

The West's Long Road to Agreement with Iran

By [Javier Solana](#)

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The latest round of negotiations in Geneva between Iran and the P5+1 — the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany — has inspired cautious optimism. A window of opportunity to reach agreement on Iran's nuclear program appears to have opened. Although the details of the meeting are not public, its relative success is clear, as the parties are to reconvene in November.

Rapprochement between Iran and the West — above all between Iran and the U.S. — would have positive geostrategic consequences across the Middle East. Iran has a long way to go, of course, to bring about permanent improvement in its relations with the West. But what Iran needs to do is not the only impediment. Other strategic actors must also be taken into account.

Without a doubt, Israel will be a major obstacle to reaching an agreement. At the very moment when negotiations were beginning in Geneva, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu said in Israel's parliament that the possibility of a pre-emptive attack on Iran's nuclear facilities could not yet be ruled out.

Netanyahu has made Iran's nuclear program his highest foreign policy priority. He is suspicious of Iran's intentions and wants its nuclear power plants to be completely dismantled. The fear is that as long as Iran maintains residual nuclear capacity — even for civilian use — it could develop atomic arms that would threaten Israel. As Netanyahu made clear at the U.N. General Assembly on Oct. 1, Israeli officials do not trust Iran's new government to change course.

But Israel is not alone. Sunni-ruled Saudi Arabia, the Middle East power competing most directly with Shiite Iran for regional influence, feels left out by the incipient rapprochement with Tehran. It has even gotten to the point of Saudi Arabia refusing a seat on the UN Security Council to express its leaders' anger. Even in the days of the Shah, Saudi Arabia feared that a strong Iran might become the dominant regional power. Heir to the historic Persian Empire, Iran has the region's second-largest gross domestic product and population. Saudi Arabia worries that a possible agreement resulting in the lifting of sanctions against Iran would allow its arch-rival to revive its economy and extend its influence.

This is not the finest hour for the U.S.-Saudi alliance. The falling out over Iran follows the U.S. refusal to bomb Syria, another Saudi rival in the region, and its blessing of the 2011 removal of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who was an important Saudi ally. Saudi Arabia seeks the overthrow of Syrian President Bashar Assad and believes that the U.S. agreement with Russia to destroy the Assad regime's chemical weapons amounts to renunciation of that goal. As a result, the Saudis are now the largest financial backer of the Syrian rebels. Riyadh is also one of the main supporters of the Egyptian Army following its removal in July of Mubarak's democratically elected successor, Mohamed Morsi.

Iran and Russia are the Assad regime's two main allies and the only external actors able to bring about a change of attitude in Damascus. The Geneva II talks on Syria are tentatively set to be held Nov. 23, although Lakhdar Brahimi, the joint special representative of the UN and the Arab League for Syria, has already expressed doubts about the suitability of the meeting in the absence of credible representatives of opposition forces.

Saudi Arabia is deeply hostile to Geneva II because formal diplomatic talks with the Assad regime imply de facto recognition that it retains legitimacy. For the Saudis, the only acceptable solution starts with the resignation of Assad and his government, while Geneva II envisages a transitional government in which all of the parties are represented.

U.S. policymakers have another major difficulty: Congress. The last-minute agreement to raise the U.S. debt ceiling and reopen the government has left Republican Party extremists in a weakened position, while President Barack Obama has emerged strengthened. But the episode sets a dangerous precedent. Any conceivable agreement with Iran would involve lifting economic sanctions. This, in turn, would require legislative approval, thus making a proposed deal vulnerable to congressional nearsightedness.

For the U.S., a concomitant problem is that Secretary of State John Kerry has made peace between Israel and Palestine a high priority. It remains to be seen how Kerry manages to balance the negotiations so that Israeli pressure on the U.S. with respect to Iran does not ruin efforts to achieve peace between Israelis and Palestinians. But if Iran and the West reach an agreement, it will be very difficult for Israel to remain on the sidelines.

Europe, for its part, has a good opportunity to vindicate itself by committing to a united, coherent, and effective foreign policy. The European Union, now through High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton, has always been a key actor in the negotiations between Iran and the P5+1. Ashton has the confidence of all the parties. It is important for the EU to be agile and maintain close coordination with the U.S. If the time comes to lift sanctions on Iran, Europe must coordinate closely with the U.S. to maximize the move's effectiveness.

Negotiation and diplomacy are the only sure way to resolve the standoff with Iran over its nuclear program. Another conflict in the Middle East is the worst option. But seizing today's unique opportunity with Iran demands long-term vision from all parties. National interests must be placed above electoral considerations.

The window for negotiation is open, but it will not remain so indefinitely.

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