

Inside the zigzag bargaining that produced an Iran framework

di David Ignatius

Listening to U.S. and Arab negotiators recount inside details of their long, zigzag bargaining with Iran over the past five months, I have the sense [that the framework announced Sunday](#) isn't the end of this story but an intermediate step — one that could ultimately prove a dismal failure or, the Trump administration hopes, the start of an extraordinary transformation toward a modern Iran.

Let's be frank: In diplomatic terms, this agreement is an exit ramp from a costly and unpopular war, not a victory parade. The deal falls far short of President Donald Trump's early talk of regime change and unconditional surrender. Even one of Trump's close advisers concedes: "It's inconclusive right now, in the sense that you can't say it was a huge success, and you can't say it was a failure."

There are more question marks than answers: The details of limiting Tehran's nuclear program haven't been negotiated yet. The Strait of Hormuz is reopening, but perhaps only temporarily. The agreement seems to apply to Lebanon, but that doesn't mean Israel or Hezbollah will abide by it. And most worrying of all, a hard-line regime remains in power in Tehran, able to threaten its Arab neighbors and Israel.

The principal U.S. negotiators have been Trump's special emissaries, Jared Kushner and Steve Witkoff, the president's son-in-law and close friend, respectively. They aren't diplomats but investors. That has given this negotiation a peculiar risk-reward character. It's an investor pitch rather than a diplomat's brief. The theme is a "pay to play," rather than "check the boxes."

When Kushner met [in April in Islamabad](#) with Iranian Parliamentary Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, he told him bluntly: "Look, if you want your Rolls-Royce price, we need the Rolls-Royce product," according to an official close to the negotiations. In other words, if Iran delivers by keeping the Strait of Hormuz open,

stopping enrichment of uranium for 20 years and halting its export of revolution, it stands to gain hundreds of billions of dollars.

The American proposal, in effect, is to recapitalize Iran through a \$300 billion plan for private investment in the country's modernization. Kushner told the Iranians, for example, that their state oil and gas company is potentially larger than Saudi Aramco, but only if Iran stops its revolutionary activities, the official said. Without stability and rule of law, Iran will remain feeble; with those changes, it could experience a postwar boom.

Here's where some proper skepticism should kick in. Iran's leaders are the hardest of the hard-liners. They have survived Israeli bombs and assassination attempts. Many are religious devotees who despise the West and its values. They're closer in temperament to North Korea's Kim Jong Un than émigré Iranian business tycoons like Uber CEO Dara Khosrowshahi. They're interested in revenge, not a leveraged buyout. But Kushner and Witkoff have worked through an extraordinary mediator, Ali Al Thawadi, minister of strategic affairs in the office of Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, the widely respected prime minister of Qatar. Al Thawadi has brought a rare understanding of the Middle East and its culture. He has traveled to Tehran, by one count, four times in the past 10 days to nail down the peace framework. Al Thawadi, though almost unknown to the general public, was a key emissary in the Gaza peace talks, on Venezuela, and a half-dozen other projects of the Trump White House. He also worked on mediation efforts with the Biden administration.

"The main message we need to keep in mind is that we have a country that has been isolated from the world for the past 47 years, and individuals that literally don't have any communication outside of their circle," a source close to the mediation team explained. "We need to show them that there is a much bigger world, and they could be accepted in it."

Americans imagine that Iran is a theocratic dictatorship where the supreme leader's decisions are decisive. But people from the region know Iran as an institutional country with layers of bureaucracy that move agonizingly slowly. Even the ruling Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is multilayered, with competing factions and

personalities. Knowing the culture, emissaries from Qatar, and also Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have been able to maneuver.

Americans like Trump want quick results, but Al Thawadi has been able to slow the process. Explains a source close to the mediation team: “Patience is part of the Persian DNA. You have to be patient with them because that’s their secret weapon. They’re able to corner you because of frustration and then drain you and get the most out of it.” Al Thawadi’s final negotiating session on Sunday in Tehran lasted 17 hours. For Kushner and Witkoff, this negotiation began many months ago. They came close to a deal in a Feb. 26 meeting with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi. Iran offered a framework deal but it was as if “there were eight holes in the net, and they offered to patch five of them,” recalls the official close to the negotiations.

The American side warned that the negotiations might be “timed out.” Two days later Israel launched the war, and the U.S. joined. When the war began, Iran was ramping up missile production, building as many as 100 missiles a month and “moving rapidly to reconstitute” what had been destroyed in the June 2025 “Midnight Hammer” campaign, the official said.

The war drove members of the regime closer together. But after the ceasefire agreement in Islamabad, splits began to emerge between Iranian leaders who wanted to negotiate a final deal and those who wanted to stay on the revolutionary path.

Ghalibaf impressed the American side over the 21-hour negotiation in Islamabad by showing that he was a reasonable counterpart. But he was assailed by militants when he returned to Tehran and sidelined for a time. The leadership scramble after Islamabad was a “jump ball,” according to the official close to the negotiations.

The official explains: “We kind of created this dynamic where they have internal tension.” Ghalibaf and his allies appear to be controlling the ball now — he’ll go to Geneva to sign the framework agreement Friday — but the jostling within the regime is likely to continue.

On the crucial question of the Strait of Hormuz, the U.S. official recalls a comment he said was made by Ali Larijani, the head of Iran’s national security council until he was killed by Israeli bombs early in the war. “He said closing the strait was a card they

could only play once,” because of how the West would respond. That assessment was right, the official said. Postwar changes will allow better defense of the strait and alternative routes for exporting oil through pipelines on land, rather than tankers at sea.

One little-noted boost in recent weeks, the U.S. official said, was a quiet continuation of the tanker-escort plan known as “Project Freedom,” which was officially shelved in May after Saudi objections. He said a limited version had continued allowing export of 7 million barrels of oil a day through the Gulf.

U.S. negotiators are hopeful that Iran will seize the opportunity to invest in its economy and modernize the nation after a peace deal, but recognize that it’s a gamble, according to the source close to the talks. “Whether they’re able to manage their politics and actually do it, I think time will tell, but we’ll find out in the next couple months. ... We’re aiming for the most transformational option possible,” the official said.

If you’ve watched as many Middle East moon shots fail as I have covering the region, you have to question whether this big idea of transformation will succeed. But bending the arc of Iran away from revolution and toward a responsible modern state is the overriding challenge — and given the failure of regime change, I frankly don’t see a better route than what the Trump team is proposing.

Asked to summarize his takeaways as a negotiator, this official at the center of the Iran talks expressed a view that would probably be shared by every observer, whatever they think of Trump and his peace plan: “My biggest lesson ... is it’s very easy to start a war and it’s really hard to get out.”