

What Trump wants from Iran talks – and what Tehran is prepared to give

Iran's nuclear programme, missile arsenal, militia network and crackdown on protesters could all feature in upcoming negotiations in Turkey.

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US President Donald Trump has repeatedly said he prefers to make a deal with Iran over going to war. But what's not clear is what type of deal he is willing to accept – or what compromises the Iranians are willing to make.

At the time of writing, the two sides agreed to negotiate and meet in Turkey on Friday, 6 February. US Special Envoy Steve Witkoff and Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi will meet in Istanbul, along with representatives from Saudi Arabia and Egypt, [Reuters reported](#).

Common sense suggests that the more maximalist Trump's demands are, the less likely Tehran will concede. In this case, military confrontation therefore becomes more likely. On the other hand, the more flexible Trump is, the more likely Tehran will cooperate and as a result, war becomes less likely.

So, what exactly is Trump asking for?

Iran's nuclear programme

In May of last year, Trump said he would accept nothing less than the 'total dismantlement' of Iran's nuclear programme. Last week, however, he said 'NO NUCLEAR WEAPONS.' But those are two very different things.

Every American president since George W. Bush has warned Iran against acquiring the bomb. If that is what Trump is seeking, then Tehran will happily bargain, lie, and conceal – as it always has – to avoid facing a far superior US military machine. It might give up its highly enriched nuclear material, but in return, keep its programme intact, essentially buying itself time until Trump leaves power so it can resume enrichment.

But if Trump insists on Iran terminating all of its nuclear programme, then Tehran most probably will not agree. This is not only because it has put in a lot of effort, time, and money into building its nuclear programme.

It's also because for Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, it will look like surrendering to the Americans, whom he views (just like his predecessor Khomeini did) as the 'Great Satan.' If it comes down to it, Khamenei might decide to take his chances by fighting (and hope Trump doesn't finish off the regime, given his aversion to open-ended wars) rather than signing a capitulation agreement with his arch-enemy.

Missile arsenal and protests

The nuclear programme is not the only important issue at play. Iran's missile arsenal and its regional militia network will also likely feature in negotiations. And there are also the freedom aspirations of the Iranian people, especially in the light of the regime's recent crackdown on protests.

At first, Trump seemed to show care for the protesters, threatening to bomb Iran if the regime didn't stop killing them. But now, his focus seems to have shifted. That shouldn't be shocking, though. The harsh reality is that human rights in Iran have not been the priority for Trump or any American president before him when dealing with the Islamic Republic. The priority has always been security.

On Iran's missiles, about which Israel and the Gulf Arab states worry a lot, it's even more complicated than the nuclear programme. It's doubtful, if not inconceivable, that Iran will give up the only shield that's preventing its adversaries from toppling its regime.

The bargaining range on the nuclear programme is wider than it is on the missiles, on which Khamenei and his generals are unlikely to make any concessions. Similar to his logic on totally giving up the nuclear programme, Khamenei might as well use those missiles in a war for survival instead of giving them up and thus making Iran especially vulnerable to future attacks.

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Regional proxies

The biggest space for bargaining, perhaps, is on Tehran's regional proxies. Those actors – the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Yemeni Houthis, the Iraqi militias, and the Palestinian Hamas and Islamic Jihad – are important tools for Iran to project power. But unlike the missiles and the nuclear programme, they're not existential issues over which Tehran can't negotiate.

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If Iran can avoid a war with the US by abandoning (or pretending to abandon) some or all of its regional allies, it might just consider it. Plus, the Iranians know it will be incredibly difficult for the US to constantly monitor and enforce such an agreement. Tehran has vast experience in smuggling weapons and cash to regional militias.

Will Iran concede?

Trump has deployed a massive amount of firepower in the region seemingly to force Iran to make a deal with some serious concessions. Secretary of State Marco Rubio is right: the Islamic Republic is at [its weakest point](#) since its birth in 1979, so for Washington, this is the perfect time to make strong demands.

But if Iran doesn't budge, then the worst thing Trump can do is launch a symbolic or limited strike (or none at all), settle for a disadvantageous or ambiguous deal, and claim some kind of diplomatic victory. That would absolutely torpedo US credibility and embolden the regime like never before.

At this point, given what Trump has asked for, what he has threatened, and what he has dispatched to the region in terms of combat power, the only acceptable outcome for Washington is an advantageous deal, reached peacefully or through military strikes, that verifiably and permanently ends Iran's path to nuclear weapons, limits its missile arsenal, and terminates its links with proxies.

Would that honour the hopes and dreams of the Iranian people? No. Washington, like regional powers, except Israel, prefers a weakened regime in Tehran over the chaos of a regime collapse that will have great repercussions across the region.

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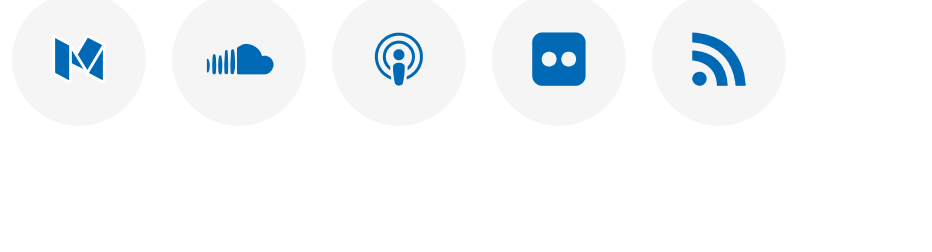
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