

Middle East war**JD Vance claims 'successful foundation' laid in US-Iran talks**

Tehran and Washington locked in negotiations in Switzerland over deal to settle four-month conflict



Iran's foreign minister Abbas Araghchi, centre, arrives in the Swiss resort of Bürgenstock for negotiations over the Middle East conflict © AFP/Getty Images

Andrew England in Bürgenstock

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US vice-president JD Vance said a “successful foundation” was laid at the first round of high-level talks with Iran aimed at turning a shaky deal to reopen the Strait of Hormuz into a permanent settlement.

Vance, who led the US delegation, said the discussions focused on building a “mechanism” to keep the strait open. He said that progress was also made on halting the conflict between Israel and Hizbollah in Lebanon, which has threatened to derail diplomatic efforts to end the more than 100-day war between the US and Iran.

“We set the foundation,” Vance told reporters at the Swiss mountain resort of Bürgenstock, where the talks were held. “We haven’t built the house, but we’ve laid a successful foundation to get to a good place for the American people.”

He also said Iran had agreed to invite International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors back into the Islamic republic.

Esmail Baghaei, spokesperson for Iran’s foreign ministry, told the state news agency, IRNA, that Tehran “did not engage in negotiations regarding the nuclear file during the 18-hour talks and did not accept any new commitments”.

Iran suspended co-operation with the UN watchdog after Israel’s 12-day war last year, during which the US bombed the republic’s main nuclear facilities.

It agreed to allow some inspectors to return in the autumn, but it has not allowed them to access the Natanz, Fordow and Isfahan plants that were severely damaged during that conflict. Iran’s 440kg of uranium enriched close to weapons-grade levels is believed to be hidden beneath the rubble of those sites.

Vance said conversations with IAEA inspectors could happen as soon as Monday.

Qatar and Pakistan, the mediators, said earlier that “encouraging progress” was made at the talks, which began on Sunday.

They were initially supposed to begin on Friday and focus on Iran’s nuclear programme, building on a memorandum of understanding the US and Iran signed last week.

But they were delayed after fighting between Israel and Hizbollah in Lebanon caused Iran to postpone sending a delegation to the negotiations.

Repeated Israeli strikes on Hizbollah also caused Iran’s Revolutionary Guards to warn on Saturday that it was closing the Strait of Hormuz again, underlining the tenuous state of US President Donald Trump’s push to end the war and ease the global energy crisis triggered by the conflict.

The talks eventually went ahead on Sunday after a flurry of diplomatic activity.

Qatar and Pakistan said on Monday that the parties had agreed to “the creation of a deconfliction cell” aimed at halting the fighting in Lebanon.

They gave few details but one of the challenges mediators have faced is not being able to accurately assess who fired first.

The MoU the parties signed on Wednesday had declared an immediate and permanent halt to military operations on all fronts, including in Lebanon, but Israel and Hizbollah, Iran’s most important proxy, continued to exchange fire.

Iran’s foreign minister Abbas Araghchi, who was part of the Iranian delegation led by Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, one of Iran’s top wartime civilian leaders, said on X on Monday that the talks had “delivered major progress to end the Lebanon war”.

The mediators said a communication line between the parties had also been formed “to avoid incidents and miscommunication with the aim of safe passage for commercial vessels through the Strait of Hormuz”.

Oil prices fell on Monday morning on signs of progress in negotiations. Brent crude, the international oil benchmark, declined 1.9 per cent to \$79.07 a barrel.

The MoU the US and Iran signed last week extended an April 8 ceasefire by 60 days, during which Iran is supposed to reopen the strait and not charge ships a fee for transiting the waterway.

Trump has already ordered the US navy to lift its blockade of Iranian ports.

The president has made reopening the strait — through which about a fifth of the world’s oil and gas normally passes — a priority as he seeks to ease a global energy crisis that has pushed up prices at US petrol pumps ahead of November’s midterm elections.

Trump and Vance have both criticised Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and members of his far-right government over the past week as Israel continued to launch strikes in Lebanon while the US pushed for a truce.

But on Sunday, Trump threatened Iran if it did not do more to rein in Hizbollah. “Iran must immediately stop their highly paid PROXIES in Lebanon from causing trouble,” he posted on his Truth Social platform. “If they don’t, we’ll hit Iran very hard again, just like we did last week, only harder!!!”

His comments, as the parties were meeting in Switzerland, threatened to complicate the talks, the first direct negotiations since they agreed the April 8 ceasefire.

Vance said that after Trump’s comments, the Iranian delegation did at one point threaten to walk out of negotiations, but the talks continued until past 1am.

Lebanese media said Israel conducted at least two strikes in southern Lebanon on Sunday, but the conflict appeared far less intense than previous days. The Israeli military on Sunday evening lifted all restrictions on public gatherings and other activities in Israel’s northern border region, suggesting it was expecting a period of calm.

Lower-level technical talks would continue this week, the mediators said.

The nuclear talks are expected to stretch out over weeks as the parties negotiate the fate of Iran’s enriched uranium and its main nuclear sites, which were severely damaged by US bunker-buster bombs last year.

The MoU stated that the parties would find a “mutually agreed” mechanism to handle the enriched uranium.

Iran has more than 9,000kg of the material stockpiled, including the 440kg at levels close to weapons-grade that Trump previously demanded Tehran hand over to the US.

Additional reporting by Najmeh Bozorgmehr

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Andrew England