



# Weighing risks and benefits of making a deal with Iran

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As part of a collaboration between The Atlantic and the PBS NewsHour, Judy Woodruff examines the challenges and opportunities of reaching a nuclear deal with Iran.

## TRANSCRIPT

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** Now back to our second look at rethinking Iran.

Just today, the Senate Banking Committee voted to advance a bill which would toughen sanctions against Iran if negotiators fail to achieve agreement on its nuclear program by the end of June.

Tonight, we focus on the challenges and the opportunities of reaching a deal with the longtime enemy of the United States.

It's part of our partnership with The Atlantic magazine.

Whether you were watching the president's State of the Union address last week in Washington or Tehran, his warning to the U.S. Congress against imposing new sanctions on Iran has been loud and clear.

**PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA:** But new sanctions passed by this Congress at this moment in time will all but guarantee that diplomacy fails.

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** Nonetheless, Mr. Obama faces varying degrees of resistance from congressional Republicans and even some Democrats.

House Leader John Boehner issued an unprecedented and controversial invitation to the Israeli prime minister to address Congress on why new sanctions are crucial.

Hossein Mousavian, former spokesperson for Iran's nuclear negotiation team, says Iranian politics are equally divided.

**HOSSEIN MOUSAVIAN, Former Spokesperson, Iranian Nuclear Negotiation Team:** The Iranian domestic situation is very much like the U.S. domestic situation, believe it or not. This is mirror image.

**RICHARD HAASS, President, Council on Foreign Relations:** They have real domestic politics. This is not a dictatorship. This is not a monolithic political entity. This fusion of political and religious authority, it's like nothing else we have seen. So negotiating with them is very difficult.

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** Journalist and Iran specialist Robin Wright has visited the country many times in the last two decades.

**ROBIN WRIGHT, United States Institute of Peace:** Iran has two parallel governments. You have both an elected president, but you also have a supreme leader who is a cleric and who has the ability to veto virtually anything.

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** A majority of the Iranian Parliament voted to support current nuclear negotiations. Still, a split at the top of Iran's leadership often pits hard-liners against those more moderate.

Author and geopolitical strategist Robert Kaplan believes it's a pivotal moment in Iranian politics.

**ROBERT KAPLAN, The Atlantic:** Does the country want to be a normal country and engage in — you know, engage with the world and trade with the world and do away with “Death to America”? Or does the country want to be a pariah for years to come?

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** Israel's ambassador to the U.S., Ron Dermer, insists there is no doubt about which holds sway.

**RON DERMER, Ambassador, Israel:** When the leader of Iran, the supreme leader — and you don't get called supreme leader for nothing — tweeted out in English on his official account, "Israel must be annihilated," it's a threat that we take very, very seriously.

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** In fact, the Iranian capital is less than 1,000 miles from the cities of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

**RON DERMER:** Israel's position is not just to prevent Iran from having a nuclear weapon today. It's to prevent Iran from having a nuclear weapon tomorrow.

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** Iran, however, has long claimed that its nuclear intentions are for civilian purposes only, energy generation and medical uses.

Mousavian says there is no better proof than the Iran-Iraq War, when, even under chemical attack from Saddam, the supreme leader publicly opposed retaliation with weapons of mass destruction.

**HOSSEIN MOUSAVIAN:** I would say, if a nation during war is attacked by weapons of mass destruction and is not reciprocating just because of its religious values, what more objective guarantees do you want to believe that this nation is not after a nuclear bomb?

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** Mousavian says that Iranian good faith was clear more recently in Syria, where, he points out, Iran was a key partner in negotiating the destruction of Assad's chemical weapons stockpile.

**HOSSEIN MOUSAVIAN:** There was a trilateral, secret cooperation between Tehran, Washington and Moscow, which led to destruction of chemical weapons in Syria.

**RICHARD HAASS:** You would have to believe in the Tooth Fairy to believe that Iran is not interested again in getting very close to nuclear weapons.

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** Richard Haass of the Council on Foreign Relations is much less trusting.

**RICHARD HAASS:** History wouldn't give you a lot of confidence. One is, Iran has at times violated understandings with the International Atomic Energy Agency. There have done a lot of things on the side surreptitiously.

**ROBIN WRIGHT:** We shouldn't be naive. Iran has the capability to build a bomb. It has the knowledge. And even if talks collapsed and we launched a war, the fact is, we can't bomb knowledge.

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** There are many who say what's really going on is that Iran is already so close to being able to build and having a nuclear weapon that these talks really don't matter very much.

**HOSSEIN MOUSAVIAN:** Judy, let me to be very sincere and frank to you. If Iranians, they wanted to build nuclear bomb, no one could have prevented it.

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** Today, there is a tale of two Irans. While many clerics claim to a view America as Iran's top enemy, many younger Iranians are looking to the West, hoping that normal relations will improve their prospects for a better life.

**ROBERT KAPLAN:** The population is one of the youngest populations of the large country in the world.

**ROBIN WRIGHT:** They're very much involved in Internet, social media. They all have satellite dishes that bring in Western programming.

**ROBERT KAPLAN:** Iran is partially democratic. Churches are allowed. Women ride on motorcycles.

**ROBIN WRIGHT:** So, a lot has changed. There is a yearning to be part of the world again, and that clashes with the deep xenophobia of the revolutionaries.

**RON DERMER:** Your problem is not with the Iranian people. The Iranian people don't hate the United States. The Iranian people, probably besides the people of Israel, are the most pro-American people in the entire region. But the Iranian people don't control their government. Their government is controlled by a radical regime. And that regime hates the United States.

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** Many basic civil liberties, from women's rights to free speech, are denied in Iran.

Journalists are routinely imprisoned by the regime, including an American reporter for The

Washington Post.

**ROBERT KAPLAN:** It's not clear who has the upper hand in Iran, but what is clear is, never in years has there been so much public expectation and hope of a political change in Iran, in this case via the nuclear talks.

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** What all sides in Iran agree on is that nobody here wants more of the crippling sanctions layered on the already fragile economy, which many in the West credit for bringing the country to the negotiating table.

But Mousavian claims Iran responded to past increases in sanctions by actually boosting their nuclear efforts.

**HOSSEIN MOUSAVIAN:** American understanding was that if we put more pressure, the Iranians would step back. They increased the sanctions. Iranians, they increased the number of centrifuges from 2,000 to 3,000 to 20,000, the level of enrichment from 3 percent to 20 percent, the stockpile of enriched uranium from a few hundred kilogram to 10,000 kilogram.

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** But with oil prices falling, Richard Haass believes U.S. economic leverage may be rising.

**RICHARD HAASS:** If Iran ever reaches that point where they believe the choice is compromising on the nuclear in order to preserve the essence of their political system and their revolution going back to '79, they would make that — they would do so, I believe.

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** So where will this high-stakes game of nuclear negotiations end? Predictions still vary.

**HOSSEIN MOUSAVIAN:** This is my belief, that we would be able to reach a deal by this summer.

**RICHARD HAASS:** I think the odds are at least even or even slightly better than even we get a deal. I think, if there is a nuclear deal, Iran will get some sanctions relief that. That will improve things.

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** What will the reaction be inside Iran if there is no nuclear deal?

**ROBIN WRIGHT:** Well, there will be tremendous disappointment. I think the government would actually be in trouble if there is no nuclear deal, because expectations are now so high.

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** Meanwhile, Israeli resolve remains firm.

**RON DERMER:** Israel's position is, Iran doesn't need to have a military nuclear capability at all. So, all of their nuclear infrastructure that could be used to build nuclear weapons in the future has to be dismantled.

*This report was produced by Sydney Tranttner and Francois Bringer, with consulting producer Mark Carter.*

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