

IRAN'S VERSION OF THE "ART OF THE DEAL"

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INTRODUCTION

As the U.S. weighs its approach to talks with the Islamic Republic of Iran, it is critical to understand the negotiating playbook Tehran brings to the table. While U.S. diplomats may believe each party approaches negotiations in the same manner, the Islamic Republic's strategy has ultimately been shaped by the Iranian-Islamist psyche – the narrow constituency that makes-up the elite – which is distinctively different from the Western mindset. In order for Western negotiators to understand the Iranian negotiating strategy, it is essential for them to comprehend the nuances of the Iranian-Islamist rationale.

For decades, Iranian negotiators have refined a strategy designed not to find compromise, but to manipulate, stall, and extract. These aren't tactics of goodwill or mutual understanding – they are calculated moves rooted in ideology, misdirection, and an overwhelming desire to weaken the West.

Iran's version of "Art of the Deal" isn't about boldness or instinct – it's about ambiguity, delay, and deception, wrapped in cultural codes and weaponized narratives. This briefing, drawn from first-hand accounts, unpacks the tactics Tehran uses to bend negotiations to its advantage – while giving up as little as possible. Understanding these ten key moves isn't just useful – it's essential.

TEN NEGOTIATION TACTICS

Deception: The Grass Can Be Greener

Promise vague future rewards to keep talks alive without offering anything concrete.

Good Cop, Bad Cop

Exploit the illusion of political pluralism—use “moderates” vs. “hardliners” to extract concessions, even though all power lies with the Supreme Leader.

The Promise of Lucrative Post-Sanctions Business Opportunities

Dangle phantom investment deals to lure Western governments and companies—then pull the rug.

Fanciful Alarmist Threats

Issue exaggerated threats to stir anti-war sentiment and paralyze tough policymaking in the U.S.

The Art of Ambiguity

Resist clear commitments; rely on vague language to allow deniability while still benefiting from deals.

Running Down the Clock and Cosmetic Concessions

Engage in endless, exhausting talks to delay action, offering superficial gestures to avoid real consequences.

A Post-Colonial Victimization Narrative

Invoke historical grievances to justify current behavior and shift blame onto the West.

Divide and Conquer

Cause and exploit rifts within Western alliances—between the U.S. and Europe and between the U.S. and Israel

Baazari Mentality and Taarof

Use bazaar-style haggling tactics—start high, concede slow, cloak intentions in false politeness.

Influence and Information Operations

Leak selectively, spin the media narrative, polarize U.S. policymaking and influence U.S. public perceptions of Iran.

As the Trump administration's negotiations with the Islamic Republic of Iran begin, United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI) can reveal ten strategies employed by Iranian diplomats. These are derived from direct accounts from individuals who have first-hand experience in negotiating and dealing with Iranian officials, native Iranian policy experts, as well as from observations from veteran Iran watchers.

These unique tactics used by the Iranian negotiators are designed to achieve **maximum gains with minimum concessions** and comprise the Iranian version of the "Art of the Deal."

Deception: The Grass Can be Greener

The Persian proverb "Dar bāgh- e sabz neshān dādan" (در باغ سبز نشان دادن) literally translates "to show the green garden" and is used to describe someone who paints an overly optimistic or deceptive picture of reality—essentially, promising the moon or offering false hope. In the context of negotiation, this proverb fits perfectly. Iranian negotiators might sometimes "show the green garden" to keep the other side engaged—offering vague promises, hinting at future concessions, or suggesting more agreement than actually exists, all without committing to anything concrete. It is a way to buy time, keep discussions ongoing, or manage the tone of the conversation through empty promises. "Dar bāgh- e sabz rā be hameh neshān midahand, vali na hameh rā bāgh dārand" — they may show everyone the green garden, but they don't let you actually enter it and enjoy its fruits. This is precisely the case in relation to [promising](#) U.S. businesses investment opportunities in Iran — as a green garden — but without any authority to do so and later citing legal or political restraints to block this.

Iranian officials have also been hawking future high-level meetings, easy diplomatic wins to the Trump administration—as long as a deal is inked on the regime's own terms—and the possibility such an agreement could garner a Nobel Peace Prize. These gimmicks are meant to try to mask the fact that the Iranians are offering nothing more than the concessions it made to President Obama under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) of 2015.

Good Cop, Bad Cop

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei — who holds absolute power — has long employed a "good cop, bad cop" approach in negotiations with the West. This is something the Islamic Republic is already operationalizing in talks with the Trump administration. The approach is aimed at extracting maximum concessions and deployed through the false dichotomy of viewing Iranian politics through the lens of reformists vs. hardliners, even though true power in the Islamic Republic is centralized and in the hands of the Supreme Leader. Iranian negotiators deploy this "good cop, bad cop" strategy by presenting the idea that concessions, namely sanctions relief, made by the other side are necessary to empower so-called reformists, or moderates, at the expense of hardliners, who seek confrontation and conflict.

Iranian negotiators will also give the impression – and even directly communicate – that they are under immense pressure from hardliners to minimize concessions from Tehran. Iranian officials and their supporters abroad even use this narrative to attempt to create an equivalence between so-called Iran hawks in the U.S. and their own radicals at home as spoilers for diplomacy to produce the illusion that the Islamic Republic – a totalitarian dictatorship run by the Supreme Leader – shares the same qualities as a Western democracy which has multiple centers of power.

The regime implemented this “good cop, bad cop” strategy during the JCPOA negotiations and was able to achieve billions of dollars’ worth of sanctions relief from the administration of President Barack Obama. As President Obama [said in 2015](#), “if we sign this nuclear deal, we strengthen the hand of those more moderate forces inside of Iran.” But the regime, rather than moderating, only continued its hardline Islamist policies after the JCPOA.

Already the regime has started using this tactic against the Trump administration, with President Masoud Pezeshkian [insisting publicly](#) in March that he is interested in dialogue, telling parliament “I myself believed that it was better to have a dialogue. Then [Supreme Leader Khamenei] said that we will not negotiate with America. After that, I announced that we will not have a dialogue with America.” Iranian lawmaker Hamid Raseei [recently disclosed](#) that Iran’s Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi had asked him to criticize the Foreign Ministry’s performance in negotiations to increase his bargaining power with the West.

The Promise of Lucrative Post-Sanctions Business Opportunities

Iranian negotiators – amplified by their lobbyists and sympathizers in the West – will promise lucrative business opportunities for U.S. companies to invest in Iran once sanctions are lifted. This approach is designed to play on the Western market-driven psyche – something Tehran is currently doubling-down on to attract President Trump’s capitalistic instincts and his desire to support American businesses.

Iran will be presented as the “only untapped market in the world” and one that would be open for business as soon as international sanctions are lifted. This tactic was used as part of the JCPOA negotiations in 2015 but as soon as that deal was signed, Khamenei’s ideological paramilitary, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), took Americans and Europeans hostage, including those who travelled to Iran to facilitate Western trade. Those who fell for this gimmick ignored the fact that anti-Americanism is one the key pillars of the Islamic Republic’s identity and is deep-rooted in Khamenei’s own worldview, with the supreme leader successively stating that Islam is in a permanent conflict with America. Iranian negotiators promising lucrative business opportunities do not have the authority to implement such promises, with this decision ultimately being in the hands of Khamenei and the IRGC.

Fanciful Alarmist Threats

The Iranian regime will issue hyperbolic threats against the U.S. and its allies to inflame American anti-war public opinion, which it tries to use as a shield against military action targeting the Islamic Republic's military and nuclear sites. Once the Islamic Republic's officials do so, they will depend on sympathizers in the West to amplify their warnings, smearing those supporting targeted military strikes against the Islamic Republic as "psychotic," "suicidal," "warmongers," and "neocons." In turn, this leads the same Western-based voices to warn of false choices: that it is either this deal or war. History and a pattern of underwhelming Iranian responses after a decisive application of American military power against the Islamic Republic's interests suggest otherwise. For example, after 1988's Operation Praying Mantis when the U.S. eliminated half of Iran's Navy, maritime provocations stopped, and it contributed to the end of the Iran-Iraq War. Israel also struck Iran twice last year. Rather than a large war, the strikes forced the Iranian regime to pressure Hezbollah into a ceasefire with Israel. Such Iranian practices are meant to polarize U.S. policymaking in the hopes of thwarting the use of force.

The Art of Ambiguity

Another key feature of Iran's negotiation style is the frequent application of ambiguity. Iranian negotiations often resist clear-cut commitments and/or rigid timelines, preferring vague or conditional language that allows room for maneuver. This approach provides Iranian officials with flexibility for interpretation, enabling them to push the boundaries of any agreement without explicitly undercutting its commitments and facing consequences as a result.

Ambiguous and open-to-interpretation clauses in the JCPOA were a prime example of this method. For instance, Iranian negotiators agreed to the JCPOA's preface which states that the JCPOA will "positively contribute to regional and international peace and security." While the U.S. and its allies highlighted that Iranian regional destabilization through its proxies and missile program violated this clause, the vagueness of this text enabled Iranian officials to deny any wrongdoing by claiming the JCPOA was strictly a nuclear deal and had no reference to its other destabilizing activities. In turn, the U.S. was forced to state that Iran violated the "spirit of the agreement" rather than the agreement itself, giving the Iranians the space to continue to reap the rewards of the deal and avoid any repercussions.

A Post-Colonial Victimization Narrative

Iranian negotiators will almost always start negotiations with a monologue on victimization that presents a twisted historical narrative of all the ills of American and European imperialism against Iran. Iranian officials play on this narrative to portray the Iranian nation as victims of U.S. military hegemony and interference. They frequently invoke historical grievances—such as foreign intervention, the 1953 coup and the Iran-Iraq War—to justify their hostile actions, skepticism, and demand for respect.

This often manifests itself with warped post-colonial historical accounts that play to Western sensitivities, such as the claim that the U.S. stopped democracy in Iran through the 1953 coup, even though in Iran, the regime claims Mohammad Mossadegh fell not because of U.S. actions but because he did not embrace Islam, the clergy, and Ayatollah Abolqasem Kashani. Another example includes claims that the U.S. and Europeans were arming Saddam Hussain during the Iran-Iraq War – a victimization narrative that Iranian negotiators use to justify Iran’s ballistic missile and nuclear programs, and support for terrorist groups.

This strategy is employed to deflect and sometimes even justify the Iranian regime’s current destabilizing activities and is designed to extract concessions as reparations for the West’s colonial past in Iran. This is precisely the strategy Iranian negotiators used with the British Foreign Office and senior British parliamentarians between 2014-2022 in its attempt to release \$400 million in frozen assets as a part of a negotiation after a tank deal with the former Shah of Iran fell through following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. First-hand accounts reveal the Iranian negotiators developed a victimization narrative that claimed that Britain not only failed to return the money to Iran, but “to add insult to injury” also sold the same tanks to Saddam Hussain to use against the Islamic Republic during the Iran-Iraq War.

This narrative of grievance dovetails with far left and far right complaints in the U.S. that all the problems in the Middle East today can be traced back to neoconservatives that drove the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, conveniently overlooking the Islamic Republic’s own agency in regional destabilization, not least in post-Saddam Iraq and post-Taliban Afghanistan.

Running Down the Clock and Cosmetic Concessions

Iranian negotiators are grand masters in the art of “talks for talks” with the aim of delaying negotiations and running out the clock, while simultaneously deflecting pressure through the shield of a long diplomatic process to advance its military programs and other nefarious activities. Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi and his negotiators will deny any stalling – [insisting](#) they do not seek negotiations for negotiations sake. He made the same argument when he was deputy foreign minister for political affairs in 2021 during the JCPOA revival talks, which went nowhere.

The regime seeks to keep the West at the negotiating table and prevent any robust action – namely the invocation of the snapback sanctions mechanism under U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231 and the gradual erosion of ideal conditions for Israel and/or the U.S. to take military action against Tehran. To do this, Iranian negotiators will often nitpick on words in the text of an agreement or overinflate the importance of superficial and non-substantive issues. This strategy is also intended to psychologically and physically exhaust Western negotiators on the basis that such an approach will make them more willing to compromise and accept the Islamic Republic’s demands.

This method was applied during the JCPOA negotiations, with negotiators commenting on how the years of talks in different locations took its toll and made

them more determined to reach an agreement to ensure the relentless negotiations were not a waste of time.

The regime also successfully deployed this tactic during the Biden administration's failed negotiations with Iran in 2021-2022, using the cover of talks in Vienna to enrich uranium to 60% without any repercussions. Iranian negotiators likewise [bragged](#) how they violated all deadlines Western negotiators imposed without consequence.

This time around, the Supreme Leader has a clear working date in mind – with the snapback sanctions mechanism expiring in October 2025 – and will seek to keep the U.S. at bay, offering superficial concessions to ensure America stays at the negotiating table.

Concessions could include gradually easing the self-imposed Iranian ban on direct talks, pushing back the expiration of the snapback sanctions mechanism, and confidence-building measures which do not fundamentally dismantle Iran's nuclear program. Such positioning can already be seen with Araghchi granting the U.S. delegation a 45-minute direct meeting in the talks in Oman in April 2025, while using the lure of more meaningful direct talks in future to keep the U.S. in the negotiations process. The Islamic Republic's diplomats pulled a similar move during the failed efforts in 2021-2022 to revive the JCPOA with President Biden's team, when then-Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said in January 2022 that "if we get to a stage where reaching a good deal with strong guarantees necessitates talks with the U.S., we will consider it." But the direct, substantive negotiations never happened.

Iran will weaponize the U.S. desire to engage in this format by making a mountain out of a molehill on this issue in order to present it as a major compromise to U.S. negotiators should direct talks take place. If direct talks do take place, Iran will exploit the situation to lead Westerners to believe it is moderating when in fact it is a procedural gesture, not a substantive concession. It will expect the U.S. government to deliver something in exchange, which it should not as it weakens the American position.

Divide and Conquer

The Islamic Republic views the West as a bloc and has always sought to apply a divide and conquer approach towards it as part of its negotiating strategy. This approach has been adopted on the basis that so long as there is division among the West, the Islamic Republic can come out on top. In turn, the Iranian regime will always seek to cause and exploit divisions amongst the U.S. and European states to weaken the West's negotiating position.

Ayatollah Khamenei's overarching strategy has been rooted in his so-called "West without the U.S." method. Grounded in Khamenei's and the Islamic Republic's vehement anti-Americanism, this strategy has sought to divide the Europeans from the U.S. to undercut U.S. national interests. Iranian diplomats doubled down on this objective during the first Trump administration, when Tehran became almost exclusively focused on exploiting European disdain for President Trump. More

recently, however, Iranian officials have sought to cause and exploit divisions within the Trump administration as well as undercut the U.K., Germany, and France (E3), who retain the ability to re-impose nuclear-related U.N. sanctions on the Islamic Republic as part of the 2015 nuclear deal. This is why some Iranian officials have been pushing countries like Italy, which has a more sympathetic position to Iran than others, to take on a larger role in the negotiating process to undercut the E3's position.

Since President Trump's second term, as part of its approach to the new administration, Khamenei has also sought to divide the U.S. from Israel on its Iran policy through non-substantive, cosmetic changes that temper the regime's explicit anti-American propaganda, but doubles down in its antisemitic and anti-Israel messaging. In doing so, the regime has sought to tap into anti-Israel sentiment of some segments of the far right in the U.S., which believes the U.S. should not go to "war" for "Israel's interests."

Baazari Mentality and Taarof

The *baazari* mentality is central to the Iranian DNA, where haggling and bargaining is part of everyday life – for example from getting a taxi to buying groceries – unlike in the West where there are much more fixed set rules and regulations. The *baazari* mentality refers to approaching negotiations like bargaining and haggling in a Middle Eastern bazaar. This involves starting your bargaining position with very ambitious demands, allowing for opportunities to compromise, and making concessions slowly and reluctantly.

While Western negotiators may attempt to approach negotiations in the same way, for Iranians it is a way of life and therefore they have mastered the deceptive *baazari* way of negotiation. This deceptive strategy enables Iranian negotiators to achieve more while sacrificing little. It also incorporates the full plethora of Iranian negotiation customs such as *taarof*, which is part and parcel of Iranian etiquette to conceal one's true intent. While *taarof* is applied in everyday life as a form polite etiquette, it is also a traditional *baazari* negotiation strategy to strategically offer or decline under the false impression of "respect" but with ultimate intent to get what you want in a negotiation. Iranian negotiators often weaponize the concept of *taarof* in negotiations with Western counterparts as a means to deceptively conceal their intent.

Influence and Information Operations

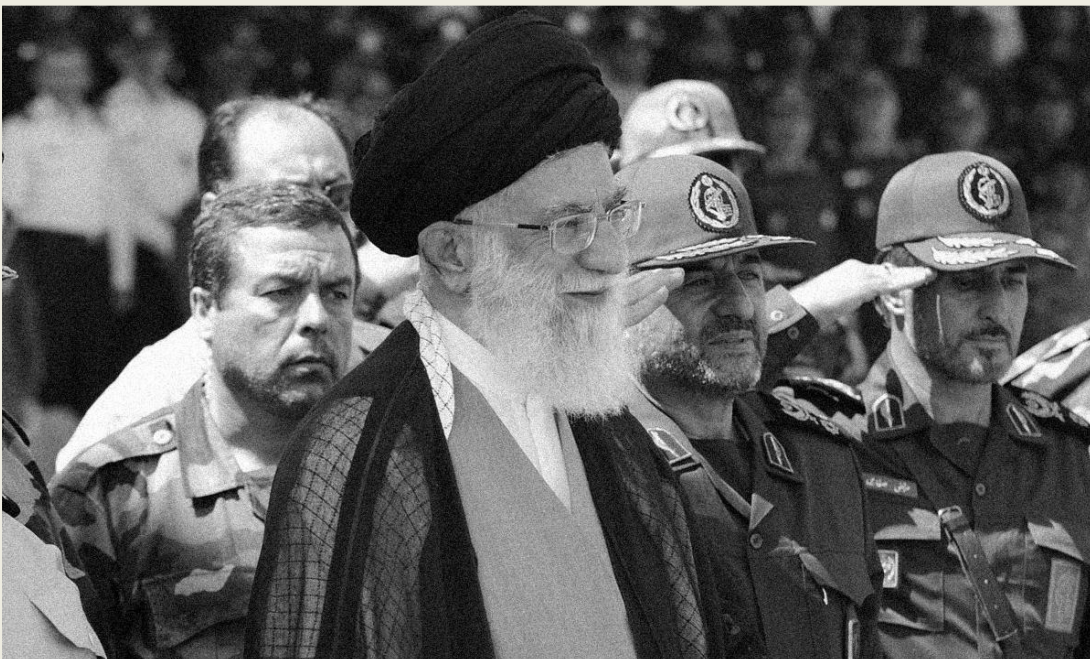
Throughout all negotiations, one of the strategies employed by Iranian negotiations is to ensure Tehran dominates the media narrative to create the impression that it is driving the agenda. This enables influence and psychological operations as Iranian press outlets drip feed confidential disclosures about the content of any negotiations, designed to provoke and enflame perceived U.S. fissures on Iran policy.

There has also been a concerted effort by Iran's regime and its sympathizers in the West to promote and defend some U.S. officials, while attacking other U.S. officials. As the U.S. Air Force has [written](#), such PSYOP efforts are aimed to "disrupt, confuse, and protract the adversary's decision-making process, undermining command and control."

Already, Iranian officials and their amplifiers in the West are [attacking](#) former Obama and Biden administration officials, despite formerly working with them on the JCPOA. Iran and its sympathizers are leveling accusations Democrats were not as strong as the Trump administration and are sabotaging its diplomacy. This is all aimed at masking Tehran's well-documented contempt for President Trump after trying to assassinate him, and inflaming the U.S. partisan divide in the hope it leads Republicans to support a JCPOA-like deal with Tehran.

This is all designed to move the goal posts, control the narrative, polarize the U.S., bolster Iran's currency, and present progress to the press to keep the clock ticking in the diplomatic channel. The Iranians used this tactic in the negotiations to normalize relations with Saudi Arabia, often providing optimistic readouts which stood in stark contrast with Riyadh being more guarded. It also occurred during the failed 2021-2022 Iran nuclear negotiations with the Biden administration.

Iran also may make cosmetic gestures like dangling invitations to prominent Americans to visit the country or greenlighting a meeting with a high-level official as a means of keeping U.S. negotiators at the table to create the impression it is moderating, while offering a heavily censored visit as a propaganda opportunity and not making substantive concessions. Iran [tried](#) this during the JCPOA negotiations, inviting influential Westerners to conferences in Tehran as a part of a malign influence operation with links to the Iran Experts Initiative, which was a project the Iranian Foreign Ministry participated in to covertly influence Western policymaking. These tactics from Tehran in 2025 would amount to an Iran Experts Initiative 2.0.



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