Iran Sent Message to JD Vance Warning that Kushner and Witkoff Were "Abusing" Their Inside Access to Negotiations

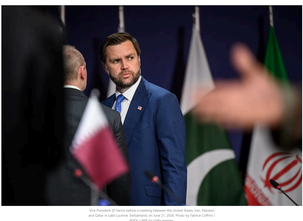
A senior Iranian official said Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner put their were exploiting the negotiations for financial gain. The Trump administration says it never happened.

JULIAN BORGER AND RYAN DEFFE
JAN 30, 2026

5,474 36 1166 Share

Drop Site's journalism is free to read because thousands of readers choose to fund it. If our work matters to you, please consider making a tax-deductible donation today.

Support Drop Site Today



Vice President JD Vance before a meeting between the United States, Iran, Pakistan and Qatar in Lake Lucerne, Switzerland, on June 27, 2025. Photo by Valeria Coffrini / POOL / AFP via Getty Images

During the US-Iran talks in Lake Lucerne, Switzerland in late June, Iranian negotiators sent a private message to Vice President JD Vance through an intermediary. The Iranians warned Vance that the continued presence of President Donald Trump's Special Envoy Steve Witkoff and son-in-law Jared Kushner would undermine the chance of forming the June 17 framework into an enduring deal, a senior Iranian official told Drop Site.

The Iranian official spoke to Drop Site on the condition of anonymity because he is not authorized to speak publicly. In the message, according to the official, Iran conveyed to Vance that the pair were more interested in exploiting insider knowledge of the negotiations to profit in financial markets than they were in reaching a deal. Iranian negotiators also expressed concern about reported pressure from Kushner to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. (A U.S. official told Axios that since the negotiations began, Witkoff and Kushner "talk almost every day to Netanyahu" and the head of Mossad.)

In the weeks leading up to the signing of the memorandum of understanding, the official said, Iran presented written documentation to mediators of what it characterized as evidence that "individuals close to President Trump" were abusing the Iran war and diplomatic developments to manipulate financial markets. "Even before the Islamabad talks kicked off [in April], we had already sent multiple messages to Trump through the Pakistanis, warning them about [Witkoff's] overall destructive role in the previous negotiation," the Iranian official said.

Type your email... Subscribe

The outreach to Vance came after these previous efforts to raise Tehran's concerns about Witkoff and Kushner with the White House, the official said—given that messages passed to mediators are delivered broadly to the full U.S. team including Kushner, who is a private citizen with no official government role.

"We transmitted data and assessments through an exclusive channel to Mr. Vance," said the senior Iranian official, who has direct knowledge of the effort. Iranian negotiators, he said, communicated to Vance that they believed Witkoff and Kushner were "abusing" the diplomatic process, "effectively disrupting the overall negotiating atmosphere."

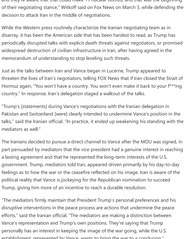
Drop Site was not able to independently confirm the intermediary actually delivered the message, though the Iranian official said Tehran was confident Vance had received it. The official declined to offer specifics. In response to a request for comment sent to the vice president's office, a U.S. official denied Iran's claims. "A message of this nature was never conveyed to the Vice President or his team," the official told Drop Site. "Additionally, any insinuation that the other members of the president's trusted negotiating team are operating under motives other than serving the president and delivering on his mission is false."

Kushner and Witkoff did not respond to requests for comment, but a White House spokesperson denied Iran's claims and denounced Drop Site. "No such message was ever transmitted to the United States. It's sad that Drop Site News 'reporters' are so filled with hate for America and devoid of respect for themselves that they have become full-throated propagandists for the Iranian regime," said White House spokesperson Anna Kelly.

A source close to Vance told Drop Site the Iranians had made no secret of their objections to the presence of Witkoff and Kushner in the negotiations.

Since the Iran war began, many financial analysts have described a pattern where speculative bets are placed or unusually large positions are taken in key markets related to the conflict and diplomatic events, including consistent announcements from Trump made just prior to the Monday openings of U.S. trading. This has led to widespread public speculation that people with access to inside information are manipulating markets in oil futures, energy stocks, and prediction markets.

In June, Iran calculated profits from such alleged manipulation had reached $9 billion and formally requested, in writing, that Iran should share in the proceeds. "We have conveyed through intermediaries that $4.5 billion of this sum should also be allocated to the Iranian side," the Iranian official said. "The exchanged texts will ultimately become part of the historical record."



Trump's U.S. special envoy and son-in-law Jared Kushner in Lake Lucerne, Switzerland. Photo by APU GUESLER / POOL / AFP via Getty Images

Iran met for indirect diplomatic talks on February 6 in Oman and February 26 in Switzerland before the war began on February 28. During our negotiation rounds in Oman, it had become completely clear to us that this person [Witkoff] had zero connection to diplomacy or actually advancing the talks," the official added, saying that Witkoff had entirely misrepresented Iran's positions on a range of issues, including what terms it was willing to offer the U.S. on the fate of its highly enriched uranium. Witkoff's "mistaken impressions from the negotiations got passed on to Trump," he charged.

The official cautioned that Iran was not naive in believing that Vance would subvert Trump's positions, but assessed that the vice president brings a more sober, professional, and realistic perspective to the negotiations. "Sending this exact message directly to Vance was done with the full approval of our negotiating team," he said. He declined to "confirm or deny anything about other messages being exchanged" between Vance and Iranian officials.

A source close to Vance, however, said the vice president is broadly looking for partners on the Iranian side. "JD is doing the job of what you're supposed to do with diplomacy, which is find people within the other side who are more willing to dialogue, and that's been a real key thing," the U.S. source told Drop Site. "And to be honest, it's diplomacy 101, when you go in and you assess the team: you always try to get as many people on the other team as possible, like you don't want it to be one on one. You want it to be like 12 on 12."

The Iranians also want to see an expansion of the size of the negotiating delegations, particularly technical experts and Iran country experts from the U.S. "We have also informed [Vance] that an expansion of our negotiating team provide a suitable opportunity for him to adjust the composition of his own delegation," said the senior Iran official.

"That being said, our assessment is that he is cautiously adding select members of his... team with expertise on the Middle East and Iran file, while facing significant constraints in making rapid changes to his team."

The Iranian official dismissed the suggestion Vance would be able to succeed in cultivating an Iranian source on the negotiating team. "The Iranian side has a small, stable team at the high levels, and the scope of their decisions is very clearly defined," the Iranian official said.

The Iranian official said that during the diplomatic talks in Oman and Switzerland before the war, Witkoff and Kushner showed up with no subject area or nuclear experts and appeared oblivious to the technical aspects of negotiating the nuclear issue. During these talks, he said, Iranian negotiators presented an outline of their existing stockpile of enriched uranium and assessed that their "unbelievable level of flexibility" formed the basis for what Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said on February 25 about the Iranians being willing to strike an unprecedented agreement."

Witkoff subsequently portrayed Iran's disclosure of its highly enriched uranium stockpile as a threat to build multiple nuclear weapons. "The Iranian negotiators said to us, directly, with, you know, no shame, that they controlled 460 kilograms of 60%, and they're aware that that could make 11 nuclear bombs, and that was the beginning of their negotiating stance," Witkoff said on Fox News on March 3, while defending the decision to attack Iran in the middle of negotiations.

While the Western press routinely characterize the Iranian negotiating team as in disarray, it has been the American side that has been hardest to read, as Trump has periodically disrupted talks with explicit death threats against negotiators, or promised widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure in Iran, after having agreed in the memorandum of understanding to stop leveling such threats.

Just as the talks between Iran and Vance began in Lucerne, Trump appeared to threaten the lives of Iran's negotiators, telling FOX News that if Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz again, "You won't have a country. You won't even make it back to your f**ing country." In response, Iran's delegation staged a walkout of the talks.

"Trump's [statements] during Vance's negotiations with the Iranian delegation in Pakistan and Switzerland [were] clearly intended to undermine Vance's position in the talks," said the Iranian official. "In practice, it ended up weakening his standing with the mediators as well."

The Iranians decided to pursue a direct channel to Vance after the MOU was signed, in part persuaded by mediators that the vice president had a genuine interest in reaching a lasting agreement and that he represented the long-term interests of the U.S. government. Trump, mediators told Iran, appeared driven primarily by his day-to-day feelings as to how the war or the ceasefire reflected on his image. Iran is aware of the political reality that Vance is jockeying for the Republican nomination to succeed Trump, giving him more of an incentive to reach a durable resolution.

"The mediators firmly maintain that President Trump's personal preferences and his disruptive interventions in the peace process are actions that undermine the peace efforts," said the Iranian official. "The mediators are making a distinction between Trump's representation and Trump's own positions. They're saying that Trump personally has an interest in keeping the image of the war going, while the U.S. establishment, represented by Vance, wants to bring the war to a conclusion."

Robert Malley, a former Middle East official under both President Barack Obama and Joe Biden who was also a top U.S. negotiator of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, said it is strategically sound for the Iranians to work to establish direct communication with Vance, but such a channel can only mean so much.

"Vance may be more authoritative than Kushner and Witkoff, but that hardly makes him authoritative," Malley told Drop Site. "If today's President Trump cannot speak for tomorrow's, then how could JD Vance?"

Still, he said, there's little harm in trying. "It makes perfect sense for the Iranians to try to establish a separate channel to Vice President Vance. He is the most senior U.S. official ever to have met with representatives of the Islamic Republic; he is known to have been skeptical of the war; a diplomatic breakthrough with Tehran would strengthen his political standing; and he is far more dependable than any of the available alternatives—namely, Kushner and Witkoff," he said. "However hard the vice president may try to persuade the Iranians that his word matters more than the president's latest outburst, they would probably be wiser to bet on the outburst rather than the word."

The future of any deal between Iran and the U.S. is very much in doubt. Trump formally informed Congress on July 10 that the U.S. is officially engaged in combat operations against Iran and he publicly declared the ceasefire dead. He has also suggested that diplomatic talks will continue. On Tuesday, Trump said that after new U.S. attacks there would not be "anybody left" in Iran.

From Iran's perspective, it's a familiar pattern of the U.S. constructing a mirage of negotiations between attacks. "Under the current circumstances, the U.S. side needs to reassess its understanding of the situation on the ground. They seem determined to test their chances of using force in relation to the Strait of Hormuz," said the Iranian official. "Our view is that once they fall again over the Strait of Hormuz, they'll almost certainly come back to the negotiating table. But by then, the negotiations definitely won't be as straightforward for them as they once were."

Update, Friday, July 17, 2026:

On Thursday, in response to Drop Site's reporting, Vance posted on X: "This is completely bogus. I never received a message like this. If I had, I would have said: Jared and Steve are trusted members of the president's team and very dear friends. No one has done more than the two of them to work towards peace and prosperity in the region. The idea they're trading on inside information is absurd."

"I see a lot of BS flying around and I normally just ignore it," he continued. "But Steve and Jared are good dudes and I'm honored to work with them."

After publication, the White House's Anna Kelly also provided a follow-up statement. "Experts have been involved in all of Special Envoy Witkoff and Mr. Kushner's negotiations. Currently, experts from the National Security Council, State Department, Energy Department, War Department, and more are all involved in Iran negotiations," Kelly said. "They have been involved in all stages of negotiations in Oman and elsewhere."

As reported by Drop Site and others at the time, the U.S. team negotiating in Oman and Geneva before the war did not include American nuclear experts.

Leave a comment

Share

5,474 Likes, 1,166 Remarks

5,474 36 1166 Share

← Previous Next →

Discussion about this post

Comments Remarks

Write a comment...

Istvan Kazi
Kushner and Witkoff isolate Vance. With Kushner having no official government position, how and why is he even there? Answer: To represent the family interest in the Gaza Riviera project.
LIKE (200) REPLY 1w ago

2 replies

Pete Hudson
I think Witkoff and Kushner are impossibly compromised, and also incompetent to deal with the task. How can Israel apologists possibly make a "deal" that will be fair to Iran. They are Netanyahu sock puppets. I am at a loss to understand how it is that Americans cannot see this.
LIKE (185) REPLY 1w ago

2 replies

14 more comments...

Top Latest Discussions

Trump issues another deadline to Iran; Strikes on universities, petrochemical plants; Israel strikes WHO vehicle in Gaza
Drop Site Daily: April 6, 2026
APR 6 • DROP SITE NEWS

UN says 3.2 million displaced in Iran; 48+ senators press Hegseth over Iran school bombing; Drone strikes in Sudan kill dozens of civilians
Drop Site Daily: March 12, 2026
MAR 12 • DROP SITE NEWS

U.S.-Iran ceasefire set to expire with talks in limbo; Gunman in Louisiana kills eight children; Israel's Gaza style "Yellow Line" in...
Drop Site Daily: April 20, 2026
APR 20 • DROP SITE NEWS

See all

Ready for more?

Type your email... Subscribe

© 2026 Drop Site News, Inc. Privacy · Terms · Collection notice

Start your Substack · Get this app

Substack is the home for great culture

Subscribe to Drop Site News