

Is Iran Negotiating Its Way to Negotiations?

by [Omer Carmi \(/experts/omer-carmi\)](/experts/omer-carmi)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Omer Carmi \(/experts/omer-carmi\)](/experts/omer-carmi)

Omer Carmi was a 2017 military fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

While Tehran’s internal debate about engagement with Washington intensifies, its words and actions already seem to be shaping—even unintentionally—the terms of any future talks.

This year’s G7 summit will be remembered for its startling dynamics regarding the Iranian nuclear issue. At first, the gathering in Biarritz, France, seemed to be the final act in President Emmanuel Macron’s efforts to mediate between Tehran and Washington. Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif surprisingly arrived on August 25 in the midst of the summit; the next day, President Hassan Rouhani stated, “If I knew that going to a meeting and visiting a person would help my country’s development and resolve the problems of the people, I would not miss it”—apparently a reference to possible talks with President Trump. Since then, however, Iranian officials have issued statements and preconditions signaling that Western governments may need to do more before Tehran will reopen negotiations.

ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK

In an August 26 joint press conference following the summit, Macron noted that while “nothing is set in stone,” a lot of work has already been done to bring Tehran and Washington back to the table, and a “roadmap has sort of been set.” Specifically, he has told Rouhani and Zarif that if they accept a meeting with Trump, perhaps “in the next few weeks,” then “an agreement can be met.” He added that the international community would first need to compensate Iran economically, for example by providing “lines of credit” or reopening certain economic sectors. During his own remarks alongside Macron, Trump expressed his readiness to meet with Rouhani “if the circumstances were correct,” and emphasized that Iran desperately needs such talks because U.S. sanctions have deteriorated its economic situation.

The positive press conference ignited speculation that a presidential summit might take place at the UN General Assembly meetings beginning mid-September. Yet such optimism was premature. Less than twenty-four hours after the G7 summit ended, Iranian officials took a step back. Zarif dismissed the possibility of any meetings with U.S.

officials unless Washington returns to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), while Rouhani stated that removing sanctions is a prerequisite to negotiations.

The same narrative was repeated on August 29, when the weekly magazine of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's office published an open letter to Rouhani and Zarif titled "Negotiations with the U.S. are definitely out of the question." The editorial emphasized the importance of power manifestation in international relations, arguing that those who believe negotiations are the only option to solve Iran's problems fail to understand that talks do not serve the national interest unless the republic's power is "in a good shape." The article then declared that no talks will be held on the sidelines of the UN meetings, since "negotiating with the U.S. has clearly shown that it doesn't serve Iran's interests." Although Khamenei himself has not publicly spoken since the G7 summit, his office's editorials usually express his line of thought. This narrative was later promoted by major Iranian media outlets, some of which tweeted a year-old video of Khamenei asserting that negotiations with the Americans are meaningless because U.S. presidents are only interested in showing that they have dragged Iran to the negotiating table.

INTERNAL CONFLICT OR REACTION TO TRUMP?

The inconsistencies in Tehran's response may seem confusing at first glance. Yet they likely indicate that the regime is in the midst of an internal debate about whether and how to pursue new discussions with Washington. This debate could in turn wind up shaping the framework of the talks themselves.

Ever since the Trump administration withdrew from the JCPOA last year, Khamenei has repeatedly lashed out at Rouhani and Zarif, intensifying the perpetual conflict between the president's "moderate" camp and the Supreme Leader's conservative camp. In particular, he has accused them of being fooled by the Americans during the nuclear negotiations, arguing that Iran should not have trusted the Obama administration or held talks with Washington in the first place. Accordingly, Khamenei may not have been fully aware that Zarif's G7 overture would turn into a high-profile effort to resume talks.

Whatever the case, once news broke of Trump's positive reaction to a possible meeting, the Supreme Leader seemed to push back against Iranian "peacemakers." This would hardly be the first time he has reined in an engagement plan led by one of his presidents. In 2009, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad agreed in principle to a proposal by the United States, France, and Russia to ship out nearly 80 percent of Iran's low-enriched uranium in exchange for reactor fuel. When details of the agreement went public, however, Khamenei scuttled it, warning that U.S. negotiators were "hiding a dagger behind their backs."

Tehran's latest reversal might also stem from President's Trump narrative that Iran will soon be compelled to enter negotiations out of weakness. Such rhetoric tends to be a red flag for the regime's leadership, since it plays on the weak spots in their never-ending battle to maintain domestic legitimacy and prevents them from saving face. On August 28, for example, Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi declared that "no country under pressure will negotiate," since doing so would be more like a surrender than a real discussion. Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps chief Hossein Salami reiterated this idea a day later, claiming that "the enemy" seeks to pressure Iran into surrender and force it to enter negotiations.

IRAN'S CURRENT STRATEGY

Whatever happened behind the scenes in Tehran this week, a few things have become clear about the regime's latest strategy and its potential implications for future talks. First, Iran has been steadily working to open channels for conveying messages to President Trump via his trusted international partners, most prominently Macron and President Shinzo Abe of Japan. As Macron noted at the G7 summit, these "mediators" may form part of a coalition of negotiators in future discussions.

Second, Iran and Rouhani are setting a high threshold for reentering talks with Washington, at least for the time

being. To be sure, Tehran has shown in the past that it can be flexible on such demands if needed. Yet stating firm preconditions at the start can help Rouhani achieve two ends. On the domestic front, it may appease some of its critics—including Khamenei—by reassuring them that Iran will not take another risky leap forward without major American concessions (i.e., removing sanctions and rejoining the JCPOA). On the international front, tough preconditions may push the EU and other parties to give Iran at least some economic concessions ahead of talks. Indeed, Tehran has been playing the grievance card with the international community over and over again since Trump withdrew from the JCPOA, with the main goal of fully implementing the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX), the European “special purpose vehicle” established earlier this year to facilitate trade with Iran. According to Araqchi, Rouhani told Macron that Europe needs to facilitate a mechanism allowing Tehran to sell oil, either by obtaining [waivers from Washington \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/renewing-the-iran-sanctions-waivers-part-2-energy-and-afghan-trade\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/renewing-the-iran-sanctions-waivers-part-2-energy-and-afghan-trade) or providing “credit lines” that Iran can use to buy goods in return for oil. Macron mentioned this theme in his G7 remarks.

Third, Iran is raising the hypothetical costs of the “no deal” scenario in order to pressure Europe on expediting INSTEX and providing similar concessions. As Araqchi explained on August 28, if Iran’s demands are not met, it will take more steps to [reduce its commitments under the JCPOA \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-six-potential-nuclear-steps\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-six-potential-nuclear-steps). The regime has already exceeded the amount of low-enriched uranium it is permitted to store under the nuclear deal, and increased its level of enrichment beyond 3.67 percent (see PolicyWatch 3126 (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-deceptive-nuclear-messaging>) for a fuller explanation of these technical issues). It is now threatening to take another such step on September 6, though officials have yet to specify what that might be.

As Iranian leaders move forward with this strategy while trying to cope with growing economic difficulties, one key question stands out: do they truly believe President Trump will waive major energy sanctions in an election year, or are they making this extreme demand solely to prod Europe or America into making lesser concessions on issues like INSTEX? The answer may determine whether new talks are even feasible, never mind productive.

Omer Carmi is vice president of intelligence at the Israeli cybersecurity firm Sixgill. Previously, he was a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute and led IDF analytical and research efforts pertaining to the Middle East. ❖

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