Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: TA | AP Insight

Mediators are working to broker a US-Iran deal

Mediators are working with Iran and the United States on trying to broker a deal to end the fighting and open the Strait of Hormuz, three regional officials and two U.S. officials told The Associated Press, but major hurdles remain between the sides.

The indirect talks come as the conflict, which is entering its eighth month, has caused global economic damage and badly battered Iran. Multiple efforts to allow safe shipping on one of the world's most crucial waterways have failed.

The officials divulged that the behind-the-scenes efforts continue even after U.S. President Donald Trump initially said he spurned an Iranian proposal to reopen the strait in a week if the U.S. agreed to lift its blockade of Iranian ports, release frozen Iranian assets and waive sanctions on Iranian oil sales, among other conditions.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi — who stayed in New York after last week's gathering of world leaders at the U.N. General Assembly — will meet with Qatari mediators Monday about the latest discussions, Iranian state media reported Foreign Ministry spokesperson Esmail Baghaei as saying.

Despite Trump's often bellicose rhetoric, he is open to pursuing a non-military resolution to the conflict if one can be achieved, a senior U.S. official said.

But the Trump administration will not reach a deal with Tehran until nuclear issues are addressed, another U.S. official said.

Trump is willing to grant sanctions relief to Iran, along with the release of some frozen funds, for concrete progress on nuclear issues, and while Iran has indicated it is flexible on nuclear issues, the sides are far apart on timing and which side makes the first moves, the official said.

All the officials were not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on the condition of anonymity about the behind-the-scenes diplomatic negotiations.

The deal would first reopen the strait and lift the US blockade

Two of the regional officials speaking to the AP confirmed that mediators are working with both sides on a proposal that would include reopening the strait and lifting the U.S. blockade, and then removing sanctions.

According to the draft text being discussed, the strait would reopen in accordance with a separate deal that Iran has been discussing with Oman, on the other side of the strait, and it would include no tolls — something Tehran has pursued.

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One regional official said the U.S. is seeking Iranian concessions on nuclear issues that include allowing inspectors to enter the country.

Under the memorandum of understanding the two sides signed in June that collapsed within days, Iran's nuclear program was meant to be discussed over a 60-day period.

The U.S. officials say the United States is skeptical about whether Iran can be persuaded to ultimately reach Trump's conditions for a deal and would be serious about any promises it makes, especially after it broke the interim deal by firing on commercial ships in the Strait of Hormuz.

U.S. officials feel their position is getting stronger as Tehran feels the impact of sanctions.

Iran's latest proposal seeks

faster action

While Iran's latest proposal echoes the June deal, a key difference is speed.

Araghchi told a closed-door meeting on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly last week that Tehran had pitched the deal as benefiting Trump in the midterm elections.

Araghchi later told journalists that "the seven-day timeline will start as soon as the United States accepts this plan."

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres also planned to meet Araghchi on Monday in a bid to help mediators, U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

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Both the U.S. and Iran have been hurting economically — the U.S. from high oil prices as Iran attacks ships on the strait, and Tehran from the naval blockade and a growing number of U.S. sanctions that bottle up its oil sales. Brent crude, the international standard, is above $108.

For months, the two sides have been trying to outlast the other, while regional countries endure missile and drone attacks as Tehran claims to target U.S. military assets in the region.

Reflecting Iran's impatience, a rare statement on Monday attributed to the theocracy's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei noted the "painful blows" that enemy forces have received near the strait. "Before long, the Arabian Sea, too, will be rid of them," the statement added.

Tehran's latest proposal again sought to end the fighting on all fronts, including in Lebanon. But a new front has emerged in recent weeks as Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen are now perched on another crucial waterway, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait at the southern entrance to the Red Sea. That has further pressured global energy markets.

Iran argues that the Houthis have their own demands, and that their conflict with neighboring Saudi Arabia is separate from the U.S.-Iran war, but Iranian officials said they are willing to help in finding a settlement between the Houthis and the Saudis, one of the officials said.