

The Illusion of Diplomacy: How Washington Deceived Tehran Through Negotiations



While diplomatic statements pointed toward a significant breakthrough in the Geneva negotiations where Tehran appeared ready to offer guarantees acceptable to Washington that it did not intend to enrich uranium for military purposes Israeli and American aircraft were refueling in preparation for launching military strikes on Tehran on Saturday morning.

What, then, happened? Were the American negotiations merely a deception and a means of buying time? Or did Washington fail to obtain what it sought through its maximum-pressure campaign against Tehran? Were the negotiations an attempt by Washington to construct a narrative of international legitimacy to justify escalation? Or has power diplomacy been Washington's defining approach for decades?

Did Tehran truly fail to recognize the ruse, or was its cautious political optimism justified, with Iran itself also buying time? What impact did the negotiations have on the intelligence, military, and political coordination between Washington and Tel Aviv? This article seeks to address these questions and more.

A Winding Negotiation Track

Following the painful strikes that hit Iran's nuclear facilities last June, Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian signed a decree completely suspending cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency, barring its inspectors from entering Iranian nuclear facilities unless authorized by the Supreme National Security Council.

This legislative step was accompanied by statements from Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, who affirmed that Tehran would not abandon its intention to enrich uranium despite the extensive damage suffered by its facilities, which had temporarily halted their operations.

It did not take long before Tehran returned to the negotiating table on August 22 in talks with France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, despite the looming threat of sanctions. Yet those negotiations were short-lived: less than a week after they began, the European states announced their intention to revive UN sanctions on Tehran.

Last November brought Omani mediation between Tehran and Washington, which carried promises from Donald Trump of the possibility of lifting American sanctions on Iran. This came before widespread protests erupted in Iranian streets in December, with demonstrators calling for the government's downfall amid deteriorating living conditions.

Washington and Tel Aviv quickly embraced the unrest, encouraging protesters to remain in the streets in hopes of toppling the regime of Ali Khamenei, repeating that "help is on the way" a thinly veiled reference to the possibility of American military intervention.

Indirect negotiations over Iran's nuclear program then began in Vienna on February 6, mediated by Oman between Washington and Tehran. Another round followed on February 17 at the highest levels, and a third a week later that Omani Foreign Minister Sayyid Badr bin Hamad Al Busaidi described as "productive and positive," despite the absence of an agreement on uranium enrichment.

On February 27, Al Busaidi announced that Tehran had agreed to reduce its current nuclear stockpile to an unprecedentedly low level. Yet despite this pledge, Trump insisted that all options remained on the table. The following morning, Tehran received the first Israeli military strike in the current round of escalation.

Power Diplomacy

The latest round of negotiations between Washington and Tehran does not merely represent failed diplomacy. Rather, it forms an essential component of an American strategy of coercion that employs negotiations to build a narrative of

legitimacy abroad, fragment domestic opposition, and finalize military and intelligence arrangements in the region before delivering a military strike.

Washington's recent talks with Tehran thus follow a longstanding pattern in which negotiations accompany war efforts not to achieve a fair peace or even prevent conflict at its minimum threshold, but to serve as political and strategic tools preparing the ground for a military strike whose decision was made before the parties ever sat at the negotiating table.

This pattern of coercive diplomacy marked by misleading negotiations preceding military action—was evident during America's open-ended "War on Terror," which defined the early decades of this century. In 2003, shortly before invading Iraq, Washington promoted what it called a "last chance for diplomacy," leading UN inspection efforts before ultimately declaring diplomatic efforts a failure and arguing that military action was necessary to neutralize weapons of mass destruction.

The same pattern repeated in Libya in 2011. Prior to NATO's military intervention in Tripoli under Washington's leadership, the United States promoted diplomacy accompanied by sanctions within a strategy of pressure and threats that included multiple negotiation rounds with Muammar Gaddafi's government. Those talks soon reached what Washington described as a dead end, paving the way for direct NATO intervention under the banner of "protecting civilians."

Nor is last year's strike on Tehran far removed from this pattern. The Trump administration sent contradictory and misleading signals suggesting that military strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities could be avoided if Tehran responded positively to direct and indirect negotiations with Washington. Yet the administration abruptly struck those facilities on June 22, after Israel had begun attacking nuclear sites on June 13.

Washington's negotiating approach reflects the theory of "power diplomacy," or coercive diplomacy, articulated by American economist Thomas Schelling, who laid the foundations for many concepts governing conflict, nuclear strategy, and social behavior in the United States. According to this theory embraced by the Trump administration—threats of harm precede the use of force in order to influence the motivations and behavior of the adversary sitting across the negotiating table.

Trump's "maximum pressure" policy toward Tehran since his first presidential campaign exemplifies this approach: negotiations accompanied by strict deadlines and threats of military intervention. In March, prior to the first military operation against Tehran, Trump sent a stern message to Iran's Supreme Leader granting him two months to reach an agreement on the nuclear program. This

was followed by the twelve-day war between Tehran and Tel Aviv, which included American strikes on Iran in June 2025.

The same pattern resurfaced during last February's negotiations, when Trump gave the Supreme Leader 10–15 days—beginning February 19—to reach an agreement satisfactory to Washington regarding Iran's nuclear program and ballistic missile system, threatening military action if no agreement was reached by the deadline.

Even before the minimum deadline expired, Tel Aviv and Washington launched the first strikes in the current round, despite conflicting diplomatic statements about the progress of negotiations.

The U.S. administration adopts the “deadline strategy” not to enhance credibility but rather as a mechanism for domestic and international justification while also providing the element of surprise, as strikes often occur before the deadline expires.

Deception Through Statements

American deception does not rely solely on deadlines followed by early strikes. It also involves diplomatic signals that contradict reality. Before last June's “Midnight Hammer” strike, American officials continued to issue reassuring statements about the possibility of successful negotiations.

White House spokesperson Karoline Leavitt, reading an administration statement, said Trump believed further talks with Tehran were possible and that he would decide on military action within two weeks. The attacks began the very next day.

The same pattern occurred prior to the most recent attack, triggering accusations that Washington negotiated in bad faith. Omani mediator Al Busaidi expressed Muscat's disappointment at what he called the undermining of “serious and effective negotiations,” urging Washington not to escalate further and stating, “This is not your war.” U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance had earlier reassured Al Busaidi that diplomacy remained possible and that momentum in negotiations was increasing an example of direct diplomatic misdirection toward mediators.

Despite this well-known tactic, Iranian officials maintained an optimistic diplomatic tone during the final negotiation round. One day before the strike, Araghchi stated that Tehran was preparing a draft agreement to present to U.S. special envoy Steve Witkoff in the coming days.

Although the strike itself had been broadly anticipated, its timing surprised some observers because of the cautious optimism expressed by mediators and reinforced by official American statements particularly given Tehran's

unprecedented guarantees regarding its nuclear program and its willingness to repeatedly return to the negotiating table. Tehran described the strikes as a “betrayal of diplomatic efforts.”

Military and Intelligence Preparations

Washington offered few signs of goodwill during the latest negotiation rounds. February witnessed a buildup of American military forces in the region unmatched since 2003. Alongside extensive deployments including at least twelve guided missile destroyers, F-22 stealth fighters, and more than one hundred refueling aircraft the aircraft carriers USS Gerald R. Ford and USS Abraham Lincoln, along with the destroyers USS Roosevelt and USS Bulkeley, arrived in the Mediterranean and the Arabian Sea.

The United States also increased its presence at military bases across the Middle East. American destroyers and warships reached Khalifa bin Salman Port in Oman, U.S. fighter jets gathered at Muwaffaq Salti Air Base in Jordan, and the destroyer USS Delbert D. Black took position in the Red Sea.

According to the Associated Press, an Israeli official said Washington and Tel Aviv had spent months gathering detailed intelligence by tracking the movements of Iranian leaders—including the Supreme Leader while monitoring military preparations and the readiness of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

This intelligence enabled three coordinated strikes by Tel Aviv and Washington in broad daylight on the first day of the attack, killing the Supreme Leader, members of his family, and forty senior Iranian officials across three different locations in a single minute.

Despite these signs of imminent military action, some optimistic analysts interpreted the buildup as a strategy of intimidation aimed at forcing Tehran back to negotiations under pressure or at most as preparation for limited strikes designed to compel Iran to make concessions. Trump himself hinted at this possibility by speaking of a potential “limited strike on Tehran” if Iran failed to respond. Tehran, meanwhile, warned that such military assets would become legitimate targets if used in hostile operations.

The Narrative of Legitimacy

Washington often uses misleading diplomacy to construct a narrative of legitimacy for escalation at both domestic and international levels. The strategy of “we did everything we could” before “reaching a dead end” has long served as a rhetorical prelude to American military interventions abroad.

In the period leading up to the latest strike, Washington echoed Tel Aviv’s

warnings about the “existential threat” posed by Tehran’s political system to its vital interests and the safety of its citizens abroad. In announcing the military operation dubbed “Operation Epic Fury” on his Truth Social account, Trump claimed that Tehran possessed a military arsenal capable not only of threatening Israel and American forces overseas but also of harming Europe and even the United States itself. The ongoing large-scale operation, he said, aimed to eliminate Iran’s missile system, dismantle its military industry, and neutralize its regional proxies to prevent further destabilization.

Trump’s statement—that “Tehran has behaved badly for decades” placed the intervention within a broader historical framework stretching back to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, rather than presenting it as an immediate reaction to failed negotiations. Such framing suggests a far broader narrative one that invites Washington’s allies in Europe and the Middle East to participate in neutralizing what is portrayed as the “Persian threat,” moving beyond the cycle of action and reaction that characterized recent months.

This broader narrative was echoed in a statement by Benjamin Netanyahu, who announced the launch of “Operation Roar of the Lion,” describing it as an effort to save world peace threatened by Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons. A subsequent statement clarified that the operation was part of Netanyahu’s broader vision to reshape the Middle East.

Yet while the initial American narrative rested on the claim that diplomatic tools had been exhausted, subsequent statements from senior officials exposed contradictions and revealed the legitimacy crisis surrounding the intervention.

Early justifications claimed Iran had been preparing ballistic missiles to strike critical American interests and that Washington’s attack had preempted those strikes. However, leaked notes from a closed meeting of Trump administration officials on March 1 indicated that U.S. intelligence agencies did not believe Tehran intended to launch a preemptive war against American military capabilities unless Washington struck first.

Further contradictions emerged in statements by officials such as Marco Rubio, whose remarks sparked a wave of criticism both in the United States and internationally. Rubio acknowledged that the timing of the war was heavily influenced by Netanyahu’s government and that it was fundamentally Israel’s war, with the United States joining its closest Middle Eastern ally.

Some senior military officials went even further, framing the conflict in religious terms as “part of God’s plan for the return of Christ.” The doctrine of Armageddon, which views the Middle East as the stage for a final battle between good and evil, holds deep influence within the current Trump administration and

forms a cornerstone of Christian Zionist nationalism in the United States.

These remarks sparked intense backlash across American politics, including from within both major parties. The MAGA movement, Trump’s core electoral base, was among the first to criticize the narrative, arguing that it represented a clear departure from the “America First” doctrine that had propelled Trump to victory in two presidential elections.

Invoking the language of religious war also appeared jarring in a political system whose constitution rejects theological doctrines as the basis for public life let alone for guiding foreign policy decisions of such magnitude. Criticism soon followed from the World Council of Churches, several Catholic institutions, and both American and Arab religious leaders, who rejected attempts to frame the conflict in religious terms and described it as an “evil war” that threatens the stability of the region.

Consequently, the narrative of exhausted diplomacy and failed negotiations quickly gave way to more controversial and openly ideological justifications narratives that are likely to face serious challenges both internationally and within the United States in the near future.

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