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SPOTLIGHT

U.S. Begins Nuclear Negotiations with Iran

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On 12 April, the first meeting between the new U.S. administration's special representative and the foreign minister of Iran took place. The talks in the Omani capital are preliminary to the start of formal negotiations and follow a U.S. ultimatum to Iran on nuclear and regional issues.

What were the circumstances and results of the meeting in Muscat?

The talks between Steve Witkoff, the U.S. special representative for the Middle East, and Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi were the first official meeting between the sides in this round of talks. Before Donald Trump was sworn in for his second term as president, the businessman Elon Musk, a special advisor to Trump, was reportedly in contact with Iran's mission to the UN. In February, the U.S. president announced the resumption of the "maximum pressure" policy on Iran, and in March he issued an ultimatum to its authorities concerning regional issues and Iran's nuclear programme. The meeting in Muscat lasted for more than two hours and used a go-between—the two delegations exchanged notes with their expectations and proposals through the Omani foreign minister. Only after the exchanges were finished did Witkoff meet with Araghchi for a few minutes. However, their public comments emphasised the "constructive atmosphere" of the entire meeting, which suggests a common interest in continuing the negotiations and finding diplomatic solutions. The next meeting is scheduled for 19 April, which media reports state will take place in Rome. Witkoff's team included his deputy, Morgan Ortagus, but there was no information about State or Energy department officials present who have experience of direct contacts with Iran. That suggests that Iran was better prepared for the talks, as Araghchi, a long-time deputy foreign minister, oversaw the implementation and suspension of the 2015 nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

What are the goals and assumptions of the U.S. "maximum pressure" policy?

Trump's return to "maximum pressure" on Iran is not a simple continuation of the policy from his first term when he [unilaterally terminated the JCPOA in 2018](#). Iran, then freed from the deal's limits, began to incrementally increase its stockpiles of both low and highly enriched uranium, so resolving this issue now is a high priority for the U.S. Among other things, Trump's ultimatum gives Iran two months to hold talks on nuclear issues and demands the "full dismantling" of its uranium enrichment plants and access to U.S. inspectors at all nuclear facilities in Iran. Moreover, Trump demands limits on the scale of Iran's missile programme and an end to Iranian support for Hamas, Hezbollah, and other Shia militias in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. These demands were underscored by additional U.S. sanctions on Iran's oil exports (80-90% of which goes to China), intensified U.S. air and missile strikes in Yemen, and the reinforcement of American forces in the Middle East. Nevertheless, the U.S. cannot this time count on active support from Arab states, which are now more interested in détente with Iran and encouraged to do so by China. Despite Trump's apparently frequent consultations with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, it is not clear to what extent the U.S. will take into account its partner in the Iran negotiations. Despite his rhetoric and the fact that the U.S. is taking advantage of Iran's difficult regional situation, Trump, like his predecessors, might be concerned about the potential for and may not support independent Israeli airstrikes on Iranian nuclear centres. Success of the U.S.-Iran negotiations could present Israel with a kind of *fait accompli*.

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and force it to choose between accepting a new nuclear deal (which may be even less precise than the JCPOA) or deciding on a risky unilateral military operation (which would certainly be less effective than a campaign carried out by the U.S.).

What might be Iran's strategic calculations?

Iran is forced to talk to the U.S. now because it did not avail itself of the opportunities provided by the previous administration. The Iranian authorities are also facing [still unresolved economic problems and social discontent](#). Iran's President [Masoud Pezeshkian](#) would like to avoid further U.S. sanctions, which, due to the slowdown in China's economy and the sharp decline in global oil prices, will be more severe than before. After the weakening of the pro-Iranian "axis of resistance" resulting from Israel's operations against [Hamas and Hezbollah](#) and the [fall of the regime in Syria](#), Iran wants to avoid open conflict with the U.S. Because of these economic and regional factors, and despite initially denying it, the Supreme Leader of Iran Ali Khamenei agreed to the government's talks with the U.S. Although supporters of Iran's nuclear arsenal have been more vocal in recent months about renewing it, according to U.S. intelligence estimates this still has not translated into resuming active work on nuclear warheads. At the same time, Iran already has both the capabilities to build and test its first nuclear device (it has the design for one, while assembly requires about a week) and a stockpile of over six tonnes of uranium in different forms and levels of enrichment (the equivalent of an arsenal of 16-17 warheads). Iran also has experts who can negotiate a return to the JCPOA, modify or supplement its provisions, or draft an entirely new nuclear agreement. Strategically, and likely the [best solution for Iran's interests, would be for it to maintain the status of a "nuclear threshold" state](#). Nevertheless, the more likely solution for the time being for Iran may be to quickly conclude some

framework agreement with the U.S. ([as in 2013](#) and before negotiating the full text of the JCPOA), which would prevent or delay any Trump administration military action. However, it is still unclear whether Iran might be equally flexible regarding limitations on its longer-range missile arsenal and support for its regional allies.

What roles can or will the EU, Russia, and China play in the negotiations?

If the U.S. administration is thinking about a nuclear deal with Iran, Witkoff's new mission will require the involvement of partners outside the Middle East. The Trump administration so far has not sought European support, even though France, Germany, and the UK in fact initiated the nuclear talks with Iran in 2003. Preventing regional proliferation is of common interest to both Europe and the U.S., but European leaders are traditionally reluctant to support military actions without a mandate from the UN Security Council. For some of them, active support for increased pressure on Iran may be tempered by the tensions in transatlantic relations provoked by Trump. However, EU support for the U.S. will be crucial in the context of a JCPOA mechanism and the reinstatement of EU and UN sanctions (so-called "snapback" restrictions), which formally expire in autumn of this year. Because Witkoff is also responsible for the most important contacts with Russia, this may favour its inclusion in the talks with Iran (as Trump suggested). Russia and China have so far declared a preference for maintaining the main provisions of the JCPOA, and in recent weeks expressed categorical opposition to any military threats or plans against Iran. It is very likely that Russia will use its influence on Iran as leverage to gain U.S. concessions in other areas and regions, including possibly limiting U.S. troops and/or missile defence systems in Europe (as was the case during the talks on the bilateral "reset" in 2009).