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# Critical Threshold in the Iran Crisis

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As we move closer to the Baghdad meeting between Iran and the world powers, scheduled for May 23, it is vitally important for both sides to maintain the positive environment generated at the Istanbul round in early April.

This means building on the achievements of the Istanbul meeting, which established trust between the two sides — the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany on one, Iran on the other — and set the stage for the Baghdad talks whose goal will be to reach “concrete” results, to quote Catherine Ashton, the European Union’s foreign policy chief.

Since the April talks, Ashton’s deputies have been communicating with Iran’s negotiating team on the agenda of the Baghdad meeting and on areas of potential accord. Both sides agreed in Istanbul to adopt the standards of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty as the framework for negotiations. This was regarded as a victory for Iran since a nuclear fuel cycle is allowed by the treaty.

Meanwhile, ahead of the Baghdad talks, another crucial meeting between Iran and top officials of the International Atomic Energy Agency to resolve certain “outstanding questions” regarding Iran’s nuclear program has been scheduled. This can be instrumental in bringing the multilateral negotiations in Baghdad to a positive conclusion.

If the I.A.E.A. and Iran can agree, agency inspectors will have access to certain military installations in Iran, such as Parchin, which is mentioned in I.A.E.A. reports as the possible site of experiments related to nuclear weapons. Iran denies any such work and notes that the I.A.E.A. visited the site twice and found nothing suspicious.

Unfortunately, the newly built trust between Iran and the 5+1 powers is in danger of collapse because of the unreasonable insistence by hawkish politicians and pundits in the West who echo Tel Aviv’s demands that Iran halt all enrichment activities and shut down the underground Fordo facility, even though the I.A.E.A. inspects it regularly.

If the West is serious about putting the Iranian nuclear genie back in the bottle, then it must stop appeasing the hawkish politicians who seek to deny Iran its inalienable nuclear rights. If not, a golden opportunity to sharply lower tensions with Iran will be lost.

Assuming that Tehran agrees at the Baghdad talks to the demands on nuclear transparency, it is

unclear whether the U.S. Congress, which has the sole authority to roll back U.S. sanctions and which is led by hawkish voices opposed to Iran, would go along with any deal. This represents a major stumbling block, since Iranian negotiators need to produce a tangible trade-off between any concessions and a recognition of Iran's right to legitimate enrichment plus a gradual lifting of sanctions.

Without the firm guarantee of such a trade-off, it is difficult to foresee a meaningful breakthrough in Baghdad. That said, Tehran may be open to taking a patient approach on sanctions so long as oil and the central bank are off the list and Iran's right to nuclear enrichment for peaceful purposes is respected.

We are now at a critical threshold in the Iran nuclear crisis. Only prudent diplomacy by both sides — not illegal threats of military action or sabotage — can produce positive results.

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