As we move closer to the upcoming Baghdad meeting between Iran and the world powers, scheduled for May 23, it is vitally important for both sides to maintain the positive environment that was generated at the Istanbul round in early April, otherwise the prospects for tangible progress in resolving the Iran nuclear standoff will be dimmed.

This means building on the net achievements of the Istanbul meeting, which built trust between the two sides and set the stage for “substantive talks” in Baghdad with the goal of reaching “very concrete results,” to paraphrase EU’s High Representative, Catherine Ashton; since then Ashton’s deputies have been communicating with Iran’s negotiation team on the agenda of Baghdad meeting and the areas of potential agreement. Both sides agreed in Istanbul to adopt the NPT standards as the framework for negotiation, regarded as a mini-victory for Iran since it is allowed to possess a nuclear fuel cycle under NPT.

Meanwhile, ahead of the Baghdad meeting, another crucial meeting between Iran and the high officials of the IAEA to prepare the modality of their future cooperation aimed at resolving certain “outstanding questions” regarding Iran’s nuclear program has been scheduled; this can be instrumental in bringing the multilateral talk in Baghdad to a positive fruition. If this modality or said otherwise framework for cooperation is adopted, then the IAEA inspectors will have access to certain military installations in Iran, such as Parchin, which is cited in the recent IAEA reports for possible nuclear-weapons related experiments, a charge denied by Iran that insists the IAEA has visited the same site twice before without finding anything suspicious.

Unfortunately, the whole edifice of mutual confidence-building mentioned above is in the danger of collapse as a result of the unreasonable insistence by certain hawkish politicians and media pundits in the west echoing Tel Aviv’s insistence that Iran must halt all enrichment activities and shut down the underground Fordo facility, which is under IAEA regular inspections.

Without doubt, if the west is serious about putting the genie of Iran nuclear crisis back in the bottle, then it must stop appeasing the hawkish politicians who seek to deny Iran its inalienable nuclear rights. To do so would be tantamount to self-wrecking a golden opportunity to de-
escalate tensions with Iran, which is straddled between two major energy hubs in Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea and plays an important role in regional security.

Assuming that Tehran agrees with the west’s nuclear demands on transparency measures in Baghdad, it is unclear if the US Congress, which has the sole authority to roll back the US sanctions and which is led by hawkish voices against Iran, will go along any deal. In turn, this represents a major stumbling block since Iran negotiators need to show tangible trade-off between any Iran concessions and its rights for recognition of legitimate enrichment plus gradual lifting of the sanctions. Without a firm guarantee of such trade-off, it is difficult to foresee a meaningful breakthrough. Still, Tehran may be apt to have a patient approach on the sanctions as long as (a) the sanction on oil and the Central Bank are off the list and (b) its nuclear enrichment rights for peaceful purposes are respected.

In conclusion, we are now at a critical threshold in the Iran nuclear crisis, and only prudent diplomacy by both sides can achieve positive results, not the illegal threats of military action, sabotage, and the like.

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