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Cease-fire talks, how war could end

INTERVIEW After the first round of cease-fire negotiations in Pakistan collapsed, the following interview was conducted with two former nuclear negotiators about prospects for ending the ongoing US-Israeli war on Iran, including what another nuclear deal might look like. Robert Malley, a US negotiator for the 2015 nuclear deal (which President Trump withdrew from in his first term), says Trump's "mercurial" behavior makes it difficult to predict his objectives and the course of any future talks. "Iran was in full compliance with the JCPOA" and was blindsided by the US's decision to pull out of the deal, says Hossein Mousavian, who served as spokesperson for Iran's nuclear negotiation team from 2003 to 2005. Now, its leaders "don't know whether the US is really for diplomacy or not."

Why don't we start off with your assessment of what's taken place? It can be right through to this week, the failed negotiations, and before that, the US-Israeli attack on Iran. Why don't we begin with you, Rob Malley?



Robert Malley

MALLEY: Well, first, we can't ignore the fact that this war was unlawful, unjustified, unnecessary. And I think even if we're now going to talk about negotiations, even if the negotiations are to succeed, none of that could let us forget or excuse how we got here. So, I do want to insist on that because, you know, if negotiations succeed, it's going to be too quick for the administration to say, "You see? We were right." But I think the real question now is whether the US and Iran are engaging in these negotiations, trying to find a solution that will meet both their sides' core needs, or whether, in this case, the US takes the attitude that "we won the war because we're stronger, and if you're not accepting the war, then we're going to inflict more pain." That won't work. And it won't work because Iran believes, and with some justification, that it has inflicted pain on the US and that every day that goes by, it's going to inflict more. So, they're not in a position right now where Iran is sort of begging for a deal because it wants to avoid an escalation. They believe, again, rightly or wrongly, that they could sustain the pain longer than the US can.

Let's go to the Iranian ambassador, Hossein Mousavian. Your assessment of what has taken place? Now it seems to be coming down to the nuclear negotiations, around, well, Iran saying they'll do a moratorium for five years and the United States demanding 20. But, overall, the picture?



Hossein Mousavian

MOUSAVIAN: I think Iranians now they're coming to negotiation table with mistrust more

than ever because once the deal was agreed in 2015, Iran was in full compliance, and the US withdrew. The second, there was a nuclear negotiation between Iran and the US in 2025. Negotiation, as the foreign minister of Oman said, had significant progress. Deal was within reach. The US withdrew and attacked Iran. We had negotiation in 2026. Again, as Oman foreign minister said, negotiations had significant progress, deal was within reach. Again, the US attacked. Then we had the latest in Islamabad. They had just one-day negotiation. It was the highest level after the Revolution, after 48 years. And the US side said there was progress. Iranian foreign minister also said we were very close to a final deal. And then immediately the US imposed a sea blockade there. That's why they really don't know whether the US is really for diplomacy or not. If you're talking now about nuclear, first of all, every assessment of all US intelligence establishments since 2007, every year, they have insisted no evidence of weaponization and no evidence of decision of Iranians, even in '25, even in '26 — this is the US security assessment — no decision to go to nuclear and no evidence of weaponization. Every IAEA report since 2003 says there is no evidence of weaponization. Therefore, there was no imminent threat. And I believe it was really illegal war, no doubt. Overwhelming majority of international community, they

have insisted the war was illegal. Now, we are coming to the negotiations. The biggest issue you have heard during the last two years is about Iran 450 kilogram of enriched uranium, 60%. They say Iran can make 10 nuclear bombs if they decide to do. And even you hear from every American officials, they are insisting on this stockpile. But I don't know whether the people know that in 2025 negotiation, Iran said we are ready to dilute all 60% to below 5%. In negotiation during 2026, Iran officially told Americans we are ready to dilute. This was said by the Omani foreign minister in his interview with the Face the Nation officially, that Iran was and is ready to dilute all stockpile to below 5%. Iran accepted to suspend enrichment for some years. Iran accepted to have zero stockpile. Therefore, there is no worry, and there was no worry, about the high-level enriched uranium stockpile. I mean, I really don't understand whether the issue is nuclear or not because we heard from American officials officially, publicly, that the aim was controlling Iranian oil reserve. They said the aim was regime change. If the aim is controlling Iranian oil reserve like Venezuela, if the aim is regime change, using nuclear as pretext, we are not going to have any deal. We need to understand, respecting the rights of Iran, like other members of NPT, for peaceful



to have a distinction between these two.

The negotiators for the Trump administration in the latest round have continued to include Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, two people who would have, some would say, virtually no knowledge of the complexity of negotiations over nuclear enrichment and the development of nuclear bombs. Your assessment of their role in all of this, and also why, in all of this talk about Iran coming under some kind of international control, there is no mention of the fact that there's one power that does have nuclear weapons in the Middle East — Israel — and it is not a party to the NPT?

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Director of US National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard (L) testifies at a House Intelligence Committee hearing on March 26, 2025, that the intelligence community "continues to assess that Iran is not building a nuclear weapon."

LEAH MILLIS/REUTERS

nuclear technology is one issue. Confidence-building measures by Iran to go for transparency measures, suspending enrichment, zero stockpile, just as a confidence-building measures, is another issue. I think we need

MALLEY: No, Jared Kushner and Steve Witkoff are not nuclear experts — by the way, nor am I. That's not the issue. The issue is whether they're surrounded by nuclear experts. And everything — all the reports that I've



Omani foreign minister Badr bin Hamad Al Busaidi (L), a key mediator in the US-Iran nuclear talks, tells "Face the Nation" moderator on February 27, 2026 — a day before US-Israeli aggression against Iran started — that "a deal actually can be agreed tomorrow".

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received is that when they negotiated with the Iranians in the past — I don't know what happened in Islamabad, but in the past, they didn't have nuclear experts. And so, there was — and I think this has been well documented, that they misunderstood Iranian positions. They couldn't appreciate what they were actually trying to convey.

And part of it, I think, is because of the oddity of this administration, where so many of the decisions seem to rely and reside in one person, not the most reliable of all people. It's the president of the United States. And he is very mercurial, and he's very unpredictable, and he changes his mind, and he changes his objectives. We don't really know what his objectives are in this conflict. And so, I think what Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner did is they relayed what they heard from the Iranians. They didn't really fully understand them. And then, depending on the president's mood, he varied on whether he was in the mood to accept a negotiated deal or was more eager for confrontation. And my assessment is that, in this case, a bit emboldened by Venezuela, he felt he could not fail at a military endeavor. He was going to win. He was going to bring Iran to knees and then be able to dictate the terms of a settlement. That's not what happened.

When the US attacked and Israel attacked Iran, I thought it was very interesting that the Omani foreign minister, who