

The United States and Iran embark on a path towards ending the conflict

Krzysztof Strachota

On 17 June, the presidents of the United States and Iran, Donald Trump and Masoud Pezeshkian, separately signed a memorandum setting out the terms for de-escalating the conflict between the two countries and establishing a framework for its comprehensive settlement within the following 60 days. Further negotiations are expected to address, among other issues, the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz, the gradual lifting of sanctions and the future of Iran's nuclear programme. The first round of bilateral talks took place in Switzerland on 21–22 June. Since then, military operations have ceased, traffic through the Strait of Hormuz has gradually resumed and the United States has begun easing its economic pressure on Iran.

Nevertheless, prospects for a comprehensive settlement remain highly uncertain. The proposed agreement entails considerable political risks for both Iran and the United States, while both sides continue to signal their willingness to return to confrontation. Deep mutual distrust also remains a major obstacle. Israel represents the principal challenge: although it opposes the normalisation process, its involvement is crucial to the success of the settlement. One of the memorandum's key provisions is the cessation of Israeli military operations in Lebanon.

The memorandum: a breakthrough in the conflict

The 14-point document signed by the presidents of the United States and Iran was drafted by Pakistan and Qatar and initialled by the parties three days earlier. It marks the beginning of negotiations aimed at resolving the armed conflict between the United States and Iran, which began on 28 February (a ceasefire has been in force since 8 April). The memorandum provides for several measures, including:

- an immediate and permanent termination of military operations “on all fronts”;
- the principle of non-interference in internal affairs and the recognition of sovereignty and territorial integrity, including that of Lebanon;
- the lifting by both parties of the naval blockade of the Strait of Hormuz (including mine clearance) within 30 days, together with the development by Iran and Oman of arrangements for the governance of the waterway;
- the preparation of a US\$300 billion reconstruction plan for Iran;

- the suspension, followed by the lifting, of all economic sanctions imposed on Iran;
- Iran's renunciation of efforts to procure or develop nuclear weapons and the negotiation of a comprehensive settlement of the Iranian nuclear issue;
- the gradual unfreezing of Iranian assets by the United States in line with progress in the implementation of the agreement.

The 60-day deadline for agreeing the final terms of the settlement may be extended by mutual consent. Its provisions are, however, open to fundamentally different interpretations in Tehran and Washington.

In the days following the initialling of the memorandum, no armed incidents involving Iranian or US forces were reported, although both sides have continued to employ confrontational rhetoric on individual issues. The Strait of Hormuz has also been partially reopened. Between 17 and 23 June, an estimated 100–150 vessels transited the waterway, despite Iran having repeatedly announced its closure during that period and, apparently in breach of the memorandum, continuing to levy charges for the 'servicing and protection' of vessels transiting through its territorial waters.

The next stage of the technical negotiations comprised talks between US and Iranian delegations: the former headed by Vice President J.D. Vance, and the latter by the speaker of parliament responsible for the negotiations, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf (with the participation of, among others, the governor of the Central Bank of Iran and representatives of the ministries of foreign affairs, oil and other governmental bodies). The talks took place in Bürgenstock, Switzerland, on 21–22 June, with the participation of Pakistani and Qatari mediators. During the talks, a plan for further work was agreed, communication mechanisms concerning transit through the Strait of Hormuz were adopted, the immediate suspension of US sanctions affecting Iranian exports of oil and chemical products was agreed – which the US administration implemented immediately after the talks concluded – and the unfreezing of Iranian assets (held in Qatari banks) was discussed.

The situation in Lebanon and the establishment of a 'deconfliction cell' to oversee one of the most challenging elements of the process – the cessation of hostilities in that country – were probably the most important topics of the talks. In addition to the United States and Iran, the body is to include Pakistan and Qatar, but not the direct parties to the fighting, namely Israel and Hezbollah.

Hopes for a breakthrough

The adoption of the document in its current form would represent a strategic breakthrough both in the current conflict and for the Middle East, as well as at the global level, given the nature of the US-Iranian confrontation that has continued since 1979. At the same time, the agreement is controversial, the principal actors remain deeply distrustful of one another, and its terms and implications concern issues that remain beyond the direct control of Washington and Tehran.

The agreement gives Iran an opportunity to achieve goals that have remained unattainable in recent decades: to end the conflict with the United States, secure the lifting of all sanctions, obtain financial support for its economy and, ultimately, establish regional

dominance by gaining de facto control over the Strait of Hormuz, safeguarding Hezbollah's position and assuming the role of a recognised guarantor of order in Lebanon at Israel's expense. The nuclear issue remains under negotiation, although Iran demonstrated its deterrent capability during the recent war. The memorandum does not, however, address issues that had been fixed points on the agenda for decades, including on the eve of the recent war: Iran's ballistic missile programme, its support for proxies operating in the Middle East (or, more broadly, accusations that Iran sponsors terrorism), or the question of democratising Iran's political system. Concluding peace on the basis of the agreement in its current form would therefore represent a strategic success for Tehran.

From the US perspective, implementation of the agreement would make it possible to defuse the economic dimension of the crisis by reopening the Strait of Hormuz, which is of particular importance in light of the congressional midterm elections in the autumn. Resolving the issue of Iran's nuclear programme would eliminate a problem that has long been both a major determinant of and a burden on US policy. Normalisation in this area could, hypothetically, provide Washington with economic leverage over Iran and significantly reduce the risk of further armed conflicts in the region involving the United States. Although an agreement within the framework set out in the memorandum would point to a significant decline in US ambitions and influence in the Middle East, it could nevertheless be presented as a moderate success for the administration and would mark the beginning of a new chapter in US engagement in the region.

The main challenges facing the negotiation process

Nevertheless, the implementation of the agreement remains highly uncertain. The principal challenges include:

- **Deep mutual distrust.** The negotiations entail political risks for both sides. Consequently, both Iran's Supreme Leader, Mojtaba Khamenei (although the talks are taking place with his approval), and the US president (who has delegated responsibility for the negotiations to Vice President Vance) have sought to distance themselves from the process. Both sides – including Trump and senior commanders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, who have acted openly despite the ongoing negotiations – have declared their readiness to resume military action and remain prepared to do so. Iranian distrust is reinforced by negative past experiences, including the US unilateral withdrawal from the 2018 nuclear agreement (the JCPOA), the Israeli-US military operation of June 2025 (the so-called Twelve-Day War) and the current conflict, which began in February 2026 while negotiations were still being positively assessed. The maximalist demands and hard-line negotiating strategies adopted by both sides in negotiating the individual provisions of the settlement may further hinder the achievement of a compromise. This applies, among other things, to the effective reopening and security of the Strait of Hormuz, transit charges, the unfreezing of Iranian assets and, more broadly, the details of the proposed international fund for Iran's reconstruction and its governance. Iran's nuclear programme also remains a particularly sensitive issue, including its future and, in the short term, questions relating to international oversight.

- **The Lebanon issue and, more broadly, Israel.** Israel is not a party to the agreement intended to end the conflict, despite being Iran's principal and most uncompromising adversary, as well as the initiator and one of the principal participants in the military operations of 2025 and 2026. At the same time, at Tehran's insistence, the parties have committed themselves to ending the fighting in Lebanon and securing the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the country. For Israel, any agreement with Iran – and even more so the abandonment of military operations against Hezbollah – is unacceptable, a position that the authorities in Jerusalem have stated openly. Israeli military operations in Lebanon continue at varying levels of intensity. The United States has only limited capacity to compel Israel to halt these operations (although it has done so on occasion in the more distant past), while imposing a fundamental change in Israel's defence policy would, in practice, be unfeasible. In the domestic US context, pro-Israeli and anti-Iranian groups opposed to an agreement with Iran remain a highly influential political force. They retain significant influence, including in Congress, and their position is likely to affect the forthcoming election campaign.

Prospects for peace

The ceasefire in force since 8 April, the adoption of the memorandum and the continuation of negotiations indicate that both Washington and Tehran seek to avoid a return to a costly and high-risk armed conflict. The ongoing talks appear to represent the most serious attempt to date to achieve a comprehensive political settlement between the two countries. It is reasonable to assume that the chief negotiators – Vance and Ghalibaf – and, more broadly, the Trump administration and the Iranian president and government have a personal interest in bringing the process to a successful conclusion.

A very important factor will be pressure from the international community – including the Gulf states, particularly Qatar, as well as Pakistan, Turkey and the financial markets – to reach an agreement. Its conclusion and implementation would entail a revision of the regional order in the Middle East (and within Iran itself) and, consequently, redefine a number of the determinants of US global policy, given that the conflict with Iran continues to absorb Washington's attention and resources.

At the same time, it should be assumed that neither side has abandoned the option of military action. Iran in particular remains fully mobilised and focused on rebuilding its military capabilities. Given the high level of mutual distrust – further fuelled by domestic political pressures – and Tehran's conviction that negotiations must be conducted from a position of strength (a position reinforced during the recent conflict by Iran's actions in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz), the possibility of armed incidents, the suspension of negotiations or, in the worst-case scenario, their complete breakdown cannot be ruled out.

The most uncertain element of the process will continue to be Israel, particularly its ongoing military operations in Lebanon. A complete cessation of these operations appears unlikely, as indicated by the broad domestic consensus in support of them and the determination of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is preparing for the autumn election.

From Iran's perspective, the war in Lebanon not only reinforces the credibility of its regional policy towards the so-called Axis of Resistance (Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed armed

organisations in the region), but has also, for the first time, enabled Tehran to become a recognised participant in the regional security architecture while undermining the US-Israeli alliance. Washington, in turn, faces the formidable challenge of maintaining its credibility in the eyes of Israel (and the pro-Israeli segment of US public opinion) while simultaneously building Tehran's trust, should it seek a political settlement of the conflict.