

# INTERVIEW

by MATIS GLENN



STEVE WITKOFF

ABBAS ARAGCHI

# IRAN TALKS CONTINUE

## WHERE ARE THEY HEADED?

**President Donald Trump says he'll use the proverbial nuclear option to stop Iran from becoming just that. He's given Iran a strict ultimatum – agree to a deal or he and Israel will obliterate the terror-sponsoring Islamist country's nuclear capabilities.**

**However, Trump has also signaled that he strongly prefers diplomacy, having somewhat held back Israel from planned strikes. "I didn't stop them," Trump said in an interview with Time magazine, regarding his dissuasion of Israel from attacking Iran. "But I didn't make it comfortable for them, because I think we can make a deal without the attack."**

**Trump is even willing to accept what some speculate to be a Trumped-up version of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA deal, which, according to its many critics, did not provide sufficient oversight from the U.N.'s watchdog group, prevent Uranium enrichment or guarantee Israel's security from terrorism – the same deal the President withdrew from in 2018.**

**Two indirect talks were held prior to this interview, one in Oman and another in Rome, with the assistance of intermediaries. A third, also in Oman, was held over the weekend and a fourth was reportedly planned for May.**

**Meanwhile, U.S. Mideast Envoy Steve Witkoff is somehow finding time alongside his involvement in the Gaza situation to steward talks with the Iranians, and, recently, Saudi Arabia's foreign minister paid a visit to Tehran.**

**To understand the evolving landscape, Hamodia spoke with DANIEL ROTH, Research Director for United Against Nuclear Iran, a non-profit policy advocacy group dedicated to preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons.**



**Can you help us make sense of the various circulating reports, including some who say that Iran is agreeing to limit its Uranium enrichment?**

There is certainly, I'd say, mixed messaging from the negotiating team, and that includes President Trump's White House team, Secretary Rubio, National Security Advisor Waltz, etc. There seems to be a little bit of a rift as to which way is the best to go. You've got diplomacy, or, what might be characterized as diplomacy on one hand, whereas the other side is more of this is a good chance to really be much stronger on Iran right now. But I think there is unison on the tactic, or the negotiating strategy, at least for the next month or so, and that is to give talks a real chance.

I think they realize they are dealing with some very experienced people in [Abbas] Araghchi and the Iranian negotiating team. They've been around as insiders, as regime insiders, for decades really, and there's not much of a rift on the Iranian side. So obviously that's something that the Iranians can use to their advantage, and, indeed, I think they are using that to their advantage. But, as you know, there have been two talks so far, one in Oman, one in Rome, and it's been indirect on both occasions. And there's going to be a third talk on Saturday. It was supposed to happen today, actually, but that got postponed. It's difficult to make too many prognostications, because things that we learn from those two talks... there's been a tight lid. But, you know, we can speculate about what's going to happen and where the Trump team is. So that's the basic outline.

**There are some people who say that Trump wants a deal quickly. He wants to avoid Iran getting a nuclear weapon, but he's willing, possibly, to have a similar JCPOA agreement. Trump, as you know, pulled out of the JCPOA in his first administration.**

**As you mentioned, there were others in the administration who are taking a harder**



Gavriil Grigorov, Sputnik, Kremlin Pool Photo  
via AP

Russian President Vladimir Putin (R) and President Donald Trump's special envoy, Steve Witkoff, shake hands prior to their talks in St. Petersburg, Russia, April 11.

### line approach. In Trump's world, what would his deal look like? Is it only like an augmented version of the JCPOA? Would it actually prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon?

No, if this deal turns out to be simply another version of the JCPOA, then no, that is not going to be acceptable. That would be, in my view, a very bad deal. I've seen a lot of skepticism about the trajectory of this deal from colleagues, from people in the think tank world. And they are very skeptical about where this is going. I don't know. I'm a little bit more optimistic, because, ultimately, I think Trump understands what a good deal is and what a bad deal is. The latest thing that I heard him say was that not only will he not permit Iran to have a nuclear weapon, he's not going to allow the concept of a nuclear weapon. So, passing that, I think we can say it's going to go much beyond the JCPOA. The JCPOA allowed Iran — this was the key — it allowed Iran to have the full enrichment cycle, you know, enriching Uranium up to the purity of 3.67%, and this was one of the big fatal flaws of that original JCPOA. As you point to, there have been some rumors that this new Trump potential deal may allow the same kind of thing, although I think that has now been walked back a couple of times. We saw [Steve] Witkoff, who's the lead negotiator, he kind of alluded to that 3.67%, but then I think we may have seen Secretary Rubio kind of clarify that and say it could be that Iran is simply allowed to import, from a third party, Uranium that is enriched to that so that would

preclude Iran from having the full enrichment cycle. But yes, if it turns out to be something similar to the JCPOA, then, yes, that would be a bad deal. There's also the issue of whether it's permanent or whether it's time-limited. Another big thing, the big problem, with the JCPOA, as you know, many of the restrictions are set to lift in six months, October of this year.

Iran is kind of counting on probably stalling the Americans up until October 2025, when it has even more leverage. And this is something that we've noticed at United Against Nuclear Iran, we've noticed that they are actually damping down their anti-Americanism, the rhetoric about "Death to America"; we're not seeing that quite so much in the last few weeks. I'm a little bit more optimistic that when it comes down to it, I think Trump knows what a good deal is. He knows that it has to be permanent, something that, as I said, the JCPOA last time did severely lack. It was a huge, huge omission.

### You mentioned the October deadline. Is that the reason why in recent months, Trump has been giving ultimatums?

I don't think that's the primary reason; I think that certainly is factoring into his calculus. I think, really, it's just that Trump wants things done on the Trump timeline. And I don't think he's really thinking about this October deadline too much; it's a technical thing, really, some restrictions come off. And then in another five years, the whole JCPOA, everything comes off. Iran can do what it wants. It's basically

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TATYANA MAKEYEVA/POOL  
PHOTO VIA AP

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi attends a news conference following his meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Moscow, Russia, April 18.



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a glide path to full nuclear weaponization, if it chooses to. And it would be legal under international law.

Trump just wants things done. He doesn't particularly want or like this issue. He just wants it off his plate. He would love to get a deal with maximalist demands, and that's what he's going for at the moment. But really, I think Americans, and Trump himself, they really want to focus on America, and that means kind of taking this off the plate as soon as he can.

### Is Trump open to not insisting that Iran abandon its terror proxies in the Middle East, or will that be a crucial element of the talks?

That would certainly be one of the more difficult things to demand, for sure. To Trump's credit, he was very strong on this, the fact that the JCPOA didn't address all this support for the terrorist proxies that are threatening Israel, not just threatening Israel, but attacking Israel and, indeed, U.S. allies around the region. I imagine Trump might be satisfied with something that goes beyond arms control... Arms control, really, that was just the JCPOA. So that means no Uranium enrichment inside Iran, accounting for the weaponization, the nuclear weaponization, that has to be completely off the table. And I think something that would certainly help with the terror angle is to address the ballistic missile program. Obviously, you need the ballistic missiles to attach these nuclear warheads to if you're going to have the weapons. So I imagine he's thinking, if we can pull off all of those things and possibly not get into the terrorism at the terror-support angle, that might be sufficient.

### On the Israeli side, they wouldn't be very happy with that. Would such a deal strain relations with Israel?

That's such a fine line. Israel obviously is right in the crosshairs; not as much as the U.S., but you may have seen again today Trump himself or Rubio saying that Trump and Israel are aligned on everything. I agree with the premise. Israel wants Iran to stop funding and supporting its terrorist proxies. I just don't think that's realistic.

Ultimately, the Iranians are their own worst enemies when it comes to this kind of thing. They want huge sanctions relief, they want foreign investment, but they are, to their core, an antisemitic regime. That is the whole basis of their existence.

The reason they came to power in '79 was to destroy Israel, really.

I mentioned they're tamping down their anti-Americanism as a negotiating tactic. There's been no such tamping down of antisemitism, in terms of their desire to destroy the world's only Jewish state. That is never going away as long as the mullahs are in power.

And likewise, their funding of these anti-Israel proxy terrorist groups, that's also not going away as long as the mullahs are in power.

### Iran stands to gain from the deal the removal of its sanctions; if that happens, Iran could become much wealthier. Would that see a boost to regional terrorism?

Yeah, absolutely. Given the fungibility of money, anything that goes into Iran, a big portion of it goes directly to the regime, and specifically to the IRGC [Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps], which is the terrorist arm of the Iranian regime.

Even if you're investing in an accounting firm or a bank, or anything unrelated to terrorism, that money will ultimately somehow find its way to the IRGC. They take their cut, basically, of whatever you do.

So, yes, there is a strong rationale for just saying we should not be dealing with the Iranians at all, because it's the nature of this regime to simply keep funding terrorism.

And a good deal, in my eyes, is going to have to be very, very strong, and a bad deal is very possible if anything does get signed.

The Israelis are talking about just taking the maximalist option and beyond; using the military option, and just destroying those nuclear facilities once and for all, or at least delaying them by decades.

### What would be the best deal that Trump can get out of the Iranians?

It's definitely the Uranium enrichment that has to be back to the red line of zero. It has to restore ballistic missile restrictions, which are now lifted; that includes imports, exports, etc...

Anywhere, anytime access to all the nuclear sites; the IAEA has to have robust oversight at all times. That's got to be an absolute foundation stone to any deal.

And then it's, as you were talking about, the terrorist funding and financing.

If they can get all that, plus the terrorism stuff, then that would be an excellent deal, I think, and Israel would probably be very happy with it.

But whether they can convince Iran to stop the terrorist funding; I'm very skeptical on that particular point.

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Trump's stated vision for the Middle East would be a U.S., Gulf State, Israel, and even Saudi Arabian alliance against Iran and its allies. Saudi Arabia's foreign minister recently visited Iran. Is there a certain warming of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and, if so, would that embolden Iran to not be as agreeable in the negotiations?

Yeah, it's interesting.

The Saudis, I think, have been scarred a little bit by the experience over the last four years under the Biden administration, which, for example, took the Foreign Terrorist Organization label off of the Houthis, who are obviously a hugely anti-Saudi terrorist group funded by Iran. That was one of the first foreign policy decisions the Biden team made. And they didn't enforce the existing sanctions clearly.

From the beginning, Biden and his team, Secretary Blinken as he was at the time, wanted to get a new JCPOA, to get back into it. It was a similar kind of accommodation with Iran.

So now Saudis are thinking, "Well, the Americans, they have not proved strong and robust allies over the past four years." They're hedging their bets. They're waiting to see what happens. They don't want to obviously kick the hornet's nest with Tehran across the Persian Gulf. But Iran is much more wary of America and Israel than of the Saudis, just in terms of the military threat that America and Israel can pose compared to Saudi Arabia.

But it is an extra little element that one has to account for.

Would Iran feel less pressure if they're able to, say, enter into economic relationships with the Saudis despite U.S. sanctions?

I don't think it's as significant as the main dynamic, which is the U.S. and Israel versus Iran.

So, not really, I think, is the short response.

On the Saudi side, they obviously don't want Iran to have nuclear weapons.

That is certainly a red line for them.

And if Iran does break out and get it, Saudi Arabia is going to demand the same thing; another reason Iran should not have nuclear weapons.

We don't want to see more nations have nukes, Russian nukes, then Egypt will get involved, etc.

You mentioned earlier that part of the deal under discussion would be Iran outsourcing its nuclear energy needs to a third party – a third party that it would choose, and presumably it would be Russia or maybe Turkey. How would we trust any country that's willing to do business with Iran in that way?

Although the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) gets a lot of criticism, I do think it is a very trustworthy agency. In particular, the Director General, Rafael Grossi; he calls balls and strikes. Any transfers could be overseen by the IAEA.

I wouldn't have too many concerns. Russia and Iran have an interesting transactional relationship right now. Iran is supplying drones to Russia for its invasion and occupation of Ukraine. Rus-

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi  
Telegram messaging app channel via AP

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi (third R) attends a meeting with his colleagues during negotiations with U.S. Mideast envoy Steve Witkoff, in Rome, Italy, April 19.



sia gives a lot of diplomatic cover to Iran. Putin, Khamenei, and the Prime Minister — they're on pretty friendly terms. But ultimately, like the rest of the world — and that includes China — they simply don't want Iran to have these nukes, or as Trump says, the “concept” of these nukes, because that's no good for Russian security at the end of the day.

Especially as Iran is pretty much one country away from Russia's border. So I wouldn't be too concerned about the technical details of transferring this low-enriched Uranium under a potential deal.

### Any other insights you might have on the current situation with Iran?

Just for your readers; I think it's something worth tracking. I mentioned they're dampening down their anti-Americanism as a negotiating tactic right now. But very significantly, they're doubling down on the antisemitism in the form of wanting to destroy the world's only Jewish state. I just saw, before you called, that the Iranians put out a video about assassinating Netanyahu. If it's up to them, they genuinely would; the threat against Israel is very real.

They're not even willing to pretend to put it away for even a month while negotiations are going on, whereas they are prepared to put away their anti-

Americanism just for negotiating tactics.

That's something Witkoff and the team should be very, very aware of as they go into this third round.

### One other question about Witkoff. He's the head representative of the U.S. side in both Israel and Gaza — and now in Iran.

How is one person able to handle that much? Both fronts are extremely deep geopolitical issues.

### Is Trump making a mistake by having one person in charge of two fronts like that?

I'd be hesitant to criticize the choice. The President has a very good relationship with him; he's a Trump loyalist. He's apparently an excellent negotiator, but time will tell.

If the deal is a bad deal, then I'll be very happy to criticize Witkoff, but for now, I don't know.

Because of all the technical details in a potential deal, it's not going to be Witkoff himself who agrees to all that. In terms of the high-level things, though, he understands the President's mind and what the President wants out of it. We'll have to wait and see. ■