In Baghdad this week, talks between Iran and the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany once again came to a standstill. Iran once again proposed a broad package covering both nuclear and nonnuclear issues, while the P5+1 sought but was rebuffed on a more limited deal under which Iran would give up 20 percent enrichment of uranium in exchange for spare airplane parts, medical isotopes, and some nuclear safety cooperation. How do you think this disjuncture -- with the P5+1 arguing for limited but concrete steps and Iran arguing that the big picture must first be addressed -- can be overcome?

The core issue is with the P5+1, which is not ready for proportionate reciprocation in a step-by-step plan. They want Iran to give diamonds in return for peanuts. They are asking Iran to give up 20% enrichment and export all stockpiles, [as well as] cooperate with the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] on the possible military dimension issues, in return for meager incentives such as the sale of spare parts for civilian planes.

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Dr. Seyed Hossein Mousavian is an Iranian career diplomat who served as ambassador to Germany during the Rafsanjani administration and then headed the Foreign Relations Committee of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council under the Khatami administration. From 2003 to 2005, he was the spokesman for the Iranian nuclear negotiation team led by Hassan Rowhani. Currently a visiting scholar at Princeton University, he is the author of the forthcoming book The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir.

Mousavian responded by email to questions from Tehran Bureau about the results of the negotiations over Iran's nuclear activities held in Baghdad this week and the prospects for a deal that will resolve the standoff between the Islamic Republic and the West.

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For the Iranians to address the IAEA's [concerns over] possible military dimension issues, they would have to practically implement the Additional Protocol [of the IAEA Safeguards Agreement] and go even beyond these measures. This concession in addition to confidence-building measures on 20% enrichment are the maximum the Iranians could accept, [and] only within the framework of a step-by-step and clear picture of the reciprocation by the P5+1, which should include the following:

1. Recognizing the rights of Iran to enrichment under the NPT
2. Gradual lifting of sanctions within the framework of the step-by-step plan

In what areas, both nuclear and nonnuclear, do you believe the first steps toward a deal could realistically be taken?

If confidence building measures on 20% enrichment is the primary goal of the P5+1, then they should be prepared to put aside the sanctions on the Iranian Central Bank and oil. If the IAEA's possible military dimension issues are the core concern, then the P5+1 should be ready to recognize the rights of Iran [to] enrichment as reciprocation, since Iran would have to implement the Additional Protocol and even measures beyond it.

Will Iran agree to give up or freeze any part of its enrichment activities before recently imposed sanctions, most notably an E.U. oil embargo, are eased? Will the P5+1 agree to ease any sanctions before Iran gives up at least part of its enrichment activities and stockpile of enriched uranium? Have the oil embargo and Iran's economic situation changed its leaders' calculus?

The steps to be taken by Iran have to be proportionally reciprocated by the P5+1. The point is that the Iranians won't make major concessions under threats and further pressure tactics by the West would be counterproductive, as it ultimately will lead to a hardened position by the Iranians.

Last week, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu suggested that Iran's participation in negotiations was merely a stalling tactic, saying, "It looks as though they see these talks as another opportunity to deceive and delay just like North Korea did for years." Has the duration of talks itself, along with accusations of stalling by hawks in Israel and the U.S., affected Iran's diplomatic approach or increased pressure on the negotiation team to produce results?

For nonproliferation, it is better for the Israelis not to weigh in [on] the Iranian nuclear dossier. Because Iran is a member of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), has allowed IAEA inspectors into the country, does not possess nuclear weapons, and there is no evidence of [an] Iranian weaponized nuclear program. While Israel is not a member of the NPT, does not permit IAEA inspections of its facilities, and possesses nuclear weapons.
Is the upcoming presidential election in the United States a consideration for Iran in its approach to the nuclear talks?

No.

What are the continued diplomatic stalemate's implications for Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency?

This has no bearing, as the ultimate decision-maker in the nuclear affairs is the Supreme Leader.

Is there significance to the choice of Moscow for the next round of talks? How do Iran's leaders view Russia and China's roles in the most recent rounds of negotiations in Istanbul and now Baghdad? What do you think will happen at the talks in Moscow next month?

The Russians and the Chinese have [been] shown to be more moderate in their approach in the nuclear negotiations; in particular, the Russian proposals are more realistic compared to the Western package. I hope that this fact will facilitate a face-saving compromise in the next round of talks in Moscow.