

# Can Trump Be a Peace President on Iran?

by Riccardo Alcaro

Three months into his second term, US President Donald Trump has little to show on his electoral promise to bring peace to the bloody conflicts unfolding in Europe and the Middle East. The way in which he tried to broker talks between Russia and Ukraine, making preliminary concessions to the former and putting pressure on the latter, has raised more concerns than hopes.<sup>1</sup> And when Israel broke the ceasefire with Hamas that Trump himself had boasted – with good reason – to have facilitated, the United States did not put up any resistance but actually encouraged it.<sup>2</sup> Against this backdrop, the meeting in Oman between US and Iranian representatives is a welcome news that should however be treated with extreme caution.

<sup>1</sup> Riccardo Alcaro, "Trump's Call with Putin Raises Great Concerns, Few Hopes", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 25|08 (February 2025), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/19524>.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Krauss, "Why Did Netanyahu End the Gaza Ceasefire?", in *AP News*, 18 March 2025, <https://apnews.com/ff48f081b069e484955a72bc68261364>.

## *Epistolary exchanges*

The stakes are high. Trump keeps evoking the spectre of a massive bombing campaign against Iran's nuclear programme to prevent Tehran from acquiring an atomic bomb.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, he maintains he would rather solve the issue diplomatically, as he reportedly put in a letter sent to Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic Ali Khamenei.<sup>4</sup> Iran denies it wants nuclear weapons, although it has never been able to explain why it has undertaken activities that have no civilian application (the general consensus, shared by the US intelligence, is that Iran aims at a

<sup>3</sup> Doina Chiacu and David Ljunggren, "Trump Threatens Bombing if Iran Does Not Make Nuclear Deal", in *Reuters*, 31 March 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-says-there-will-be-bombing-if-iran-does-not-make-nuclear-deal-2025-03-30>.

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Wintour, "Trump Says He Wrote to Iran and Wants to Negotiate Nuclear Weapons Deal", in *The Guardian*, 7 March 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/xxyzf7>.

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nuclear weapon capacity rather than a deterrent per se, as a form of insurance).<sup>5</sup> While condemning Trump's belligerent rhetoric, Iran is ready to talk over the nuclear issue on a basis of mutual respect; at least, this supposedly is the substance of Khamenei's response letter to the US president.<sup>6</sup>

The Iranians have good reasons to mistrust Trump. It was he who in 2018 unilaterally withdrew the United States from the nuclear deal that Iran and six world powers – the United States, China, Russia and the so-called 'E3' (France, Germany and the United Kingdom) plus the EU – had painstakingly negotiated in July 2015.<sup>7</sup> Following the US withdrawal from that deal, known as Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA, Iran greatly expanded its nuclear activities.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Tulsi Gabbard, *Opening Statement - Congressional Testimony: Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, US Senate, 25 March 2025, p. 5, <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/hearings/open-hearing-worldwide-threats-5>; Marc Rod, "Gabbard: Iran Is Not Currently Developing Nuclear Weapons", in *Jewish Insider*, 25 March 2025, <https://jewishinsider.com/2025/03/gabbard-iran-is-not-currently-developing-nuclear-weapons>.

<sup>6</sup> "Iran to Respond to Trump Letter after Scrutiny", in *Reuters*, 17 March 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-will-respond-trump-letter-after-full-scrutiny-ministry-spokesperson-says-2025-03-17>; Seyed Abbas Araghchi, "Iran's Foreign Minister: The Ball Is in America's Court", in *The Washington Post*, 8 April 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2025/04/08/iran-indirect-negotiations-united-states/>; "Iran Responds to Trump Letter on Nuclear Talks, State Media Reports", in *Al Jazeera*, 27 March 2025, <https://aje.io/fqk8rj>.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Landler, "Trump Abandons Iran Nuclear Deal He Long Scorned", in *The New York Times*, 8 May 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/world/middleeast/trump-iran-nuclear-deal.html>.

<sup>8</sup> The trajectory of Iran's nuclear activities can

### *Iran's motives*

The Oman meeting is a first step towards the restoration of a minimum degree of trust. The high seniority of the people involved is reassuring: Trump's Middle East envoy and close confidant Steve Witkoff (who also handles the Russia dossier) and Iran's foreign minister Seyed Abbas Araghchi would not be involved had the two parties' not been serious in their intentions and ambitious in their goals. Considering that the Biden Administration tried for years to break the wall of Iran's refusal of direct and high-level contacts, Trump may have scored an important point.

A number of reasons explain Iran's greater flexibility. One is President Masoud Pezeshkian's stated desire to relaunch the economy, whose growth potential has been severely stymied by years of draconian US sanctions with extraterritorial reach.<sup>9</sup>

Another is the unsustainability of the current impasse on the nuclear front, where Iran keeps accumulating material potentially employable in warheads while keeping it just short of the weapon-grade threshold. By the summer the E3 will have to decide whether to start a procedure known as 'snapback' that would lead to the almost automatic re-adoption of all

be traced on the website of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN nuclear watchdog: *Verification and Monitoring in Iran*, <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/focus/iran>.

<sup>9</sup> Bijan Khajepour, "The Iranian Economy under President Pezeshkian", in *Amwaj media*, 26 July 2024, <https://amwaj.media/en/article/the-iranian-economy-under-president-pezeshkian>.

UN sanctions on Iran that had been lifted pursuant to the JCPOA.<sup>10</sup> While the impact would be more symbolic than practical – UN sanctions would add little that US extraterritorial sanctions do not cover already –, Iran would feel compelled to retaliate to what it would perceive as an injustice: after all, it only breached the JCPOA after the US original violation, which remains unpunished. Iran could go as far as to leave the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, to which it is a party as a non-nuclear state, or at least kick out UN nuclear inspectors. Either way, it would make Iran a pariah and would strengthen calls for military action to prevent Tehran's nuclear breakout. Oman's mediation (tellingly, not Europe's, despite the fact that the E3 and the EU had played an essential role in the JCPOA process) has come in handy in this regard.<sup>11</sup>

Iranian concerns are not misplaced. Anti-Iran hawks in Israel, starting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and in the United States, where they abound from Congress to think tanks, believe this is the ideal timing to deal a decisive blow to the head of the Iran-promoted 'axis of resistance', which in the past months has seen Hamas decimated and Hezbollah downgraded by Israel and Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria liquefy.<sup>12</sup> Trump-ordered air

strikes on the Houthis, Iran's allies in Yemen, and redeployment of B-2 stealth bombers carrying 'bunker-busters' bombs to the US base of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, within reach of Iran's nuclear facilities, have reinforced the credibility of the threat.<sup>13</sup>

A final reason behind Iran's openness to talk is that, however hard the negotiation and uncertain the outcome, a deal with Trump would likely have the backing of most Republicans – and, albeit grudgingly, many Democrats too – and would therefore be less susceptible to being cancelled by future administrations, like Trump did to the JCPOA. Because he would face less opposition, the Iranians also hope that Trump could put on the table the reopening of direct Iran-US trade, whereas the 2015 agreement focused mainly on the resumption of Europe-Iran trade.

### Negotiation prospects

The purpose of the Oman meeting is to explore initial position and test the parties' readiness to make

<sup>10</sup> Faramarz Davar, "How the Snapback Mechanism Brings Back Sanctions on Iran", in *IranWire*, 25 November 2024, <https://iranwire.com/en/article/136431>.

<sup>11</sup> Riccardo Alcaro, *Europe and Iran's Nuclear Crisis. Lead Groups and EU Foreign Policy-Making*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Isabel Kershner, "Some Israelis Favor Attacking Iran, Expressing Skepticism About Talks", in *The New York Times*, 8 April 2025,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/08/world/middleeast/israel-iran-reaction.html>; Marc Rod and Emily Jacobs, "Lawmakers, National Security Experts Skeptical of Trump's Iran Diplomacy", in *Jewish Insider*, 10 April 2025, <https://jewishinsider.com/2025/04/iran-diplomacy-witkoff-trump-national-security-experts-lawmakers>. Amongst the Washington-based think tanks, several advocate for a tough line on Iran, most notably the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (which is registered as a foreign lobby organisation).

<sup>13</sup> Brad Lendon, Haley Briztky and Avery Schmitz, "US Moves B-2 Stealth Bombers to Indian Ocean Island in Massive Show of force to Houthies, Iran", in *CNN*, 2 April 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/04/02/middleeast/us-b2-bombers-diego-garcia-intl-hnk-ml/index.html>.

concessions. Iran may want to push for an interim deal that would freeze tension while laying the groundwork for a comprehensive agreement.<sup>14</sup> What the Trump Administration wants is anyone's guess.

At the cost of oversimplification, the Administration hosts two main views on Iran. The first school of thought, favoured by Secretary of State Marco Rubio and National Security Advisor Mike Waltz, a number of Republicans (and a few Democrats) in Congress as well as Netanyahu, pushes for maximalist demands.<sup>15</sup> Not only would

<sup>14</sup> Barak Ravid, "Scoop: Iran Wants to Explore Interim Nuclear Deal in Talks with U.S., Sources Say", in *Axios*, 11 April 2025, <https://www.axios.com/2025/04/10/iran-nuclear-deal-us-interim-agreement>.

<sup>15</sup> Jose Pelayo, "What a Secretary of State Rubio Means for the Middle East: Getting Tougher on Iran and Tighter with Allies", in *MENASource*, 21 January 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=819935>; Steven Sorace, "Waltz Tells Iran to Give Up Nuclear Program or 'There Will Be Consequences'", in *Fox News*, 23 March 2025, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/waltz-tells-iran-give-up-nuclear-program-there-consequences>; Bob Agnew, "Senator Cotton to Iran: 'Deal with Trump or Be Bombed'", in *SRN News*, 8 April 2025, <https://srnnews.com/audio-news/senator-cotton-to-iran-deal-with-trump-or-be-bombed>; "Fetterman: I Fully Support Partnering with Israel to Bomb Iran's Nuclear Facilities", in *Pittsburgh Jewish Chronicle*, 20 March 2025, <https://jewishchronicle.timesofisrael.com/fetterman-i-fully-support-partnering-with-israel-to-bomb-irans-nuclear-facilities>; Lazar Berman, "Netanyahu Says Iran Deal Will Only Work If Nuclear Facilities Blown Up, Otherwise Military Force Needed", in *The Times of Israel*, 8 April 2025, [https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/netanyahu-says-iran-deal-will-only-work-if-nuclear-facilities-blown-up-otherwise-military-force-needed](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/netanyahu-says-iran-deal-will-only-work-if-nuclear-facilities-blown-up-otherwise-military-force-needed); "Netanyahu Says Iran Should Blow Up Own Nuclear Sites under US Supervision", in *Zero Hedge*, 9 April 2025, <https://www.zerohedge.com/geopolitical/netanyahu-says-iran-should-blow-own-nuclear-sites-under-us-supervision>.

Iran have to dismantle the whole nuclear programme, but it would also be required to downgrade its ballistic arsenal and cut off ties with the militias, from Hezbollah and the Houthis to the Popular Mobilisation Forces in Iraq, which make up its cherished axis of resistance. If this line were to prevail, the chances of a diplomatic breakthrough are close to zero.

The alternative path is for the US Administration to aim for a "Verifiable Nuclear Peace Agreement", as Trump himself put it – excellently, it should be added – weeks ago.<sup>16</sup> This goal is compatible with Iran's position. If the parties were to agree beforehand that this is the expected outcome of the negotiation, the question – complex but far from insolvable – would be how to set new limits to Iran's nuclear work and create an effective verification system (the two problems the drafters of the JCPOA also had to address).

### *The costs of failure*

The benefits of an agreement are evident, in terms of both nuclear non-proliferation and regional stability. In addition, the resumption of direct trade with the United States would give Iran incentives to avoid to fully align with Russia and China, as it has been doing in the past years also due to US ostracism.

On the other hand, a bombing "the likes of which they have never seen

<sup>16</sup> Michael D. Shear, "Trump Torpedoed the Iran Nuclear Deal. Now He's Calling for Another One", in *The New York Times*, 5 February 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/05/us/politics/trump-iran-nuclear-deal.html>.

before”,<sup>17</sup> to use Trump’s disgustingly crude vocabulary, presents potentially immense costs against very uncertain benefits. Air strikes could bring the nuclear programme back a few years even, but not destroy it altogether. An Iran under attack would have few qualms about seeking a nuclear deterrent, which would compel the United States and Israel to strike again and again, at intervals, perhaps for years. Nor would the conflict remain limited to the Islamic Republic: US forces in the area, Israel, and commercial shipping in the Gulf would all become targets of the kind of asymmetric warfare Iran and its allies excel at. Human loss would be considerable (in the thousands possibly), adding to the misery of a region that in the XXI century has known more war than any other place.

It is no coincidence that in the MAGA area of American conservatism, which includes Vice-President JD Vance and star podcaster Tucker Carlson as honorary members, the possibility of war with Iran is seen as smoke and mirrors.<sup>18</sup> Regrettably, this could not be enough to prevent this ominous

scenario. The Trump Administration does not seem to have a clear strategic orientation and, worse still, is staffed with inexperienced people (or even incompetent people, as the Signal scandal painfully proves).<sup>19</sup> It could well be that it does not have the wherewithal – the patience, discipline and diplomatic sophistication – to handle a technically complex negotiation.

Even if an agreement is indeed achieved, there is the risk that it could resemble the ridiculously vague statement on the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula jointly released by Trump and North Korea’s leader Kim Jong-un in 2018 rather than the 100-plus page long, hyper-technical and detailed JCPOA.<sup>20</sup> Resisting pressure from the anti-Iran lobby, which has in Netanyahu and his backers in Congress formidable champions, a hard task already during the talks, would become even more difficult due to the vagueness of the deal’s terms.

Then again, Trump had no problem to have the meeting in Oman take place only a couple of days after he

<sup>17</sup> “Trump Threatens ‘There Will Be Bombing’ if Iran Fails to Make Deal on Nukes”, in *The Times of Israel*, 30 March 2025, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/trump-threatens-there-will-be-bombing-if-iran-fails-to-make-peace-deal>.

<sup>18</sup> Jacob Magid, “Vance: US and Israeli Interests Won’t Always Overlap; We Don’t Want War with Iran”, in *The Times of Israel*, 29 October 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/vance-us-and-israeli-interests-wont-always-overlap-we-dont-want-war-with-iran>; Justin Baragona, “Can Tucker Carlson Talk Trump down from Escalating War with Iran? He’s Done It Before”, in *The Independent*, 18 March 2025, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/tucker-carlson-trump-iran-war-b2717358.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Trump Administration Accidentally Texted Me Its War Plans”, in *The Atlantic*, 24 March 2025, <https://www.theatlantic.com/article/682151>.

<sup>20</sup> White House, *Joint Statement of President Donald J. Trump of the United States of America and Chairman Kim Jong Un of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea at the Singapore Summit*, 12 June 2028, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/joint-statement-president-donald-j-trump-united-states-america-chairman-kim-jong-un-democratic-peoples-republic-korea-singapore-summit>; US Department of State website: *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action*, 14 July 2025, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/e/eb/tfs/spi/iran/jcpoa/index.htm>.

once again welcomed the Israeli prime minister to the White House.<sup>21</sup> It could be that Trump is on Iran more autonomous from the hawks than his detractors tend to believe. One can only wish this is indeed the case, combining hope with great, dispassionate caution.

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<sup>21</sup> "Report: US Only Told Netanyahu It Was Talking with Iran after He Got to DC; Trump Did Not Promise that Deal Would Meet PM's Demands", in *The Times of Israel*, 8 April 2025, [https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/report-us-only-told-netanyahu-it-was-talking-with-iran-after-he-got-to-dc-trump-did-not-promise-that-deal-would-meet-pms-demands](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/report-us-only-told-netanyahu-it-was-talking-with-iran-after-he-got-to-dc-trump-did-not-promise-that-deal-would-meet-pms-demands).

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