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## Negotiations with Iran: What Has Changed?

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On May 23, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (P5+1) will enter into talks with the Iranian leadership about the latter's nuclear program. The Baghdad talks come after talks last month in Istanbul. A number of observers have raised expectations for the talks in Baghdad. The latest hopeful development is IAEA chief Yukiya Amano's declaration, on the heels of his visit to Tehran, that he expects a structured agreement for inspections to be signed "quite soon." Any progress toward a diplomatic solution would be preferable to backsliding or a collapse. Unfortunately, the talks are unlikely to live up to the high expectations.

Beyond Amano's visit to Tehran, the big change since last month's talks is French president Nicolas Sarkozy's loss to the socialist François Hollande, who appears less truculent on Iran than was Sarkozy. Previously, Sarkozy was [the hardest-driving member of the P5+1](#), so Hollande's victory is likely to bring the P5+1 into closer harmony. More broadly, the considerable anxiety over the prospect of an outright collapse of the euro is likely to diminish European interest in focusing too much attention overseas.

Despite these changes, however, one wonders how the underlying calculus of negotiations has changed. The United States is still [threatening to bomb Iran](#) in order to prevent it from developing a nuclear deterrent. Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu continues [to define "success"](#) in a way such that it cannot realistically be achieved and to warn that anything less than total Iranian capitulation is failure. Like-minded U.S. legislators, such as [Senator Lindsey Graham](#) (R-SC), agree that the only acceptable Iranian move is immediate surrender. And high-ranking Iranian military officials are declaring that Iran is ["standing for its cause that is the full annihilation of Israel."](#)

Given these two sets of developments, the question remains: Have sanctions by the United States and its partners caused enough pain and fear of instability in Iran that its leadership will forego a nuclear program that it likely feels is vital for its legitimacy and security? Most skeptics, this writer included, would like to be proved wrong, but they still appear to have the better of the argument.

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What's changed -- and this is being ignored -- is that the US seems to have finally accepted that Iran has a right to enrich uranium. Until now the US has consistently insisted that Iran should be deprived of this right, and dismissed Iran's many compromise proposals that still envisioned Iran maintaining even a small, symbolic enrichment program as a non-starter. And naturally the Iranians weren't going to accept this deprivation of their legal rights. But why is it that the pundits want to ignore this point about the US dropping this precondition? Is it because it indicates a defeat for the US? Whatever the final shapes of a deal between the US and Iran, the fact is that a similar if not better deal could have been worked out years ago had the US dropped that precondition. It remains to be seen, of course, if a deal will be worked out, or whether the US will once again pull the rug out from under the deal at the last minute as it did with the Turkish/Brazilian brokered deal on swapping Iran's uranium for reactor fuel.

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