

# Countering Iran's Deceptive Behavior in Nuclear Negotiations

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Apr 17, 2025

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**In negotiations, the Iranian regime prefers to operate discreetly and secretly, allowing Tehran to shape the information spectrum and protract talks to buy time and wear down their negotiation counterparts. By shining light on the diplomatic process, U.S. policymakers can provide a counter-narrative that takes to task Iranian intransigence and provides accurate information for the Iranian public.**

Iran's adept use of secrecy, disinformation, and stalling tactics has long posed significant challenges to international efforts aimed at curbing its nuclear ambitions. As the United States prepares for its renewed negotiations with Tehran, anticipating and countering these tactics is key to shaping the negotiating context and facilitating diplomatic progress.

## Understanding Iran's Negotiation Tactics

Iranian negotiation strategy has historically been characterized by obfuscation and procrastination, prolonging discussions without yielding substantive progress and buying time while heading towards nuclear enrichment. Iran has consistently been slow or nonresponsive in addressing concerns about the possible military dimensions of its nuclear program. Meanwhile, engaging in prolonged negotiations allowed Iran to ease international pressure and delay the imposition of stricter sanctions, such as by providing last-minute concessions at the IAEA to avert a referral to the UNSC. During the 2021-2023 period, Iran systematically delayed engagement with the Biden administration and European partners by initially refusing to commence negotiations, subsequently prolonging the talks through procedural stalling, and ultimately taking several months to formally reject a draft agreement that had previously been accepted in principle.

Now, Europeans insist on an agreement by this summer in order to maintain the snapback option before it disappears on October 18, and the U.S. administration is talking about a two-month deadline starting last Saturday. Iranians are aware of both and will seek to undermine efforts to enforce a timeline.

Yet by expressing a willingness to negotiate to these partners in the first place, Iran has also often hoped to sow divisions among the P5+1 countries and regional stakeholders over the appropriate response to its nuclear activities to avoid punitive measures, especially by pressuring or providing incentives to individual countries negotiating as part of a bloc. Now that Iran has reached the high enrichment threshold, Tehran uses talks to give the impression that there is still room for negotiations and to distract from their hard-won weapons program.

Iran's current insistence on discreet and indirect negotiations—in contrast to the U.S. call for direct negotiations—likewise evinces a desire to control the public narrative and evade accountability both domestically and internationally. Iranian officials have emphasized that any discussions should be mediated through intermediaries, especially Oman. Without public information about negotiations, Iran can manipulate the information flow and maintain plausible deniability regarding their active engagement with and possible concessions to the “Great Satan”—in contrast to their private messaging with negotiators—while shifting blame for the negotiations’ failure or delay.

### **Misinformation and propaganda**

This preference for secrecy is long-standing. Khamenei’s public stance has been to shun direct dealings with Washington, which he brands as futile and dishonorable. He frequently asserts that talking with “the Great Satan” yields nothing; In 2013, even as Iran was secretly talking with the United States in Oman, Khamenei publicly insisted that Iran would never negotiate with the Americans. Once the JCPOA was announced, Tehran framed the agreement as a “multilateral compromise” rather than a bilateral deal between Tehran and Washington in order to control the domestic narrative, follow a long-term hedging strategy and buffer against a possible future U.S. reversal, attract international trade and investment and encourage other participants to push back against unilateral U.S. sanctions, and gain UN Security Council backing via Resolution 2231.

In 2021, Iran denied talks were taking place to maintain its anti-American posture for internal consumption even as European mediators relayed proposals word-for-word between the two parties, a method of obfuscation that should be denied in these current talks.

Had it not been for President Trump’s early announcement, these latest negotiations would have most likely also remained behind closed doors. There, a lack of public pressure due to a lack of publicly available information allows Tehran more leeway in the negotiating dynamic, slowing things down (as messages have to go through intermediaries) and sheltering Iran from any psychological pressure regarding any particular stances.

Iran then takes advantage of this secrecy to employ misinformation, influencing both domestic and international perceptions of negotiations when they do occur. Iranian state media and officials portray any negotiation as a struggle in which Iran heroically resists excessive U.S. and Western demands, even when Tehran is the side injecting delays or falsehood. Through these false narratives, the regime will continue seeking to undermine U.S. credibility and justify its nuclear pursuits.

Absent transparency on the content and progress of these talks, Tehran can shield its leadership from being held to account by both the Iranian public and the international community for lack of progress.

Underpinning these narratives is the regime’s insecurity about its own people and its stance within the international community, and the mere fact that the Islamic regime’s revolutionary ideology—rooted in anti-Western, anti-American and anti-Israeli fervor—has failed to deliver tangible benefits for Iran’s long-overlooked national interests.

## Recommendations for the U.S. Administration

To effectively counter Iran's deceptive practices and ensure meaningful negotiations, the United States would benefit from adopting the following strategies:

- 1. Insisting on direct and transparent negotiations:** Direct talks not only save time and energy but also ensure clarity and reduce the potential for miscommunication and deliberate misinformation. By engaging face-to-face and through implementing public diplomacy, the United States will have a better chance of holding Iranian negotiators accountable and minimizing opportunities for Tehran to distort dialogue outcomes. Transparency is also key for determining successful outcomes—helping to eliminate the ‘fog of mediation,’ shortening the negotiating cycles, raising the cost of deception, and improving the U.S. psychological position.
- 2. Engaging in public diplomacy:** In order to best benefit from this transparency, the United States should seize the initiative to communicate directly with the Iranian public. Utilizing platforms accessible to Iranians such as now-defunct VOA Farsi and Radio Farda, the administration can provide regular updates on negotiations in both Persian and English. In absence of VOA Farsi and Radio Farda, a modern single multimedia platform drawing on a pool of extant expertise and experience can relay the U.S. messaging directly and effectively to the Iranian people. Such communication could also be made official through a bilingual spokesperson who can clearly articulate the U.S. narrative to Iranian audiences, providing a cogent and coherent alternative to the narrative of the regime and exposing misinformation. This approach fosters transparency, undermines the regime's deceptive narratives and obstructive practices, and helps empower Iranian citizens with accurate information.
- 3. Enhancing Coordination with Allies:** Likewise, regular briefings with partner nations and allies present a well-defined united front against any efforts to manipulate individual states. Sharing intelligence and aligning strategies can mitigate the efficacy of Tehran's divide-and-conquer approach, and coordinating closely with European allies, Israel, and Gulf states can help ensure a unified public line on any Iranian misbehavior at the table and that the international community remains cohesive in its objectives and responses.
- 4. Implementing strict timelines and benchmarks:** Establishing clear steps, deadlines and measurable objectives within the negotiation framework can counter Iran's stalling tactics. By holding Iran accountable to a structured timeline, the United States can reduce opportunities for procrastination and ensure that discussions remain focused and goal-oriented.

Iran's use of deception, disinformation, and delay can present a formidable challenge to any achievements of the future nuclear negotiations, especially if the primary Iranian goal for negotiations is to deflect attention from its current actions and buy time for future ones. Washington can deny Tehran the advantages of opacity and delay by insisting on direct and timely negotiations, engaging in proactive public diplomacy, enhancing coordination with allies, and ensuring that the Iranian people have access to accurate information regarding decisions being made on their behalf. Speaking over the regime's censorship empowers the Iranian public with knowledge that is likely to increase pressure on the regime from within—as Iranians come to realize when their nation's interests in political and economic recovery is being sacrificed for ideological dogmatism and posturing. Such an approach would maximize pressure on Iran to prioritize national interests and negotiate in good faith—or, at the very least, ensure that if Iran's leaders choose intransigence and dishonesty, they do so under the full glare of international and domestic scrutiny. ❖



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