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Iran's Motives for Negotiations With the US in Oman

By Huzeir Ezekiel

SYNOPSIS

Iran's talks with the United States in Oman on April 12 surprised international observers as they were contrary to the official stances laid out by its Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. Aware of its weakness, Iran used the negotiations to forestall or delay attacks by the US, manage tensions with the superpower, and generate optimism among Iranians.

COMMENTARY

On April 12, an Iranian delegation led by Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi arrived in Oman for talks with the United States Special Envoy to the Middle East, Steve Witkoff. The talks were held indirectly, with the two parties in separate rooms, [exchanging communications](#) via the Omani Foreign Minister. More negotiations are planned in Oman on May 3.

Remarkably, these talks were held despite Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's [repeated declarations](#) that Iran will not negotiate with the US and that the latter cannot be trusted. Furthermore, Iran has long resisted US pressure to end its nuclear programme and support for the Axis of Resistance (AOR), such as the Yemeni Houthis and Iraqi Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF). What can we make of Iran's strategy, and what is it hoping to achieve from negotiations with the US?

Buying Time

First and foremost, Iran wanted to buy time to forestall US attacks and rebuild its strength. Iranian vulnerability is increasingly apparent, especially after the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria, and the crippling of Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon by Israel. Israeli missiles also struck Tehran in [October 2024](#).

A direct attack by the US was also feared, given the Trump administration's record of hostility. In 2020, Donald Trump, during his first administration, ordered the [assassination](#) of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani and imposed maximum sanctions pressure on Iran. In March 2025, during Trump's second administration, he [threatened](#) Iran, "If they don't make a deal, there will be bombing". The following month, he [moved](#) six B-2 stealth bombers to Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, within striking distance of Iran.

Thus, negotiations with the US prevented or delayed more attacks by the US and Israel and gave Iran time to strengthen itself, as ultraconservative Iranian leaders had [argued](#). In fact, before the talks in Oman, Israel had [planned an attack](#) on Iranian nuclear sites with US assistance. Cognizant of Iran's willingness to negotiate, President Trump opposed the plan.

In the lead-up to the negotiations, Iran strengthened AOR militias and repaired air defence systems damaged by Israeli missile strikes in 2024. Supreme Leader Khamenei reportedly [directed](#) the Iraqi PMF and other Iran-backed militias to "protect Iranian interests" and prepare against US attacks if negotiations in Oman failed. General Esmail Qaani, Soleimani's successor, left a [team](#) in Iraq to ensure militia compliance. To stop US attacks on the Iraqi PMF, [suspected](#) Iranian disinformation operations conveyed reports that the PMF was considering [complete disarmament](#).

In February 2025, Mohammad Bagheri, chief of Iran's armed forces, [announced](#) that all air defence systems were repaired. On April 12, as negotiations in Oman were ongoing, Iran's Ministry of Defence announced that Iranian airspace was protected by 900 multilayered "[indigenous defence systems](#)", which included electromagnetic missile jamming systems, Bavar-373 surface-to-air missiles, and the Arman long-range anti-ballistic missile network.

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) [reportedly deployed](#) missile systems on three islands near the Strait of Hormuz, a critical waterway for international trade and oil flows. This could be leveraged if negotiations failed. Thus, America's focus on forcing Iran to the negotiating table gave it time to rebuild its defences.

Managing Tensions With the US

Negotiations also allowed Iran to manage tensions with the US and even soften President Trump's hostility. Iranian leaders understood Trump's inclination for transactional deals and victories, even if symbolic. By appealing to these characteristics, Iran hoped to make Trump more amenable to its positions. In effect, Iran hoped to change Trump's perceptions, making Iran appear as a potential partner rather than an adversary. These considerations explain why Iranian leaders agreed to the high-profile meeting in Oman.

The sudden agreement to negotiate in Oman also appears calculated to give President Trump the appearance of a symbolic victory. Since January 2025, Trump has repeatedly been pushing Iran to deal directly with the US, including a letter to the Supreme Leader. In response, Khamenei and other Iranian leaders had [consistently refused](#), citing their distrust of the US. The delayed response, combined with Iran's agreement to negotiate at the foreign ministry level, gives Trump the satisfaction of a

symbolic victory. In contrast, many talks during the previous Biden administration were conducted through [working groups](#) and [intermediaries](#).

In an unprecedented statement, Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian announced that Supreme Leader Khamenei “[had no objection to American investors](#)” in Iran. By signalling Iran as a potential investment opportunity, its leaders appealed to Trump’s business-oriented focus. Indeed, Trump understands that the realisation of US investments in Iran would cement his presidential legacy, as the last time the US had business ties with Iran was before the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Raising Optimism Among Iranians

Negotiations in Oman also helped Iranian leaders raise optimism among the people, potentially mobilising political support for the leadership. Negotiations give the impression that Iran’s leaders were actively working to remove economic sanctions that have set back Iranian society, contributing to a near 40 per cent inflation rate, a collapse in the value of the Iranian Rial, and high unemployment. Iran’s leaders have actively promoted the Omani talks to garner public support. As government spokeswoman Fatemeh Mohajerani [said](#), the “government is pursuing a diplomatic path to lift sanctions and ease pressure on citizens’ lives”.

According to a [public poll](#) in October 2024, 61 per cent of Iranians supported a nuclear agreement with the US and believed that Iran should negotiate with the West. By appealing to this constituency, the leadership could secure support as the government had faced mass protests over economic issues. This was borne out immediately after the Omani negotiations when Iranians expressed [cautious optimism](#) over social media. This optimism was also [reflected](#) in the rising value of the Rial, while Tehran’s stock exchange rose 2.16 per cent, its best performance since January 2025.

Irreconcilable Aims

This analysis shows that Iran is pursuing a short-term survival strategy of using negotiations to stave off attacks, moderate tensions with the US, and strengthen domestic support. Although current negotiations have only a slim chance of reducing the enmity and distrust between the US and Iran, both countries entered negotiations with [mismatched and irreconcilable](#) aims, which can impact the effectiveness of the talks in resolving bilateral tensions.

Iran wants a complete removal of economic sanctions and the ability to sell its oil in international markets while maintaining unrestricted regional influence through AOR militias. On the other hand, the US wants a complete shutdown of Iran’s nuclear and missile development programme and an end to Iranian support for AOR militias. If these differences cannot be reconciled, the negotiations will fail to achieve lasting reconciliation between the two longtime foes. But for now, the Iranian leadership will do what it can to survive Trump.

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