**, BGen, USAF (Ret'd) (Hudson Institute), **Dr. Ariane Tabatabai** (German Marshall Fund of the United States), **Mr. Behnam Ben Taleblu** (Foundation for Defense of Democracies), **anonymous expert**

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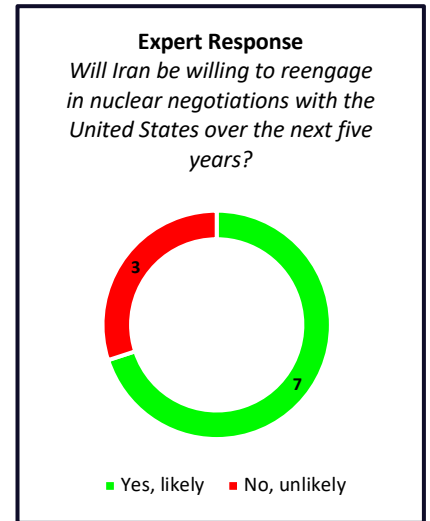
Bottom Line Up Front

Most of the expert contributors agree that, though not a certainty, it appears likely that Iran will be willing to reengage in some form of nuclear negotiations with the United States at some point over the next five years. The likelihood of a new nuclear agreement being reached between the two sides, however, is less certain. It is unclear as to whether Iran will be willing to negotiate an entirely new nuclear agreement with the United States, especially absent some form of United States recommitment to elements of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement as an initial starting point. Moreover, for such an agreement to be reached, the United States will also need to be willing to reengage in negotiations. It is similarly unclear as to whether that will be the case. The United States' self-described maximum pressure campaign against Iran has created notable burdens and constraints that are likely to drive Iran's willingness to reengage in negotiations, but maximum pressure in itself is not a means to an end. If the end goal is a new nuclear agreement with Iran, then the United States will need to demonstrate a willingness to sincerely reengage in negotiations as well.

Will Iran Be Willing to Reengage in Nuclear Negotiations With the United States?

The expert contributors are divided in their assessments of whether Iran is likely to be willing to negotiate a new nuclear agreement with the United States over the next five years. While there is general agreement that Iran is likely to be willing to reengage with the United States in some form over this time, there is less agreement as to whether Iran will be willing to negotiate a new nuclear agreement altogether. Moreover, even if Iran is willing to sincerely reengage in nuclear negotiations, it is unclear as to whether the United States will share the same willingness.

The expert contributors offer three general schools of thought as to whether Iran is likely to be willing to negotiate a new nuclear agreement with the United States over the next five years. First, some contributors believe that Iran is likely to be willing to reengage with the United States on nuclear negotiations toward some form of new or amended nuclear agreement over the next five years, and that Iran will probably be willing to do so sooner rather than later (Goldenberg, Nephew, Tabatabai, Taleblu). These contributors generally agree that, if current conditions persist, it is really a question of “when” not “if” Iran will be willing to reengage in nuclear-focused negotiations with the United States.¹ Second, other contributors believe that Iran is likely to be willing to reengage with the United States on nuclear negotiations over the next five years but unlikely to be willing to conclude a new nuclear agreement altogether, especially one that does not use the JCPOA as its starting point or is more restrictive or requires significant Iranian concessions (Brewer, Ehteshami, Markey). These contributors generally agree that Iran will likely be willing to reengage in nuclear discussions or negotiations about returning to or building upon the JCPOA, but unlikely to accept being pushed or pressured toward accepting a new agreement or any significant concessions, especially absent the United States returning to the JCPOA as a starting point. Third, a final group of contributors believe that Iran is unlikely to be willing to reengage with the United States on nuclear negotiations or toward a new nuclear agreement over the next five years (Edelstein, Spalding). These contributors generally agree that Iran is likely going to be more willing to avoid compromising with the United States on nuclear concerns than it is going to be willing to compromise.



Why Might Iran Be Willing to Reengage in Nuclear Negotiations With the United States?

The expert contributors align on several driving factors behind why Iran might be willing to reengage in nuclear negotiations with the United States over the next five years, namely 1) a need for relief from international economic constraints, 2) a desire to normalize relations on the international stage, 3) a perception that its negotiating partner is sincere and willing to negotiate, 4) a renewed United States commitment to the JCPOA, and 5) an opportunity to save face on the international stage.

¹ Though, several contributors believe that Iran will likely hold off on reengaging in nuclear negotiations with the United States until after the United States elections in November 2020. These contributors largely agree, however, that regardless of the results of that election, Iran is likely to be willing to reengage in some form of nuclear negotiations with the United States over the next five years.

Relief From International Economic Constraints

The most frequently cited reason as to why Iran might be willing to reengage in nuclear negotiations with the United States is an interest in relieving some of the economic burden it has faced as a result of international economic sanctions (Brewer, Ehteshami, Goldenberg, Markey, Nephew, Tabatabai). International sanctions and restrictions have taken a serious toll on the Iranian economy and, more broadly, have created real problems for the Iranian regime, both internationally and domestically (Brewer, Ehteshami, Nephew, Goldenberg, Markey, Tabatabai, Taleblu). So much so that several expert contributors see an interest in easing these constraints and reducing the economic burden as likely being the most significant driving force behind any eventual Iranian willingness to reengage in negotiations with the United States (Brewer, Goldenberg, Markey, Nephew, Taleblu). Attaining some form of sanctions relief and breathing space from current international economic constraints would likely be a central focus for Iran at the onset of any new negotiations with the United States (Brewer, Goldenberg, Markey, Nephew). In fact, Iran may even seek such relief as a precondition for its reengagement in those new negotiations (Brewer, Markey).

Normalization of Relations on the International Stage

Iran has grown increasingly isolated on the international stage. International sanctions and constraints have hindered Iran's economic and political connectivity and relations with the outside world and has made doing business far more difficult for the Iranian regime. The escalation of tensions with the United States stemming from its maximum pressure campaign has increased this isolation and the associated hardship for Iranians. Reengaging in nuclear negotiations with the United States may present Iran with an opportunity to ease some of this pressure, reduce its international isolation, and open new opportunities to formally reconnect with the outside world (Brewer, Goldenberg, Nephew, Tabatabai).

A Negotiating Partner That is Perceived as Sincere and Willing to Negotiate

US-Iran relations have deteriorated since the United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA and implementation of its maximum pressure campaign against Iran. Recent tensions have further eroded this relationship. These actions, from the Iranian perspective, have raised deep skepticism as to whether the United States is willing to negotiate in good faith (Brewer, Ehteshami, Goldenberg, Markey, Nephew). This skepticism has been compounded by some of the demands that have been made by the United States in recent years. The "twelve demands" that United States Secretary of State Pompeo presented in a May 2018 speech about the United States' strategy for Iran, for example, were largely viewed by Iran as extending far beyond what it would be prepared to negotiate and, essentially, as a call for complete Iranian capitulation and a fundamental transformation of the Iranian regime (Brewer, Goldenberg, Nephew, Tabatabai). Ultimately, taken together, the United States' complete withdrawal from its existing nuclear agreement with Iran, escalation of tensions on the ground with Iran, and demands for complete and fundamental capitulation from Iran, do not paint a picture of a willing negotiating partner in the eyes of Iran, and likely explain why diplomatic relations between the two sides have continued to flounder.

With presidential elections upcoming in the United States in November 2020, and the possibility of a new administration that may be more willing to consider easing some of the pressure on Iran, a window of opportunity for improved US-Iran relations and/or reengagement on nuclear negotiations may be opened in the eyes of the Iranians (Brewer, Ehteshami, Goldenberg, Markey, Tabatabai). Either way, several contributors

contend that even with a second term of the current United States administration, Iran is likely to eventually be willing to reengage in some form of negotiations with the United States over the next five years (Goldenberg, Nephew, Tabatabai, Taleblu). However, given the current state of US-Iran relations and the current United States administration's hardline approach to Iranian relations, Iran may be more willing to more expediently reengage in nuclear negotiations with a new United States administration, as it will likely be perceived by the Iranians as more willing to negotiate in good faith (Brewer, Ehteshami, Goldenberg, Markey, Nephew, Tabatabai).

Renewed United States Commitment to the JCPOA

Since the United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA, diplomatic relations between the United States and Iran have eroded and tensions have escalated. If the United States is interested in sincerely reengaging with Iran on nuclear negotiations, providing some level of recommitment to the JCPOA could be the easiest step for the United States to take that would also be acceptable to Iran for getting both sides to return to the negotiating table (Brewer). Such United States recommitment could serve as a stepping-stone for new negotiations focused on potentially building on the JCPOA or toward a new nuclear agreement (Brewer, Nephew).

Face-Saving Opportunity

Attaining some form of face-saving opportunity in return for a commitment to reengage in nuclear negotiations with the United States may more expediently drive Iran's willingness to return to the negotiating table (Brewer, Tabatabai). Such a face-saving measure could entail an easing of the economic pressures on Iran or providing Iran with some form of economic or political opportunity that it can present publicly, or even something as modest as a toning down of the rhetoric coming from United States leaders toward Iran, as the Iranian regime may be driven by an interest to demonstrate some form of progress or hope to its people (Brewer, Tabatabai).

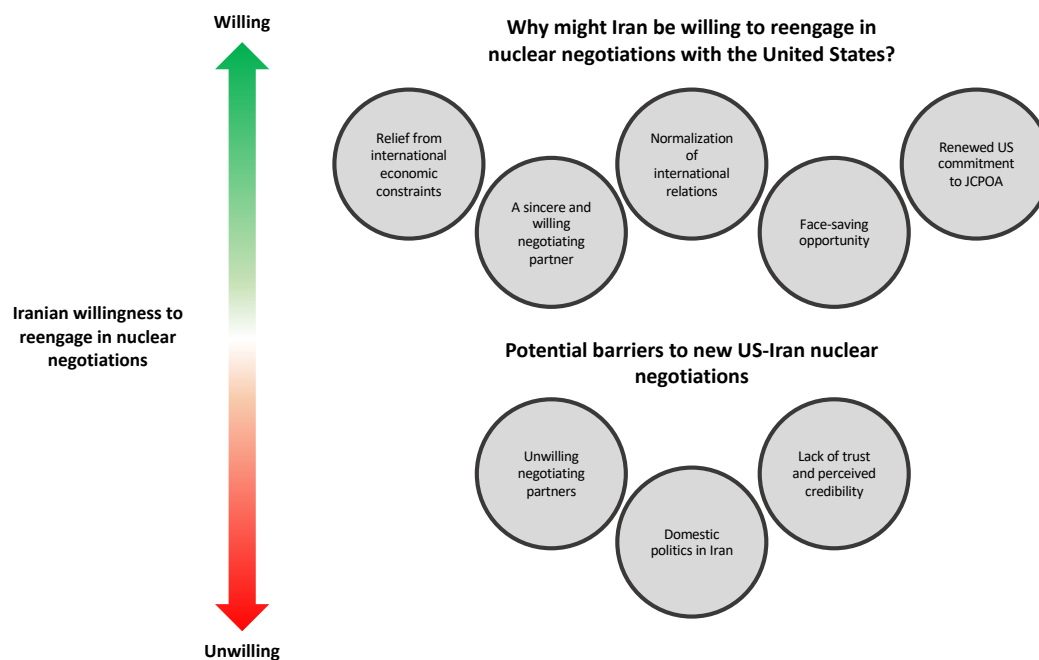


Figure 1: Potential drivers of Iranian willingness/unwillingness to reengage in nuclear negotiations with the United States

Potential Barriers to New US-Iran Nuclear Negotiations

The expert contributors also align on several potential barriers to renewed US-Iran negotiations over the next five year, namely 1) a perception that the negotiating partners are unwilling to negotiate, 2) a lack of trust and perceived credibility, and 3) domestic politics in Iran.

Unwilling Negotiating Partners

As discussed above, a United States that is perceived as willing to negotiate in good faith could go a long way in driving Iran's willingness to reengage in nuclear negotiations (Ehteshami, Goldenberg, Markey, Nephew). On the other hand, Iranian perceptions that the United States will not be willing to negotiate in good faith, or will accept only complete capitulation from Iran, will pose nearly insurmountable barriers to Iran's engagement in nuclear talks. Even if Iran was willing to reengage, the United States would need to share a similar willingness in order for talks to move forward. It is unclear whether that is currently, or would be, the case.

There is also the possibility that Iran is simply unwilling to negotiate any form of new compromise or concession other than a United States return to the JCPOA (Brewer, anonymous expert). Iran may be more concerned with avoiding the risks associated with any form of negotiations that would require compromise on nuclear concerns than the possible gains those compromises might produce (Brewer, anonymous expert). This may be the result of a strategic calculation by Iran that it can maintain some level of progress on its core strategic programs without having to make new concessions, since it is essentially already making such progress in the face of the United States' current maximum pressure efforts (anonymous expert).

Lack of Trust and Perceived Credibility

There is a fundamental lack of trust between the United States and Iran (Goldenberg, Nephew, Taleblu). The United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA, despite international recognition of an Iranian commitment to the terms of the agreement, combined with the United States' maximum pressure campaign toward Iran, has eroded the United States' credibility in the eyes of the Iranians (Brewer, Ehteshami, Goldenberg, Markey, Nephew). To Iran, the United States is viewed as increasingly untrustworthy as a result of inconsistent and unpredictable foreign policy statements and activities (Brewer, Ehteshami, Nephew, Markey). All of this has created a current state of US-Iran relations that is engulfed in distrust, contempt, and insincerity, and one that is ultimately not conducive to new, reengaged negotiations.

Domestic Politics in Iran

With presidential elections upcoming in Iran in June 2021, and a more hardline president expected to replace President Rouhani, diplomatic relations with Iran may become more challenging for the United States (Brewer, Ehteshami, Goldenberg, Markey, Taleblu). The current Iranian regime may perceive a narrow window of opportunity to reengage and salvage some form of nuclear agreement with the United States in the seven months between the (scheduled) United States and Iranian presidential elections. This may be particularly the case if a new United States administration were to replace the current one (Brewer, Goldenberg, Tabatabai). A more hardline president in Iran is likely to be less willing to reengage in nuclear discussions and less interested in negotiating altogether, especially if some form of Iranian compromise or concession is to be expected (Ehteshami, Taleblu). Such an Iran will also almost certainly be less accepting of being pressured into any new nuclear agreement with the United States (Brewer, Ehteshami, Taleblu).
