

A Negotiated Path Out of the Israel-Iran War

by Kamran Bokhari - June 20, 2025

Amid fears that the Israel-Iran war could escalate and draw in the United States, a potential pathway toward a negotiated settlement is becoming apparent. The Trump White House does not want to plunge the country into a war, and all regional stakeholders are deeply concerned about the consequences of escalation. Israel appears to have achieved its goal of destroying all the nuclear facilities that it could without U.S. involvement. Iran has been weakened to the point that it appears ready for a compromise.

According to a June 19 Reuters report citing three diplomatic sources, U.S. special envoy Steve Witkoff and Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi have spoken by phone several times since Israel began its strikes on Iran last week. One of the key issues discussed was a U.S. proposal, delivered in late May, to establish a regional consortium to enrich uranium outside Iran. During those talks, Araghchi reportedly told Witkoff that Tehran “could show flexibility in the nuclear issue” if the U.S. pressed Israel to halt its attacks. Araghchi is scheduled to meet with his German, French and British counterparts in Geneva on June 20. Separately, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz spoke with Qatar’s emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, on ways to prevent the conflict from spreading.

Having watched several Arab states collapse into civil wars since the 2011 Arab Spring, regional players – especially Saudi Arabia – are wary of the consequences of further destabilizing Iran. For decades, the Islamic Republic has contained rising internal dissent. Even within the regime, there are serious fissures, most notably its two parallel military institutions: the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Artesh, which diverge sharply in their ideological and strategic outlooks. Ethnic fragmentation adds another layer of instability. Only slightly more than half of Iran’s 92 million people are ethnically Persian. The rest include large Azeri, Kurdish, Baloch, Arab and other minorities spread across a territory slightly smaller than Alaska.

As a result, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, Turkey and Pakistan fear that a weakened Iran could spiral into chaos, creating a contiguous shatterbelt stretching from Afghanistan’s Hindu Kush to the shores of the eastern Mediterranean. These states share an imperative to end the conflict before the Iranian regime is so debilitated that it cannot withstand large-scale public unrest. This concern is shared by the Trump administration, which is pursuing a global strategy to reduce U.S. exposure to a world in geopolitical churn. The president is also navigating a serious divide within his political base, with one

faction opposed to entanglements in foreign wars and another that views U.S. interests as aligned with those of Israel.

Another looming risk is the possibility that the United States could be pulled into a broader war. Washington has the technical capacity to destroy the Fordow enrichment facility, which lies deep beneath a mountain. While a limited operation in scope, operationalizing such a strike would be complex. Multiple B-2 bomber sorties carrying 30,000-pound GBU-57 bunker-buster bombs would be required. These strikes would need to be spaced out for battle damage assessments – which may be hindered by debris and atmospheric conditions affecting satellite imagery, making it difficult to determine if the target was destroyed.

This would prolong the presence of U.S. aircraft in Iranian airspace, exposing them to anti-aircraft fire. Furthermore, a U.S. attack could prompt Iranian retaliation – either directly or through proxy forces – against U.S. forces in the region. With the potential loss of American lives, what started as a limited operation could quickly evolve into a costly and politically damaging war.

From Israel's point of view, it has largely achieved the goals it set out to accomplish. It has destroyed all major Iranian nuclear facilities save Fordow, which will be dealt with by the U.S. – either militarily or via negotiations. Israel has also significantly depleted Iran's ballistic missile capability. Most important, it has dealt a huge blow to the IRGC by eliminating many of its senior generals, thereby weakening its dominance of the security establishment.

Israel, therefore, can afford to agree to a ceasefire without incurring significant costs. Iran, for its part, stands to lose the most if hostilities continue. First, the longer the war drags on, the more likely it is that the regime's authority will begin to unravel. More important, the weakening of the IRGC has created a power vacuum that is being filled by the Artesh, whose commander-in-chief, Maj. Gen. Abdolrahim Mousavi, was appointed chief of staff of the armed forces after his predecessor, Maj. Gen. Mohammad Bagheri, was killed on June 13.

This means that the Artesh – the more secular, professional and nationalist institution – has begun gaining the upper hand over the ideological and hawkish IRGC. As a result, the Artesh will enjoy greater influence over the national security and foreign policy decisions of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Its realpolitik approach, combined with the fear of regime collapse, means the supreme leader could be steered toward accepting a deal that includes full International Atomic Energy Agency access to Fordow and agreement on the consortium proposal.

In short, conditions are aligning for a return to the negotiating table in the Omani capital. A deal could be crafted that allows Tehran to save face while addressing Israeli fears of a nuclear-armed Iran. It

would also help President Donald Trump avoid a war that could undermine him at home. Finally, such a deal could reassure regional powers that dread the prospect of an Iranian bomb but are even more terrified of the fallout from a war to prevent it.

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